



Sexism in Parliament

India needs more women in legislatures to combat the likes of Azam Khan

The triple talaq bill was passed in the Lok Sabha on July 25, silencing Opposition voices that the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2019 should not be pushed through in a hurry, and without scrutiny. But the dissent on the nitty-gritty of the bill was overshadowed by the sexist remarks made by Samajawadi Party MP Azam Khan, directed against Bharatiya Janata Party member Rama Devi who was in the Chair. Referring to an intervention by Minority Affairs Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, Mr. Khan quoted a couplet, “... tu idhar-udhar ki na baat kar (do not digress).” When Ms. Devi asked Mr. Khan to address the Chair, he made an “objectionable” statement, marking a new parliamentary low. The irony that this was said while the House was discussing an issue concerning women was not lost on Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who quipped: “Don’t politicise an issue that affects women.” Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani pointed out that Mr. Khan’s comment was a “blot on all legislators including men”. Mr. Khan, a veteran from the Uttar Pradesh Assembly but a first-time MP who is no stranger to controversy, was banned from campaigning for 72 hours in the recent Lok Sabha polls after his misogynist remarks against BJP candidate Jaya Prada. While Mr. Khan has been asked to apologise to the House, some women members have renewed the pitch for the passage of the women’s reservation bill.

The 17th Lok Sabha has the highest number of women MPs, 78, comprising 14.39% of the House. This is higher than 2014 and a long way from the first election in 1951-52, when they made up only 5% of the House. The global average stands at 24.6%, and neighbours Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal have quotas for women in Parliament. In India, the women’s reservation bill or the Constitution (108th) Amendment Bill to set aside one-third of seats in Parliament and State Assemblies for women was passed in the Rajya Sabha in March 2010. However, the Bill couldn’t overcome odds and the opposition in the Lok Sabha and went into cold storage. Critics have cited several reasons behind the bill being thwarted, not least that the quota for women would be appropriated by powerful stand-ins. But this could hold true for men as well. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which has an overwhelming majority in the Lok Sabha (303 of 543 seats) and has rushed through more than a dozen bills in this session, must take the lead. Slogans such as ‘Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao’ will sound like mere lip-service if political parties don’t speak out against gender prejudice. Women must have greater political representation in decision-making bodies as a first step towards changing chauvinistic mindsets, and Parliament needs to show the way.

Ban or regulate?

There are issues with cryptocurrencies, but a ban might not be the best answer

The recommendation of an inter-ministerial committee that India should ban all private cryptocurrencies, that is, Bitcoin and others like it, hardly comes as a surprise. Indian policymakers and administrators have time and again made clear their distaste for them, their existence owed almost entirely to advanced encryption technologies. In his Budget speech in 2018, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said the government doesn’t consider them legal tender. The Reserve Bank of India has repeatedly warned the public of the risks associated with dealing with cryptocurrencies. Bitcoin, the most prominent among them, has yo-yoed wildly in value, even over short periods of time. A May 2019 article by Bloomberg, citing data from blockchain analysis firm Chainalysis, said “speculation remains Bitcoin’s primary use case”. Its use in illegal online marketplaces that deal with drugs and child pornography is well-documented. There have been cases of consumers being defrauded, including in India. Given all this, it is understandable that the committee, under the chairmanship of Subhash Chandra Garg, the former Economic Affairs Secretary, has come across as being wary of private cryptocurrencies even while advocating a central bank-issued cryptocurrency.

Governments and economic regulators across the world are wary of private cryptocurrencies. As they need neither a central issuing authority nor a central validating agency for transactions, these currencies can exist and thrive outside the realm of authority and regulation. They are even deemed a threat to the official currency and monetary system. The question then is whether banning cryptocurrencies is the most effective way to respond. The inter-ministerial committee believes it is, going so far as to draft a law that mandates a fine and imprisonment of up to 10 years for the offences of mining, generating, holding, selling, dealing in, transferring, disposing of, or issuing cryptocurrencies. But six of the seven jurisdictions that its report cites have not banned cryptocurrencies outright. Many of them, including Canada, Thailand, Russia and Japan, seem to be moving on the path of regulation, so that transactions are within the purview of anti-money laundering and prevention of terror laws. China, which India has taken a cue from, has gone for an outright ban. Even there, the report says, “owing to the network-based nature of cryptocurrencies, after banning domestic crypto exchanges, many traders turned to overseas platforms to continue participating in crypto transactions.” Trading in China is now low but not non-existent. But why would an outright ban be a superior choice to regulation, especially in a field driven by fast-paced technological innovations? The report, unfortunately, doesn’t clarify that point.

