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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Gulf crisis, India's stakes

Turmoil in Persian Gulf will hurt India's economy. Delhi must rethink policy options if US ignores its concerns



SANJAYA BARU

THE GEOGRAPHY, POLITICS, security and stability of West Asia over the past century have always been about oil. Nations were created, regimes were changed and wars have been waged in the name of oil. From the First World War till the Second Gulf War, it was about Western powers securing access to oil. Over the past decade, with the US becoming self-reliant on the energy front, the focus of US policy has shifted to retaining control over the sources of supply, and not just ensuring its supply. This is by now a commonplace observation. But it is an observation that merits repetition. Renewed tension in the Persian Gulf is not about over-powering Iran-sponsored terrorism. It is about securing control over Iran-produced oil.

Structural changes in the market for energy have, in particular, reduced US dependence on imported oil and, in general, Western dependence on hydrocarbons. While the trans-Atlantic nations, especially the US, no longer depend on Gulf oil, Asian economies, including China, Japan, South Korea and India, depend critically on Gulf oil. India's dependence on imported oil has risen sharply over the past decade, and now exceeds 90 per cent of its domestic consumption. By destabilising regions of the world that supply oil and gas, the US is throwing sand into the engine of Asian economic growth, keeping Rising Asia off-balance.

Consider the fact that US hostility towards Venezuela and Iran is having the effect of imposing constraints on the supply side at a time the market for oil was shifting from being a sellers' market into becoming a buyers' market. Decline in oil consumption and the increased use of renewables had begun to ease demand pressures, but geopolitics has intervened to once again destabilise the market. The countries most hurt are India, China and several developing countries.

Having reinforced US influence within the Arab Sunni world, the US has been seeking to secure control of the Shia Islamic world

— including Iraq, Syria and Iran. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran and Kuwait are the major oil exporting nations that increasingly sell their oil to Asian economies, including China, India, Japan, Korea and the ASEAN economies. Regime change in Venezuela is also impacting the supply of oil.

That President Trump seeks the geo-economic containment of China is no secret. In an influential treatise, *The Rise of China vs The Logic of Strategy (2012)*, Harvard scholar Edward Luttwak made the point convincingly that the only way the US could deal with a rising China would be through its geo-economic containment, applying "the logic of strategy in the grammar of commerce", by restricting Chinese exports into (US) markets, denying raw materials to China insofar as possible, and stopping whatever technology transfers China would still need for the future. Luttwak suggested that US policy ought to be to slow down China's economic growth so as to ensure adverse domestic economic and political consequences that would exert pressure on China's leadership to act more in accordance with Western interests.

Be it hydrocarbons or nuclear, any denial of access to new sources of energy or any increase in the cost of energy can only hurt India's growth prospects as much as it would hurt China. India could suffer collateral damage as a consequence of US policy of the geo-economic containment of China. Indian diplomacy will, therefore, have to ensure that economic actions being taken by the US aimed at hurting China do not end up hurting India.

Many countries, including India, may appreciate Trump's trade policy action against China because they have all been saddled with a persistent imbalance in their trade with China. However, bringing energy into play will not be acceptable to most economies, especially those like India that are now excessively dependent on imported Gulf oil. Nor, indeed, can India afford to support any policy of containment against China that would also end up hurting India.

That the military thrust to Iran could in fact be part of such a geo-economic containment is a point that another Harvard scholar has more recently made. William R Polk, a professor of history at the universities of Harvard and Chicago, views Iran as "the missing pillar in an American policy of imperium in imperio toward China. One way

or another — threat, surrender, regime change or war — Trump believes that Iran must be brought into line." The "Trump Doctrine", suggests Polk, is that the US should be able to dictate the pace of Chinese economic growth by controlling the price and supply of oil.

The use of access to energy as a neo-imperialist tool in a strategy of restraining the rise of emerging economies is an argument that has long been made even in the discourse on climate change. The former chief economic advisor to the government of India, Arvind Subramanian, had dubbed it "carbon imperialism" — the strategy of denying access to coal and other hydrocarbons in the name of climate change and thereby, hurting developing country growth prospects.

Be it hydrocarbons or nuclear, any denial of access to new sources of energy or any increase in the cost of energy can only hurt India's growth prospects as much as it would hurt China. India could suffer collateral damage as a consequence of US policy of the geo-economic containment of China. Indian diplomacy will, therefore, have to ensure that economic actions being taken by the US aimed at hurting China do not end up hurting India also. Hence, India has a stake in ensuring peace and stability in the Persian Gulf.

