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comment

## The gene is out of the bottle

India could take the lead in the debate on this technology

**H**umanity is creating a post-natural future for itself, but giving only minimal thought to what that will mean. A joint team of United States, Chinese and Korean scientists this week succeeded in repairing a genetic mutation in dozens of human embryos. If these embryos had normally become babies, they would have been born with a genetic heart ailment. After the genetic editing done by the scientists, the resulting babies would have not only been free of this heart problem it would also no longer exist in their descendants. This work builds on earlier, less sophisticated, work done in other countries like China. These embryos were not allowed to become babies and much more experimentation, including clinical trials, will be required before a gene edited baby is allowed to crawl the earth.

However, it is now clear that gene edited humans are probably only a generation away. The medical benefits of such technology are obvious. Over 30,000 single and multiple gene disorders could be eliminated forever. Many diseases like diabetes and cancer which are partly genetic in background would be easier to prevent. The human genome is the physical blueprint of a person and helps determine, among other things, intelligence, height, external features like skin and eye colour, and possibly longevity. Mankind is now on the verge of being able to predetermine these at the embryonic level.

Strangely, though this technology is now several years old and accelerating rapidly, there has been little or no attempt to begin a social or political debate about its future. The United Nations General Assembly and various international fora have sought to create a framework for genetic technology and its applications. These have all failed largely because of the total apathy among the governments concerned. Scientists have been holding regular meetings on the issue, but have found little public interest in their actions. India is not at the forefront of this science but it could take the lead in starting an international discussion about access to gene editing technology. Domestically, the government should consider asking Indian scientists to both develop capabilities in this field and consider how it can benefit Indians medically but in an economically inclusive manner. The genetic era is on us and requires us to look well beyond our present concerns.

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## The change in heritage protection laws is bad news for historic sites

The intended beneficiaries of the proposed amendments are developers and not monuments

AGK MENON



**I**t is ironic that for a government that celebrates the heritage of the country as a badge of its identity, the imperatives of conserving ancient monuments should be considered a 'problem'. What else is one to make of the recent proposal to amend the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010 (AMASR Act, 2010) to permit the construction of government-funded infrastructure projects in the proximity of protected monuments?

The Act is for the protection of monuments, but the intent of the amendments is to facilitate new infrastructure projects in the proximity of monuments. How has this egregious reversal of priorities come about?

The original legislation to protect monuments was the AMASR Act, 1958. Over the years, it was perceived to be inadequate to protect monuments in the face of the rapid development taking place in the country. As an antidote, the AMASR Act, 2010, was promulgated, which prescribed that an area of 100 meters around protected monuments would be declared as 'prohibited area', where no new development would be permitted, and a further 200 meters area would be 'regulated area'.

Though it appeared a draconian initiative, the Act also set up the National Monument Authority (NMA) to draft by-laws for each monument to administer its provisions. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), and other agencies to be identified, were to help the NMA and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to draft the

by-laws envisaged in the Act.

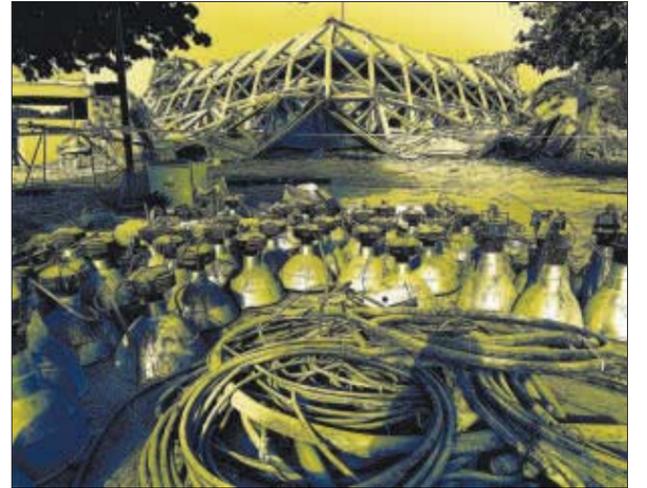
On the face of it, the legislation was a genuine response to a real problem. The requirement for context-specific by-laws for each monument was also an intelligent strategy to deal with the variety of problems that the implementation of the Act would entail. But events did not unfold as envisaged in the Act. In spite of concerted efforts by INTACH to set up a mechanism to draft the by-laws, neither the NMA nor ASI responded positively.

Consequently, ad hocism triumphed and status quo prevailed. Development projects struck a wall when they were planned in the proximity of monuments. The planners did not know the rules they had to follow and the regulatory authority, NMA, in the absence of by-laws, found it difficult to accord permissions to projects.

