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# Journalism is different from PR

## LS Speaker must realise that varnishing facts helps no one

**L**ok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan on Wednesday had some words of advice for those who earn their livelihood by writing. Asking journalists to use "beautiful language," Ms Mahajan said we — journalists — should sometimes avoid telling the unpleasant truth. Speaking at a function organised by RSS-affiliated Indraprastha Vishwa Samvad Kendra, she also supported statements asking journalists to report news in the national interest. Ms Mahajan said journalists can learn a lot from the mythical character Narad Muni when it comes to objectivity: "... Whatever is said should be said in beautiful language. A lot can be communicated to the government using such [polite] language. Satyam Bruyat Priyam Bruyat, Na Bruyat Apriyam Satyam [Tell the truth. Tell nice things. Do not tell unpleasant truth] — this is also required sometimes."

By saying that journalists should try to avoid unpleasant truths, what does Ms Mahajan mean? Should we varnish information and dress it up for the public, which incidentally is paying to get authentic news? Does this mean that we don't talk about the shortcomings of government programmes and like good stenographers take down whatever figures are given to us? And can beautiful language hide difficult truths? If the Speaker thinks that such journalism helps the government in power, she is wrong. No government can benefit from dressing uncomfortable facts in pleasant language or indeed not bringing them to public attention at all. In fact, Ms Mahajan is discounting the intelligence of citizens/voters if she thinks only good news from the media can shore up a party's prospects in an election.

A person who has such a wish list for journalists obviously cannot be an admirer of someone like George Orwell. Yet, here's what he said about the profession: "Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed: everything else is public relations." It's time Ms Mahajan appreciates the difference between the two. However, she is not the only one to think this way; politicians cutting across party lines often express similar views. Shamefully, many journalists are also not without blame in shying away from being totally objective. Yet, Ms Mahajan is mistaken if she thinks that is way journalism should be.

# Pentagon report a fillip to India's Afghanistan policy

## The analysis is crucial as it comes when geopolitical equations are being rewritten

**T**he half-yearly Pentagon report on the status of Afghanistan has declared India the most reliable friend of the Kabul regime. This is merely a statement of fact: Even the United States has been wayward in comparison to the continuity that has marked Indian support. The report's importance lies in its timing. It is the first one released under the Donald Trump presidency and is taking place as the geopolitical playbook in Afghanistan is once again being rewritten. All the evidence points to the US recommitting itself to upholding the Kabul government. While Mr Trump believes the US must get out of Afghanistan eventually, he has rejected his predecessor's ill-conceived public deadlines for withdrawal. Washington today accepts that only strength on the battlefield will convince the Taliban to hold sincere talks. All of this is music to India's ears.

At the start of the year the Afghan government was unusually isolated. Iran and Russia, traditional opponents of the Taliban and Pakistan, began shifting to a view that undermining the US in Afghanistan and wooing Pakistan made more sense. Kabul's regional allies were reduced to India and a few Central Asian governments.

The US' final Afghan policy is still awaited. The great game, in any case, is changing again. Iran and Pakistan have seen relations sour after violence on their border. India will seek to encourage the US to ensure its tough stance against the Taliban encompass Pakistan as well. In all this, New Delhi's commitment to Kabul, as the Pentagon acknowledged, is notable for its stability. Afghanistan was known as the graveyard of empires. Today this should be updated to the graveyard of grand strategies. Which is one reason India is right to keep its Afghan policy short and simple: Support an independent Kabul regime.

beyondthebite

RAJDEEP SARDESAI



# Media must question those in power

## When powerful politicians won't take 'political' questions, it reflects badly on our democracy

**W**e don't need to be told by media or opposition what we need to do for farmers. We would rather listen to farmers and not to carping, negative opposition or 'know-all media' that knows little of grassroots realities": GVL Narasimha Rao, BJP spokesperson during a television debate on July 12. When one of the more affable voices of the ruling party chooses to launch a diatribe against the media when asked a simple question on whether demonetisation is one of the causes for growing farmer unrest, you realise how easily power accentuates hubris.