Governing India through fiscal math

A focus on fiscal deficit reduction alone is not sound economic management. The revenue deficit must be in the picture



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

While it is important for a government to pursue a sound economic policy, including management of the public finances, it is yet another matter to make a fetish of any one aspect of it. The latter appears to govern this government’s approach to policy when the fiscal deficit is given pride of place in its self-assessment. Not only is this unlikely to yield results on its own, it is not even necessarily prudent.

Thread of fiscal discipline

Soon after the Budget for 2019-20 was presented, one of the Finance Minister’s predecessors remarked that “fiscal prudence rewards economies”. This was perhaps issued both as praise for the Budget itself and as a justification of the approach taken during his own tenure. Though a concern for the size of the fiscal deficit would have been inevitable since the enactment of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Bill in 2003, and has therefore been on the radar of political parties of all persuasions at the Centre, it has been raised to special significance since 2014. It figured in the most recent Economic Survey, and its anticipated magnitude for 2019-20 was the final statement in the Budget speech that had followed. The Finance Minister had commenced the speech saying how the government was committed to fiscal discipline.

In the context, “fiscal discipline” is understood as taking the

economy towards the 3% of the gross domestic product. The basis for this figure can be queried but that is beside the point. Actually, the point is two fold: whether the fiscal deficit should be the sole index of fiscal management and what a reduction in the deficit would achieve. To suggest that fiscal prudence rewards economies is to suggest both that the fiscal deficit is the right indicator of fiscal soundness and that reducing it is bountiful.

Not always a perfect measure

While a sound fiscal policy is highly desirable, the magnitude of the fiscal deficit is not always and everywhere – think here of the state of the economy – a good measure of soundness. First, the fiscal deficit reflects the overall imbalance in the Budget. Embedded in the accounts of the government is the revenue account which is a statement of current receipts and expenditure. A fiscal deficit may or may not contain within it a deficit on the revenue account, termed the “revenue deficit”. The possible embeddedness of a revenue deficit within a fiscal deficit muddies the waters somewhat. For movements in the overall, or fiscal, deficit by itself tell us nothing about what is happening to the revenue deficit. Why should we worry, one might ask. We worry because it is the balance on the revenue deficit that indicates whether the government is saving out of its income or spending more than it receives as current revenue. A revenue deficit implies that the government is dissaving.

A fiscal deficit co-terminus with a revenue deficit is to be frowned upon as it implies that at least some part of the borrowing is to finance current consumption, something a government ought pru-



dently to avoid, at least for long. Therefore, unless the revenue deficit is kept explicitly in the picture, we cannot deduce the soundness of economic management from a mere reduction in the fiscal deficit. In fact, in the Budget for 2019-20, while the fiscal deficit projected is marginally lower than earlier, the revenue deficit is projected to rise. Even though the magnitude of the changes is minuscule, their direction calls into question the Finance Minister’s claim that the government is committed to fiscal discipline. It is yet another instance when the fiscal deficit can end up being no more than window dressing. While a pathological adherence to a revenue account balance is itself avoidable, a steady revenue deficit as the fiscal deficit shrinks makes a mockery of fiscal consolidation. Worse still it is open to the interpretation that the exercise is ideological in that it aims only to shrink the size of government, fiscal prudence be damned.

Rewards yet to be seen

A detour through history would help bring some perspective here. A revenue deficit of the Central government is relatively recent, having been virtually non-existent till the 1980s. After that a rampant populism has taken over all political parties, reflected in revenue deficits accounting for over two thirds

History and the 5G dilemma

As India looks to developing 5G technology, its quest in the 1980s for an American supercomputer offers lessons



ARUN MOHAN SUKUMAR

New technologies have a curious history of finding their way into the crosshairs of international politics. ‘5G’ is no different. In many respects, the dilemma facing Prime Minister Narendra Modi – to embrace Huawei and other Chinese purveyors of 5G-enabled telecommunications infrastructure, or to salvage the political relationship with the United States – is similar to the one faced by Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s. Then, India had sought for itself a “supercomputer” from, among others, Japan. Instead, it was dealt a bad hand by the U.S., and made to settle eventually for an American machine that belonged to an older, slower generation of computers. The lessons from that moment in history are instructive, and Indian policymakers would do well to heed them.

