



## Wages of neglect

The Gorakhpur tragedy demands a prompt inquiry and a holistic health-care overhaul

The death of more than 60 children in the span of a few days in a major referral hospital in Uttar Pradesh has jolted the conscience of the nation. This was an entirely preventable tragedy. It will take an independent inquiry to establish why children perished at the BRD Medical College in Gorakhpur between August 7 and 11. Such an inquiry should examine whether and to what extent the disruption of oxygen supply to those who were extremely sick was a cause for the deaths. That the two events were not entirely unrelated seemed to be indirectly confirmed with the frantic requisitioning of emergency oxygen supplies and the State government suspending the principal of the college. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's immediate assertion that no deaths took place due to lack of oxygen was inappropriate as it would prejudice any administrative probe. After all, the company that supplied the oxygen had issued notice to the hospital on large unpaid bills, warning of a crisis. Only a high-level judicial inquiry will have credibility. That no lessons have been learned by the State government and the Centre is evident from the unremitting annual peaks of disease and death in U.P., particularly in the eastern districts: data show that Japanese encephalitis, which afflicted many of the children who died last week, has claimed more than 10,000 lives in the State between 1978, the year of the first major outbreak, and 2005. High mortality has been witnessed in subsequent years as well. As a parliamentarian representing Gorakhpur for almost two decades, Mr. Adityanath was only too familiar with the epidemics that wracked his constituency frequently. Previous State governments have done little to address this problem, but that cannot be Mr. Adityanath's response to the tragedy.

Reducing the incidence of fatal or crippling disease calls for robust medical infrastructure, which governments can create quickly, if they have the will. In the case of U.P., the epidemics have their roots in weak social determinants such as housing and sanitation, coupled with ecological changes. Encephalitis is correlated with expansion of irrigation and construction of dams four decades ago, resulting in an increase in disease-transmitting mosquitoes. Proximity to pigs and birds created viral transmission pathways. The Centre has a vaccination programme in place and a stated commitment to build paediatric intensive care units in priority districts, but these have not had significant impact. The way forward would be for the Indian Council of Medical Research to launch a special commission for U.P., treating it as a public health emergency. It is also an appropriate moment for the Centre and the States to consider their poor record. They trail even other developing economies, such as neighbouring Thailand and some African countries, in moving to universal health care. Such a system should be non-commercial and regulated to contain costs, giving everyone affordable access to doctors, diagnostics and treatment.

## Sound and fury

The U.S. President needs to wind down war talk and initiate direct talks with North Korea

U.S. President Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric against North Korea and equally strident counter-threats by Pyongyang have made the situation in the Korean Peninsula drastically worse. After reports emerged that North Korea has developed a miniaturised nuclear warhead that can fit inside its missiles, Mr. Trump said that the country would be met with "fire and fury" of the sort the world had never seen if it continued to threaten the U.S. If Mr. Trump's tough talk, which he repeated again in the following days with even a reference to America's nuclear weapons, was intended to deter Pyongyang from escalating the situation, it was an instant failure. The North issued a specific threat, saying it was considering a plan to fire missiles towards Guam, the American territory in the Pacific. It is appalling that there's no substantial effort to defuse tensions even as two nuclear powers are steadily escalating threats against each other. Though the State Department has tried to play down Mr. Trump's remarks and countries like Russia, China and Germany have counselled calm, it's not clear whether there are any efforts from either side to reach out to the other diplomatically. More worryingly, the U.S. and South Korea are going ahead with massive sea, air and land exercises later this month.

This is a dangerous spiral. Even a limited strike by the U.S. to diminish North Korea's missile capabilities, as advised by some strategists in Washington, could instantly turn into a full-scale war if Kim Jong-un, North Korea's volatile leader, sees it as a threat to his regime. North Korea has installed thousands of pieces of artillery along the demilitarised zone which can rain down fire on South Korea in minutes. In the same way, if Mr. Kim continues to ignore the threats from Washington and goes ahead with an attack on Guam, it could prompt Mr. Trump, who is equally unpredictable when it comes to decision-making, to pick an option his predecessors avoided because of the risks involved. Mr. Trump's predecessors have some responsibility for the crisis the world is facing today. They resorted to sanctions and war games in the region to weaken and intimidate North Korea even after the futility of such methods became clear. Sanctions work only in a country where the rulers are responsive to their people through some political process, not in a totalitarian regime whose primary goal is its own survival. If Mr. Trump continues to tread the same track, it could also push the world into a major conflict, putting the lives of millions on the line. It's time for Mr. Trump to change course and take the road less travelled, but the only promising route currently available: direct negotiations with Pyongyang.

