

# Prosecute the Vadras and Clear the Air

That is how to establish guilt or innocence

By now, it is part of the political common sense that committees or commissions of inquiry are instituted when the authorities want to take no immediate action and seek to diffuse the public pressure to act. But committees and commissions also serve another purpose: to keep an issue alive, without resolving it either way. This serves no public good. Alleged acts of political crime deserve to be investigated with dispatch and the guilty punished with exemplary severity, and the innocent spared the calumny of undeserved suspicion. This principle must apply in the case against Robert Vadra, husband of Priyanka Gandhi, with regard to land deals in Haryana when the UPA led the government at the Centre.

Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad is reported to have said that the UPA government knew about many misdeeds of BJP leaders but refrained from taking action against them. If he thought he was taking credit for political magnanimity, he made a mistake. If what he said is right, the UPA government was negligent and patronised the Opposition. Honour among thieves is not what the people want in democracy. Thieves must be punished. Period. If Robert Vadra's purchase and sale of land parcels had anything illegal about them, he and those in the administrative apparatus and the political leadership that supervised the administrative apparatus must be punished. If there was nothing illegal about those transactions, that must be established. To conclusively prove either, the government of Haryana must prosecute Robert Vadra for his alleged crimes immediately. If his wife and daughter of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka, was a partner in crime, she too must be penalised. But if either of them is innocent, it would be gross violation of their rights if they are denied a chance to establish their lack of guilt.

The straightforward solution is to frame charges against the Vadras and prosecute them and allow the due process of the law to establish their culpability or the lack of it. What India does not require is the politics of innuendo and lingering suspicion.



and the political leadership that supervised the administrative apparatus must be punished. If there was nothing illegal about those transactions, that must be established. To conclusively prove either, the government of Haryana must prosecute Robert Vadra for his alleged crimes immediately. If his wife and daughter of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka, was a partner in crime, she too must be penalised. But if either of them is innocent, it would be gross violation of their rights if they are denied a chance to establish their lack of guilt.

# With Two Service Rates, Scrap Abatements

The Centre and states reportedly want two tax slabs for services under the goods and services tax (GST). This is pragmatic to start with, while the goal should be to eliminate all classification controversies and collapse almost all rates to a standard rate. The Centre's extant rate structure for services is complex. Apart from the standard rate (15%), there are about 10 lower rates due to abatement. This is allowed in services such as railways, restaurants and goods transport. It lowers the tax burden for the service provider and consumer, but breaks the value-added tax chain as a service provider cannot claim credit on all the taxes paid on inputs (read: goods). Abatements should go, when these services are charged a lower tax rate.

Ideally, a manufacturer or a service provider should be able to claim credit for all the taxes it pays on inputs. This will lead to audit trails that will expand the tax base. The GST design now has four rates for goods, plus cesses, and excludes real estate, electricity, alcohol as well as petroleum products. A lower rate for, say, goods transport makes sense as the major component, fuel, has been excluded from GST. However, there will be little leeway to lower rates if the tax base is riddled with exemptions. Cross-crediting between goods and services must be complete to make production efficient.

Petroleum products must be quickly brought under GST. Similarly, the power sector should form an integral part of the GST base as recommended by the task force set up by the Thirteenth Finance Commission. There is no reason why electricity duty levied by states cannot be subsumed in GST. With reforms underway in real estate, the case to bring the sector under GST is also compelling. A low, uniform GST encompassing all sectors should be the eventual goal.

# Johnson calling Corbyn a mugwump makes him more interesting than he is

## Political Jousts Need Rhetorical Wizardry

As British parliamentarians are not as thin-skinned as their Indian counterparts, they continue to amuse aficionados of rhetorical jousts with humorously intemperate gems such as British foreign secretary Boris Johnson's latest outburst: calling Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn a "mutton-headed mugwump" in a newspaper article. While Johnson's allegations of mutton-headedness may not be for alliterative purposes only, Harry Potter fans would know that the Supreme Mugwump was head of the International Confederation of Wizards. And Johnson has evoked Potter similes earlier too. In 2015, for instance, he said Russian President Vladimir Putin looked like Dobby the House Elf. So, he was not alluding to the historical definition of mugwumps: Republicans supported a Democrat for US president way back in 1884.

Recent political convulsions around the world do point to the presence of ideological mugwumps, but Corbyn cannot be said to be one of those with little political conviction. Quite the opposite, in fact. Therefore, Johnson was most certainly referring to a Potteresque mugwump, which would make the Labour leader Dumbledore. But his white-bearded visage notwithstanding, JK Rowling tweeted last August very categorically that "Corbyn. Is. Not. Dumbledore". Even Johnson must admit she knows best.

