

# htthink!

REFLECTIONS

chanakya



## NO PETTY PARAMETERS FOR THE PRESIDENT

**Y**ou must have heard of Draupadi Murmu by now. Ah yes, you will say, the tribal woman from Odisha who just might be India's next President. Tribal, yes, but that is not all she is and that is not what should matter at all. She has been an academic, a governor and has held several ministerial portfolios, yet her utility is being seen as her tribal origins and with it the possibility that she could become a mascot to gain votes from among the marginalised for the formation seen to patronise her. What a shame that the race for the top constitutional post is now being predicated on every consideration other than merit.

While I am no mean gender advocate, I see no reason why a woman should be chosen for the sake of some form of political correctness. Look how sadly we fared with Pratibha Patil. I remember reading with some mortification that her visit did not even get a quorum in Parliament of a small South American nation for her to address. I won't go into her delusions of grandeur in the form of setting up a museum to house the artefacts she received during her presidency in her hometown. When KR Narayanan took office, we celebrated it as a triumph of our social inclusiveness; he was, after all, a Dalit. He was in fact a distinguished diplomat and scholar and

deserving of any high office, but we sought to reduce him to his caste. I am not saying that all presidents have covered themselves in glory. Many have indeed been guilty of acting as handmaidens of the political party to which they owed allegiance, some articulating this somewhat embarrassingly as Giani Zail Singh did. And now as the race begins in earnest, we are once again inundated with information of the various criteria on which the next president may be chosen, all of them unsuitable if I may say so.

The President's office is the last port of call in our democracy. If he or she returns a bill to Parliament, the ruling formation can send it back and eventually the President will have to go along with it. But it is considered a huge embarrassment for the government of the day. You will have gathered from this that studying complicated legislation, understanding its implications and on the occasion imposing President's rule in troubled states are just some of the duties that the first citizen has to undertake.

Now many among us, and I am guilty of this myself, think that being President is a walk in the park. Even though real political power vests with the prime minister, the President's role in this time of intense ideological divisions and social upheavals cannot be overstated.



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

He or she has to guide the ship of state when politicians fail on their watch. But we often think that the President has not much more to do than rattle around the many bespoke rooms of Rashtrapati Bhavan, stroll in its fabled gardens, shake hands with foreign dignitaries and be waited upon hand and foot. Well, I would not sneeze at living in a style I am not accustomed to, but if we were to take the office of the President for what it is should be all about, we would simply opt for the best person for the job.

We should look at that person's qualifications for the complex constitutional and legal problems that he or she will face. We should look at how well this person will conduct himself or herself on the world stage where there are colourful

and erudite personalities as counterparts in this post in other countries. We have had outstanding presidents like S Radhakrishnan, Zakir Husain, and KR Narayanan to name a few. But over the years, all sorts of petty political considerations have crept into the making of a President.

It is not a post which should be given as a reward or to get a troublesome politician out of the way. It is not the office to be occupied by a sycophant and it is not an ornamental position. The person who occupies the once imperial residence should do India proud and be looked upon as the final and fair arbiter to any political imbroglio. Today we see a situation when we are openly

talking about which President would suit the needs of this or that political dispensation. No, this office cannot be allowed to be dragged so low. Its credibility hinges on its distance from the machinations of politics and partisanship.

This is why I feel uncomfortable when I read about a conglomeration of political parties that have nothing in common coming together to ensure that the BJP does not get its way in the presidential race. I am not saying that the BJP has any proprietary rights on the office by virtue of being in power. But to try and prop up a candidate whose qualifications are solely geared to appeal to the largest political pool is worrying because then all the criteria which I have been railing against come into play.

Oh, and I have to add a thought that you may not agree with. Why should the President be necessarily of a certain age? Why can we not have a young President to represent India's youthful demographic? It would sweep away some of the imperial fustiness of the office, wouldn't it? I am not suggesting that the next President open the residence to Justin Bieber concerts or anything, but if a younger person were in place, we would see more relevant interventions on behalf of a vast cohort of our population, our future.

Age has not deterred young men, and how I wish it were also women, from occupying the most powerful post in the world. So, India could be a trailblazer in the region if we had a young, but qualified President—the emphasis being on qualified. I really wish some of the younger, smart politicians or even professionals would throw their hat into the ring. Let us have a real choice of whom to make the next President. The old criteria are worn and tattered. Let us have a new prototype for a new India.

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sundaysentiments



KARAN THAPAR

## PRINCE PHILIP, FOOT FIRMLY IN THE MOUTH

**T**he closest I've ever got to Prince Philip was at my graduation in 1977. Perhaps because he became Chancellor of Cambridge in the preceding year he was personally present to handover the degrees. Unfortunately, I can't recall what he said or if he spoke at all. Yet if he only grunted, while his eyes lit up with mischief, it would be typical of the man.