# History is not repeating itself

Street power and the electorate's wishes may well redefine the nature of who holds power in Pakistan



S. AKBAR ZAIDI

Former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would never have imagined three weeks ago that he would be spending Pakistan's 70th anniversary of Independence today as yet another of the country's former Prime Ministers deposed by a verdict of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. He must have had very different plans for today, perhaps even to address the Pakistan public on national television, telling us how his government since 2013 had brought Pakistan closer to M.A. Jinnah's dreams and vision for a just, egalitarian and prosperous Pakistan. He must surely have prepared a speech, perhaps even to be delivered at the Minar-e-Pakistan in his hometown of Lahore, extolling the many achievements and virtues of his most recent tenure as Pakistan's 19th Prime Minister since 1947, not a single one of whom was able to complete his or her full term as appointed or elected head of government.

### The players in the sphere

Even the cliché of his being 'third time lucky' when he was sworn in as Prime Minister in 2013 proved misplaced, and now Mr. Sharif has the ignoble honour of being the only Prime Minister of Pakistan who was elected three times to that office, and who was also thrice dismissed. But this dismissal is a long cry away from another cliché, that 'history repeats itself', whether as tragedy or farce, for other than being dismissed yet again, there is little of repetition of what has happened in Pakistan's political



history this time round.

Pakistan's 70 years of Independence have had an almost equal tenure of military dictatorships intermingled with civilian appointed and elected leaders. In simple numerical terms of the actual years between military dictatorships and civilian interregnums, the non-military rule, by 2011, had nudged ahead. But one cannot deny the fact that Pakistan's military state and the establishment of the deep security state have dominated Pakistan's politics for considerably longer. The dominance of the military on political institutions has been marked for at least 50 of Pakistan's 70 years as an independent state. However, over the last decade, there have been clear signs that other competing institutions, such as the judiciary and legislature with elected civilian elected representatives, to name just two, have emerged to contest and claim the hegemony over the political sphere. Rather than the undisputed supremacy of the military from 1958 to 2008, other institutions have emerged to challenge this hegemony.

This is not the first time that the supreme judiciary has played its part in the removal of an elected prime minister, but on almost all

occasions it has played a supportive role to either the military or the President of Pakistan. The first dismissal of Mr. Sharif and his government (1993) were made under the provision of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, under Article 58 2(b), which allowed the President of Pakistan to dismiss Parliament. Both Benazir Bhutto (1991, 1996) and Mr. Sharif have been dismissed under this provision, and all three dismissals were during the tenure of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan. Mr. Sharif's removal in 1999 was after a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf, bringing in Pakistan's third military dictatorship. Pakistan's supreme judiciary, as in 1958, 1977 and 1999, supported the actions of the military often citing the 'doctrine of necessity' to give some constitutional and judicial cover to the military coups.

### Emergence of the judiciary

The judiciary, along with other institutions such as the media and pro-democracy forces, played a key role in marking the shift away from the military's hegemony, a process which could be dated to around 2007-2008 when what is known as the 'lawyers' movement' gave some credibility to the notion

that the judiciary could actually be independent in asserting its own interests rather than being perceived to be a lackey of the military. It is this new, forceful entity which has been responsible for dismissing two of Pakistan's last three Prime Ministers. What is particularly pertinent is that following the new democratic turn in Pakistan's politics in 2008, it has been the judiciary, and not Pakistan's supposedly omnipotent military, which has dismissed the two longest serving Prime Ministers of Pakistan, Yousuf Raza Gilani of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in June 2012, and Mr. Sharif less than three weeks ago.