Threats to globalisation have been overcome before. As they are bound to be once again

# There's Only One Way to Go



Mythili Bhushurmah

Never in the lifetime of men now living has the universal element in the soul of man burnt so dimly. Is that the anguished cry of some disillusioned liberal trying to come to terms with what The Economist describes as the "divide between left and right being replaced by the divide between open and closed"? As President Donald Trump turns the US inwards, Britain pushes ahead with its exit from the EU — ironically in the very month the EU celebrated the 60th anniversary of its founding Treaty of Rome — and Australia and New Zealand tighten visa rules, it could well be. Except that it was actually written almost 100 years ago by John Maynard Keynes, one of the earliest proponents of 'open borders' (the word 'globalisation' coming much later).

## Economic Schadenfreude

To Keynes, writing in *The Economic Consequences of Peace*, the humiliating terms forced upon Germany by the victorious Allies at the end of World War I were the result of the victors' inability to appreciate the shared future of mankind. "The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions and depriving a whole nation of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable. Some preach it in the name of Justice. In the great events

of man's history, in the unwinding of the complex fates of nations, Justice is not so simple," he warned. Unfortunately, his warnings fell on deaf ears. Germany, smarting under the burden of war reparations, put its faith in a fascist leader. It was not long before the world was convulsed by World War 2.

Today, there are no winners and losers in the military sense. But there are winners and losers in the race for economic well-being and prosperity, and the divide between the two is no less dangerous. The average per-capita income in the richest country (Luxembourg) is close to 450 times the poorest (South Sudan).

The gulf in human development indicators is worse. In such a scenario, the increasing tendency of nations — especially the richer, more advanced nations — to look to their own narrow interests could have serious consequences. So, is it countdown to Armageddon? Not quite. There is one saving grace. The reality is the world has now gone so far down the path of globalisation that there is no turning back. There is no way advanced nations can insulate themselves from the adverse consequences of turning inward. Without shooting themselves in the foot.

We've seen that in the context of climate change, terrorism and pandemics, where the West, the US in particular, initially dismissed these as "Third World problems", only to find that when it comes to such issues, national borders are meaningless. Likewise, whether the West likes it or not, our economic interests are now far too intertwined. Take the case of US Treasury bills. China is the second-largest holder after Japan. As of February 2017, China owned about 10% of publicly held US debt (little

over \$1.1 trillion). If the US were to carry out the threat that Trump had held out during his campaign — that one of his first actions on being elected would be to name China a currency manipulator — then China could react by dumping its stock of US Treasury bills, causing prices to fall and yields to spike (price and yields are inversely related) putting paid to the US Fed's carefully laid plans of a gradual hike in interest rates.

It applies equally to trade and investment. Trump has long accused China of unfair trade practices, resulting in a US bilateral trade deficit of more than \$300 billion. The Chinese response has been that this has benefited American consumers as it increased

access to cheaper goods, and increased China investment in the US.

And that is good news for the rest of the world. It also explains why, for all of Trump's bluster, when the two leaders of the world's most powerful economies actually met in early April, the maverick Trump toned down his talk. Sabre-rattling about import tariffs against Chinese imports was replaced by more sane talk of a 100-day plan to address trade imbalance.

Of course, the threat has not entirely disappeared. "If we don't get some tangible results within the first 100 days, I think we'll have to examine whether it's worthwhile continuing them," said US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, speaking of the temporary reprieve. But that's likely to be an ideal threat.

Writing in *The European* in December 2014, sociologist George Ritzer pointed out, "Globalisation is not a single process, nor is it all about economics." True. But it is economics that ensures it remains largely a one-way street.

Like economic reforms in India, the pace may vary. But the broad direction will necessarily be forward.

Like economic reforms in India, the pace may vary. But the broad direction will necessarily be forward.



The road ahead

over \$1.1 trillion). If the US were to carry out the threat that Trump had held out during his campaign — that one of his first actions on being elected would be to name China a currency manipulator — then China could react by dumping its stock of US Treasury bills, causing prices to fall and yields to spike (price and yields are inversely related) putting paid to the US Fed's carefully laid plans of a gradual hike in interest rates.

## Footing the Treasury Bills

Of course, if China were to suddenly sell its holdings, the renminbi would appreciate, making Chinese exports more expensive in foreign markets. So, China, too, would have to be more circumspect. The fact is, the two largest economies of the world are now locked in a fatal embrace. The two-way dependence goes beyond holding US debt.

