

Use this law more selectively

Misplaced enthusiasm after a cricket match is not sedition

India's increasingly fragile national ego was hurt this week by a cricket match. Fifteen people, all Muslims, were arrested from Madhya Pradesh's Burhanpur district and slapped with sedition for allegedly celebrating Pakistan's victory in the final of the Champions Trophy. The police say their offence was shouting "pro-Pakistan" slogans and bursting fire-crackers on the roads. On how crackers or slogans could imperil the country, though, the authorities had no explanation. The episode underlined a mounting trend in India of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut — a British law to muzzle criticism of the state or government, with the focus often on who said it instead of what was said.

The sedition law has an ignominious history. The colonial provision has been used against activists, political opponents and even students. In most cases, the charges have been struck down by courts and legal experts have repeatedly stressed that even anti-India slogans didn't amount to sedition. In this case, for example, the families say they never celebrated India's defeat at the hands of their arch-enemy. But even if they did, it doesn't amount to any serious threat against the country.

Charges of sedition are usually triggered by acts intended to subvert or overthrow the government through violence. But increasingly, they are wielded as a threat to deal with people who don't toe the official line. This augurs badly for Indians, who pride themselves on nurturing a thriving democracy, unlike our neighbours. But by booking people for sedition on account of slogans, remarks made on television or cricket matches, we are baring a needless ego that cannot tolerate even the slightest hint of dissent, let alone criticism. The strength of India lies not in suppressing voices but in its long-standing tradition of multiculturalism and plurality that has held the country together even at the worst of times. The current amplification of nationalism that seeks to take on anyone who doesn't agree is a threat to this tradition, and is not in keeping with our cultural and democratic ethos. The sedition law, and its repeated use, is the sharpest marker of this trend. This has no place in our democracy.

The green tribunal must help save the Aravalis

A Natural Conservation Zone is needed owing to depletion of water resources

Every government document speaks about the need to ensure economic development without depletion of natural resources. But on the ground, things are different. Take for example, the ongoing tussle between the Haryana government and environmentalists over the Aravali Natural Conservation Zone (ANCZ) at the National Green Tribunal (NGT). While the former wants to dilute the norms to free around 11,500 hectares, which are under the natural conservation zone (NCZ) 'status to be decided', for development of real estate, many citizens are dead against such a move for good reasons. The Aravali Natural Conservation Zone is categorised under two heads — 'confirmed' NCZ and 'yet to be decided' NCZ. While the former has 51,000 hectares of forest land in its cover, the latter spreads across 11,500 hectares. On Tuesday, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) came to the rescue of the ANCZ. Hearing a petition filed by environmentalist SS Oberoi, the NGT issued notices to the Haryana government and forest department, seeking replies by July 3. With dwindling water resources, the NCZ concept is highly relevant today since concrete structures on wetlands, gullies, ravines, foothills and storm water drains disrupt the replenishment of ground water.

The assault on the India's ecology has assumed gigantic proportions. According to a recent report by the WWF, three major natural World Heritage Sites — the Western Ghats, Sundarbans National Park and the Manas wildlife sanctuary — are facing threats from harmful industrial activities.

The UNEP's Green Economy Initiative has demonstrated that the greening of economies is an engine for growing wealth, increasing decent employment, and reducing persistent poverty. Unfortunately, many myopic Indian policymakers don't seem to comprehend such ideas thanks to the pressure of five-year election cycles when development becomes a big vote-catcher.

line of sight

SRINATH RAGHAVAN



The scales are unfavourably tilted

The Hasina government's proposed hate statue will only weaken democracy in Bangladesh

Earlier this week, the Bangladesh government made a curious announcement. The minister for liberation war affairs told parliament that the government would build a 'hate statue'. This statue would "express hatred towards Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams and other collaborators of the Pakistan army [during the Liberation War of 1971]." This would be a first in the commemoration of mass atrocities anywhere in the world. And it is indicative of the political corner in which the government finds itself.

A few weeks ago, the Sheikh Hasina government was caught in a controversy over another statue. Hefazat-i-Islam, a fundamentalist network of madrasas, had protested the installation in the Supreme Court of a statue of a blindfolded lady holding a sword in one hand and the scales of justice in the other. Hefazat claimed that this was tantamount to idolatry and sought the removal of the statue. When the government caved in, a large group of students quickly mobilised in protest. Although it cracked down on the protestors, the government also ordered the reinstallation of the statue in the Supreme Court's premises — now tucked in a discrete corner.

