## Preventing violence

A law to protect doctors is good, and a health-care upgrade is essential

All it took West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to end the week-long strike by junior doctors in the State was a meeting with the agitating medicos and a credible assurance that their safety was a priority for her government. The attack on a junior doctor on June 10 over the death of a patient had sparked the agitation, which spread to other parts of the country when it appeared that the State government was reluctant to negotiate with the striking doctors. Now that Ms. Banerjee has reached out to young doctors and conceded that their demands are genuine, the government, in West Bengal and elsewhere, must focus on addressing the deficiencies afflicting the health-care system as a whole. Reprisal attacks on doctors by agitated relatives of patients who die during treatment are known to happen. Such violence is invariably the result of systemic problems that adversely affect optimal attention to patients, such as infrastructural and manpower constraints. It is apparent that doctors work in stressful environments, sometimes under political pressure with regard to admissions. Several States have enacted laws to protect doctors and other health-care personnel from violence. Last week, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan wrote to State governments highlighting the need for stringent action against anyone who assaults doctors. He asked States that do not have a law to protect doctors against violence to enact one, and circulated a 2017 draft of a law that envisaged imprisonment besides recovery of compensation from perpetrators for loss or damage to property.

However, is such a law really effective? Ironically, West Bengal, the epicentre of a strike that involved nearly the entire medical fraternity across the country, has such a law too. Like the law in most other States, the West Bengal Act provides for a three-year prison term and a fine, which could go up to ₹50,000, to anyone indulging in violence against any "medicare service person", which covers doctors, nurses, medical and nursing students and paramedical staff. The offence is cognisable and non-bailable. It also provides for recovery of compensation for loss. Many other States have similar laws, with the one in Tamil Nadu providing for a prison term that could go up to 10 years. It is clear that having this law did not prevent the incident that sparked the latest agitation. There are no figures available on how many times the medical service person protection law has been invoked. In any case, causing simple or grievous injuries to anyone is a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code. Treating the issue as a law and order problem is just one way. The real solution may lie in improving health infrastructure, counselling patients about possible adverse treatment outcomes, and providing basic security in medical institutions.

## Organisation men

J.P. Nadda's elevation as BJP working president reveals the party's long-term goals

The appointment of J.P. Nadda as the Bharatiya Janata Party's working president is proof yet again that it does not leave anything to chance in the relentless pursuit of its politics. Union Home Minister Amit Shah will continue as party president until his term ends in December 2019, when Mr. Nadda is expected to succeed him. Mr. Shah has been Prime Minister Narendra Modi's close confidant and strategist for several years, and an architect of the party's Lok Sabha victories in 2014 and 2019. The decision to appoint a working president, as Mr. Shah would not be always available for party work, is a sign of the importance the BJP and its ideological mother ship, the RSS, attach to organisation. Except for the communist units, this is in contrast with the general nature of all other parties, which give limited attention to organisation-building. The RSS had meticulously assigned distinct roles to the multiple outfits that it floated over the decades, all converging into the larger stream of Hindutva politics. The BJP's emergence as the primary pole of Indian politics through sweeping victories in two consecutive general elections could strain the organisational edifice of the Sangh Parivar, but not immediately. The orderly, clinical manner in which Mr. Nadda was selected, with the concurrence and prompting of the RSS, demonstrates the Parivar's ability to be clear-eyed in its priorities.

Hindutva politics does not see power as an end in itself but as a tool to advance its ideological goals. Also, individual ambitions are expected to be subordinate to organisational priorities. The rise of Mr. Modi with Mr. Shah alongside, and their combined role in the party's outstanding electoral performances in recent years, have inspired commentaries that put them on a pedestal. Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah will remain in command of the overall scheme of things, and Mr. Nadda, by all accounts, is a proven loyalist to both of them. At the same time, by promoting a new power centre the BJP is also demonstrating that individuals are not indispensable despite the commanding authority and presence of the two big leaders. Mr. Nadda is not as combative as Mr. Shah but is as disciplined, a trait that he imbibed through his long association with the RSS. His elevation is also a continuation of the BJP's efforts to promote leaders who have spent more time in the States than in Delhi – Himachal Pradesh in Mr. Nadda's case. The selection of Thawar Chand Gehlot as the BJP's leader in the Rajya Sabha is also remarkable in this context. A Dalit who came up from a small town through the trade union wing of the RSS, he is an outlier in the Upper House's general character, which is metropolitan, upper class and usually upper caste. Mr. Shah recently stated that the BJP has not yet peaked. The organisational changes are evidently being made in that belief.

# An idea whose time may not have come

But the debate on simultaneous elections is useful — it could throw up other reforms to cleanse the electoral process

S.Y. QURAISHI

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Not even a month after the world's largest elections in history were over, the debate around "one nation, one election" has been resurrected. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had continued to flag the issue for the last five years, has now called for a meeting on the subject with leaders of other political parties.

