



A thought for today

If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle

CARL SAGAN

Coal Block Verdict

To stem corruption, white collar crime has to be taken seriously

A special CBI court set up to try cases of alleged corruption in coal blocks delivered a noteworthy verdict this week. It sentenced former coal secretary HC Gupta and two of his junior colleagues to two years in prison for allocating a coal block to a private company in an illegal manner. The managing director of the beneficiary was sentenced to three years but all the accused were granted bail to file appeals in a higher court. The verdict may be the first of its kind. It also foregrounds the tricky issue of accountability in government decision making.

The case is not about a commercial decision taken in public sector based on forecasts which went wrong. It is an instance where guidelines were not followed. Given the economic context in which coal block allocations took place, it would be a travesty of justice if no accountability were fixed for the inappropriate way in which a screening committee of bureaucrats functioned.

To put matters in perspective, it is best to go back to what the Supreme Court verdict which cancelled coal block allocations in August 2014 said. The apex court observed that the screening committee functioned in an inconsistent and opaque manner. In the backdrop of a commodity price boom the screening committee minutes did not bother to explain the rationale for selecting or rejecting applicants for coal blocks. "On many occasions guidelines have been observed in breach," observed the Supreme Court, "common good and public interest have, thus, suffered heavily."

It is inexplicable that the most experienced layer of bureaucracy chose to function in this manner. Particularly when it was tasked with recommending allocation of a scarce natural resource.

The matter is unlikely to end here as the accused have recourse to an appeal. But the case does raise two issues. One, the existing anti-corruption legislation is in urgent need of reform. This is one legislation where improvements cannot wait. Two, there is a strong case to roll back the role of public servants in economic activities. Not only are they ill equipped for it, even acts of omission are damaging. It is no one's case that there should be a witch hunt. But fear of paralysis in decision making should not deter the law from taking its course.



Bad Guest Test

When Atithi Devo Bhava gets sorely stretched by modern politicians

Atithi Devo Bhava. Guest is equivalent to God. That's an ancient saying and a modern anthem. But what if the guest is boorish. Surely, no guest should be dissing his host either. There's an uproar in Karnataka that this is exactly what BJP state president BS Yeddyurappa did when he breakfasted at Dalit homes last week. Specifically the accusation is that he shunned the pulao cooked by his hosts; the idlis he tucked into in front of the cameras were smuggled in from a neighbourhood eatery.

Over in UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath proved a brusque guest recently, when visiting the family of BSF head constable Prem Sagar who was martyred in Kashmir. Their home was fitted with an air conditioner, sofa and carpet by the administration before the CM graced it, but those trappings of affluence were whisked away within minutes of Yogiji's departure.

It's true that an important part of the job of being a politician is chowing down with the plebeians. Because nothing says 'I understand you' like 'I eat with you'. Voters are supposed to fall for this gimmick up and down the world. So on the American election trail the candidates, besides kissing babies, guzzle beer and devour cheeseburgers till their heart hurts. In Japan they do giant oysters and sushi and slurp Ramen noodles. In Pakistan it can be anything from aloo gosht to korma. But Indian netas probably enjoy the richest smorgasbord. Besides taking tokenist politics and sham symbolism to a new high. Perhaps, instead of marching into aam admī's home like invading armies looking for that impeccable photo op, they could act a little more appreciative. So that the host is not left gasping, Atithi Tum Kab Jaoge? Ancient culture may have met its match in modern politics. Perhaps we are in dire need of a new TV soap, Kyunki Netaji Bhi Kabhi Aam Admi Tha.



Hands off, says Melania

Plus, bare headed while deplaning in Saudi Arabia, she shows off a mind of her own

Shinie Antony



Donald Trump may never hum 'I want to hold your hand' again. Not after the hand he put out was refused by the missus. Maybe Melania, the Slovenian who dropped the 'J' from her name at some point and now the US president's hand in full public view, prefers to go hands-free. Perhaps she is shy, hates to fly. Or is it just another jet lagged mother struggling to socialise with husband's work colleagues. Whatever the impulse, a slow-motion version of her brush-off is playing on a loop, her manicure all over social media. There is his hand and there is her hand, famously not in each other's. More star-crossed hands will be difficult to find.