Sure, India can diversify its sourcing of oil and reduce its dependence on Iranian oil, as it has done before, but the problem of rising cost will remain. The destabilisation of the Persian Gulf will impact prices even before it impacts supply. That is already happening. If President Trump is insensitive to India's concerns, New Delhi will have to seriously rethink its foreign policy options since sustaining high economic growth with low inflation is a fundamental developmental priority and a key strategic objective.

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BJP's SADHVI TEST

Party may have sent her a show cause notice. But it is Sadhvi who has posed a question to BJP on its nationalism

SADHVI PRAGYA THAKUR, accused in the Malegaon terror blasts case, who is out on bail and the BJP's candidate for the Lok Sabha elections in Bhopal, has been issued a show cause notice by the party for her comments hailing Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse as a "patriot". The BJP's disciplinary committee has given her 10 days to respond, reiterated party president Amit Shah at a press conference on Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi by his side. The PM has, separately, condemned Candidate Pragya's remarks. The PM and the party president have publicly disapproved of the Sadhvi's comments, therefore, not long after they staunchly endorsed her controversial candidature. Yet, the BJP's Sadhvi problem may only just have begun.

Pragya Thakur's praise of Godse follows close on the heels of her outrageous claim that it was her curse that sent Hemant Karkare to his death — the Maharashtra ATS officer, who led the probe into the Malegaon blasts case, died fighting terrorists during 26/11. At that time, too, the BJP was compelled to distance itself from her remarks. There is no predicting what the BJP may have to rush to explain or apologise for next — possibly on the floor of the House, if she should win the election. But appointing a permanent spokesperson for apologies for Pragya Thakur's remarks may not be a solution either. The Sadhvi's comments on Gandhi have only brought to the fore a simmering predicament that will not go away. There is a deep strain of unease within the BJP and the Sangh Parivar with Gandhi, and his reputation of the majoritarian claim and ethos, even as the Modi-BJP has set out to appropriate political-cultural icons, especially Gandhi, in order to relegate the Congress. But the problem lies not in debating Gandhi, nor in criticising him. In fact, if anything, his deification as Father of the Nation has meant that a deeply political thinker has not got his due share of disagreement. The problem, really, is that today, the refuting of Gandhi comes wrapped in a toxic nationalism that encourages a sense of seige in the Hindu majority, rides on a historical and cultural illiteracy, and intolerance of the Other, and even emboldens violence.

Those like the Sadhvi were once said to be the BJP's fringe. Today, her elevation in the party is posing a crucial question mark against its moderate space. While a party can carry along internal complexities and contradictions, Pragya Thakur's candidature from Bhopal, and her comments, highlight a larger question that the show cause notice sent to her does little to answer: Does the BJP participate in, does it own up to, her version of desh bhakti, her brand of nationalism? It is not so much the BJP that is asking the Sadhvi to explain herself today. It is the Sadhvi who has posed a question to the BJP on its nationalism that it cannot evade or escape.

10 YEARS LATER

Sri Lanka is still to take steps towards reconciliation and accountability, a decade after the LTTE's defeat

IT IS 10 years since the Sri Lankan military defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam decisively, ending a long and violent chapter in the history of the island nation, one that India was drawn into for a full decade, first on the side of the LTTE, and then against them. The LTTE started off as an insurgency in response to the failure of the country's dominant Sinhala-Buddhist leadership to accommodate Tamil political aspirations. In their quest for an independent Eelam, the Tigers built themselves into a formidable fighting machine that conscripted children and used human shields, as well as a ruthless terrorist group that, with the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, introduced the world to suicide bombs. By the time its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed at the end of the war on May 18, 2009, it had lost all political purpose and had rejected every chance at a peaceful settlement. Prabhakaran had turned it into a cult of the leader. Over three decades, he led the Tamil people into four self-serving "Eelam Wars", for which they paid the heaviest price.

Rid of the LTTE, Sri Lanka could have been magnanimous in its military victory and made efforts to heal the wounds of the Tamil community by addressing immediate post war issues, including accountability in the Sri Lankan forces. Instead, unfazed by international censure, it gave in to a triumphal Sinhala-Buddhist militarism, fanned by the Rajapaksa clan that saw this as the way to perpetuate its own power. President Rajapaksa's 2014 electoral comeuppance was supposed to be Sri Lanka's new dawn. The militarism wound down immediately, and in its first few months, the unlikely coalition of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, seemed ready to do what it would take towards political reconciliation and accountability, including a list of commitments to the UN Human Rights Council. Unfortunately, their bickering with each other ensured that some of those steps remain implemented on paper only, while constitutional reform to address the Tamil political question is stuck.