It applies equally to trade and investment. Trump has long accused China of unfair trade practices, resulting in a US bilateral trade deficit of more than \$300 billion. The Chinese response has been that this has benefited American consumers as it increased

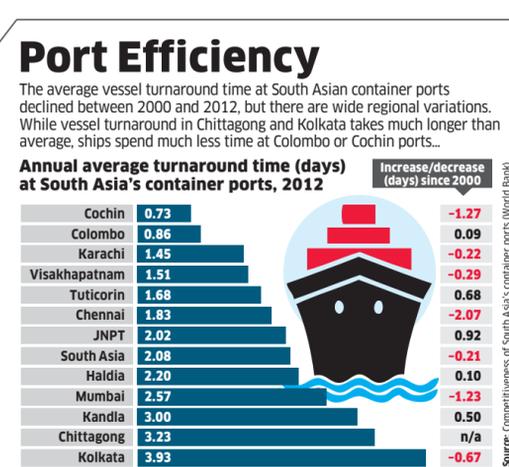
## MEME'S THE WORD



**WIT & WISDOM**

"Sweet April showers do spring May flowers."

Thomas Tusser  
Poet



## RED HERRING

# The Partitioning of Begum Jaan



Indrajit Hazra

What makes Saadat Hasan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' a Partition story, while Srijit Mukherji's Begum Jaan an overwhelmingly 'feminist' film — or an attempt to be one? The absence and presence of women, specifically prostitutes, in the short story and the movie respectively, it would seem going by the lava flow of reviews that I mustered up the courage to read after watching the film.

Most all reviewers seem to have encountered Begum Jaan — the story of a brothel madam and her employee-companions caught in the brutal absurdities of Partition — purely as a 'feminist' film, and a failed one at that. The intended message apparently ends up circulating the same 'patriarchal clichés' that the film intends to criticise.

The usual sex workers and women-standing-up-to-male-tyranny comparative boxes are ticked by the reviewers, with Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* and Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* nailed on the doorpost. But I must have seen a very different movie. Yes, the film being bookended by the depiction of a contemporary attempted gang rape in Delhi does clamber up the 'gender studies' shelf. But what lies at the core of the film are the inhumanities and horrors of Partition shown unflinchingly and, yes, melodramatically. After all, Begum Jaan isn't a Bergman movie, nor was it meant to be.

At the heart of the movie is a line: the Radcliffe Line. Like the asylum in *Toba Tek Singh*, in all this hyper-rational-driven chaos lies an anomaly: a warehouse that lies bang in the middle of where the Line that

will keep India and Pakistan separate is meant to pass.

Begum Jaan, played by Vidya Balan with the swagger one expects from both a brothel madam and a Hindi movie brothel madam, finds moving her establishment away from the line of fire first ridiculous and then worthy of resistance. The film, set in the weeks leading up to independence from colonial rule, also deals with the struggle of a bunch of people to retain their independence from the absurd rituals of nation-building.

The fact that some critics who have brought up Partition references mention Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* hints at another bias at play: that of a serious subject like Partition only worthy of being depicted in a somber, non-over-the-top way.

Similar criticism was faced by Roberto Benigni's *La Vita è Bella* (*Life is Beautiful*) when it won the 1999 Oscar for Best Foreign Film, as it was perceived by many wories to be 'offensive' in its treatment of the Holocaust as a comedy-drama film. A Partition story, it seems, cannot be told in a 'Wasseypur' way.

Scenes in which an elderly member of the kotha retells the tale of Padmini resisting hostile forces to a girl

have also received flak. I'm unsure why. But I suspect it may have something to do with the recent controversy over Sanjay Leela Bhansali's forthcoming film, *Padmavati*, and the 'Hindustva history myth vs historical figure' ruckus over *Padmini*.

But Rajkahini — from which Mukherji's Bengali 'original' movie is named after — Abanindranath Tagore's 1905 stories for children dealing with 'legends' of Rajput warrior-princes that was inspired by Colonel James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, is a children's classic that has delighted many across generations. To find the telling of the 'courageous Padmini' performing *jauhar* (self-immolation) with enemies at the gate distasteful is being both anachronistic and anal, not to mention crazily politically correct.

The two characters played by Rajit Kapoor and Ashish Vidyarthi, the Pakistani and Indian government officials 'carrying out' the Radcliffe Line to a T, are shown as mandarin idolaters. Their successors continue to ply their trade. Mukherji shows the Indian 'Radcliffier' to be more venomous than his Pakistani counterpart, as he 'hires' the service of a truly malevolent character, played with chilling brilliance by (an unrec-

ognisable) Chunky Pandey to see to it that the brothel and its inhabitants are 'removed'.

