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Let women make  
the choice

The Supreme Court's ruling is a setback to giving women autonomy over their bodies

**T**he Supreme Court's refusal on Tuesday to allow a woman to abort her 26-week-old unborn baby with Down Syndrome is a setback after its progressive women-centric January ruling. In this, it relaxed the 20-week ceiling on legal abortion to allow a woman to abort her 24-week baby with anencephaly, a life-threatening congenital defect. Children with Down Syndrome have lifelong disabilities because of impaired brain and physical growth and are predisposed to health problems like congenital heart defects, sleep apnea, and Alzheimer's disease, among others.

India's Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act legalises abortions up to 20 weeks if there is threat to the mother's life or her physical or mental health, or if the unborn baby has abnormalities, but many women end up using unsafe abortion methods because they don't know where or who to go to because there are not enough legal providers.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the abortion law, the Union health ministry has proposed amendments to relax the cut-off period for legal abortions to 24 weeks and increase the number of skilled providers. The new amendments set no upper limit for abortions if the baby has "substantial foetal abnormalities," which are yet to be defined in the rules that will be drafted after the bill is approved by Parliament. The proposed changes are with the Cabinet for approval before being tabled in Parliament. Whether Down Syndrome makes the cut as a "substantial foetal abnormality" is not known, but the right to abort is as much a rights issue as a medical one. Unwanted children get no State support, and neither do children with disabilities, who have to be cared for all their lives by their parents.

Women must have control over the decision-making related to their body and India must guard against a rights issue being hijacked by the moral police. Women keen on ending unwanted pregnancies find ways to do it, at risk to their health. Awareness that abortion is legal in India is low, ranging between a low 36% in Bihar and Jharkhand to a dismal 12% among Jharkhand youth in the age group of 15-24 years. Unsafe abortions kill 10 women in India each day, with an estimated 6.8 million women each year choosing unsafe methods to end unwanted pregnancies. Unsafe abortion is responsible for 8% of all maternal deaths in India, which makes it the third biggest cause of women dying of childbirth-related causes in the country. Strong laws and medical services that give women the right over their bodies can stop hundreds of thousands of these deaths.

## Time for the right to recall

An amendment to the representation of the people bill could put power back into the hands of the voters

**I**f you have the power to elect your representative to the assemblies or Parliament, you should also have the power to recall them if they fail in their duties. This is the crux of the bill moved by BJP MP Varun Gandhi with the provision that if 75% of those who voted are not satisfied with the performance of the elected representative, he/she should be recalled. To implement the right to recall, Mr Gandhi has proposed the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 2016 by which the process can be initiated by any voter by filing a petition before the Speaker and which is signed by at least one fourth of the total number of electors in that constituency. This bill merits consideration. The people elect their representatives based on their promises, which often are forgotten once the seat is secured. But people have no recourse but to wait till the next election to make their displeasure felt.

The right to recall has been implemented in several European countries with good effect. The move would make the elected representatives accountable. The caveat is that this should not be misused by vested interests. The Constitution has been amended numerous times, so there is no argument against taking another look at this bill. With the growth of the electronic media and the Right to Information Act, people are far more aware today of what they are entitled to, and with this they are demanding accountability from those they vote to power.

This bill would put power back into the hands of the people which is the cornerstone of our democracy. People are also increasingly fed up of the manner in which assembly and parliamentary proceedings are often conducted with no real business being transacted. The right to recall would be welcomed by the public, though it may not go down too well with many in the political establishment. This is an idea that should be debated and discussed both in Parliament and civil society forums. Taking into account the various strands of opinion, Parliament should consider this proposal.

## line of sight

SRINATH RAGHAVAN

Get down from  
the high horse

New Delhi does not have many cards to play. It must reconsider its stand and join China's One Belt, One Road initiative

**T**he recently held India-China strategic dialogue provides a useful reality check on the state of the play. Over the past year, the relationship had reached an impasse owing to China's unwillingness to support India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group and to allow Masood Azhar of Jaish-e-Mohammed to be placed on the United Nations Security Council's terror list. In both cases India had insisted that these were litmus tests of its ties with China. New Delhi's stance stemmed from an underestimation of the growing importance of Pakistan to China and from an overestimation of its own clout. If the former underscored the inability of the government to get the measure of China-Pakistan convergence, the latter flowed from the curious belief that international influence was mostly about talking ourselves up. The meeting between the Indian foreign secretary and his Chinese counterpart has not yielded much on either of these issues. Yet, New Delhi has sought to bracket them and emphasise the avenues of cooperation with Beijing. Given the disparity in power between the two, it was always faintly ridiculous for India to believe that it could stare down the Chinese. In its new co-operative mood, too, New Delhi should keep this underlying asymmetry of power fully in view.