The late 1980s saw the waning of Cold War tensions on account of the Soviet Union’s inability to stand toe-to-toe with the military might of the U.S. But U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s administration had already set its sights on a small nation making rapid advancements in computing: Japan. Their technological rivalry spawned a trade war between Washington DC and Tokyo, each trying to outpace the other in penetrating newer markets. It reached a crescendo in 1987 when

Reagan himself blocked the acquisition of Fairchild Semiconductors by Fujitsu Corporation. Fairchild was responsible for giving “Silicon Valley” its name – the audacious Japanese attempt to buy off an American crown jewel was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

The supercomputer saga

But long before this rivalry reached a head, India had become its unfortunate casualty. Geopolitics induced by technology coincided with Rajiv Gandhi’s winning the 1984 general election by a landslide. His early initiatives included the New Computer Policy (NCP) of 1984 and the Software (Exports) Policy of 1986, which resulted in a steep drop in the price of computers, and heralded a remarkable shift in the government’s attitude towards them. However, to keep up with rapid, generational leaps in computing, India needed the assistance of nations that had made big strides in the sector. The U.S. made it known early that it called the shots.

Months after the NCP was passed, Reagan put India in a list of destinations that needed special “review” before exports of American technology could be cleared. Rajiv Gandhi made a much publicised visit to Washington DC in the summer of 1985 to break the impasse. It resulted in the Technology Cooperation Agreement (TCA), a genuine, diplomatic success forged by the personal chemistry the young Prime Minister shared with the septuagenarian Reagan. The TCA eased regulations on technology exports, and it was during this visit that Rajiv Gandhi broached the possible purchase of



a supercomputer.

Publicly, India sought a supercomputer to forecast its monsoons better. Negotiations with the U.S. were however long and cumbersome, and an entire year passed by without any progress. Meanwhile, Rajiv Gandhi himself had staked political capital in promising to bring home a supercomputer, lending urgency to the matter. India eventually approached Japan, whose NEC Corporation was the only company outside the U.S. that could offer a supercomputer.. The *Wall Street Journal* at the time made the stunning revelation that Japan had promised India it would “sign a supercomputer agreement within 30 days if the US deal fell through”.

Instrument of politics

The availability of advanced technology from a competitor undermined the U.S. objective of wielding it as a blunt instrument of politics. Reagan wanted to wean India away from its partnership with the Soviet Union on high technology, and rein in New Delhi’s progress on its nascent guided missile programme. Therefore, the U.S. attached riders to the sale,

of the fiscal deficit such as the case today. Revenue deficits have become structural in India by now. This has three implications: that the public debt is only bound to rise; we are permanently borrowing to consume, and leaving it to future generations to inherit the debt. While the populism referred to is not the monopoly of any one political party, it is particularly stark in the case of the present one which relentlessly flags its virtue in lowering the fiscal deficit.

We can see the hollowness of the claim that fiscal consolidation or the shrinking of the fiscal deficit is always and everywhere prudent, for the issue is what is happening to the revenue deficit. Now onto the former Finance Minister’s claim that “it rewards” economies. This government has lowered the fiscal deficit alright, though not as much as the United Progressive Alliance government, but the rewards are yet to be seen. Export growth has slowed and the unemployment rate has risen. Even private investment has not soared, an outcome predicted following the claim that government borrowing “crowds out” private investment.

International borrowing

Of late an entirely new dimension has been added to fiscal management, but here again the appropriateness of conducting economic policy by reference to the magnitude of the fiscal deficit remains the issue. In the last Budget the government has signalled its intention to borrow in foreign currency from the international market. This is an innovation alright as the Government of India has so far never borrowed in the international markets, leaving it to public sector organisations and the private corporate sector to do so.

In the Budget speech of the 17th

Lok Sabha, the Finance Minister justified the move in terms of the very low share of foreign debt to GDP. The proposal has received criticism, some of it focussing on the consequences of exchange rate volatility. Benefits have been flagged too, such as that Indian sovereign bonds will attract a lower risk premium because the price of the foreign-currency-denominated sovereign bond will now be discoverable. This though ignores the biggest lesson from the global financial crisis of 2007, that the market cannot be relied upon to price risk correctly. And, both arguments overlook the foreign exchange constraint.

Dollar-denominated debt has to be repaid in dollars. Right now our reserves are fairly high but this could change. Oil prices could go back to where they were, the trade war initiated by U.S. President Donald Trump holds little prospect for faster export growth, and portfolio investment may flow out. While these are only possibilities, they point to the need to ultimately base your borrowing plan on expected dollar earnings. The opportunity offered by low global interest rates right now is not matched by the likelihood of robust export growth.