The sheer violence and horror of Partition — and the suspension of humanity — is powerfully shown in Begum Jaan. Sure, the way in which two rapes in two separate scenes are avoided — by shaming the would-be rapists — isn't believable even by narrative standards handed down by rapists of Manoj Kumar and Manmohan Desai. But to trash the film for its portrayal of a brothel madam keeping her employees on a tight 'patriarchal' leash betrays ignorance about brothel madams as well women employees who put business before sisterhood. For crying out loud, she runs a brothel, not a book club.

The fact that Begum Jaan tries everything to stop the exodus from her kotha — including allowing, with much painful reluctance, her princely benefactor (Naseeruddin Shah) to have sex with a minor rape victim — is missed by many who make the cardinal mistake of mistaking flaws depicted in characters as approval of these flaws.

Begum Jaan, more than anything, underlines what historian Joya Chatterji, in *The Spoils of Partition*, highlights, "All this careful plotting by Indian politicians, and not just by Cyril Radcliffe and the departing British government as we have been told by our history books) rested on the assumption, soon to be proved to be false that partition would entail major movements of population."

Begum Jaan is the powerful, heightened story of one such 'population' that refused to move while "major movements" were forced upon millions as a route to self-rule. Much more than being a one-dimensional movie about women standing up against men, it's a dramatic story told in full colour of a ghastly episode of our history we have been far too used to seeing in sepia.



Nation-on-girl action

indrajit.hazra@timesgroup.com



# Love is Not by Reason

SWAMITEJOMAYANANDA

Devotion is essentially of the nature of love. It is not a mere physical attraction to a person or thing, nor just an intellectual appreciation of the qualities of the desired object. The abode of love is the heart. That is why it is not possible to understand the nature of love by intellectual analysis or by logical reasoning. The only sure way to cultivate it is in the company of divine souls whose hearts are filled with love for the Lord.

People often misunderstand 'bhakti' (devotion); they consider it a display of emotion and, thus, not fit for intellectuals. However, looking at the great rishis (sages) of India and elsewhere, we find that though well-educated, they still revelled in supreme love for the Lord. Even in ordinary relationships (brother, sister, spouse), love helps us develop a cheerful attitude towards life and all beings. So, imagine the attitude of one who develops love for the Lord!

Bhakti is devotion to a higher cause. It uplifts us, makes us unselfish and helps us rise above petty limitations and sacrifice. Then, even the ego (the sense of 'I' and 'mine') is sacrificed for the object of love. Anyone can develop love, for it requires no analysis or study, elaborate rituals and ceremonies. Where there is love, nothing else is required.

The best way to develop devotion is by *satsang*, in the company of the wise and devoted. Associate with them, listen to their words and raise your mind higher. Attachments diminish, desires reduce, we develop discrimination and, ultimately, attain lasting freedom.

## Chat Room

### A Lot Achieved, a Lot Remains

May Day is celebrated as International Workers' Day on May 1. Workers in the organised sector may no longer face the harsh exploitation as in the past centuries, but life is caught in a time warp for those working in the small and medium enterprises that constitute about 65% of the labour force. We have adopted modern ways of life but remain feudal towards all those who perform for us many useful and menial jobs. Let May Day be the time for us to think it over, forgetting our class bias, and enthrone workers and promote true partnership for meaningful trade, business and industry.

PARTHASARATHY SEN  
New Delhi

### Think When Re Gains Muscle

Apropos the Edit, 'Don't Fret Too Much Over a Strong Rupee' (Apr 29), is it because of more inflow of foreign exchange, or is it because of lower imports and lower outflow of forex? More inflow of forex will result in more rupees in the market,

thereby causing inflation. This may not give scope for reduction of policy interest rates by RBI. A strong rupee will make the export-oriented industry to feel the strain to service their borrowings, adding another dimension of NPAs. Hence, a calibrated approach is required depending on the reason why the rupee is gaining strength.

S KALYANASUNDARAM  
Byemail

### A Baahubali in Collections Too

Baahubali 2: The Conclusion has hit cinema screens with a bang. What is drawing the crowds to the mega Rana Daggubatti-starrer is not just the high-voltage entertainment but also the poser that haunts a cinema-crazy nation: why did Kattappa kill Amerandra Baahubali? The first part collected over ₹600 crore, and the sequel may exceed this by several notches — making it the highest grosser ever in Indian cinematic history. Here's adrenaline rush for everyone.

N J RAVI CHANDER  
Bengaluru

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com