The 2014 manifesto of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) read: "The BJP will seek, through consultation with other parties, to evolve a method of holding Assembly and Lok Sabha elections simultaneously. Apart from reducing election expenses for both political parties and Government, this will ensure certain stability for State Governments."

### Constant campaigners

In an interview with a news channel in January 2018, the Prime Minister had rightly highlighted the demerits of the country being in constant election mode. "One election finishes, the second starts," he said. He argued that having simultaneous Parliament, Assembly, civic and Panchayat polls once every five years and completed within a month or so would save money, resources and manpower. This, he pointed out, happened on account of a large section of the security forces, bureaucracy and political machinery having to be mobilised for up to 200 days a year on account of electioneering.

The BJP's 2019 manifesto also mentions that simultaneous elections for Parliament, State Assemblies and local bodies to "ensure efficient utilisation of government resources and security forces and... effective policy planning". It goes on to say that the party "will try to build consensus on this issue with all parties". It is in this spirit of reform and consensus building that the Prime Minister has revived this debate, calling an all-party meeting for discussions on June 19.

The re-elected Chief Minister of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik, has already welcomed the idea, saying, on June 15, that frequent elections affect the development climate, and hence it is better to have simultaneous elections in the country.

The Law Commission had recommended simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and the local bodies as far back as in 1999. The BJP's L.K. Advani also supported the idea back in 2010 in an eloquent blog post. The matter was examined by a Parliamentary Standing Committee in December 2015, and was also referred to the Election Commission of India (EC). Both supported it in principle.

### Genuine concerns

The concerns raised are indeed genuine, and the idea is worth debating. First, it is becoming more and more difficult to contest elections. The 2019 general election was the most expensive on record; a whopping ₹60,000 crore was reportedly spent on the whole exercise. Given that there is no cap on the expenditure incurred by political parties, they spend obscene amounts of money in every election. It is argued that simultaneous elections would help reduce this cost.

Second, frequent elections hamper the normal functioning of the government and disrupt civic life. This happens because the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) comes into operation as soon as the EC announces the election dates. This means that the government cannot announce any new schemes during this period. This results in what is often referred to as a policy paralysis. The government cannot make any new appointments or transfer/ appoint officials. The entire government manpower is involved in the conduct of elections.

I would also like to add that elections are the time when communalism, casteism and corruption are at their peak. Frequent elections mean that there is no respite from these evils at all. This has directly resulted in the souring of the political discourse, something that was on full display during the 2019 general election.

From the point of view of EC, simultaneous elections make perfect sense because the voters for all three tiers are the same, polling booths are the same and staff/security is the same – the suggestion of "one nation, one election" seems logical.

### The hurdles

The idea, however, has some hurdles. First, how will "one nation, one election" work in case of premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha, for instance, as happened in late 1990s when the House was dissolved long before its term of five years was over? In such an eventuality, would we also dissolve all State Assemblies? Similarly, what happens when one of the State Assemblies is dissolved? Will the entire country go to polls again? This sounds unworkable both in theory and in the practice of democracy.

Second, as for the implementation of schemes of the government during the MCC period, only the new schemes are stopped as these could be tantamount to enticing/ bribing voters on the eve of elections. All ongoing programmes are unhindered. Even new announcements that are in urgent public interest can be made with the prior approval of the EC.

Additionally, frequent elections are not so bad for accountability after all. They ensure that the politicians have to show their faces to voters regularly. Creation of work opportunities at the grass-root level is another big upside. The most important consideration is undoubtedly the federal spirit, which, inter alia, requires that local and national issues are not mixed up.

Now, as the debate has been rekindled, wider deliberation on the need for a range of reforms must be considered. Till the idea achieves political consensus, there are two alternative suggestions to deal with the problems that arise due to frequent elections.

First, the problem of uncontrolled campaign expenditure can be remedied by introducing a cap on expenditure by political parties. State funding of political parties based on their poll performance also is a suggestion worth considering. Private and corporate fund collection may be banned.

Second, as I have suggested elsewhere, the poll duration can be reduced from two-three months to about 33 to 35 days if more Central armed police forces can be provided. The problems associated with a multi-phased election have been getting compounded, with more issues being added to the list with every election. Violence, social media-related transgressions and issues related to the enforcement of the MCC which are unavoidable in a staggered election will vanish if the election is conducted in a single day. All that needs to be done is to raise more battalions. This will also help in job creation.

### A healthy debate

To conclude, it is undeniable that simultaneous elections would be a far-reaching electoral reform. If it is to be implemented, there needs to be a solid political consensus, and an agenda of comprehensive electoral reforms should supplement it. The pros and cons need to be appropriately assessed and practical alternatives sincerely considered. It is good that the government continues to encourage a debate on the subject rather than forcibly pushing it through.