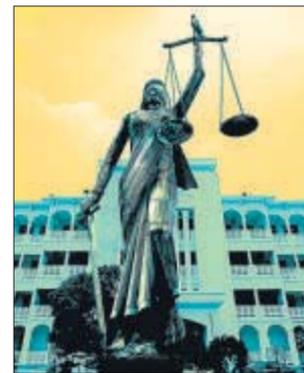
The government's original decision to remove the statue was aimed at currying

favour with conservative Muslims ahead of the next general elections. Hasina called the statue "ridiculous" — whether on aesthetic or political grounds was left unsaid. The reinstallation of the statue was an attempt to burnish its credentials with the liberals. The proposed 'hate statue' seems yet another attempt to assuage the concerns of the Awami League's core constituency about the government's commitment to nationalism.

Hasina has resorted to such balancing acts earlier — most notably on the question of secularism in Bangladesh's constitution. The original constitution of Bangladesh, which came into existence in 1972, was a remarkable document for its time. It proclaimed four guiding principles for the new state: Democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism.

The notion that the State should be secular with the approval of various sections of the polity. The tiny Islamist minority that believed otherwise had been discredited by its role in opposing the country's independence. So their views carried no weight in the making of the constitution.

Things began to change with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the following period of military rule. The 5th Amendment was moved in 1979, during the reign of General Zia-ur Rahman. It sought to



• The reinstated statue of the Lady Justice near the Supreme Court in Dhaka. AP

impart constitutional legitimacy to the military dictatorships that followed Mujib's assassination. Among other things, Zia deleted Article 12 which proscribed religious parties.

The removal of this article paved the way for the entry of the Jamaat-i-Islami into the political arena. It is not surprising that Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party — now led by his wife — embraced the Jamaat in 2001.

In August 2005, the Bangladesh high court ruled that the 5th Amendment was unconstitutional. The BNP and the Jamaat challenged

this verdict. On July 28, 2010, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh dismissed their petitions and upheld the high court's ruling. What is more, it explicitly criticised the omission of secularism under the 5th Amendment as a step that "destroyed one of the basis of our struggle for freedom and also changed the basic character of the Republic".

The government took years to give effect to the Supreme Court's ruling. Eventually, the 15th Amendment passed in 2015 made Bangladesh a secular country with Islam as the state religion. This muddled compromise was Hasina's way of striking a balance between the religious sentiments of Bangladesh's Muslim majority and the historic mantle of the liberation war claimed by the Awami League.

But there have been escalating demands from the conservative Islamist critics of the government. The Hefazat wanted the government to prove its Muslim credentials by removing poems from school textbooks which were pronounced as 'atheist'. The Hasina government quietly complied.

More worrying is the government's reluctance to uphold the rule of law, especially over freedom of expression. This has emboldened Islamist outfits. Still more problematic is the government's attempt to silence the political Opposition by using every trick in the book. In so doing it has struck a blow to democracy. Building 'hate' statues to stoke chauvinism will deepen the damage already done.

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The views expressed are personal

RIBBON ROW



• Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurating the Kochi Metro with Union minister M Venkaiah Naidu, Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan and governor P Sathiasivam PIB

Why should heads of state unveil municipal projects?

Getting the President and PM from New Delhi to Bengaluru and Kochi is a move in the wrong direction



NITIN PAI

Last week, both the President and the Prime Minister inaugurated metro lines: Pranab Mukherjee came to Bengaluru and Narendra Modi went to Kochi. Some people criticised the PM for not sharing the stage with E Sreedharan.

The criticism misses the point. The question we ought to ask is just why do we need the head of the Indian state and head of the Union government to inaugurate what are essentially municipal projects. The fact that they did inaugurate them reveals just how disempowered our city governments are.

Like water supply, garbage collection and street lighting, urban transport is a municipal matter. If anyone argues that the bus routes and bus stops in Bengaluru, Kochi or Coimbatore should be decided by a civil servant or political leader in New Delhi, we are likely to ask that person to get his head examined. So why is the metro any different? Oh, it involves spending a lot more money than bus routes, which is seen as the reason why the Union government must get involved in municipal matters. That begs a question: Why can't city governments raise the money required to spend on their own essential infrastructure? Metro rail shouldn't even be a matter for

the state government: it is and should be a municipal subject. Why is it not? Well, because the framers of the Constitution paid insufficient attention to municipal governance — ironic, considering Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and Vallabhbhai Patel cut their political teeth in municipal councils — and the 74th amendment that is the basis of urban local bodies is imperfect. Mayors of Indian cities have little real power. Municipalities depend on the state and Centre for funds and political direction.

While Union Finance Commissions have consistently done well to devolve funds to states, very few states have professionally-led and effective finance commissions. This leaves municipal (and rural) governments at the mercy of the chief minister for funding. Cities are both cash cows and orphans: the taxes that they generate go off to New Delhi and to state capitals, and disproportionately little comes back to them. They are orphans because they do not have enough assembly or parliament seats that will give them a stronger voice.