Not only is Mr. Sharif's third removal as Prime Minister very different from his earlier two, but given his political standing, it is also different from the judiciary's dismissal of Mr. Gilani. Mr. Gilani was a full-in candidate following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and was never the leader of the PPP, which has always been dominated by the Bhuttos, and now by Asif Zardari. Mr. Sharif, on the other hand, is the leader and main voice of the most popular political party in Pakistan, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, although following his dismissal, the Election Commission of Pakistan has asked him to be removed formally as the party's president. In 1999, he was arrested after Gen. Musharraf's coup, and was humiliated on national television by the General. This time round, Mr. Sharif has taken to the streets and to the electorate, claiming to be a victim of his times, suggesting that the people's electoral mandate which brought him to power is far stronger than the judiciary's decision to dismiss him. Moreover, 1999 saw the end of democracy in Pakistan with the end of Parliament, while this time around, if anything, there has been

a smooth transition in electing a replacement Prime Minister, with Parliament still very much in session, and Pakistan functioning with much semblance of its own particular democratic norms and procedures.

So while one could make the case that the democratic process continues in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif's own future is certainly at stake. There has been much public debate, especially by lawyers, about the Supreme Court's decision to dismiss him as Prime Minister. While allegations of corruption against him still abound, he was dismissed for not declaring income which he received from a Dubai firm at the time he filed his nomination papers for the 2013 election. He has promised to challenge the decision and gathered some support among the legal community over the *modus operandi* of the superior judges. Still, claiming that he is innocent of any corruption, his conviction a la Al Capone, on grounds unrelated to the real allegations, does allow him to seek redress and attempt to make a comeback. In 1999 after a General removed, then imprisoned and finally exiled, him, Mr. Sharif's political career surely seemed over. Whether he can make yet another comeback and make history repeat itself will be determined over the course of the next few months as Pakistan prepares for its next democratic elections. Whether street power and the electorate's wishes can do to the judiciary's verdict what they did to a sitting General's in 2008 might redefine the nature, yet again, of who holds power in Pakistan.

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## An odd leniency

So-called 'minor' sexual offences such as stalking inhibit women from occupying public space



NAMRATA MUKHERJEE

On the night of August 7, Vikas Barala, the son of the Haryana BJP chief, and his friend, are alleged to have stalked Varnika Kundu, the daughter of a bureaucrat, on the streets of Chandigarh. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau show that there has been a rise in stalking registered since the provision was introduced through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013; from 4,700 cases in 2014 to 6,227 in 2015. Despite rising numbers, the conversation on sexual violence in India continues to be centred on rape. Given the involvement of high-profile individuals in this incident, an often-trivialised form of violence against women has suddenly taken centre-stage.

### As a legal offence

Before the 2013 amendment came in, the law was ill-equipped to deal with the offence of stalking. The closest it came to being addressed was Section 509 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC): "Word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman." The provision was inadequate in tackling the

menace of stalking because one had to prove that the accused intended to 'outrage the modesty of the woman' through his act. Other provisions such as Section 354 - "Assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty" - necessitated the use of physical force. Further, the phrase "outraging the modesty of a woman" is not defined anywhere in the law, leaving its interpretation open-ended. The Information Technology Act, 2000 also lacks adequate provisions to deal with electronic stalking. Under it, Section 66E, on the violation of the privacy of an individual, requires the intentional capturing, publishing or transmission of an obscene image of a person without their consent.

It took mass outrage and public pressure after the Nirbhaya gang rape in Delhi in 2012 to compel the government to recognise the varied dimensions of sexual violence against women. Apart from expanding the scope of rape and penalising voyeurism and eve-teasing, the 2013 Amendment also defined and recognised stalking as a standalone offence. Section 354-D of the IPC makes both physical and electronic stalking an offence. Here, under subsection 1, the intention of the perpetrator is irrelevant as long as the woman in question "has clearly expressed her disinterest". Subsection 2 criminalises the monitoring of a



woman's online behaviour.

While the 2013 Amendment is a welcome step, some believe subsection 2 goes too far. The Verma Committee draft stated that online monitoring should amount to stalking only when it results "in a fear of violence or serious alarm or distress in the mind" of the victim. In view of this, it has been argued that subsection 2 has the potential to be used arbitrarily. Further, there are three exceptions to the offence if the conduct was: (i) pursued for prevention or detection of crime by a person authorised to do so, (ii) pursued under any law or (iii) reasonable and justified in the circumstances. While exception (iii) can to a certain extent counter the open-endedness of subsection 2, it is in itself vague and can prove to be an escape clause given that stalking is culturally normalised.