In an age when we're suffocatingly conscious of political correctness the prince has a reputation for being forthright and indiscreet but also witty and fun. His gaffes, as the British press calls them, have shocked a few but delighted many more. At times they tell the blunt truth while on other occasions they're the sort of thing you wish you had said yourself. Some of his funniest comments have been levelled at foreigners. On

meeting Nigeria's former president Olusegun Obasanjo, who was wearing traditional robes, he quipped: "You look like you're ready for bed."

On seeing an exhibition of "primitive" Ethiopian art he pronounced: "It looks like the kind of thing my daughter would bring back from her school art lessons." And to a student who had been trekking in Papua New Guinea: "You managed not to get eaten then?" Of Chinese food he told the World Wildlife Fund: "If it has got four legs and it's not a chair, if it has two wings and flies but is not an aeroplane, and if it swims and is not a submarine, the Cantonese will eat it."

Asked in 1967 about a possible trip to the then Soviet Union he replied: "I would like to go to Russia very much—although the bastards murdered half my family." But my favourite is this delightful statement: "I declare this



Prince Philip at a reception, Canada House, London (File Photo) GETTY IMAGES

thing open, whatever it is", as he cut the ribbon to inaugurate Vancouver's City Hall.

Some of these comments are no doubt impolite. You might even say they smack of racism. But where would humour be without such ingredients? More importantly, the prince is equally outspoken about the British. "British women can't cook" he once said before adding, "They are very good at decorating food and making it

attractive." On a visit to Scotland he asked a driving instructor: "How do you keep the natives off the booze long enough to pass the test?"

On meeting Lord Taylor, the first black Conservative peer, the prince questioned: "And what exotic part of the world do you come from?" "Birmingham" Lord Taylor replied.

Sometimes the prince does correct himself but that only makes the joke better. Whilst touring a Glasgow factory his attention was caught by the state of a fuse box. "It looks as though it was put in by an Indian", he exclaimed. Then he quickly added: "I meant to say cowboys. I just got my cowboys and Indians mixed up!"

The best part is that the prince is well aware of what he's up to. Fifty years ago he told the General Dental Council: "Dontopedology is the science of opening your mouth and putting your foot in it, a science which I have practised for a good many years." As The Times commented last week, when the prince announced his retirement: "Somehow, no matter how wide he opens his mouth or how deeply his foot becomes lodged in it, people never stay offended for long."

And now an admission: I like a risqué sense of humour. It's not just different it also brightens up our lives.

The views expressed are personal

## POLITICIANS, MEDIA, JUDGES, MUST NOT LET UP SO EASILY



MARK TULLY

**S**ix months on and economists tell us the economy appears to be recovering from the trauma of demonetisation. But has everyone recovered? Have those who depend most on cash recovered, the casual workers, the rickshaw-pullers, the weavers, the vegetable sellers, and so many others whose fragile economies were disrupted? Certainly not all of them have recovered.

For instance micro-credit organisations have experienced a sharp rise in defaults on loan repayments, indicating the adverse impact of demonetisation on poorer working women. Nevertheless the Uttar Pradesh election indicates that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was successful in portraying himself as a man of action attacking black money, the corruption it spawned, and the corrupt who deal in it.

Will the promise of a black-money-free India be fulfilled? The demonetisation and the measures which accompanied it have had a dramatic impact on the property market which was awash in black money. Suddenly cheques are not just acceptable, they are demanded by sellers and buyers. But what about political parties another major source of black money? The reforms of the rules governing contributions to political parties don't provide for any public disclosure.

**AS FOR THE JUDICIARY, THE PHRASE USED BY THOSE ACCUSED OF CORRUPTION, 'LET THE LAW TAKE ITS COURSE', SAYS IT ALL. THAT COURSE RARELY ENDS WITH TIMELY CONVICTION**

The views expressed are personal

deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

## IT+IT MAY NOT EQUAL A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

**A** friend who analyses conversations on social media tells me that expressions of economic anxiety have become as frequent as they used to be in 2013. Back then, India had fallen off a high growth trajectory — amid rising global uncertainties and lingering political differences that stalled policy making at home. The nation's aspirational journey had paused, triggering a clamour for change. In the elections that followed in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stormed to power, riding on popular hope that he will turn things around. Three years on, it appears the challenges remain as daunting as they were then.

A review of surveys and news reports on hiring by Indian companies shows that services continue to generate more new jobs than manufacturing, but hiring activities in both segments have slowed through the past year, dropping sharply after

demonetisation.