Not surprisingly, the resulting frustrations the delays generated developed into virulent antipathy towards AMASR Act, 2010. Instead of trying to understand the genesis of the problems with the Act and remedy its shortcomings, the government is throwing the baby with the bath water by succumbing to the pressures of developers. This will compromise the cause of heritage protection. Let us not mistake the consequences of the proposed new legislation: It will ring the death knell for many of the country's treasured monuments.

In India, conservation of heritage has always been a contentious issue. The situation has become more pronounced with the present government. It clearly sees conservation and development as antithetical to each other.

In 2015, for example, it withdrew the nomination of Delhi to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Cities on the specious grounds that it would impede 'development'. And more recently, it purposefully demolished the iconic Hall of Nations in Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, to make way for a 'world-class' convention centre, again on the specious grounds that



Recently, the iconic Hall of Nations in Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, was demolished to make way for a 'world-class' convention centre. SONU MEHTA/HT PHOTO

the new convention centre could not be constructed otherwise.

The fact is that anywhere else in the world, the imperatives of conservation and development would both have been intelligently accommodated to add to the richness of the city's heritage assets. One suspects that in both cases the real motives were political in nature: Citing the problems of development was a red herring.

One can easily read the political intent of the government's decisions if one knows that similar rationalisations favouring development were also used in other countries for political ends. During the post-war urban renewal boom in the US and Britain, for instance, the neighbourhoods of the 'other' (blacks, ethnic minorities and the poor) were routinely targeted for demolition in the name of development and to permit developers access to prime real estate.

Activists like Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, however compellingly exposed the

underlying nexus between political intent and capital intensive infrastructure 'solutions' to urban problems. She advocated the efficacy of more culture-sensitive approaches to meet habitat needs of society, which have lessons for us in India.

The intended beneficiaries of the proposed amendments to the AMASR Act, 2010, are the developers of the infrastructure projects and not the monuments. What is needed are strategies to strengthen heritage protection by drafting the monument-specific by-laws as the Act intended.

There are many development options and compromising the integrity of the monument, as the proposed amendment permits, should not be one of them. This is why the amendments to the AMASR Act, 2010 must be opposed.

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The views expressed are personal

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SUNNY HUNDAL



## The Indian government must help Italian Sikhs

Allowing them to practise their religion does not hurt integration. In fact, it strengthens the national character

**I**talian cheeses such as Parmesan and Mozzarella are known and eaten around the world. But how many people know these cheeses are alive today mostly because of Punjabi Sikhs? It sounds bizarre but it's absolutely true.

This is a story not just of migration and globalisation but also how it impacts us in unexpected ways. Over the last 20 years, thousands of Indian Sikhs have migrated to Italy for work.

Most found jobs in Italy's dairy farm industry, which was already facing a big shortage of workers since younger Italians were not as interested in farming. The influx of Punjabi Sikhs saved the Italian dairy and cheese industry and even helped it grow.

"If you go to almost any dairy farm round here, you'll find Sikhs working in the cow sheds," dairy farmer Maurizio Novelli told the BBC recently. He was referring to the region of Reggio Emilia, the only place

that Parmesan cheese can be made under EU rules.

Sikhs have become a success story in Italy. Thousands have stayed and built families in villages and towns across the country.

There is even a huge gurdwara near the city of Milan, the Sri Guru Kalgidhar Sahib, which opened in 2011. Up to 150,000 now live there, making it the largest Sikh community in Europe after the one in Britain. (Though the number of Hindus in Italy is thought to be larger, they keep a lower profile).

Italian Indians are like the economic cousins of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims who settled in Britain, like my parents, and North America. They are building a new life in a new country while keeping alive their heritage and culture.

But they now face a formidable challenge. Just a few months ago an Italian court ruled that Sikhs were not legally allowed to wear kirpans (the Sikh dagger), even for religious reasons. The court stated: "Attachment to



An Italian court has outlawed the carrying of the kirpan (Sikh dagger) SHUTTERSTOCK

values which violate the laws of the host country is intolerable, even if they are lawful in the country of origin."

But Italian law already makes exceptions in matters of religion: for example, the Vatican Church is uniquely exempted from property taxes and gets a lot of money from the government every year. If Catholics can get special dispensation then why not Sikhs?

You might think that as a Catholic country, Italy should have the right to give them special preference. But this would be a mistake. In giving preference to one religion over others, Italy is saying that

Hindus and Sikhs there are second-class citizens. It creates disharmony.