In the final analysis though, it is not the risk of exchange rate depreciation or stagnant exports or even capital flight that is the issue; it is the rationale for borrowing. With revenue deficits the overwhelming part of the fiscal deficit, we would be borrowing to finance consumption. Dollar denominated sovereign debt is just a matter of shifting this borrowing overseas. That is the real issue.

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placing intrusive safeguards and certification requirements that the supercomputer would be used by India only for civilian purposes. Ironically, American technology companies such as Honeywell and Unisys were supplying advanced electronics to Saddam Hussein around the same time, augmenting Iraq’s missile system. When Japan stepped into the picture, the U.S. immediately began negotiations to reach a “common understanding” with Tokyo for the sale of supercomputers.

The Japanese too believed the safeguards were “too broad and too stringent” but simply did not have the diplomatic firepower to resist Reagan’s overtures. With Japan making its reluctance known, India was held captive at the negotiating table by the U.S. The agreement finally inked was for the sale of a Cray XMP supercomputer a generation older to its latest variant.

The deal did little for Rajiv Gandhi domestically. After all, the Indian disaffection with IBM had begun, leading to its eventual exit in 1978, on account of its selling of obsolete machines to customers. If India has made modest forays into supercomputing today, it is thanks to the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), which stepped up its efforts to create an indigenous machine in the wake of this episode.

The Cray supercomputer sale is well-documented, but less storied is the American effort to dissuade Japan’s technology giants from the Indian market. By investing heavily in his political relationship with the U.S., Rajiv Gandhi unwittingly waded into Reagan’s technology

trade war with Tokyo. It diminished his ability to negotiate autonomously with NEC.

Fast forward to the present

The 5G saga is no different. At the recently concluded G20 summit in Osaka, Mr. Modi suggested he was talking to his U.S. counterpart to “collaborate and develop 5G technology for mutual benefit”. Few American vendors have the ability today to compete with a Huawei, Nokia or Ericsson – the statement was a concession on Mr. Modi’s part, allowing the U.S. to shoot off India’s shoulders against Chinese technology giants. With the Principal Scientific Adviser, K. Vijay Raghavan, also the head of the high-level panel on 5G, openly calling for the exclusion of Chinese players from national trials, the government has unwisely put all its cards on the table.

The U.S.-China technology rivalry is eminently political, one in which India should not take sides. If anything, New Delhi should take care to see history does not repeat itself. Much like the U.S.-Japan understanding on supercomputers, Osaka also saw the beginning of a U.S. rapprochement with China on technology trade: India must ensure whatever bilateral configuration that emerges from such talks does not restrict the sale of 5G equipment to others. There are no winners for India to pick in this battle: just decisions to be made coldly from the prism of economic self-interest.

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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.

Train rescue

The heroic rescue of the passengers on board the Mahalaxmi Express which was caught in flood waters about 65 km from Mumbai is much appreciated (Page 1, “1,050 passengers rescued from stranded train near Mumbai”, July 28). The Central Railway should now be proactive and cancel train services in flood-affected regions in the best interest of passenger safety. The incident should also lead to better facilities on board trains. A public announcement system in all trains to communicate information to passengers during an emergency or crisis must be in place. Railway staff should also be

equipped to handle any emergency.  
VARUN DAMBAL,  
Bengaluru

■ Compliments to the entire team and agencies involved in the dramatic rescue. We often blame government agencies whenever there is a disaster but seldom appreciate a good job such as this. The role of the local people cannot be ignored, with young men assisting the forces. May their tribe grow.  
TILAK SUBRAMANIAN V.,  
Kunjibettu, Udupi, Karnataka

Open House

I was one of the 40 readers to participate in the first Kerala Open House with the Readers’ Editor (“Revive

passion for reading among youth, say readers”, July 28). As many readers have pointed out, *The Hindu* is the best newspaper to improve a person’s vocabulary and knowledge. From Saturday’s meeting I understand that most readers have expressed dismay over the declining passion for reading especially among the millennials. Students of my generation do find social media to be a huge draw and hardly look at the newspaper. The daily needs to take the initiative to encourage the reading habit right from school and must shape its products towards meeting this goal. Finally, more such open house

meetings must be held across India so that the editor-reader relationship grows.  
GEORGI K. JEEMON,  
Kumarapuram, Ernakulam, Kerala

■ While it is gratifying to note that the ‘Readers’ Mail’ column will be restored and improved, the space for the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section should be increased, taking up from what a reader at the Kochi session has suggested.  
R. SIVAKUMAR,  
Chennai