Bengaluru could easily double its revenues if it were to introduce paid parking on a fraction of its roads. Yet it is content to seek more grants from the state government than mobilise its own resources. Nehru, Patel and Prasad started in municipalities and went to New Delhi. That's why getting Mr Mukherjee and Mr Modi from New Delhi to Bengaluru and Kochi is movement in the wrong direction.

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The views expressed are personal

India and China must lead from the front

The world should not be held to ransom because the United States will not take climate change seriously



CHANDRAN NAIR

United States President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord has been met with angst from Western allies, the media and the foreign policy establishment, who have framed the move as his abandonment of US global leadership in pursuit of his nationalistic 'America First' foreign policy. The unfortunate truth, however, is that the US has never been a leader on the issue of climate change, nor the wider question of sustainability.

After former US president Jimmy Carter worried that "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption", Ronald Reagan criticised the whole idea that constrained resources could impact the economy. He said that there were "no such things as limits to growth", and it was not "what's inside our minds and hearts".

Despite the efforts of Bill Clinton and his vice-president Al Gore on the Kyoto protocol, George W Bush abandoned the treaty once he took office. Barack Obama did what he could with climate negotiations in Copenhagen and Paris, and it was only in his second term that he made the deliberate decision to pursue a less stringent agreement to avoid passing a treaty through a polarised and obstructionist Congress. Trump's action on climate change is thus not a break from the past, but a continuation of it.

At the 1992 Earth Summit, George HW Bush stated that "the American way of life is non-negotiable": A statement that holds true today. Few Americans today realise that a serious effort to tackle climate change requires Americans to change how they live. Even supporters look to technological innovation and new industries as the mechanism to tackle carbon emissions. The political narrative supports this denial: Even arguments that support tackling climate

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change are wrapped in promises of 'green jobs' and 'energy independence'.

What we need is an 'eco-civilisational revolution' led by the developing world where the majority of people live. While it is disappointing that the US — the world's second-largest emitter and largest per capita emitter among industrialised countries — will not contribute, the world should not be held to ransom because the domestic political processes of five per cent of the world's population cannot treat the problem seriously. China is now seen as the leader of the global effort to combat climate change. Beijing pledged to work with the EU to control carbon emissions, and California governor Jerry Brown, insistent on an environmental agenda despite Trump, travelled to China almost immediately after the decision.

China's motivations may be geopolitical (an attempt to seize global leadership from the US), economic (a way to invest in renewable and 'green' industries of the future), or entirely sincere (in that it understands the potential impact of rampant climate change and environmental catastrophe). But there is also a cultural argument. China is a much older civilisation and culture than the US, and predates today's consumerist, resource-intensive and materialist cultures.

And even as China embraced it to help lift people from poverty, it now seems to understand its limits. Deng Xiaoping first used the term "moderate prosperity" in 1979, connecting the idea to Confucian principles, and was echoed by later Chinese leaders. In 2013, President Xi Jinping called for "ecological civilisation reforms" to account for the environmental repercussions of China's development. India too has expressed its support for tackling climate change after Trump's decision. Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that "exploitation of nature is not acceptable to us". Modi too referred to India's long history, when he stated that "for the last 5,000 years, even when I was not born, it has been the tradition in India to protect the environment".

Many will dismiss this statement, given India's current struggles with environmental protection. But there's something to this reference to India's culture and experience — its vegetarianism, fasting and traditions of frugality. Like China, India has a long history steeped in wisdom and knowledge that predates today's industrial economies.

In contrast, the US has known little else but modern-style capitalism. To admit that its lifestyle may need to be managed in a resource-constrained future is to reject the 'American Dream', something that has guided the country for most of its history.

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innervoice

NOTHING IN LIFE COMES FOR FREE, THERE IS HARD WORK INVOLVED AT EVERY STEP

Abhishek Sarin

This happens to all of us at some time or another. Despite putting in a lot of hard work, we do not get the desired results, and this leaves us frustrated. We start blaming our luck, our stars, and sometimes even God for being unjust to us. However, we must remember that hard work never goes unrewarded.

We may not get the result in the way we desire, but the Almighty will definitely reward us for our hard work in one way or

another. A lazy man once dreamt of finding a treasure in his farm and he dug the entire field searching for it. He was disappointed at not finding the treasure. On the advice of a saint, he had sowed some seeds in it. After some time, he harvested a bumper crop and with this money he could buy anything.

Whatever we achieve as individuals is due to the hard work that we put in. All inventions, space explorations and discoveries are the result of hard work. Luck also favours people who help themselves. Often, when we see successful people, we only see

their success and not the years of hard work that preceded it. Thomas Jefferson rightly said: "I'm a greater believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it." As per the Bhagavad Gita, we are in control of our karma, and not the results. Hence, as individuals, our primary duty is to do our work with utmost sincerity and devotion.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.)
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