The Easter bombings, claimed by the ISIS and carried out by what so far seems like an ISIS inspired local group, have rudely destroyed whatever recovery Sri Lanka had managed to make. The aftermath of the attacks that killed more than 250 people have cracked wide open new ethnic faultlines that might have been addressed if the Sri Lankan polity had taken the task of nation-building and constitutional reform after the war as a serious and urgent project. That the top two leaders of the country are still engaged in a game of one-upmanship with each other inspires little confidence.

A MERRIER GAME

AirBadminton could rope in a new demographic, let some fresh air and fun into the court

TAKING A CUE from how the sport grew organically in back lanes and parks, where more recreational players toss around the shuttle than those sweating it out in high-ceilinged indoor courts, AirBadminton is racing towards a 2020 season. This development holds the potential for roping in a new demographic — from untouched corners of Africa and America as well as mixed 3-member teams from the traditional hubs, in a fun format never seen before.

For Indians, these are merry tidings. Not many childhoods have missed out on the hurriedly assembled net and the endless summer afternoons and winter evenings spent playing casually outdoors, with the sole motive of keeping the shuttle in play. Badminton is perhaps the most popular recreational sport right upto the senior citizens category.

This isn't too dissimilar to the 3X3 basketball that Americans indulge in with hoops casually jutting out of outer walls. Or how South America scouts for its footballers — Pele and Maradona were first spotted off the streets. Closer home, Indian outdoor shuttlers are perhaps closest to how Pakistan channels its tape-ball cricketers and routinely unearths 150+ pace bowlers catapulted into the national team. Next to cricket, badminton has been India's second largest participatory sport — perhaps more even, given girls are not kept away from the 'building compound' games. An organised tournament structure for the outdoor sport might well mean that a Pulela Gopichand or Prakash Padukone with their highly trained eye get invited as chief guests to many such breezy AirBadminton outdoor tournaments, and can scout the thousands who for many reasons, financial mostly, never knocked on the doors of the state of the art academies.



KHALED AHMED

THE BIG news on May 8 was that Asia Bibi, acquitted two years ago by the Supreme Court of blasphemy, was finally allowed to leave for Canada to join her already exiled family. She had rotted in jail for eight years as the judges refused to challenge the injustice of Pakistan's infamous Blasphemy Law. What the sessions court had ruled could not be set aside by the High Court either. Even at the Supreme Court, it took a lot of guts to let the innocent woman walk.

A Christian, Asia Bibi was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 under dubious circumstances. She was treated as an untouchable by society, and called unclean because of her religion whereupon a quarrel ensued. She was then accused of insulting the Holy Prophet, triggering prompt police action who put her in jail. A cleric "maulvi" said she had, indeed, blasphemed.

This "black law", Pakistan Penal Code's (PPC) Section 295-C, inserted into the Penal Code by an Act in 1986, has made hundreds rot in jail. It seeks to punish with death individuals who insult the Holy Prophet in "word gesture or innuendo" — it typically targets the minorities in Pakistan.

The Ahmadis, declared a non-Muslim minority in 1974, collectively insult the Prophet by allegedly violating the doctrine that he was the last prophet. All Christians, by reason of their belief in the Old Testament, attract death penalty because the Old Testament, which the Muslims believe is fake, contains insulting references to the prophets mentioned in the Quran. All the Shia community, who disagree on the status of the Companions of the Prophet, by innu-

CURSE OF THE BLACK LAW

Asia Bibi's plight retrains the spotlight on Pakistan's Blasphemy Law

endo insult the Holy Prophet, and therefore may be collectively liable to be punished under the law.

Since "insult" happens by innuendo, desecration of the Holy Quran can also be converted to "insult" if the judge so decides. Hundreds of cases where the Christian community has been assaulted by mobs, relate to the dispossession of land, removal from job, plunder and rape. Most cases have been reported in the press with a slant that goes against the minority community. The police have, more often than not, joined hands with the mobs to persecute the Christians, and the judges have passed unfair judgements under pressure from groups pursuing vengeance through the Law.