The backdrop to the meeting, as the foreign secretary observed, was the "flux" in the international system. The advent of Donald Trump has called into question the continuation of a stable, open international economic order—one that benefited both China and India. In this context, it was desirable to aim at "a more stable, substantive, forward-looking India-China relationship". Both the diagnosis and the prescription are well taken. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the changing global context will impinge upon China and India rather differently.

The prospect of a trade war sparked off by Trump's imposition of tariffs is a major cause for concern to the Chinese leadership. But they also know that United States does not hold all the chips. For one thing, China can retaliate against American exports on a range of things from aircraft to soya bean. More importantly, American tariffs will undercut global value chains and the accompanying deep integration of regulatory systems—commercial laws, taxation, intellectual property rights—fostered assiduously by the US in the past.

While this will hurt China in the short run, it also provided Beijing an opening to reorient economic integration in Asia under its leadership and on more congenial terms.

The collapse of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the rolling out of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative have provided Beijing the perfect setting in which to pursue a more ambitious agenda of Asian integration. Chinese economists have also mooted ideas to channel a greater portion of Asian savings into investments in Asia—instead of persisting with the current pattern of effectively sending those savings to the US and allowing American banks and financial institutions to reinvest them in Asia. All this will take time and enormous effort, but the Chinese are well poised.

Politically, too, Beijing will stand to gain from Trump's attitude towards longstanding partners in Asia. If an ally like Australia—which stood by the US even during the Vietnam War—came in for rough treatment, what are the odds that others are going to have smooth relationship with the Trump administration? To be sure, many of these countries will continue to be concerned about China but the emergence of countervailing coalitions may become difficult.

Unlike Beijing, New Delhi does not have many cards to play. Despite repeated expressions of interest, India's record in fostering economic integration even in the subcontinent

is underwhelming. Further, New Delhi has firmly refused to sign up to the Chinese OBOR initiative. The two sides did, however, discuss the possibility of cooperating on developmental activities in Afghanistan. Again, while this is welcome, New Delhi should recognise that Beijing does not really need to work with it in Afghanistan.

Over the past year and a half, the Chinese have been active in diplomatic efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Apart from Pakistan and Afghanistan, they have worked with the US and Russia to facilitate these negotiations. Most recently, the Chinese have acknowledged that they have undertaken joint counter-terrorist operations with Afghan forces. All this is a sharp departure from Beijing's earlier, tentative policy towards Afghanistan. In the light of growing Chinese activism as well as their deepening ties with Pakistan, it is unlikely that India-China "cooperation" in Afghanistan will amount to very much.

Instead of pursuing such chimeras, New Delhi should reconsider its position on the One Belt, One Road initiative. At the latest meeting, the foreign secretary reiterated India's refusal to participate on the grounds that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor violates India's sovereignty over Kashmir. What matters is not our motivations or desires but the outcomes of the Chinese initiative and their implications for India. Riding the high horse is unlikely to get us very far.

New Delhi is also put off by the fact that Beijing has not been adequately consultative in its approach. But petulance should not drive our policy. The reality is that the Asian economic order is set to undergo far-reaching changes. By refusing to take a realistic tack, India is depriving itself of an opportunity to shape the transforming landscape of Asia.

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The views expressed are personal



Foreign secretary S Jaishankar with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, in Beijing, ahead of the strategic dialogue, February 22

## newsmaker

DONALD TRUMP US President

**YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT IS EXACTLY HAPPENING BEHIND THE SCENES. I THINK THAT PRESIDENT OBAMA IS BEHIND IT [WHITE HOUSE LEAKS], BECAUSE HIS PEOPLE ARE CERTAINLY BEHIND IT. AND SOME OF THE LEAKS POSSIBLY COME FROM THAT GROUP, WHICH ARE REALLY SERIOUS BECAUSE THEY ARE VERY BAD IN TERMS OF NATIONAL SECURITY.**



Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE

## THINK IT OVER »

A MAN'S CHARACTER MAY BE LEARNED FROM THE ADJECTIVES WHICH HE HABITUALLY USES IN CONVERSATION.

MARK TWAIN

## Modi has mesmerised Uttar Pradesh voters

His mix of extravagant promises, powerful rhetoric and incendiary Hindu nationalism continues to be a major attraction

Jawid Laiq

Electoral analysis jigsaw puzzles like India or Uttar Pradesh is a daunting task. Multiple layers of castes and communities and differing regions baffle political pundits and professional pollsters who often fail to predict election results correctly.

One group who have been astonishingly accurate in their poll analysis and predictions over many elections are the humble mallahs or traditional boatmen of Allahabad. (Their forecasts were commented on by me in the Hindustan Times of May 1, 2004, April 28, 2009 and May 5, 2014.)

Every day, they row thousands of yatis (pilgrims) from all over the country to take a holy dip at the Sangam, the sacred confluence of the waters of the Ganga and Yamuna. The boatmen quietly listen to the chatter of the pilgrims and after much coaxing divulge the electoral opinions of the yatis.