But why blame Mr Rao, whose nightly task is to defend the government on television. The disdainful attitude towards the media begins right at the top. The prime minister has chosen to virtually bypass the mainstream media, preferring instead the one way communication offered by Twitter or a feel-good monthly Mann ki Baat on radio. No press conferences and only the odd pre-scripted interview, prime minister Narendra Modi, who was once a popular and communicative BJP spokesperson himself, has now chosen to make himself mostly inaccessible to media scrutiny.

As a result, there hasn't been any serious questioning of the prime minister on the sin-

gle biggest move undertaken by his government. Why, for example, do we still not know how much of the old demonetised currency is back in the system? Or what exactly happened to the government's 'war' on black money or on counterfeit currency? Unfortunately, with the narrative being spun in a manner where any questioning of authority is now seen as 'anti-national', influential sections of the media are being pushed on the defensive, forced to oscillate between self-censorship or else get fully embedded as cheerleaders of the 'establishment'.

But why single out the prime minister? The Congress president Sonia Gandhi has been in public life for almost two decades but has never shown a willingness to answer uncomfortable questions on contentious issues like political corruption. Last November, I had the rare chance of interviewing Mrs Gandhi. Just ahead of the interview it was made clear that only questions related to Indira Gandhi on the occasion of her centenary celebrations could be asked. "No political questions!" I was told in no uncertain terms. When one of the country's most powerful politicians won't take 'political' questions, isn't that indicative of the skewed nature of our democracy?

This unwillingness of those in public life to be held accountable has now spread like virus



Sensation has replaced sense on television news, or so it appears

through the political system. In 2015, Mamata Banerjee chose to walk out of an interview because I raised the issue of the Saradha chit fund scam. Mamata at least agreed to an interview; Mayawati hasn't given one in a decade so we still don't have answers to allegations of disproportionate assets. An imperious Jayalitha refused to step out of Fortresses Poes Garden to meet the press, Naveen Patnaik follows a similar 'no questions' policy in Odisha, while in Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan has never hidden his open hostility towards the media.

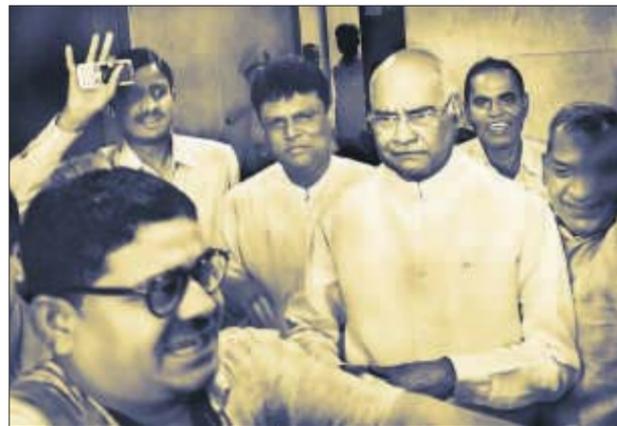
Sadly, rather than defend the media's right to dissent and speak truth to power, there are many who choose to applaud an opaque, authoritarian leadership. It wasn't always like this. When Indira Gandhi muzzled the media in the Emergency in the mid-1970s, those who stood up to her were celebrated. In the late 1980s, when Rajiv Gandhi introduced the Defamation Bill, the media rose in one voice to protest. In almost every instance of arbitrary use of state power against the media, the citizenry has been on our side. Not any longer: now, when a politician takes on the media, there is a sizeable audience which cheers from the sidelines, perhaps reflective of ideological cleavages in society.

Maybe we in the media also need to introspect as to why we have allowed this to happen to us. When sensation replaces sense on television news, when political alignments determine news priorities, when ownership patterns are non-transparent, then we make it that much easier for the netas and their hired armies to chastise us as 'presstitutes'. Actually, we aren't a 'know-all' media as Mr Rao suggests; maybe we are just a media which has lost its moral spine to fight back.