Such loose drafting can be attributed to the fact that the 2013 Amendment was a knee jerk reaction.

### The parochial discourse

While sexual violence of varying degrees and forms is a routine affair for women in India, it is the "grave" forms of sexual violence primarily, such as rape, that dominate our everyday understanding of the issue. Other "minor" forms such as stalking and "eve-teasing" are not only normalised but are often romanticised and encouraged, especially in popular culture such as Indian cinema. One only needs to watch *Badrinath ki Dulhania* and *Raanjhanaa* to understand this argument.

The perception that violence against women must necessarily involve some form of bodily harm does not only inform societal attitudes but also the law. The fact that it took a heinous incident of rape for stalking, eve-teasing and voyeurism to be recognised as offences demonstrates the myopic lens through which sexual violence against women is viewed in India. One can also argue that these offences would have never been introduced in the law had the government not come under pressure from the public. Interestingly, the introduction of stalking as an offence was met with deep resistance from some parliamentarians. Some argued that it could be mis-

used by women while others viewed stalking as an acceptable norm in the country since "everyone has stalked women at some point in their lives". Finally, the Committee's recommendation of making stalking a non-bailable offence was rejected. Now, only repeated stalking is non-bailable. Courts too have been complicit in this process of trivialisation. In 2015, a court in Australia acquitted an Indian man accused of stalking two women on the ground that Bollywood had influenced him and thus such behaviour was normal for Indian men.

### Broadening the narrative

Had these series of events not involved politicians and bureaucrats, it is likely that neither the criminal justice system nor the media would have acted. The reality is that while rape is a heinous crime, it is not the only form of sexual violence against women in India. So-called "minor" sexual offences such as stalking, voyeurism and eve-teasing in effect deprive us of our fundamental right to occupy public space without fear. The Chandigarh incident gives us an opportunity to broaden our narrative on sexual violence and it's about time we start recognising the multitudes of infractions as a part of it.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Gorakhpur tragedy

It is heart-wrenching that a mere non-payment of dues for the supply of the oxygen has cost the lives of several children in Gorakhpur ("Gorakhpur hospital ignoring warnings on oxygen supply", Aug. 13). The hospital authorities have behaved in an irresponsible and negligent manner. While the general complaint was that the deaths were due to the non-supply of oxygen, the statements of the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and the Union Minister of State for Health that the deaths were not due to the interruption of oxygen supply are contradictory and confusing. The government and the hospital authorities have the moral obligation to spell out correctly the reasons for the deaths. It is tragic that the poor bear the brunt almost every time ("Hospital with a high patronage of the poor", August 13)  
D. SETHURAMAN,  
Chennai

■ The news is a great tragedy and is on a par with the case of faulty surgical sterilisation procedures in Chhattisgarh that resulted in a number of women losing their lives. The only silver lining in the Gorakhpur episode is that the hospital employees who are normally portrayed as irresponsible and lethargic had dutifully warned the hospital authorities in advance of falling levels of oxygen.  
A. JAINULABDEEN,  
Chennai

■ Without understanding what the real cause is and unless backed by solid data, one should not be quick to shift the blame. However the hospital authorities should keep all essential supplies in perfect order and carry out their job with sincerity and dedication. Another important issue is that hospitals, whether government or private, should not be made to experience disruptions in essential supplies of any

type, including electricity and water for non-payment of dues, as it affects treatment. Grievances of such a nature must be tackled at the official level.  
J.P. REDDY,  
Nalgonda, Telangana

■ It is shocking that so many children have died due to asphyxia. This heart-rending incident has only laid bare the poor infrastructure of government hospitals and the apathy of the State government towards the poor. The Yogi Adityanath government cannot shy away from its responsibility by laying the blame on poor hygiene and Japanese encephalitis. The government needs to admit the deplorable condition of government hospitals and order a fair probe. It is sad that we continue to be felled by various preventable diseases that have vaccines. We also need to probe why Japanese encephalitis is still prevalent

in Uttar Pradesh.