When the accused have been awarded bail, they have been either attacked and wounded or killed, thus establishing the trend of not awarding bail to the accused. The biggest flaw in the law, apart from conviction on the basis of innuendo, is its FIR, used by the semi-literate police officer to arrest individuals whom he is unable to protect from the mob. Or, he leverages it to let off individuals on the payment of a heavy bribe.

Why is Pakistan doing it? The latest wisdom is that the majority community wishes to retain or enhance its identity through what social scientist Francis Fukuyama calls "isothymia" or the collective urge to be recognised as "equal". He explains the injustice arising out of this urge: "Contemporary identity politics is driven by the quest for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalised by their societies. But that desire for equal recognition can easily slide over into a

demand or recognition of the group's superiority. This is a large part of the story of nationalism and national identity, as well as certain forms of extremist religious politics today."

India follows in the footsteps of Pakistan in setting aside what its founding fathers had sought to avoid while writing its constitution. The violence unleashed against the minorities by mobs in the streets while no existing law supports or allows it, is the new "identity" trend. Fukuyama says: "National identities can be built around liberal and democratic political values, and the common experiences that provide the connective tissue around which diverse communities can thrive. India, France, and the United States are examples of countries that have tried to do this. Such an inclusive sense of national identity remains critical for the maintenance of a successful modern political order for a number of reasons."

Most Indians who react negatively to my opinion in *The Indian Express* express nothing but contempt for Pakistan. But it is shocking how most Indian critics of Pakistan forget the imitative groove into which India itself has fallen despite the fact that India has no comparable Blasphemy Law dishing out death as the minimum punishment.

Pakistan is trapped. Its top judiciary, when not named by Islamists, lets the victims walk after an average period of six to eight years in jail. But a victim can get presented before a court manned by "pious" judges, in which case, he is sure to go to his death.

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MAY 18, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

ABSENT SIR

GOVERNMENT WHIPS WERE under severe criticism from within the Janata Party in Parliament over the defeat of the Constitution's 46th Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha today. Judging from the vote, there was no difference of opinion in the party or in Parliament over the amendment which seeks to give statutory status to the Minority Commission and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission. Yet the bill fell through because not even the minimum 273 members were present in the House at the time of voting. Nearly 280 Janata members of the Lok Sabha were in town last night to cast their vote in the JPP polls, but in the House

today, out of the 205 members who voted for the Constitution Amendment Bill, not more than 180 members could be from the Janata Party, which had the main responsibility in seeing the official bill through.

SPECIAL COURTS BILL

THE PRESIDENT GAVE his assent to the Special Courts Bill that was passed by the Lok Sabha last week. The bill, which will be gazetted tonight as the Special Courts Act, paves the way for the early trial of Indira Gandhi, her son Sanjay Gandhi and some of her Emergency associates. The government is initiating steps to set up three special courts in Delhi. The Chief Justice of India and

the Chief Justice of Delhi High Court have been requested to nominate three sitting judges to these courts.

ALIGARH VIOLENCE

SOME PARLIAMENT MEMBERS are responsible for incitement in the incident that occurred in Aligarh, recently. The minister of state for home affairs, S D Patil, said in the Rajya Sabha today that he had information that "certain honourable members did incite." He did not name them and no member pressed him to say who they are. He was replying during the nearly five-hour long discussion on the incidents resulting in the closure of Aligarh Muslim University.

Dividing to rule

The contemporary use of the policy of divide and rule demonstrates the persistence of the temptation colonial rulers had given in to