Post-script: Earlier this month, the BBC, in the spirit of true democracy, had both the prime ministerial candidates in Britain face the general public with no choreographed questions. How many of our political leaders are willing to subject themselves to a similar no-holds-barred interrogation?

Rajdeep Sardesai is senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

CASTE CONUNDRUM



The Bharatiya Janata Party's presidential nominee Ram Nath Kovind (third from right) at Bihar Niwas in New Delhi, June 20

# Why BJP's masterstroke dashes Maya's dreams

## The Dalit candidate for President has punctured the 'political empowerment' movement of the BSP



SUNITA ARON

**B**ahujan Samaj Party founder president late Kanshi Ram and his protégé Mayawati had dreamt of giving India its first Dalit prime minister. That they could not do. However, the BJP stole a march over them by nominating a seasoned Dalit leader for the highest constitutional post — President of India.

The calculated move to give the country its second SC president, 15 years after the country had its first Dalit President KR Narayanan, has put the Opposition on the back foot, demolishing their fragile unity, much before it could be built up. Several regional forces, including the champions of Dalits, the BSP, will not oppose Ram Nath Kovind's ascendancy to the president's post.

Thus the BJP has killed two birds with one stone. First it has again derailed the Opposition's ambitious move to unite before the 2019 general elections. Second, it has punctured the 'political empowerment' movement of the BSP, hitting it hard for the second time after the 2017 UP elections.

As the BSP was the only Dalit-led party in the country, Mayawati filled the vacuum caused by the demise of former deputy Prime Minister Jagjivan Ram as no other leader,

including his daughter and former Speaker of the Lok Sabha Meira Kumar, could walk or talk the language with which their clan could identify with.

However, while Mayawati reached the portals of power in UP, she failed to take her constituency on the path of progress. She gave parks and statues in the form of dignity to them but wasted an opportunity to spread wings in the country after her party's euphoric victory in 2007. But Dalits of today aspire for more than dignity even though the BJP's rise to power has brought back the ghost of untouchability.

In this background the BJP has played a master stroke, dashing the Congress' hopes of Dalits returning to the party fold from a weakened Mayawati, and her own expectations of retaining them now that a Rajput leads Uttar Pradesh. Her visit to caste clash-hit Saharanpur had surprised her own cadres as she is infamous for keeping away from any troubled spot, including Muzaffarnagar, since the 2007 victory of her party.

Now ahead of 2019 elections, the BJP has emerged as the new champion of Bahujan Samaj by giving a backward caste PM and a Dalit president, derailed Mayawati's claim, "Just as BSP today is a symbol of Bahujan Samaj's dignity, Mayawati, in the opinion of intellectuals, has acquired a standing in Indian politics where in people may criticise her, even condemn her, but nobody can ignore her."

However, now Mayawati's brand value has nosedived. What political brinkmanship!

aron@hindustantimes.com

Parthasarathy Sen

**innervoice**

**FORGIVENESS IS ONE OF THE GREATEST VIRTUES AND WE MUST ASPIRE TO IT**

Of all the virtues, nothing is greater than forgiveness. No two people think alike. Real happiness arises when we speak our minds and allow others to do so without any vengefulness.

We tend to be angry when others speak their voices openly and differently. It will be profitable listening to Khushwant Singh's message. "Anger is a waste of time and energy. If you cannot forgive, withdraw."

Differences coupled with anger breeds vicarious pleasure from one and victimhood from the other; resulting in agony and pain. A situation arises when these two people refuse to see each other and discuss misunderstandings. The only medicine for healing is forgiveness; continued bitterness will result in harm for both.

All religions espouse forgiveness. We must therefore cultivate humility and only a humble person can forgive. Forgiveness leads to better health of the body and spirit

of opposing sides and parties, kills hatred and enmity, and enables them to evolve and rise high and discover the hidden secrets of the universe. The greatest people in history have never been unkind and lacking forgiveness. Women because of tender qualities value forgiveness more than men. A person who forgives is not a coward, rather has the ability to look beyond the immediate.

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innervoice@hindustantimes.com