JANGA BAHADUR SUNWAR,  
Bagrakote, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal

### Assam's annual sorrow

Floods in Assam are a recurring natural phenomenon. The Brahmaputra eats into the cultivable land as it erodes more land every time it floods the plains. Lakhs of people are displaced and thousands are rendered homeless. The government has always held a traditional response to the problem with a focus on short-term measures such as relief and damage assessment rather than preventive and innovative measures to help tackle the problem in the long run. The government's inability to find lasting solution to the flood problem has affected the State socially and economically. Youth migration and human trafficking are two sad realities and a fallout of the annual floods. Having lost their houses and cultivable land, poor and

unsuspecting families under duress become prone to the ploys of the traffickers who promise them jobs. Women and children too are a part of this. Assam has also seen substantial migration of able-bodied youth hailing from flood-prone districts of the State to other parts of the country in search of petty jobs. Erosion and sedimentation of cultivable land and the lack of encouragement to take up agriculture have resulted in such migratory tendencies. Development activities take a hit too. As a result, several projects have been delayed for years, paving the way for malpractices. Although rich in natural resources and fertile plains, Assam has failed to meet its potential and develop its human resources thanks to distorted and myopic governance. When will the government rethink the paradigm of development and focus more on creating conditions that enable the optimal use of people's resources? Flood protection

must shift to flood governance.

HIMANGKA KAUSHIK,  
Guwahati, Assam

### In cross hairs

By banning a tribal writer's collection of short stories and serving a notice to him, the Jharkhand government has resorted to the age-old tactics of how tyrants of yore used to harass those literateurs they intensely disliked ("Writer asked to explain his actions", August 13). The State government must understand that poets and writers, being close to the common people, highlight their everyday problems through their works. Instead of choosing to target Hansda Sowndra Shekhar, the State government must make sure that tribals, who are exploited a great deal, reap the benefits of its welfare schemes.

SAMUL HASSAN QUADRI,  
Bikaner, Rajasthan

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# Beauty and the regulatory beast

Data from gene trials should be open to the wider public for greater transparency and abundant caution



SHAMNAD BASHEER

India is known for its designs and designers, one more colourful than the other. But more importantly, we are known for our babies, rapidly proliferating even as our population threatens to overtake China. What if the two came together? I speak of designer babies, the new threat on the horizon. And yet, how real is this? And what should we do to regulate this threat?

First off, designing babies is not anything that's new for India. Indeed, if a recent pronouncement by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh health wing is anything to go by, we have a medley of mantras to ensure that our babies are born "tall, fair and smart" — an "uttam santati" (ideal progeny) of sorts!

## Threat of designer babies

Indeed, even as the narrative of "modern" science gets suffused with an alternative epistemological wisdom of the past, it becomes difficult to separate the wheat (of wisdom) from the chaff (of conjecture). But we'll leave that for another day. Within the realm of modern science, we now have the impending threat of designer babies, stemming from a revolutionary technique entailing the editing of our genes by bacterial DNA scissors called CRISPR (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats). The gene editing technique using such DNA scissors is titled "CRISPR/Cas9" and was the subject of an intense patent battle between the University of California, Berkeley and MIT/Broad Institute. The verdict was somewhat Solomonic, splitting the patent pie between these two rivals.

Since its evolution, CRISPR/Cas9 has been tested across an array of domains, such as human health (gene-based therapy) and agro biotech (pest-resistant crops). In fact, trials for gene-based therapies are already under way, with scientists successfully editing out genetic mutations that code for disorders such as hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (a functional impairment of the heart) and retinitis pigmentosa (a degenerative disorder of the eye). The question



• GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

now is: if we can edit out medically problematic gene sequences, can we also alter genes to make us look more attractive? Smarter? Stronger? Fairer? In other words, can we beautify the babies of tomorrow? It is this scary spectre of a new age eugenics that forms the starting point for this piece.

## Safety, efficacy of techniques

Given that the line between "cure" and "cosmetics" is a fast blurring one, one has to first acknowledge a rather nebulous slippery slope here. Assuming, however, that one could make this distinction, the solution appears seemingly easy: prevent the purely cosmetic in baby design, while paving the way for life-saving medical interventions. But is the science so certain that we can rest easy, without worrying about the "side effects"?