KRISHNA KUMAR

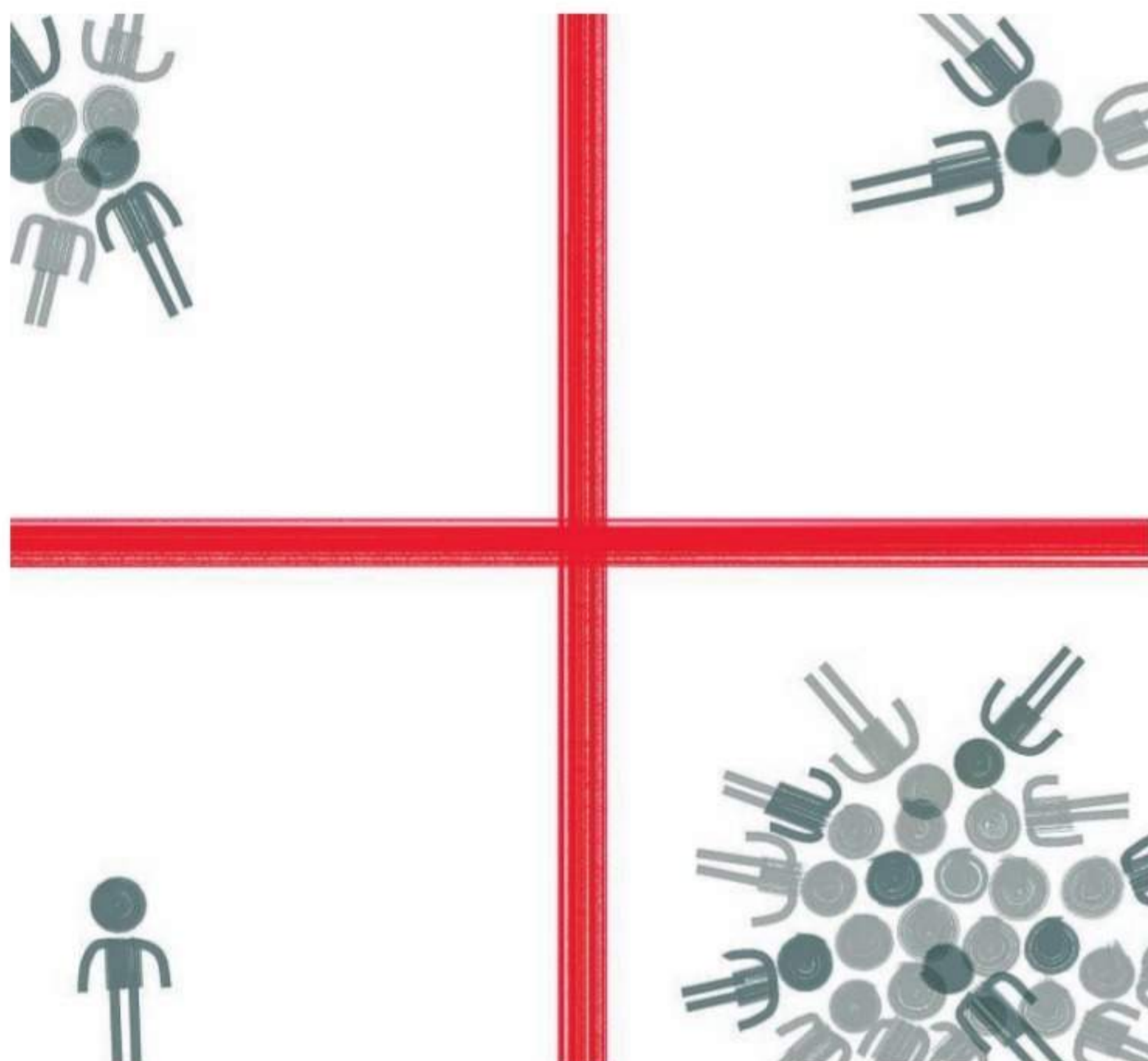
"BEG TO DIFFER" was one of the many phrases that made no sense but you had to get used to them in order to learn English. That this phrase would one day become essential had never occurred to me. Now it has. I feel like using it all the time these days. Differing from another person in public is full of risk, so if begging secures you some kindness in advance, there is no harm in begging. This is, of course, not why an English gentleman said, "I beg to differ".

Many old expressions that have gone out of use in the native land of the English continue to be used in India. Our system of education keeps them alive. They are regularly used in administration, police procedures and in the judiciary. As an English-using nation, our status has improved and many of our English writers are treated as mother-tongue speakers.

Consider the staple of colonial history. The English practised a divide and rule policy, according to several Class 8 history textbooks. According to them, Partition was a consequence of this policy. If that is so, why are we doing the same thing now? Divide and rule seems to have become the winning ideology of the current election. We call it differently now. The term preferred by television anchors and the press is polarisation. They say the outcome of this election will depend on the extent to which the polarising rhetoric of the ruling party succeeds. Other parties are also said to be following this approach except they are polarising along regional or caste lines.

If this is indeed a continuation of colonial strategies, we should return to authors like Paul Scott and Albert Memmi. I read the latter in a course on Third World development. Along with Franz Fanon, Memmi made immense sense though both these authors were concerned with Africa. The story of India was different from that of Africa and Latin America, but there were continuities too. The ones in economic relations between the colonisers and the colonised were easy to notice and grasp. Not so visible were the psychological parallels, especially because figures like Gandhi made India look and feel different from anywhere else. He seemed to have given India a new identity, putting the fear of imperial power at rest. Memmi's thesis was that loss of identity and fear push the colonised towards religion. If Gandhi averted that fate for India, his success was neither total nor permanent. Had it been so, the colonial formula of divide and rule on religious lines wouldn't have come back to haunt this election.