*S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the author of 'An Undocumented Wonder – the Making of the Great Indian Election'*

# Building confidence, BIT by BIT

Indian bilateral investment treaties need to strike a balance between foreign investor interests and those of the state

PRABHASH RANJAN

As Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs Nirmala Sitharaman gets ready to present the first budget of the 17th Lok Sabha, she faces enormous challenges. The GDP growth rate is at a five-year low, domestic consumption is sinking, the business confidence index has plunged, and India has recorded its highest unemployment rate in the last 45 years. To add to this list of woes is a claim made by Arvind Subramanian, India's former Chief Economic Adviser, that India's GDP has been overestimated. Foreign direct investment (FDI) equity inflows to India in 2018-19 contracted by 1%, according to the government's own data. After an increase of 22% and 35% in 2014-15 and 2015-16, respectively, FDI equity inflows began tapering off since 2016-17 with the growth rate falling to 9% and then to 3% in 2017-18.

### Lost opportunity

This contraction in FDI inflows comes at a time when global supply chains are shifting base as a result of the ongoing trade war between the U.S. and China. India has failed to attract firms exiting China. Many of these supply chains have relocated to Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia. India is clearly not the natural/first option for these firms for a host of reasons, such as poor infrastructure, rigid land and labour laws, a deepening crisis in the banking sector and a lack of structural economic reforms.

The decline in the FDI growth rate, despite the well-advertised improvement in India's ease of doing business rankings, interestingly, has coincided with India's decision, in 2016, to unilaterally terminate bilateral investment treaties (BITs) with more than 60 countries; this is around 50% of the total unilateral termination of BITs globally from 2010 to 2018. Unilateral termination of BITs on such a mass scale projects India as a country that does not respect international law. India also adopted a new inward-looking Model BIT in 2016 that prioritises state interests over protection to foreign investment.

In the absence of empirical evidence, one cannot conclude that termination of BITs and adoption of a state-friendly Model BIT adversely impacted FDI inflows. Nonetheless, since studies have shown that BITs positively impacted foreign investment inflows to India, an examination of the link between the two should be a high priority for the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Affairs – the nodal body dealing with BITs.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The decision to terminate BITs and adopt a state-friendly Model BIT was a reaction to India being sued by several foreign investors before international arbitration tribunals. The government concluded that these claims were an outcome of India's badly designed BITs, signed in the 1990s and 2000s that were based on a laissez faire template.

### Bad regulation

True, India's BITs gave extensive protection to foreign investment with scant regard for state's interests – a characteristically neoliberal model. This design flaw could have been corrected by India negotiating new balanced treaties and then replacing the existing ones with the new ones instead of terminating them unilaterally, which has created a vacuum. Importantly, the design flaw was not the real reason for the increasing number of BIT claims. A large number arose either because the judiciary could not get its act together (an example being inordinate delays in deciding on the enforceability of arbitration awards) or because it ruled in certain cases without examining India's BIT obligations such as en masse cancellation of the second generation telecom licences in 2012. Likewise, the executive – the Manmohan Singh government – got the income tax laws retrospectively amended in 2012 to overrule the Supreme Court's judgment in favour of Vodafone and cancelled Devas Multimedia's spectrum licences in 2011 without following due process, thus adversely impacting Mauritian and German investors.

These cases are examples of bad state regulation. They also reveal an absence of full knowledge of India's obligations under BITs by different state entities. Thus, the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Affairs should invest extensively in developing state capacity so that the Indian state starts internalising BITs and is not caught on the wrong foot before an international tribunal.

In correcting the pro-investor imbalance in India's BITs, India went to the other extreme and created a pro-state imbalance as evident in the Model BIT.

### For a four point plan

Correcting this imbalance should be high on the reform agenda of the government. 'Progressive capitalism' (channeling the power of the market to serve society, as explained by Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz) provides the right template. Indian BITs should strike a balance between interests of foreign investors and those of the state. A certain degree of arrogance and misplaced self-belief that foreign investors would flock to India despite shocks and surprises in the regulatory environment should be put to rest. Clarity, continuity and transparency in domestic regulations and a commitment to a balanced BIT framework would help India project itself as a nation committed to the rule of law, both domestically and internationally, and thus shore up investor confidence. As the 2019 World Investment Report confirms, since India is fast becoming a leading outward investor, balanced BITs would also help in protecting Indian investment abroad.

*Prabhash Ranjan teaches at South Asian University and is the author of 'India and Bilateral Investment Treaties: Refusal, Acceptance, Backlash'*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Bihar deaths

If proved to be true, the dereliction of health-care duties in Bihar is unpardonable as it has resulted in over 90 precious lives being lost (Editorial, "The litchi link?", June 18). In India, life is cheap and the underprivileged are almost like the cat with nine lives. It is shocking that simple treatment is not delivered. Even more appalling are the flimsy excuses being used in defence such as the heat wave. Such lapses harm the credibility of the medical fraternity and the outcome is ugly episodes of the West Bengal hospital-type.