Life of a doctor

A doctor’s life is always on edge (Open Page, “All in a day’s work for this doctor”, July 28). Ultimately he is judged, hailed or condemned, based on the

end result, ignoring all the sincere efforts and dedication invested by the doctor when handling a case. The primary reason for this is the assumption that a doctor is an omnipotent saviour. This misconception needs to be erased from our minds. Even after the best treatment, a patient may not survive due to extraneous factors. A doctor is also a normal being just doing his job. He can only do it with all the wisdom, knowledge,

sincerity and dedication at his command.  
KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,  
Hyderabad

■ The article was extremely poignant, conveying the anguish of not being able to save a patient. Doctors wage a relentless battle day in and day out to save patients under their care but at times fate decides otherwise.  
C.V. ARAVIND,  
Bengaluru

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:  
www.hindu.co.in/opinion/letters/

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a Business page (July 28, 2019) report on ICICI Bank’s performance, there was an erroneous reference to consolidated return on assets – both in the text and in the graphic. It should have been consolidated return on equity.

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# It's time for India and Pakistan to walk the talk

Given the various breaches, the Simla Agreement could do with a makeover



V. SUDARSHAN

The Simla Agreement may be somewhat overrated. It could even be dead though we keep referring to it as a guiding light and take shelter behind it. Signed on July 2, 1972, by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistan President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Agreement has been observed mainly in its breach. It commits the two countries to “put an end to the conflict and confrontation that have hitherto marred their relations and work for the promotion of a friendly and harmonious relationship and the establishment of durable peace in the sub-continent”. Pending “the final settlement of any of the problems between the two countries”, it stipulates that “neither side shall unilaterally alter the situation and both shall prevent the organization, assistance or encouragement of any acts detrimental to the maintenance of peaceful and harmonious relations”. This is followed by a list of admirable, if ineffectual, exhortations. If these had been implemented effectively by New Delhi and Islamabad, Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar could well have been tourists in India rather than terrorists. Given the various breaches, the Simla Agreement could do with a makeover.

It took more than 10 years after Simla to group the subjects that India and Pakistan would sporadically talk about, and even then the two countries have been going around in circles. It is reasonable to assume that nowadays Pakistan talks more about India and Kashmir to the U.S. than to India. Terrorism was one of the subjects that the two nations emphasised they would bilaterally discuss, but the 2011 Mumbai blasts shattered that premise. Since then India has been talking about Pakistani terrorism not so much with Pakistan as with any country willing to listen. This is probably why U.S President Donald Trump revealed at the Oval Office on July 22 that he and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan would be “talking about India”. “I think maybe if we can help intercede and do what



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistan President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto signing the Simla Agreement in July 1972. ■ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

tever we have to do,” he said. “But I think it’s something that can be brought back together.”

**Clinton’s role during Kargil**  
President Trump may have been overstating it, but when the Simla Agreement was violated in Kargil, it was an American President who helped push the Pakistani troops back into Pakistan. As the Kargil War began to get bigger, a worried President Bill Clinton, who called the region “the most dangerous place in the world”, reached out to both Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, urging Mr. Sharif to pull back from the Line of Control (LoC) and Vajpayee not to widen the war front.

On July 2, 1999, the 27th anniversary of the Simla Agreement, when the Indian Army launched a three-pronged attack in Kargil, Mr. Sharif called up Mr. Clinton. He wanted the Americans to intervene. To make it happen, he was even ready to fly to Washington with his family in case he became a Prime Minister in exile. Two American diplomats in the Clinton administration, Bruce Riedel and Strobe Talbott, detail the developments in fascinating detail. They write that the Americans told Mr. Sharif not to come unless he was willing to agree to an unconditional withdrawal. Mr. Sharif told the Americans that he was coming anyway. Presi-

dent Clinton, who had been briefing Vajpayee every little step of the way, called him. Vajpayee was by then a sceptic of peace. He had made a high-risk bus trip to Lahore and the Pakistanis had rewarded him by violating the Simla Agreement in Kargil to seek to alter the LoC. Vajpayee did not tell Mr. Clinton that this was a bilateral affair and he should stay out of it. Instead, he warned the President that Mr. Sharif would take him on a merry ride, and he was afraid that Mr. Clinton would get co-opted. Mr. Riedel, who was present at all the meetings, writes in “American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House”: “Sharif handed the President a document which he said was a non-paper provided to him early in the crisis by Vajpayee in which the two would agree to restore the sanctity of the LoC (a formula for Pakistani withdrawal) and resume the Lahore process. Sharif said at first India had agreed to this non-paper but then changed its mind”.