Compare this to her hands-on approach with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin's wife, Nechama. Whose hand Melania grabbed at first sight and held on to. The Trump hands hit the headlines as soon as they got off an Israeli airport this week. He held out his, she didn't. Now body language experts are busy decoding Trump's palm-down gesture to Melania (as opposed to Obama's more equal palm-up one to Michelle).

Melania, who demanded and got an abject apology and \$3 million from a UK paper that said she 'provided services beyond simply modelling', is proving to be a first of a kind FLOTUS. Her bare head while deplaning in Saudi Arabia not just showed off her shampoo but also a mind of her own.

Born in Slovenia, living in America and now roaming around in the Middle East, the former model is no stranger to travel. If German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May can enter these realms with uncovered heads, so can she. Notwithstanding a husband who mocked Michelle's lack of scarves in 2015.

They should know that any stand-offs between them play into the media's hands. Their hands, four in all, are under 24/7 scrutiny. These are hands that shake important hands the world over. Hands that wave and sign. These are... First Hands.

If necessary, Melania Trump will deploy an elbow to nudge hubby so he puts his hand on his heart during national anthems. Rest of the time she prefers to keep her hands to herself. Donald Trump, whose hands are two decades older than his wife's, is probably putting his hands behind him. Even presidents need a little hand-holding sometimes.

A Charter For Liberal Indians

Liberals, it's time to boldly and constantly assert your vision of patriotism

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Dear Indian liberals, The photograph of a blood-soaked father of three urgently negotiating for his life minutes before he was beaten to death in a Jharkhand town, has horrified you. It reveals the impunity a mob enjoys when violence goes unpunished. Is the rule of law becoming only weak liberal wishful thinking in times of cow hooligans and enraged mobs enforcing street retribution?

The entire liberal project, you're being told, is apparently dead. This is supposed to be the era of macho patriotism in which those arguing for a dialogue with Kashmiri stakeholders or talks with Pakistan or those who question religious nationalism, are shouted down as 'anti-nationals' and 'jihadists'. Driven into silence by an anti-minority nationalistic fervour, the idealistic middle class, once the great bedrock of India's freedom movement, is missing in action. The potential loss of idealism among the middle class can become a tragedy of monumental proportions. But it's not too late to recover it if liberals speak up strongly.

Indian liberals, you're told that you belong to a small 'westernised elitist club' and have 'colonised mindsets'. This is not true. Numerous liberal protestors who down the decades have fought for progressive values have hardly been disconnected and exclusive. Those who stood by Tamil author Perumal Murugan after he was slapped with criminal complaints, rationalists like Kalburgi, Pansare and Dabholkar, those who fought for women's empowerment like Ela Bhatt, for farmer's rights like Sharad Joshi, to deepen democracy at the grassroots like Sandeep Pandey and Aruna Roy, none of them were or are 'westernised elitists'. The rooted salt-of-the-earth liberal is found in every Indian small town and city.

Indian liberals, your quest is individual freedom. Your ancestors are Gandhi, Tagore, Ambedkar, Nehru (who was a social liberal if not an economic one) even a C Rajagopalachari, all of whom believed in the individual



over dominant state power. You would like to see citizens' freedom enhanced responsibly and lawfully. You have always chafed at controls, both economic and social. You don't like theocracies or morality cops.

The nationalist Right-wing (like the ideological Left) believes in a gargantuan state machinery, in unbounded state power and in the state's superior rights over the individual, as reflected in the attorney general's recent comment that "You may want to be forgotten but the State doesn't want to forget you." The AG of a Hindu nationalist government sounded a bit like a Soviet commissar!

Indian liberals instead have always stood against rampaging state power and for individual rights. Those who protested against the Emergency, against the Anti-Defamation Bill, against bans on books and movies and those who campaigned for citizens' rights, they have all held firm against brute state authority.

Liberals are called 'anti-national'. But the greatest patriot of all, Mahatma Gandhi was India's original liberal.