DEEPAK SINGHAL
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

■ Undernourishment is a major problem in India, with alarming data on underweight, stunted and wasted children in Bihar. The POSHAN Abhiyaan, which "is a multi-ministerial convergence mission with the vision to ensure attainment of malnutrition-free India by 2022", must reach every corner of India. On the lines of the Right to Education, a 'right to nutritious food' should also be implemented for children below five.

BALAJI AKIRI,
Hyderabad

■ It is unfortunate that announcements made in 2014 about improving the infrastructure in health facilities have still not been met. There are large gaps in the infrastructure. The doctor-patient ratio is way below what is required. It is the same situation forparamedical staff. Technical facilities too are below par, a reflection of the apathy towards the poor in a region known for health-care issues. A long-term strategy must also include special investigative procedures (including autopsy) to reach the causes of such events quickly. The government needs to increase public spending on health.

DR. ARUN MITRA,
Ludhiana, Punjab

### GM farming

We should not forget that farmers' fields are not botanical gardens (Editorial page, "Serious concerns about Bt brinjal", June 18). Farmers do practise artificial ways and means to grow crops. Brinjal has the one of the most diverse germplasms in the plant world, so fears about its gene erosion appear to be misplaced. As far as nutrition issues are concerned, it may be incorrect to say that GM crops will have low nutrition. The WHO itself is taking an active role in exploiting biotechnology. One should also not forget that there are proper guidelines that have been set by the Codex Alimentarius guidelines on safety assessment of GM foods. We should at least consider the success of the U.S. where 93% of soyabean and maize that is used is GM.

ARJUN SHARMA,
Bathinda, Punjab

### Chennai's water woes

The water problem in Chennai began around the late 1950s with the installation of public taps, often below ground level. Then came the hand pump followed by small borewells. Fortunately the groundwater level was by and large satisfactory. Trouble began to brew when the population crossed the five-lakh mark. The 'water history' of Chennai for the past 50 years can be characterised by good rains, floods and a few droughts in between. But the response to the drought this year is a reflection of apathy, inaction, lack of imagination and a total lack of planning. Of course, water tanker owners have hit a gold mine. What is shameful is the absence of a sustainable plan to reverse this disgraceful situation.

S. RAJAGOPALAN,
Chennai

■ In some of the extensive coverage being given to the 2019 water crisis in Chennai (Chennai city pages), I disagree with the opinion expressed (June 14) that rainwater harvesting (RWH) systems alone could have saved the city; we have not had even a drop of rain in the last six months. I say this as a former director of the IMD. Lack of periodic maintenance of RWH systems is essentially about cleaning rainwater filter systems (less than a cubic metre) and replacing the blue metal and sand, which costs a fraction of the total initial cost of a RWH system. This must be done by the dedicated maintenance group. If all RWH installations in the city are kept in working condition during the next six months and if the North East monsoon does not disappoint us, we can hope for a fairly comfortable summer next year.

D.V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

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**CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:**

The second deck headline in the report, "Priyanka's outburst panned, but party men back her" (June 16, 2019, some editions), erroneously referred to byelections due in 11 *Lok Sabha* seats in Uttar Pradesh. The text, however, correctly talks about a clutch of byelections to the *Assembly* that are due.

"Modi to meet Xi, Putin at SCO" (June 11, 2019) erroneously referred to Sooronbay Jeenbekov as the *Uzbekistan* President. He is the President of the *Kyrgyz Republic*.

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# Averting deaths in Muzaffarpur

## All it could have taken was to ensure that the children had a meal at night

T. JACOB JOHN

PTI

Along with my colleagues, I had investigated the so-called mystery disease in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, during its outbreak in 2012, 2013 and 2014. The local name for it was acute encephalitis syndrome, but we found that the disease was not encephalitis but encephalopathy. This distinction is important. Encephalitis results from a viral infection, unless proved otherwise. The pathology is primarily in the brain. Encephalopathy is a biochemical disease, unless proved otherwise. The primary pathology is not in the brain. Specific treatment is scanty for viral encephalitis, but encephalopathy is eminently treatable.

Hypoglycaemia (when the level of glucose in the blood falls below normal) is usually due to an overdose of insulin in children with diabetes. It is easily corrected with oral sugar or intravenous glucose. The easily available 5% glucose solution suffices. Hypoglycaemic encephalopathy, however, is different from simple hypoglycaemia.

### The disease pathway

We found that the disease broke out during the months when litchi was harvested, i.e. April, May and June. Muzaffarpur is full of litchi orchards. The illness started suddenly – children were found vomiting, displayed abnormal movements, were semi-conscious, and were convulsing between 4 a.m. and 7 a.m. The disease progressed fast – children went into coma and died within a few days. When sick children were tested, the blood glucose level was always below normal.