Mr. Sharif wanted a withdrawal in return for a time-specific resolution of the Kashmir issue. President Clinton exploded saying he wouldn’t be blackmailed. The meeting broke to take stock of the matter. During the break, President Clinton called a worried Vajpayee to brief him again. “What do you want me to say,” Vajpayee asked when informed of what had gone on. President Clinton res-

ponded that he was holding firm. When they met again, Mr. Clinton told Mr. Sharif that if Pakistan didn’t withdraw, he would issue a statement naming Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism as it had already readied nuclear missiles. Mr. Sharif said he feared for his life, but he reluctantly agreed to pull back troops. President Clinton called Vajpayee to give him the news. “That guy’s from Missouri big-time,” he said later. “He wants to see those boys get off that mountain before he’s going to believe any of this” (*Engaging India*, Strobe Talbott). The U.S. helped boot out the Pakistanis from Kargil for India.

**Trump’s hint**  
Was what President Clinton did mediation? Or was it intervention? Or meddling? Or was this all a shining example of bilateralism envisaged in the Simla Agreement? President Trump gave India a preview on February 28, before Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was freed by Pakistan, of what was coming when he said: “We have some reasonably decent news. I think hopefully that’s going to be coming to an end. It’s been going on for a long time, decades and decades. There’s a lot of dislike, unfortunately. So we’ve been in the middle trying to help them both out, see if we can get some organization and some peace, and I think probably that’s going to be happening.” Was that mediation or the Simla Agreement at work? Nobody pointed out to President Trump that only the Ministry of External Affairs or the Pakistani Foreign Office or the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations were allowed to make such announcements.

We have to recognise that the world has changed since the Simla Agreement was signed. After the 1971 war, India returned land taken in battle on the western border, to create lasting peace. The LoC is now more firmly established than ever before. There is no talk any more of United Nations resolutions. Most of the subjects in the ‘composite dialogue format’ like Siachen, Sir Creek and Wullar Barrage have been discussed threadbare. Some of them have been ready for political signatures for years. If the way forward is bilateral, then surely it is time to prove it?

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## FROM THE READERS’ EDITOR

# Dialogue dividends

The Hindu’s Open House ensures a free and frank exchange of ideas between readers and senior editors



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

The *Neiman Reports* recently explored the idea of ‘dialogue journalism’ in a piece titled, “Can dialogue journalism engage audiences, foster civil discourse, and increase trust in the media?” In that report, Chuck Todd, the moderator of NBC’s Meet the Press, observed: “As a journalist, you can’t just sit in the observation tower anymore and report that one side is saying this and the other side is saying that. Listening to community voices and encouraging them to listen to each other is not a new tactic in journalism, it’s just more of a necessity than before.” In polarised times, dialogue helps people listen to each other rather than emphasise their own points in echo chambers. In my experience, *The Hindu’s* Open House has become a forum for engagement. It is a form of dialogue journalism.

### Discussion in the Open House

We invited 40 readers for the last Open House, which was held in Kochi on July 27, for a free and frank exchange of ideas with the senior editorial team led by the Editor. A representative from the management was also present to address non-editorial queries. We provided adequate time to the readers to raise their concerns. It was heartening to note that there were young college students, literary translators, teachers and retired bureaucrats in the audience. The reason for limiting the number to 40 was to ensure that every participant got an opportunity to express his or her opinion.

Louise Diamond of The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy once said: “Dialogue means we sit and talk with each other, especially those with whom we may think we have the greatest differences. However, talking together all too often means debating, discussing with a view to convincing the other, arguing for our point of view, examining pros and cons. In dialogue, the intention is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover.”

Instead of being trapped in the binary of digital media and legacy media, readers understood the value of the process of news-gathering and news processing. Two young readers, Anna Kattampally and Chithra S. Nair, both graduate students from St. Teresa’s College, said younger readers now wait for proper journalistic writing to know the truth as social media forwards carry too much misinformation. They told us that there is a dramatic increase in the sharing of sensational, unverified content which is eroding trust in various institutions. They said that the fact that such messages come from known circles give them some form of credence. It is in this context that they have decided to become readers of *The Hindu*, a newspaper which makes central to its news coverage the act of verification.