And this is where the regulatory beast steps in. For we need to ask: how do we establish the "safety" and "efficacy" of these techniques? Most drug regulatory regimes insist that drug makers submit clinical trial data to establish that their drugs are safe and effective. Gene therapies and the defect-free babies that flow forth ought to be subject to a similar regulatory standard.

However, the question is: how long must these trials last? Genetic changes and alterations take years to manifest and side effects perhaps even more so. Do we put all these potentially life-saving medical advances on hold till then? Or do we tinker on, not bothering ourselves with the fate of the future? For in the long run, as

Keynes famously noted, we're all dead anyway!

Clearly, the line must be drawn somewhere. Perhaps, much like judge made common law, one could adopt an incremental case-by-case approach. For, evolving a precise principle that will account for all possible cases in future is a quixotic feat, to say the least. Unfortunately, insisting on foolproof safety data at the budding stages of a breakthrough technology might bury it altogether. Indeed, even within the realm of standard drugs (based on chemical molecules), the most voluminous of safety data still does not ensure that the drug is safe; there are plenty of instances of adverse effects reported well after the drug has been cleared. If we are to wait for the perfect safety data, that wait may well be forever.

## Innovation and ethics

One must therefore balance out the innovation imperative with that of ethics. Unfortunately, for way too long, these two domains have operated in largely different silos, and the twain seem to have hardly ever met. But now, with some of the leading tech evangelists expressing their ethical concerns in public, its kosher to cross over. Indeed, the fight today is more about which of these threats rate higher on the Frankenstein index: Artificial Intelligence (AI) or gene editing? Elon Musk "trumps" in favour of the former, while India-born tech maverick Vinod Khosla plonks in favour of the latter. As for the zesty Mark Zuckerberg, even as he took umbrage at Mr. Musk's cautionary call on AI, his own bots went

ahead and apparently invented their own language.

As these tech titans fight it out, one shudders at the prospect of a fearsome future, where AI robots begin to edit our babies! Given these concerns, the line between the permissible and the prohibited will always remain contested. However, we could begin by establishing certain baseline principles. First, one might insist on a more rigorous regulatory standard (safety/efficacy data, etc.) for interventions that cuddle close to the "cosmetic". And a less onerous one for critical life-saving therapies.

Second, and more importantly, all data relating to safety and efficacy of these new technologies ought to be put out in the public domain. This is where most governments get it wrong — cosy-ing up to big corporate behemoths who argue that this trial data is a "trade secret", a valuable intellectual property of sorts! This argument was recently endorsed by the Indian regulator before the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) in the context of clinical trials for GM mustard. Fortunately, the CIC ruled that the wider public interest trumped any potential IP interest in the trial data.

Data may be the new oil. However, unlike oil, which often requires the incentive of exclusivity (a prospecting license) to trigger heavy-duty investments, one cannot afford any exclusivity for health data. It is far too valuable to be tucked away in the secret IP cabins of corporate conglomerates. For, even the best of regulators can never really spot all the "bugs" in the bountiful data that is piled up before them.

We need to therefore encourage more transparency and openness; and open up this trial data to the wider public, and to scientists and doctors. That way, even if our regulators don't get it right, we'll at least have the prospect of someone somewhere spotting a glitch. That someone could well be you and I — the *aam aadmi* so to speak.

In the end, only a democratic regulatory enterprise premised on openness and public participation can ensure that we rein in the dangers of designer babies and the like. Lest a utopian future become a dystopian nightmare.

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## FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

# Journalists and social media

Technology platforms must ensure that they are safe spaces



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

As independent India turns 70, there were some suggestions to the office of the Readers' Editor, which if implemented would become censorship and infringement of free speech. The immediate provocation for these suggestions was the formal statement by the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) that condemned the online abuse heaped on the Bengaluru-based journalist, Dhanya Rajendran. The network demanded a safe online space for women.