This disease was reminiscent of the Jamaican Vomiting Disease, a form of hypoglycaemic encephalopathy. It is triggered when unripe ackee fruits are eaten. These fruits contain a substance, methylene cyclopropyl alanine, which blocks a biochemical process called fatty acid oxidation, or gluconeogenesis.

There are two essential steps: gluconeogenesis is turned on and is then blocked midway by methylene cyclopropyl alanine. The back-up molecules of the unfinished process are certain amino acids that are highly toxic to the brain cells. Ackee and litchi belong to one plant family. My toxicology colleague, Dr. Mukul Das, found generous quantities of methylene cyclopropyl glycine in litchi fruit pulp.

The disease affected only malnourished children between the ages of two and 10. A majority of them were from families camping in orchards for fruit harvesting. No child from the nearby towns fell ill. Children of well-to-do families never fell ill.

Litchi harvest usually begins by 4 a.m., which means that families are awake before that. They go to sleep early. If children go to sleep without dinner, parents usually do not wake them up and feed them. Litchis are collected in bunches and sent to the collection points, but single fruits fall to the ground. Children are free to collect and share the fruits with their friends.

With this information we made the hypothesis that the disease was hypoglycaemic encephalopathy. Along with my paediatric colleague, Dr. Arun Shah, we conclusively showed that the disease was indeed hypoglycaemic encephalopathy. With all the pieces in hand, we reconstructed the disease pathway.

After prolonged fasting, malnourished children slipped into hypoglycaemia in the morning. Since they had very little reserve glycogen in their livers, they were unable to mobilise glucose from liver glycogen, unlike well nourished children. The brain needs glucose as a source of energy. As a result of lack of liver glycogen, gluconeogenesis was turned on. Had there not been litchi methylene cyclopropyl glycine, the glucose levels would have been maintained, and the children would have come to no harm. As the children had consumed litchis the previous day, gluconeogenesis had been blocked, aminoacidaemia had developed, and brain functions had been affected. Hypoglycaemic encephalopathy had set in.

We were unable to demonstrate aminoacidaemia in children with hypoglycaemic encephalopathy, but that was done by investigators from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The only missing piece in our studies was filled in by CDC colleagues.

The disease can be prevented if children are well nourished, but that is not possible in the immediate term. It can also be prevented by ensuring that children eat a meal at night. All families were taught to provide a cooked meal to children before going to sleep at night. Preventing children from eating litchis is not easy, but the quantity of the fruit can be restricted with parental supervision. With all this health education, I was told that the disease number had come down drastically in 2016-18 compared to what it was in 2014-2015. I don't know what went wrong this year.

In 2015, all primary health centres were supplied with glucometers to check the blood glucose levels of sick children. Doctors were instructed to take a blood sample for glucose estimation and, irrespective of the results, infuse 10% glucose intravenously. To correct mild hypoglycaemia, 5% glucose is enough, but here the problem is not hypoglycaemia alone, but aminoacidaemia as a result of blocked gluconeogenesis. To prevent any further back-up amino acid from accumulating, the fatty acid oxidation process has to be turned off quickly. That requires raising blood glucose level to abnormally high levels so that insulin secretion is stimulated, and that in turn turns off the gluconeogenesis.

### No sustained health education

What Dr. Shah and I found was that if ill children are infused with 10% glucose within four hours of onset of brain dysfunction, recovery is fast and complete. If only 5% glucose is given, or if 10% glucose is not administered within four hours, recovery is unlikely. I do not have detailed information from the field, but there seem to have been some human slip-ups this time.

Glucometers have not been maintained well. Health education was not sustained. New doctors are not familiar with all the information. Instead of 10% glucose, 5% is given. Children are taken mostly to private clinics and are then referred to the Sri Krishna Medical College in Muzaffarpur city since ambulance services are free of cost and easily available. Ambulances take more than four hours to reach the city hospitals from many rural clinics. We might think each error is minor, but when all the errors add up they contribute to deaths that should have been averted.

*T. Jacob John is a retired professor of virology from CMC Vellore*

# Doctors and patients deserve better

## Violence against doctors is a symptom and not the disease. Structural and policy changes in India's hospitals, and not increased security, may help in controlling it

SANJAY NAGRAL


AFP

Yet another chapter in the sickening saga of violence against doctors in India is coming to an end. It mostly ran a predictable course: junior doctors in a state-run hospital in Kolkata were attacked by the angry relatives of a patient who died there, junior doctors across West Bengal went on strike, outraged senior doctors paid lip service to their cause, medical associations went on a token strike, and there were calls for stricter laws and for increasing security for doctors. It was the usual narrative involving lumpen mobs, allegations of political instigation, unrealistic expectations from patients, overworked doctors, and calls for increased security, which included bizarre demands for bodyguards and even bouncers. Perhaps the only novelty was the rather knee-jerk and insensitive response by a Chief Minister suffering from a poll hangover, which seems to have acted as further provocation.