### A difficult balance

Many readers spoke of a balance of hyperlocal, local, state, national and international news. Diverse opinions indicated that any fixed formula would make someone unhappy, as the interests of each reader are different from another’s. One idea that the Editor approved of was the creation of an edition-centric letters section to deal with local and civic issues. This can be a form of citizen journalism. He has promised to make the local letters section an interactive one: readers will raise issues and the newspaper will seek responses to these issues from the authorities concerned. One reader said that the official responses could become formulaic and wanted the newspaper to examine both the complaints and the responses, so that there is a system of accountability. This new section should be available within a fortnight.

In the era of digitisation, a question that was asked was, shouldn’t news be free? When there are multiple sources of information, why should a publication have a paywall? Some argued that the paywall proposal was an attempt to turn news into a commodity that people are willing to pay for.

The answer is simple: news costs money, and credible news costs more money. It is our own democratic investment to pay a fair price for high-quality journalism. For nearly a century, the revenue model was driven by advertising, which is now getting fragmented across platforms.

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# Respecting reproductive choice

Regulation of commercial surrogacy rather than a blanket ban may be the way forward

VIJAITA SINGH

It is unfortunate that the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2019, approved by the Cabinet, bans and criminalises commercial surrogacy and only allows altruistic surrogacy. The Bill stipulates that a surrogate mother has to be a ‘close relative’ of the intending couple.

### Imposing morality

The legislation shows that the government is eager to impose a certain morality on others as the Bill excludes gay couples, single men and women, and unmarried couples who want a child. In doing so, the government overlooks the needs of many same sex couples and single parents.

In its earlier form, the Surrogacy Bill was cleared by the Lok Sabha on December 19, 2018. It was passed after a short debate of just two hours among only nine members of Parliament. It could not be introduced in the Rajya Sabha, however. At that time, the Health Minister, J.P. Nadda, said various political parties supported the Bill which was drafted “keeping the Indian ethos in mind”. He said the “intention is to save the family” and if the family is not able to bear children, to help them bear children through facilities offered by modern science. A family, according to the Minister, consists of “a registered husband and wife.” The 228th Law Commission India Report on Commercial Surrogacy too strongly recommended prohibiting commercial surrogacy. However, it said that “prohibition on vague moral grounds without a proper assessment of social ends and purposes which surrogacy can serve would be irrational.”

How did the the Health Ministry conclude that that all forms of commercial surrogacy are suspicious? If it relied on or conducted studies on commercial surrogacy, it would be helpful if it shared these with the public, especially since this Bill, if it becomes law, could affect the chances of many couples in India who are desperate for children and whose only ray of hope is often commercial surrogacy. Is there an inventory of clinics offering commercial surrogacy services? If yes, did the health inspectors carry out inspections?

Should there be a charter of regulations that these clinics must follow? Many questions remain unanswered. The legislation allows surrogacy only through a close relative. However, the Bill doesn’t define ‘close relative’. Moreover, the surrogate, the Bill says, should be married, aged 25 to 35, and should have at least one child. This further brings down the number of eligible surrogate mothers.

Votaries of the ban have argued that commercial surrogacy is used for trafficking, and foreigners abandon children born through surrogates. Such violations should be addressed with an iron fist. However, has there been a comparison between the number of cases of misuse and those cases where families have benefited from surrogacy? Other practices are misused too, but they are all not banned.



### Tightening regulations

The focus should be on the well-being of the surrogate. The intending couple should ensure financial enumeration, a sound insurance cover and regular health check-ups for the surrogate. The relevant parts of the process should be legally documented. To impose a ban where better regulation may have sufficed will only take the entire process underground. Tightening regulations would respect the interests of infertile couples who might have a chance to have a child through surrogacy. That would also respect the woman’s choice about how she wants to bear a child.