Earlier, the journalist had tweeted that she walked out of the film, *Jab Harry Met Sejal*, midway and that a film she had walked out of before was *Sura*, a Tamil film starring Vijay. This led to an avalanche of sexist abuses, including threats of rape, from a section of self-styled fans of the actor on Twitter. The NWMI statement read: "The Twitter accounts of those who had issued rape and death threats have not been suspended. The lack of prompt response from Twitter is of deep concern, given that misogynist trolling, sexist and sexual abuse and outright threats create an atmosphere of intimidation that forces many women to self-censor or even quit the platform altogether."

Instead of outrightly condemning this appalling behaviour, there were some who suggested that journalists stop using social media platforms — they have their own outlets after all. They wanted media organisations to develop a code that defined journalists' engagement on social media. The defining element of this code, according to this section, would be to bring any posting by individual journalists on platforms, including their own news platforms, under the purview of editorial oversight. They expect the Readers' Editor to examine every social media post by professional journalists and check whether it has the potential to generate troll-backlash. In an earlier instance, one caller wanted me to take up the case of an offensive posting by a third-party on the Facebook page of a staff of this newspaper.

## Freedom of expression

I am stupefied by these suggestions. The focus was not on the abnormal behaviour of some on social media. There was not a word on the impunity with which trolls operate. The troubling part was that these suggestions came from otherwise reasonable people who were disturbed by the new

depths to which public discourse is plunging by the day in cyberspace. I would like them to ponder the Supreme Court ruling quashing Section 66A of the Information Technology Act a couple of years ago before suggesting any form of restrictive and limiting mechanism. Section 66A contained provisions that led to the arrests of many people for posting content deemed to be "allegedly objectionable" on the Internet. Justices J. Chelameswar and Rohinton F. Nariman's 112-page verdict drew critical distinctions between discussion, advocacy and incitement. They held that a law curtailing speech or expression can be made only when such utterances inexorably lead to or tend to cause public disorder or tend to affect the sovereignty and integrity of India.



The suggestion to curb an individual journalist's engagement on social media is a minefield as it conflates too many roles and responsibilities. It fails to delineate the rules that govern the flow of information in mainstream media, where multi-tiered gatekeeping processes generate the cooling period between an idea that captures an individual's imagination and being put out in the public sphere. There is an element of pause and act, which is also subject to the scrutiny of at least three more pairs of eyes. However, social media posts are often impulsive and impressionistic. There are no gatekeeping processes that aid a sense of responsibility.

A journalist is also a citizen who enjoys the rights guaranteed by our Constitution. Freedom of expression is an inalienable right, and expressing an opinion about a film, or a policy, or a politician on a forum that calls itself social media is a natural extension of that inalienable right. It is another issue that anonymity in these platforms generates space for hate that is capricious, unreasonable, absurd, and chilling. The focus should be on the role of powerful technology platforms to create a space that eschews hate, misogyny, and bigotry. It cannot be on individual journalists who post an opinion on these platforms. However, journalists can set standards by exhibiting the best practices of public discourse in social media.

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## SINGLE FILE

# A full antibiotics course

There is no evidence that a shorter course will guarantee cure of the infection

R. PRASAD



A single analysis piece published in the *The BMJ* journal has done more harm than good to antibiotics stewardship. Though the article makes a strong case for carrying out research in shorter antibiotic courses, it is very misleading. The headline, "The antibiotic course has had its day" (July 26), seems to suggest that completing the antibiotic course is no longer necessary. Worse, the authors say that patients who are not admitted in hospitals "might be best advised to stop treatment when they feel better".

The media's coverage of this too was unquestioning. An article in *The Guardian*, "Rule that patients must finish antibiotics course is wrong, study says", read: "Experts suggest patients should stop taking the drugs when they feel better rather than completing their prescription". It was shared 25,000 times.