Having taught colonialism for over two decades, I am used to facing the criticism that it is an irrelevant topic. The fact that the system of education continues to carry numerous marks of its colonial legacy does not make colonialism a worthwhile topic of study. Unless you present it as history, you can't get very far with students who believe that colonialism ended when India gained freedom. They attribute its living legacies to inefficient administrators and politicians. It doesn't help much either if you try to distinguish colonial rule from colonial relations



C R Sasikummar

and the ideology they signify. Gandhi's critique of the colonial worldview arouses some interest in the few who agree to wonder why education does not fortify people against divisive propaganda. Indeed, the view that the common people are emotional and their hearts are more important for votes than their minds is also a colonial legacy. Many senior British administrators were guided by the stereotype of Indians as emotionally driven people, lacking rationality. This stereotype gained popularity among Indians who started to identify with colonial masters, not just in lifestyle but in ideas and perceptions too.

An important distinction needs to be made about election propaganda. Identity politics is part of a much larger social phenomenon. It has grown in recent decades in response to the growth of collective self-awareness and communication among dispersed members of communities. Creation of vote banks along caste lines is one thing; actively promoting religious otherness is quite different. The emotive potential of the two processes also differs. In the first case, people who see their caste identity as means of consolidating their material interests come together without necessarily hating others who identify with a different voting collective. In the case of divisive otherness along religious lines, inimical feelings are mixed with anger and aggression.

The advantage that colonial rulers derived by using divide and rule policies was that they weakened resistance. What advan-

Our diversity alone will save us when divide and rule is back in business. No emotion seems to last long in a diverse social landscape. Nor does any emotional mood cover India's territorial vastness. Even during patches of war, such as 1962, 1965 and 1971, the awareness of problems like water and food shortage was quite widespread. Regional issues remained sharply capable of influencing politics. This is unlikely to change, and the current phase is particularly prone to the force of diversity.

tage can a divide and rule strategy offer today? It will make India less governable even if you win one more chance to govern it by putting the coloniser's strategy to fresh use. It will also weaken the state apparatus. Institutions in charge of maintaining law and order have not outgrown the legacy and shadow of colonial history. As recent events show, even institutions that directly manage the electoral process now prefer to overlook than intervene.

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The author is a former director of NCERT and a Hindi writer

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Brexit is obviously important, but it seems clearer now that the only way it will be resolved is through a fresh referendum." — THE INDEPENDENT

It's about social justice, not welfare

To fulfill constitutional requirement, reservation must be based on a rigorous identification of economic backwardness



ABUSALEH SHARIFF AND MOHSIN ALAM BHAT

THE INTRODUCTION OF the 124th constitutional amendment that provides the possibility of quotas for the "economically weaker sections" (EWS) has rekindled the debate on reservations. These quotas diverge from reservation policies for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other socially and educationally backward classes, by jettisoning caste or community identity as the basis of identifying beneficiary groups.

Parliament's power to amend the Constitution is limited by the basic structure doctrine, according to which no law can violate the Constitution's essential features. In order to meet the established constitutional parameters, the conceptualisation and implementation of EWS reservations must satisfy the principle of equality and the constitutional mandate of social justice that are basic features of the Constitution.

Before the Supreme Court approved caste as the basis of defining "socially and educationally backward classes" or OBCs in 1992, caste reservations beyond SCs and STs had attracted controversy. In the *Indra Sawhney* case, the Court held that reservations were designed, among other things, to provide a share in power and representation to the classes, which were historically excluded from such avenues.

The key to the acceptance of a caste-based interpretation of the OBC category was the Court's endorsement of the Mandal Commission's argument that a low caste status represented a form of marginalisation that was so entrenched and trans-generational that it could not be dismantled by either being blind to it, or only through welfare measures. The Court's observation that reservations are not poverty alleviation programmes should be interpreted in this light. Reservations are particularly ineffective for distributing economic benefits, but more meaningful in distributing opportunities, as a matter of representation, among the marginalised classes which do not have an adequate share in governance.