The Italians think that allowing Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims the freedom to practise their religion will make them less Italian. But other western countries have proven this wrong.

Sikhs in Britain and North America fought for and won the right to wear kirpans because these countries allow more freedom to practise religion. Allowing them that freedom has made Sikhs even more proud to be British or Americans, not less. They are glad they live in a country that recognises and respects their beliefs, not treats them as a problem.

Italian Sikhs are now desperately trying to resolve their predicament. Last month they presented the Akal Takht, the highest temporal Sikh body (in Amritsar), with an alternative version of the kirpan. It was harmless, symbolic and approved by the Italian government.

But last week the Akal Takht rejected the modified kirpan, saying it went against the Sikh tenets. That leaves Sikhs in Italy in an unfortunate stalemate.

This is where the Indian government can help. It's not for the centre to interfere in Sikh affairs, but the Prime Minister can certainly make the Sikh case to the Italian government.

Allowing people the freedom to practise their religion doesn't hurt integration or the national character. In fact it strengthens it. Across the West, Sikhs Hindus and Muslims have demonstrated loyalty to their country while enjoying religious freedom. Italians need to understand the strength that comes from diversity, not dismiss it.

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## Antsy with Republicans, Trump's likely to go rogue

**O**nly in these times of Trump could a tabloid have a feature about cullings at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. In the past, the New York Post often had the 45th President of the United States within its covers, usually on Page 6, the gossip section about celebrity shenanigans. Those capers have migrated to the front page in a graphic representing administration honchos being kicked off the island as in a reality show.

This, then, is the season for Survivor:

White House, with the latest oustee, left without a lifeboat, being Anthony Scaramucci, who within 10 days of becoming the communications chief cussed his way out the circle. Now a mere meme, he will go down as a memorable footnote of those booted out without having had enough time to tie their laces.

However, as he went out the door, Scaramucci may well have furthered Donald Trump's agenda—cleaning the administration of establishment Republicans. Sean Spi-

cer, the former press secretary, made his exit and then his former boss in the Republican National Committee Reince Priebus vacated the office of Chief of Staff.

This may just be Trump's style of stocking up on loyalists after initially making some concessions to the mainstream of the party. Somewhat like the grouping of the Margdarshak Mandal of superannuated veterans that Prime Minister Narendra Modi used to clean house in New Delhi, Trump's performing his sweeping changes.

Modi, however, has consolidated the party behind him, partly because the BJP knows he's their most potent magnet for voters. Trump, though, isn't as attractive to either his party or the American electorate, and that's possibly why he faces resistance within the ranks, as evidenced by the attempt to repeal Obamacare being scuttled by three naysaying Republican Senators.

But watch this space: Increasingly antsy with the party, Trump's likely to go rogue, asserting his independence, a tactic that worked for him in the 2016 elections. In fact, Trump usually reverts to his original positions, expressed vociferously during that

campaign, like his contempt for the party he sought the nomination from. For those that still don't get it, past statements presage future Trump moves.

The problem, of course, is in trying to go that route, his short fuse can blow up even in the face of original Trumpeters—his rants about Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the first Senator to have endorsed him last year, being the latest marker of that fragile temperament.

So, outside the immediate Trump family, those remaining will feel like contestants on another show, wondering when they will be evicted from Big Brother's White House, or, in the Indian context, Big Boss' boardroom. They will doubtless remember that Trump found television celebrity with his words "You're Fired".

But, if there's a television show that's most apt for this Trump tamasha, it's House of Cards. And as the pack keeps getting shuffled, we will keep seeing fewer faces being dealt and more jokers at hand.

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The views expressed are personal

## This Friendship Day, let us make an effort to reconnect with each other

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Mithun Dey

The first Sunday of August is celebrated as 'Friendship Day'. However, these days, people don't seem to take much interest in the significance of "Friendship Day". This is due to the fact that everyone is busy with their own work and hardly get any time to spend with friends.

We have changed a lot in the past decade. Most of us are usually not aware what our 'friends' are doing. When I wished one of my friends "Happy Friend-

ship Day", it came as a surprise to him. I believe that friendship has great significance for all individuals, because it makes us into more responsible and more dynamic people. I feel that today's youth somehow do not seem to attach that sort of significance to the meaning of true friendship.

I wish everyone would know that just one heartfelt moment of joy or just one happy smile has the power to bring great joy to your heart. This Friendship Day, I hope we all get a chance to spend some quality time with a true friend. It is only in the company of true friends that we can truly spread our wings and fly.

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