ManpowerGroup, a leading global headhunter that regularly monitors the hiring activities of Indian businesses, sees job prospects hitting a four-year low in the current quarter. It estimates the net employment outlook — the difference between the percentage of companies planning to offer new jobs and the percentage of companies planning to cut jobs — will decline to 18% in April-June from 23% a quarter ago and 38% a year earlier. The outlook has seen a 14 percentage point drop since demonetisation. About 68% of the 4,389 employers surveyed said they had no plans to hire through April-June.

Data from other recruitment firms and hiring agencies present a similar outlook, which explains my friend's observation about social conversations. Google search results for words or phrases such as job cuts and layoffs have seen a steady spike in

## A MILLION-PLUS STUDENTS GRADUATE FROM INDIA'S ENGINEERING COLLEGES EVERY YEAR, BUT LESS THAN A QUARTER OF THEM ARE FOUND TO BE EMPLOYABLE

recent months. At this point, the grim scenario relating to jobs is most pronounced in the information technology (IT) sector. A combination of new technologies, changing business models and a tighter visa regime in the United States has forced IT companies to go for large-scale layoffs. No matter how much we talk about diversifying the global spread of Indian IT workers, the US market remains the biggest determinant for the Indian IT sector. When the going was good, most of our IT firms did little to climb up the value chain or prepare themselves to face adversities such as they do now.

A strategy that leans heavily on wage-arbitrage offers little cushion against risks associated with increasing automation and adoption of new technologies such as cloud computing. It is unlikely that the trend will reverse, even though many of the affected companies continue to be in denial. The top seven IT firms in the country plan to lay off 56,000 engineers this year. In their defence, they attribute a good share of this number

to non-performers, which should take us to another issue that has been crying for attention: The quality of our workforce and the talent coming out of our educational institutions.

About a million students graduate from engineering colleges, but less than a quarter of them are found to be employable, according to industry surveys. Some relatively more quality-conscious reviewers offer a much lower estimate, which deems 90% of them to be not employable. In the past, companies didn't mind hiring suboptimal resources in the hope they can be trained on the job. But such optimism takes a backseat when times get harder and the room for manoeuvre is limited. As an HT analysis shows, placement rates at IITs dropped to 66% this year from 79% a year earlier, meaning every third IITian didn't get placed because he/she either didn't get a suitable job or wasn't found to be suitable for a job. If this is the state of what are showcased as institutions of excellence, imagine how hopeless the condition would be at the other 4,000-odd colleges of engineering and technical institutions across the country.

Indeed, neither the information technology sector nor the nation's talent pool is in a state to win a brighter tomorrow for India. Perhaps, that is also a message Prime Minister Modi was trying to underscore when he said: IT+IT = India Tomorrow.

@RajeshMahapatra

## thisweekthatera

### PICTURE OF THE WEEK

**MAY 15:** Prime Minister Indra Gandhi is received by the acting Governor of Kashmir, MR J N Wazir (Centre), and the Chief Minister, Mr G M Sadiq, on her arrival at Srinagar on Sunday (May 14)



### NEWS OF THE WEEK

#### INDIA

#### ZAKIR HUSAIN TAKES OVER AS PRESIDENT OF INDIA

**MAY 14:** Amidst the solemn grandeur of a 30-minute ceremony in the Central Hall of Parliament today (May 13), Dr Zakir Husain took over as President. Chief Justice of India Mr K N Wanchoo, administered the oath of office to the new President.

#### WORLD

#### CAIRO TELLS UN FORCE TO QUIT ISRAELI BORDER

**MAY 18:** The UAR (United Arab Republic) on May 17 called on the United Nations to pull its peacekeeping troops out of the border with Israel as army chiefs in Cairo ordered their troops to prepare for defensive action against Israel.

May 14-20, 1967 FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

### Not as clear as it should be

Rajesh Mahapatra in Swachh Survekshan needs to come clean (Deep Cut, May 7) hits the nail on the head. It is a pity that a survey is done based on a questionable methodology and its findings are publicised because it suits a campaign which is heavy on theatrics but thin on substance. While it is a commendable thing that Modi has taken up the issue of cleanliness, it would be counterproductive if it is not pursued in the right manner. DHANUSH NARAYAN VIA EMAIL

### It's a human rights violation

Karan Thapar's Modi's right, do not politicise triple talaq (Sunday Sentiments, May 7) argues both sides of the debate and fails to make a point. He blames the Opposition for not making its stand clear, but that's hardly a point. Personally, I think a human rights violation should not be permitted, even if it's in the name of a religion. SHENAZ MERIYUM T MUMBAI

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