Will punitive action, new laws or increased security change this scenario? Will we never see an incident like this if such measures are taken? As someone who participated in a strike by junior doctors as long back as 1985 in response to an assault by a corporator in Mumbai and continues to witness such events in the public hospital where I work, I can only dismiss these as rhetorical questions. But is there something beyond this customary discourse that springs from the debris of such a fracas that we should recognise? In medical parlance, is there a disease that is producing these symptoms in recurring fashion? These are questions worth examining.

### Examining the setting

The setting in which a majority of such incidents have taken place offer some clues. The most common scenario is that of a patient being brought to the casualty ward of a public hospital in a critical condition by family members or neighbours. If the patient does not survive, there is the reality or perception that treatment was not administered to him or her in time. The tipping point is when the staff in hospitals display insensitivity when they are questioned about delays. It is true that the emergency wards of India's public hospitals are chaotic, disorganised and resemble conflict zones. While there are several factors that contribute to this, the complete absence of the globally recognised protocol of 'triage' is a big reason. Triage involves a rapid examination of a patient to determine whether he or she needs instant care, early care, or care that can wait. The absence of this protocol means that emergency wards are often occupied by patients with all sorts of minor injuries. Data from a study at our hospital showed that more than 90% of patients frequenting the casualty ward over a two-year period had minor injuries which could have been easily treated in a smaller setting. In India, when people go to the police with a complaint of an assault, they are advised to go to a government hospital even if they have very minor injuries, to record them to strengthen their legal case. All these patients come to the casualty ward adding to the crowd and the burden of the hospital staff. If the staff have to treat only 10% of the load of critical patients, they would do a much better job and perhaps even save lives.

The huge workload in large teaching hospitals in cities, such as in Kolkata's Nil Ratan Sarkar Medical College and Hospital, is also the result of the poor capacity of suburban and rural hospitals to handle sick patients. This uneven scenario is due to excessive centralisation of funds, staff and equipment.

### A growing chasm

A dangerous argument that is put forth in the aftermath of such attacks is that people's expectations have increased. I am not sure what this means in a system where the bar has been set very low. Are people who see huge delays, rickety ambulances and lack of equipment or malfunctioning equipment not supposed to respond? Isn't it possible that common citizens who see swanky private hospitals delivering quick, organised care wonder why they get such a raw deal? That they now realise that just putting an oxygen mask on an individual who is gasping for breath is not enough, a ventilator is needed? In other words, is the realisation that there is a more effective way of care, which the common man is being denied because of his or her inability to pay for it, the cause for anger which periodically explodes in a perverse manner?

One reason why laws are unlikely to work is that patients and their families or friends do not come to a hospital with a plan to attack. Attacks are impulsive responses in an emotional moment. What may work instead is softening the blow on families by examining how, where and who delivered the bad news to them. If family members in moments of intense grief are now regularly donating organs to their near and dear ones, there must be something that we are doing right. This is happening probably because the news is broken to them in a planned and organised manner by a trained transplant coordinator, usually in the sanitised setting of an intensive care unit of a large private hospital.

### Demanding change

As members of a profession who have been trained in the method of science, we can do better than imitate the impulsive, inappropriate responses of those who attack the first doctor in sight, as well as the political class. We can certainly do better than come up with ludicrous demands such as appointing bouncers or bodyguards in hospitals. Several structural and policy changes in the way India's hospital systems work can reduce, if not eliminate, the perception that there is negligence in caring for patients. Medical associations who swing between fawning over politicians when they need favours to faux militancy after an incident, such as the one that took place in Kolkata, need to take the lead in demanding policy change.

In the heat of this debate it is worth remembering that in spite of being caught in the pincer of a tottering public health sector and an unaffordable private sector, a large majority of our patients show tremendous tolerance, resilience and trust in their interaction with us. We all deserve better.