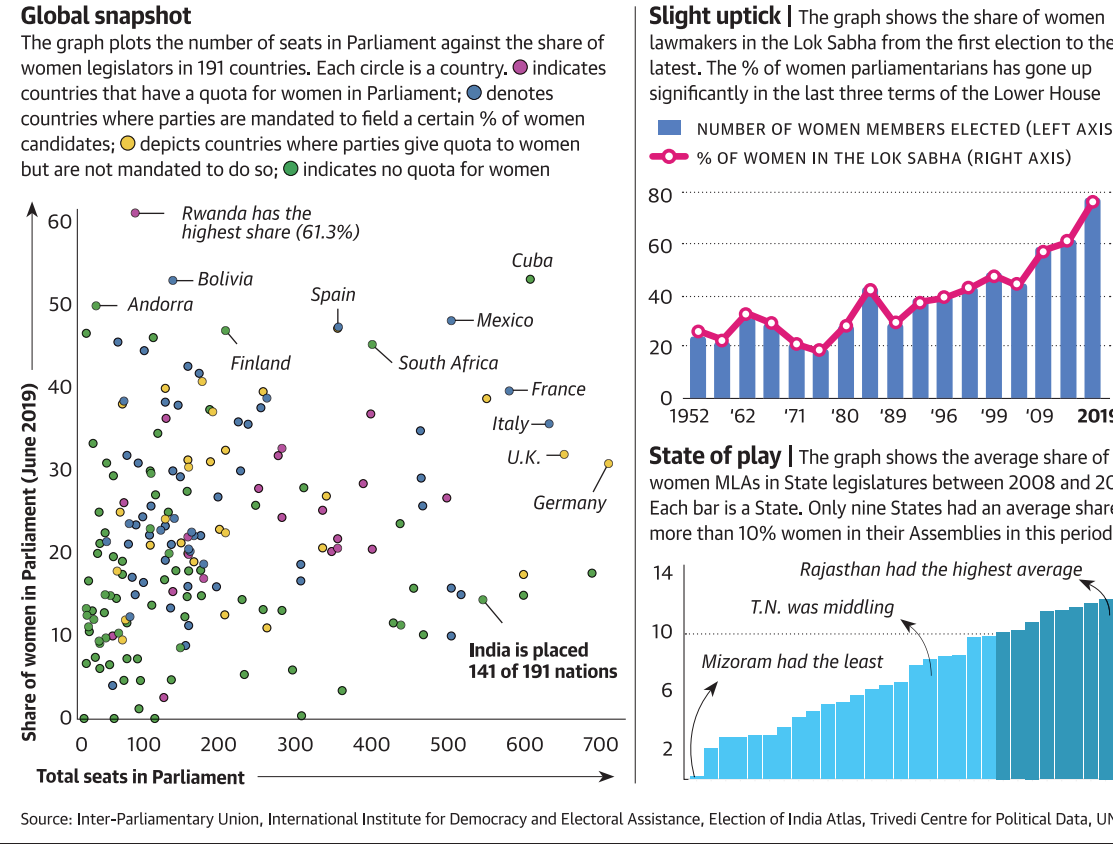
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## DATA POINT

# Women in charge

Despite the share of women legislators in the Lok Sabha peaking at 14.39% as of June 2019, India is still worse than 140 countries in the representation of women in Parliament. The global average for the share of women parliamentarians stood at 24.6%. By **Sumant Sen**



## The Hindu

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 29, 1969

### Signs of ferment in Nepal

The suppression of three newspapers here [Kathmandu] last week, along with the arrest of student demonstrators and a prominent member of the National Assembly, focussed attention on the troubled political conditions in Nepal. The developments indicate that the Panchayat or Assembly system of limited representative Government inaugurated by King Mahendra nine years ago is running into serious new difficulties. One of the chief elements in the situation is a Communist movement looking mainly toward Peking that stands to profit if turbulence and repression continue. The latest flare-up of student restiveness results from recent student union elections. For years, Communist nominees have been winning the annual vote but this year non-Communists came out ahead. Demonstrations by rival factions centred on international issues, with the Communists attacking their opponents through anti-Indian slogans, denouncing the small Indian military liaison group in Nepal, Indian border watchers on the Tibet frontier and India’s position over Susta, where location of boundary posts is in dispute.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 29, 1919.

### Letter to Mr. Gandhi.

A portion of the correspondence that has lately passed between Mr. Gandhi and the Hon’ble Sir George Barnes, Commerce and Industries Member of the Government of India, in regard to the Asiatic Trading Amendment Act, passed by the South Africa Legislature, has been issued to the Press [in Bombay] by Mr. Gandhi. It consists of two letters, one written by Sir George Barnes to Mr. Gandhi on the 18th instant reviewing the position in South Africa at length, regretting that protests from the Government of India had been unavailing and assuring that the Government would consider most anxiously further action to be taken when the full text of the new statute is received, and the other being Mr. Gandhi’s reply to Sir George Barnes. The following is the text of Sir George Barne’s letter to Mr. Gandhi: Dear Mr. Gandhi, I sent you only a very short note a few days ago in answer to your letter because I wanted to defer a fuller answer until I was able to deal with the subject at length. I told you, in my first note, that I felt certain that you needed no assurance from me that the events in South Africa which have led up to the passing of the new statute have caused the Viceroy and myself the deepest anxiety.