I have been visiting the boatmen as a political pilgrim since the momentous 1977 election when Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime was sent packing and the boatmen had told me of the impending victory of the Janata party. This is the seventh time I am visiting the boatmen during an election, though the first time during an assembly election. The other six visits were during national elections.

My most reliable analyst during the past three Lok Sabha elections has been Rajan Kumar Nishad, the head of the boatmen's association at present. This time, he claims "Ab bhi Modi ke lehar hai" (Even now there is a Modi wave.) He and his fellow boatmen had also foreseen a Modi wave in 2014, much bigger and more accurate than that predicted by the professional pollsters and pundits.

I ask him the reasons for Modi's continuing popularity despite being unable to fulfil all the electoral promises he had made in 2014. Nishad says that unlike other leaders Modi is working for all Hindus, regardless of caste. Every caste now favours Modi. Asked about notebandi (demonetisation), Rajan Nishad says that it caused some initial problems but got rid of big black money including that of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Akhilesh Yadav, Mayawati and Jayalalitha. Rajan is confident that entirely due to Modi the BJP will get at least 50% of the 403 seats in the UP Assembly. If required, Mayawati's BSP may support him in the state



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing a rally in Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh, a part of the BJP's campaign in the 2017 assembly elections

HT PHOTO

legislature.

Santu Nishad, aged 21, nods in agreement. He will be voting for the first time in this election and it will be for Modi. I question "and other young Nishads (all the boatmen use their caste name), about the failure of Modi to provide the mass employment that he had promised to young people in his 2014 election campaign. The Nishads have an instant answer. The UP government led by Akhilesh during the past five years gave jobs only to Yadav youngsters. They expect that Modi, through the coming BJP government in Lucknow, will create employment for all.

To test the predictions of the boatmen, I ask Santu to row me to the Sangam where we intercept several boats carrying families and clans from various districts of Uttar Pradesh. We ask each boatload who they will vote for or who they have already voted for in the seven-phase election. We manage to question nine boatloads who have come from villages and small towns in nine districts—Banda, Bareilly, Basti, Bijpur, Etawah, Kanpur, Lakhimpur Kheri, Meerut and Sitapur which roughly represent the geographic spread of the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Seven of the nine boatloads respond that they have already voted for or will be voting for "kamal ka phool" (the lotus symbol of the BJP). The yatis from Etawah shout

from their boat that they will vote for the Samajwadi Party while those in the Bijpur boat ignore our queries.

The next day, I visit two villages near Bahrauli on the outskirts of Allahabad. I had also visited them in the past three elections. Barwah, which is a totally Brahmin village, is committed to voting for the BJP, according to their spokesman, Prem Narayan Tiwari, whom I am meeting for the fourth time during an election.

Bhagwatpur is a village with a population of 70% Dalits and 30% upper castes. Here Mahavir Saroj, a Dalit young man, has become angrily anti-Modi as not one promised job was provided to the village youth. Arguing against Mahavir, Krishna Kant Dwivedi, a Brahmin who owns a tiny grocery, openly declares "I am proud Hindu". He will vote for Prime Minister Narendra Modi whose mix of promises, powerful rhetoric and incendiary Hindu nationalism continues to be a big attraction in the Uttar Pradesh election.

I also visit Noorullah Road, a Muslim locality of Allahabad, for the fourth time. The Muslims here seem to be quite divided about which party they will vote for. In 2014, they had voted largely for the Congress Party.

Jawid Laiq is a political commentator who has been analysing nationwide elections since 1977. The views expressed are personal.

## innervoice



It's time to praise the unsung heroes of our country

Vinav Sharma

We all have personal idols. But in this materialistic world, we always want to emulate the one on the top. However, sometimes we forget to acknowledge the unsung heroes who make our lives better and richer.

Here are three examples: First, those who run the public transport system. Have you ever thought how difficult it must be for a driver to work eight hours a day, negotiating the bumper-to-bumper traffic of our cities? The same goes for taxi drivers. I was using an app-based car service and the driver told me that he is suffering from high blood pressure because of his schedule, the pollution and difficult customers. Despite these daily challenges, these people ensure that we reach our destinations on time, safe and secure. Shouldn't we thank them? In fact, we must imbibe their punctuality and sense of responsibility.

Second, our security forces. They ensure that we are safe and secure all the time. Only allow my children to go out after sunset because I know these responsible people will keep an eye on them. Third, our armed, paramilitary and rescue forces. They keep us safe from external challenges. But it is almost every day that we hear that soldiers die due to cross-border violence and harsh weather.

There are many who say that these people are paid to do a certain kind of job and so there is nothing special about them. This is true, but that does not mean that we should overlook the courage and commitment that is required to do these jobs.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal.)

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