*Sanjay Nagral is a Mumbai-based surgeon*

SINGLE FILE

# Linking civilisation, culture and religion

## We need to make sense of these terms in less exclusive ways

UDAY BALAKRISHNAN

AKHILESH KUMAR

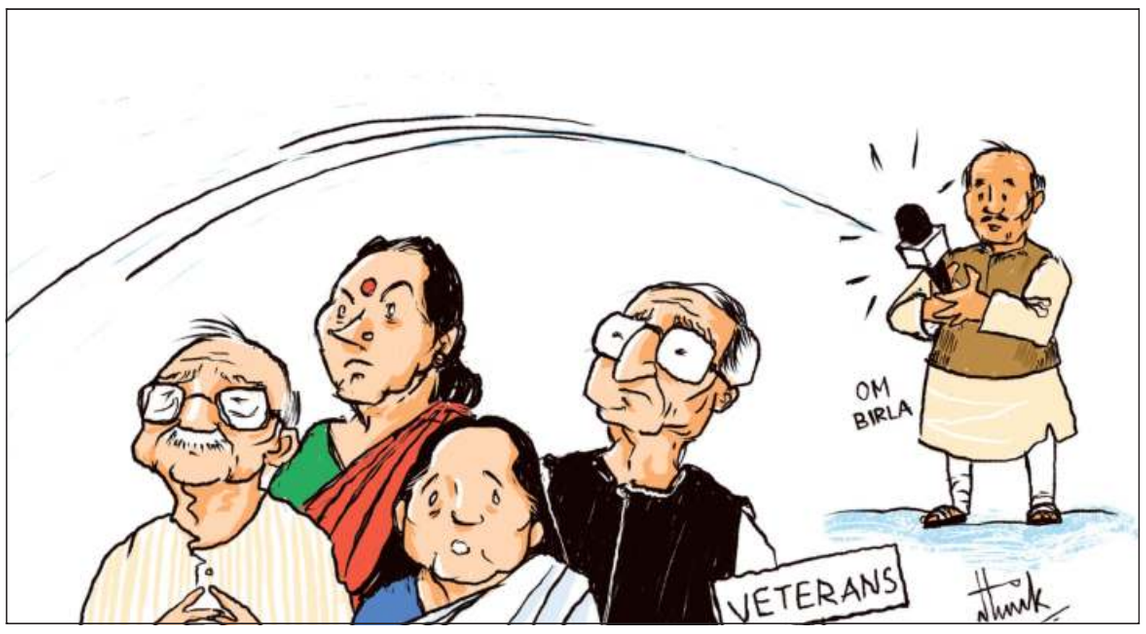
The words civilisation and culture are bandied about a lot these days. We are defensive about the first and protective of the other to a point where insulation becomes exclusion. Add religion to the two and we have a venomous plait that is near impossible to undo. Collectively we need to step back and look at these terms in perspective, if only to make sense of them in less exclusive ways and appreciate the common thread that runs through them. This is more important now as majoritarian points of view are being mistaken for, or are being passed off as, voluntary consensus.

Let's take religion first. Is mine better than yours? This is a question that has no answers, no sensible ones in any case. However much we may argue, there is much to commend in each faith and a lot to condemn in every one of them. The great philosopher, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, observed: "To admit the various descriptions of God is not to lapse into polytheism. When Yajnavalkya was called upon to state the number of gods, he started with the popular number 3306, and ended by reducing them all to one Brahman. 'This indestructible enduring reality is to be looked upon as one only.'" So where is the big difference between the many faiths in India? I, for one, am proud of the juxtaposition of a temple, a mosque and a church at Palayam in my home town Thiruvananthapuram, and hail the Holkar queen of the Maratha Malwa kingdom, Ahilyabai Holkar, for preserving the Gyanvapi Mosque even as she rebuilt the Kashi Viswanath Temple. There is a lot to learn from our past.

Culture is more problematic than religion. It is an omnibus term that hints at something good. But in the way it is deployed, it is a loaded and sinister term seeking to establish the superiority of one way of life and the inferiority of another. In his thoughtful book, *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, the sociologist Wolf Lepenies suggests a direct relationship between the German understanding of culture, which "has remained the catchword by which the Germans tried to distinguish themselves from the rest of the civilized world", and the rise of Hitler. Totalitarianism has deep roots in the collective minds of people. To be aware of it and keep it in check is a task cut out for civilisation.

As a term, civilisation is somewhat ambiguous but it strongly suggests harmony, unity, tolerance, enlightenment and confidence. But civilisation can be easily destroyed, as the renowned art historian Kenneth Clark cautions, "by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs". That happens when, quoting Yeats in his book *Civilization*, he exclaims, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst /Are full of passionate intensity." How true.