You represent the tradition of liberalism in the Upanishads, in the Bhakti movement and the one embodied by Gandhi and the Constitution

Gandhi was always deeply apprehensive of state power and did not believe in enforcing his personal ideology through government agencies. A devout Hindu, he never wanted a law banning cow slaughter. For Gandhi individual rights of others were greater than his own beliefs. In fact, he had unlimited faith in the power and goodness of individuals, which is why he saw the freedom struggle as a lift off into personal as well as political regeneration.

To Gandhi, the means were always much more important than the ends. He called off the 1921-22 non-cooperation campaign because it descended into violence and failed to be the just means to a cause. For the liberal, means are

always just as important as ends: because once the ends are achieved, the means shape the nature of the victory.

Indian liberals, don't let anyone tell you that you don't represent a mighty tradition. You represent the tradition of liberalism in the Upanishads, in the Bhakti movement and the one embodied by Gandhi and the Constitution. It's a heavy duty legacy that is neither confined to a small minority, nor elitist, nor westernised nor simply restricted to any political party. But with such a strong tradition why then are liberals losing out to the votaries of majoritarianism?

That's because the liberal language has become mired in, as newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron pointed out, negativity and fear. It's become too focussed on denigrating and demonising opponents. Instead, the Indian liberal language should draw upon Gandhi and propose something positive, open and persuasive, a language that stimulates goodness and a sense of justice in every citizen and encourages every citizen to be her best not her worst self. It should encourage private enterprise, not crush or over-protect it and seek ways out of poverty for globalisation's victims. Above all, it should recognise the freedom of every citizen to pursue his or her goals without harming others.

Liberal Indians, why should you be fearful? Above your heads floats the spirit of the founders of constitutional India, a spirit that has always opposed those who insist on dress codes, behaviour codes, romance codes, bans on free speech and restrictions on religious, intellectual, dietary and sexual freedom. Confronted with a control-freak state, once again it's up to you to speak up against those who seek control of what you eat, study, watch, wear, speak or worship, in the name of their version of 'nationalism'.

This is not the time to shy away or secede or retreat from the debate. This is the time to speak boldly and constantly on every current issue, and emphasise your version of patriotism, grounded in law and respect for all faiths. It's time to proudly say yes I am a patriotic Indian and I am a liberal.

'Triple talaq patently unjust, does not have religious sanction ... AIMPLB should read writing on the wall'

With the Supreme Court hearing arguments on the constitutional validity of triple talaq under Muslim personal law, acclaimed actor, social activist and former Rajya Sabha MP Shabana Azmi

spoke to Rohit E David on the issue, why she thinks the practice should be abolished and the role of All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB):



dilbert

■ As someone who has backed the abolition of triple talaq, what do you make of the arguments given in its defence as a religious practice by AIMPLB?

Triple talaq in one go does not have religious sanction and is patently unjust and anti-women. More than 20 Muslim countries have banned it and it must go from India too.

■ But AIMPLB has also said that it will publicly boycott those who misuse triple talaq. Why does it then persist on defending the principle of it?

AIMPLB's call for boycotting abusers of triple talaq is not even a fig leaf because triple talaq in itself is an abuse. What pray is misuse of triple talaq? It is the same as misuse of molestation. These tactics are being used to stall the issue.

In the wake of the court case, AIMPLB's claim that qazis will take the brides' views on triple talaq is a charade. For years the community has been asking for a model nikahnama because in Islam marriage is a contract

and can be negotiated by both parties based on gender justice. AIMPLB resisted it initially and then said let it be optional, knowing full well that that this cannot be feasible.

This is because a poor father in a village can hardly dare to ask his prospective son-in-law for a model nikahnama if it's optional. It must be made mandatory to give women the rights that Islam accords them.

■ Do you think calling for a ban on triple talaq is an idea whose time has come?

The fight against triple talaq has been waged by very brave Muslim women such as Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan members. They have brought the issue centre stage. So when, in 2016, Shayara Bano petitioned the Supreme Court to challenge the constitutionality of the practices of triple talaq, nikah halala and polygamy, several women's groups emerged from the community such as Awaaz-e-Niswaan, Sahiyar, Muslim Mahila Manch, Pehchan, Muhim, Parvaaz Sangathan, and, more recently, Bebaak Collective.