These conclusions led the Court to also hold that reservation policies must be based on empirically-sound and rigorously-applied criteria of backwardness. The implementation of the EWS category must thus involve a rigorous empirical process of identifying the criteria of economic backwardness. It cannot be just about relative poverty or poverty plain and simple, but must indicate compelling forms of trans-generational poverty that demand measures beyond welfare policies. Only this conceptualisation and procedure will be able to justify the requirements of equality and social justice.

The present models adopted by the Centre and state governments violate these standards. The government has not consti-

tuted any commission to conduct a rigorous empirical analysis and instead has chosen income and asset criteria by fiat. They also run into practical and conceptual problems.

Let us take the income criteria. Practically, the income criteria is unworkable owing to the difficulty in assessing personal incomes in India and the fact that only a fraction of the population pays income tax. In 2018, only 8.3 per cent of the total labour force paid income tax, which in all likelihood were employed in the organised sector. The threshold of Rs 8 lakh per annum that is being touted as the income qualification may end up including everyone but the top few percentage of the Indian population. If 95 per cent of India's population technically fits into the category, the category has definitely not been defined in a meaningful fashion that can serve an affirmative action scheme.

The problem is not so much in the threshold of income but in determining EWS on a single axis like income or asset holding. This will be severely inadequate in identifying the sections that suffer from trans-generational economic disadvantages that place severe barriers in equal participation and opportunity. It is only for this latter class of citizens that the government can make a persuasive case of reservations above and beyond welfare measures as a matter of equality and social justice.

So, is it possible to create an index of economic indicators that adequately define EWS on these lines? The Mandal Commission's recommendations were unprecedented in boiling down the complexity of social stratification in India into measurable indicators of social, educational and economic backwardness. Defining EWS will also be a challenging exercise, but far from being impossible provided a commission is allowed to evolve appropriate criteria and methodologies.

Some possibilities are relatively easy to start with. Rakesh Basant, an economist who was also a member of Sachar Committee, has argued that parental education has a strong impact on higher education participation, much higher than even caste or community affiliation. Other economic criteria can supplement parental education status to prepare a composite index of EWS. These could include households headed by females, applicants who belong to rural areas, individuals or households located in notified slums, whose primary income source is manual labour, and who are migrants from poorer states like UP, Bihar or West Bengal. The index can also contain disqualifications for the creamy layer — ones that exclude households which own a specified portion of land or own living quarters of specified size in cities and towns, an automobile, or have at least one family member with a group A or B job with the Central or state government.

The EWS reservations could add a desirable dimension to India's reservation scheme. But this would depend on whether the policy is implemented scrupulously in line with the fundamental constitutional precepts.

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SOWMIYA ASHOK

Drowning in the current

Nuanced interventions, not bureaucratic silos, will help to clean the Ganga

IN NOVEMBER LAST year, three men from Bihar entered a drain in Varanasi. They were promised Rs 5,000 each, quick income in time for their visit home for Chhath Puja. Within the hour, two of them fainted, and died from the noxious gases. Their cousin, who escaped with a broken leg, told me that they were daily wagers who worked only on construction sites. They were not equipped to enter drains.

But on that day, they were rounded up, and promised more money to break a concrete wall inside a large drain that would divert sewage towards the Dinapur Sewage Treatment Plant (STP). The work was part of a Rs 34-crore sewage network, contracted locally under the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG). But no safety equipment was provided to any of them. Two days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew to Varanasi to inaugurate the STP at Dinapur as part of his government's efforts to clean the Ganga. The men's names found no mention in the FIR filed four days after the incident.

On April 26, when Modi filed his nomination to contest once again from Varanasi in the ongoing general elections, he told an *Aaj Tak* reporter that "water should also be a festival". "In the past, water bodies were worshipped. Had these left liberals treated (the) Ganga like mother, nobody would have polluted the river," he said. "Indians considered the Ganga to be so holy that it would wash sins. Throwing trash into the Ganga should

be stopped. Sewage should not flow into the Ganga. I have focussed on that, the results are there to see."

But what about all those people who might think of the Ganga as their mother? What about their source of livelihood for that hour, day, week, month, year, or even lifetime? For those men from Bihar, tasked to smash a wall inside a drain, it was wages that would pay for a child's tuition, a parent's ailment. This is the case for several other men and women who live and work along a river that flows over 2,200 kms across five states. They serve as the frontline staff who carry out the dirty work during festivals, like the Kumbh Mela, so that politicians can later take credit in campaign speeches.