*The writer teaches at IISc, Bengaluru*

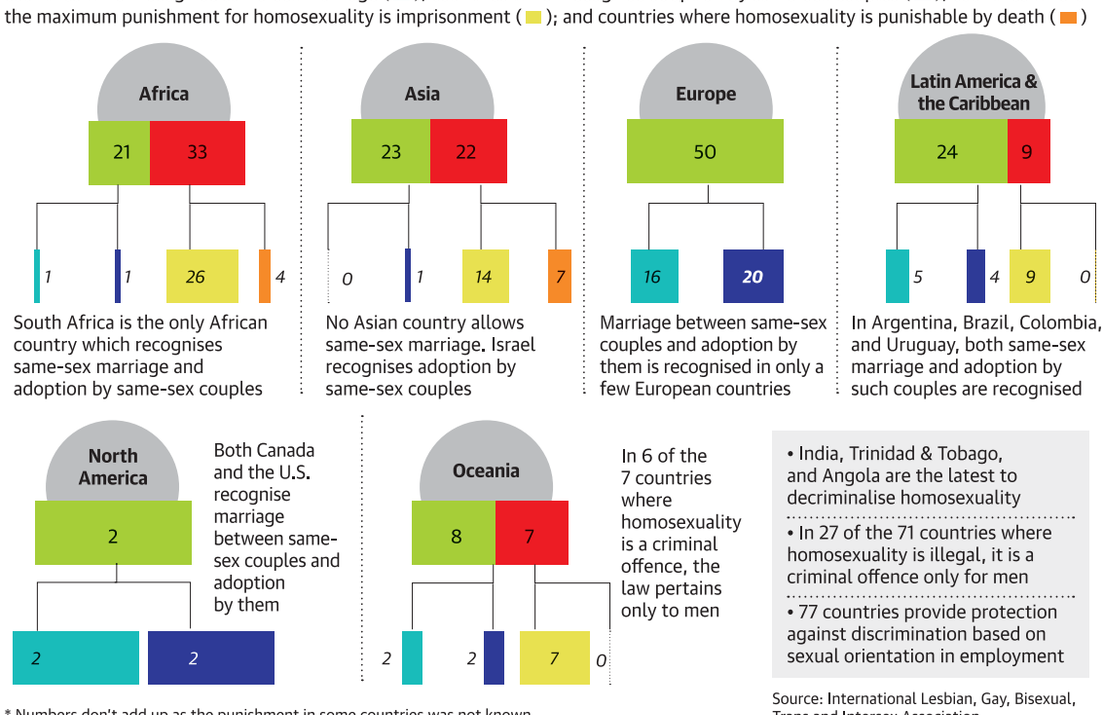



DATA POINT

# Not a free world yet

Fifty years since the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, which sparked an LGBT liberation movement in the U.S. and elsewhere, 36% of countries are yet to decriminalise homosexuality. In 6% of countries homosexuality is punishable by death. A region-wise look at the progress achieved. By **Srravya C**

**How to read the graph*** | The first rung of the flowchart shows the number of countries in each region where homosexuality is not a criminal offence ( ) and is a criminal offence ( ). The second rung breaks down the countries further into four groups – countries which recognise same-sex marriage ( ); countries which recognise adoption by same-sex couples ( ); countries where the maximum punishment for homosexuality is imprisonment ( ); and countries where homosexuality is punishable by death ( )




- India, Trinidad & Tobago, and Angola are the latest to decriminalise homosexuality
- In 27 of the 71 countries where homosexuality is illegal, it is a criminal offence only for men
- 77 countries provide protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment

* Numbers don't add up as the punishment in some countries was not known

Source: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

**FIFTY YEARS AGO** JUNE 19, 1969

### P.M.'s choice of Giri not fully supported

All day to-day [June 18] and until late to-night, there was hectic political activity in the capital [New Delhi] with an endless series of high-level consultations between the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and her senior Cabinet colleagues and the principal Congress leaders over the selection of the Congress party's nominee for the Presidential election. But even after these intensive discussions, it was not clear whether Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her close supporters will be able to have their way in getting Mr. V.V. Giri nominated as the Congress candidate. The party leaders led by the Congress President, Mr. Nijalingappa, were still opposing Mr. Giri's nomination on the ground that a tried and trusted Congressman - which clearly meant one of them - should be chosen for this key post in view of the many political uncertainties ahead.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** JUNE 19, 1919.

### Swadeshi Campaign.

Another swadeshi cloth store to sell purely indigenous cloth was opened last night [June 18] at Morarji Goculdas Market [in Bombay] by Mr. Gandhi. One of the organisers of the movement, Mr. Narandas Purshotamdas, in opening the proceedings said that the necessity of opening the stores arose from the fact that there had been promulgated two swadeshi vows, the pure swadeshi vow and the mixed swadeshi vow. Those who had taken the first vow found it difficult to obtain such goods from the existing stores. The stores they were opening would sell only goods manufactured from Indian yarn charging only five per cent on the cost price so that the buyers would get clothes at the cheapest rate. Mr. Gandhi in declaring the stores open, said that the swadeshi vow was necessary for the progress of a nation and if they took a vow to use swadeshi clothes only, they would achieve truth.

CONCEPTUAL

## Epistocracy

POLITICS

This refers to a form of political governance where the votes of people who are well informed about politics are weighed more heavily than the votes of people who have very little political knowledge. This is in contrast to democracy where everyone's vote is given the same weight despite the large differences in the political knowledge possessed by individual voters. The idea of epistocracy was first proposed by American political scientist Jason Brennan in his 2016 book *Against Democracy*. Supporters of epistocracy believe that such a system will incentivise people who are ignorant about politics to educate themselves in order to vote.

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*http://bit.ly/HormuzStrait*