They joined forces and articulated a new radical politics, at once with progressive and feminist groups. It was a demonstration of the support system created by the women's movement over the past three decades.

■ There is a concern that the call to ban triple talaq is a precursor to the demand for implementing a uniform civil code. What is your view on this possibility?

Personal laws of all religions discriminate against women on matters of marriage, inheritance, divorce. The framers of our Constitution believed that imposing a common civil code in the wake of Partition would create greater insecurity amongst the minorities. It was hoped that with the passage of time the need for reform would come from within the minorities which would be a better option. Unfortunately that has not happened and over the years it has become a stick to beat the minorities with, with a view to fuelling communal tension.

I believe the time has come, sooner rather than later, when a blueprint of a common civil code (not uniform but common) that culls out the best laws from all religions based on gender justice is placed for a national debate.

■ Do you feel that AIMPLB should not be given the right to take decisions on behalf of Muslims?

AIMPLB is an NGO that is a respected body amongst some sections of the community. But to retain its position it is imperative that it read the writing on the wall and accord women equality and justice, or else it will become redundant.



There Are Many Ways To Deal With Depression

Reena Singh

You might know someone who often feels sad and lonely, or for no apparent reason, hits the blues. In other words, someone who is 'depressed'. Many look upon depression as a form of karmic suffering, a black hole with no escape. But linking karma and depression may be too simplistic an approach to the problem. Quite often, a person suffering from depression doesn't know the reason for his own sadness.

According to the World Health Organization, global figures for depression stand at around 5%. The number of depressed worldwide grew 18.4%, between 2005-15. Depression can afflict anyone - poor or rich, successful or unsuccessful, young or old. Hollywood comedian Robin Williams succumbed to depression whereas Bollywood actor Deepika Padukone succeeded in pulling herself out of it, thanks to help from family and professional counselling. I

knew a retired senior police officer, who was the life and soul of every party. One day, he took his life. He had been depressed because of a painful back ailment.

Would empathy and compassion for the depressed person help? Yes, say spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama - we must first recognise the gravity of a person's misery, empathise and put ourselves in his shoes.

Close family members may make a depressed person feel worse by making statements like, "Come on, cheer up; the world is not coming to an end." How can friends and relatives help? It could be as simple as reintroducing the person to that forgotten, simple lifestyle of yesteryears - where outdoor activity and friendly banter with neighbours, relatives and friends were a part of life. The human touch is important for everyone.

WHO is observing 2017 as the Year of

Depression. Henk Bekedam, WHO representative in India, blames modernisation for the increasing incidence of depression. "Modernisation brings its own challenges," he says. He reflects on his own youth in the Netherlands - after school, every day, he would play football. But today's children are instead busy on their smartphones and PCs.

Physiologically speaking, outdoor play is necessary. It releases endorphins - those hormonal gifts that the body releases to cope with stress and depression. But with the Indian education system's obsession with superlative marks as the criteria for admission to a good university, children are skipping play periods and opting for tuition instead.

Older people are so caught up in the rat race of work and commuting that they, too, skip the outdoors. Play and social interaction teach life skills - a

sense of sharing, team spirit and how to take winning and losing in our stride.

We also need more celebrity role models like Deepika to come out and tell the world that it is okay to seek help and talk to professional therapists if you are unable to deal with depression on your own.

Still others may describe the emotions a depressed person has - of unexplained anger, frustration, rage, sadness and despair - as a demonic spirit that takes control of rational thought processes. This may not be the right approach. On the other hand, spiritual masters do recommend mantra chanting, meditation and seva (service) to enable one to overcome self-obsession and become more giving and compassionate.

Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh says, "The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention." But the one who is depressed also needs to acknowledge the problem and be open to receiving help.

Sacredspace

Freedom to Choose

The real key is to live in an environment where the mind feels free to choose the right thing instead of being compelled by habit and inertia to choose the wrong thing.

Deepak Chopra