Take Kanpur, for example. Six writ petitions have been filed over the last nine years by a supervisor, an operator, a scrubber operator, a safai karamchari, and two pump operators at the Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) in Jajmau.

These petitions have demanded regularisation of work, better pay, health benefits, and provident fund options for the 200-odd men who manage a plant that treats tannery waste laced with chromium in the most polluted city along the river. The men are sick, and have been getting sicker over the last two decades — skin disorders, lung problems, heart conditions. They showed me the pills they take, the prescriptions they carry in their shirt pockets,

the contaminated bore-well water they cannot drink. Nobody eats vegetables grown in Jajmau.

Many of them have worked at the CETP for nearly two decades and speak fondly about a river on the banks of which they grew up. Eighty per cent of the funds (nearly Rs 20,000 crore) sanctioned under the NMCG, till six months ago, had gone towards putting in place sewage infrastructure — an integral part of which is the labour that runs the show. They bear the brunt to make the Ganga safe and clean for those who have the privilege to worship the river as their mother.

If the goal is to have a cleaner river, the objective should be to make more nuanced interventions. The cleanliness of the river on the ground is driven by engineering. The on-site senior engineers at STPs, overwhelmingly men from mechanical and electrical backgrounds, think of cleanliness "within norms". It narrows down to checking boxes after parameters have been met.

This does not consider the health of the worker, the health of the river from an environmental standpoint or ensuring that the processes in place work smoothly. The responsibility for cleaning the river instead seems to be cordoned off, contained within the compound walls of the executing agencies across the cities that I visited.

The official version of how the system works is straightforward: Intercepting pol-

luting drains, diverting and capturing it at a particular place, pumping it towards an STP, and treating the sewage to reduce the level of contaminants before pouring it back into the river. It is a policy that works perfectly in theory, but encounters hiccups in sprawling cities which have a chronic plastic pollution problem and where numerous houses are not connected to the sewerage network.

An interaction I witnessed in Kanpur between two officials, one from the Jal Nigam and another from the Kanpur Nagar Nigam, arguing over who is responsible for keeping solid waste out of the drain, was telling. The officials disagreed on how to ensure that people don't dump waste into the drain.

Meanwhile, behind them, sitting on a low wall of the Sisamau Nallah was Barkun Nisha. "All the city waste flows into the drain," she told me. "People throw mattresses and anything else they want to dispose off. In the monsoon, we wade through sewage in our homes because the drain overflows into our homes."

Behind her, a Nagar Nigam truck clips a fork claw into the drain and excavates solid waste and dumps it in the truck. There was no clear idea as to where the waste will be taken. Residents gather to watch — children are pushed back for their safety. Someone shared a story of a child having fallen into the drain 30 years ago, and found floating on the Ganga.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WORRYING CHANGE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A new poriborton' (IE, May 17). West Bengal was exceptionally peaceful after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots. It is now communally charged. The TMC has inflicted violence on cadres of other parties. The destruction of Vidyasagar's statue signifies the growing intolerance in the state.

Vasant Nalawade, Satara

JUDGING JUDGES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Undue criticism,' (IE, May 13). One wonders whether the writer took into account the fact that being procedurally correct need not necessarily mean being fair and just. The fact that the procedure laid down by the court does not allow engaging a lawyer by the complainant should be reason enough for questioning it. The writer's idea that we should trust our judges if we want our democracy to function is worrying. Democracy is not about trusting individuals but respecting the rule of law and law cannot be divorced from justice. Judges must also be judged by the same yard sticks we use for others, especially in the matter of sexual harassment cases.

Apurba K Baruah, Guwahati

WORK IN PROGRESS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'IBC hits and misses' (IE, May 16). There is no

LETTER OF THE WEEK

COURT AND SOCIETY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Undue criticism' (IE, May 14). Since 1999, when the in-house procedure of the Supreme Court evolved an informal inquiry procedure (which the eminent jurist describes as "peer review") much has changed with respect to legal provisions to prevent sexual harassment of women in work places. The Me Too Movement has shown that workplaces have not yet become safe for women. The skewed gender ratio in the higher judiciary would impinge on the peer review procedures as well. It is time that the SC evolved procedures to enforce on itself the standards of women's rights it sets for the society.

Shruti George, Jaipur

doubt that IBC is the best thing to happen as far as bad debt resolution is concerned. A recovery of Rs 70,000 crore is an indication of the same. It will take time to evolve. All stakeholders should strive to reduce the resolution time and bring it as close to 270 days.

Bal Govind, Noida