## The WHO's advice

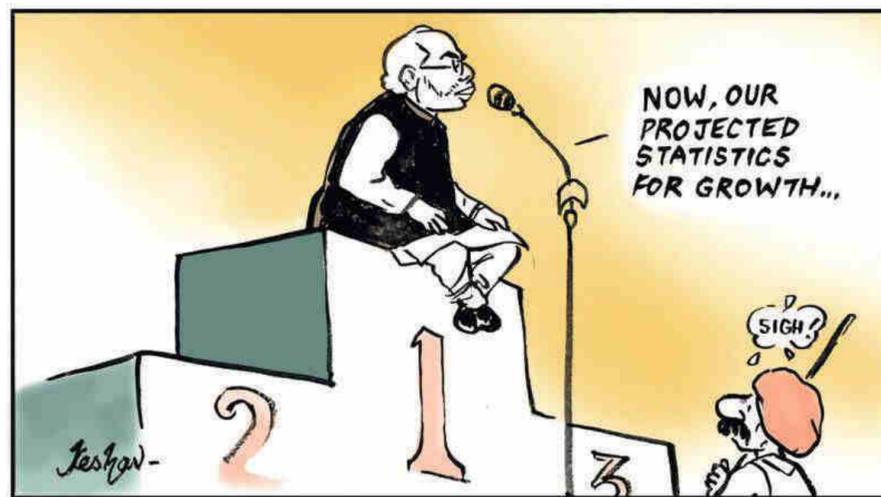
The bone of contention is the WHO's advice to patients to "always complete the full prescription, even if you feel better, because stopping treatment early promotes the growth of drug-resistant bacteria". According to the authors of *The BMJ* article, this advice is not evidence-based and is incorrect.

"The WHO statement is oversimplified and partially incorrect. Stopping antibiotics early will not promote resistance in the case of common bacterial infections though stopping them halfway when the patient feels better may not guarantee cure," says Dr. Abdul Ghafur, Consultant in Infectious Diseases at Apollo Hospital, Chennai, and co-ordinator of the Chennai declaration on antibiotic resistance. "*The BMJ* article, instead of clarifying this confusion, gives an erroneous impression that it's safe to stop antibiotics when patients feel better."

It is to address this confusion that the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention slightly changed the WHO's advice and asked patients to take antibiotics "exactly as prescribed". It does not ask patients to decide when to stop medication.

As per the available evidence, patients cannot stop antibiotics when they feel better. Antibiotics misuse such as inappropriate use (for viral infections), over medication, self-medication, and stopping treatment midway are already leading to problems. Asking patients to stop medication when they feel better can be dangerous, especially in the case of TB. One of the main reasons why drug-resistant TB strains have emerged is because patients discontinue medication mid-course when they feel better, much like what the authors are advocating. *The BMJ* article has failed to clarify upfront that its suggestion is restricted to common bacterial infections.

Asking patients to stop antibiotics when they feel better is a new concept and there is no evidence to support it in clinical practice. There are several patient groups such as adults, children, the elderly, and immuno-compromised patients. "We need data on all these groups for each indication before advocating it," Dr. Ghafur says. As the authors have argued, there is evidence that a longer rather than shorter course of antibiotics promotes bacterial resistance. Shorter courses based on evidence are already available for certain bacterial infections. "Whether a short/long-course, patients should not decide to stop taking antibiotics when they feel better," Dr. Ghafur says.



## CONCEPTUAL Bounded rationality

ECONOMICS

This is a theory of economic behaviour which states that human beings make decisions on the basis of limited information and constrained cognitive ability. This is in contrast to the typical assumption in economic models that human beings are perfectly rational and can choose what's best for them at ease. The idea of bounded rationality was proposed by American economist Herbert A. Simon in his 1957 book *Models of Man*. Critics, on the other hand, argue that the economic concept of rational decision-making does not deny the possibility of irrational economic behaviour among individuals.

## MORE ON THE WEB

#WITBragDay: The gender bug in the software industry

http://bit.ly/WITBragDay

## SHELF HELP

# Exploring Bhutan

It's a mystery why so little has been written about it

SUHASINI HAIDAR

With the Doklam stand-off entering a third month, the spotlight remains on a country that has traditionally shied from it: Bhutan. How does a nation described by its leaders as "one of the world's smallest countries, sandwiched between two of the world's biggest powers" keep its identity and sovereignty intact? And given that it does not have ties with too many other countries, how has it managed to make no enemies? One of the factors may be that Bhutan has allowed very little to be written about it.

Most books that chronicle Bhutan since the 19th century are either travelogues or the "eat, pray, love" variety that show the spiritual power of the country's beauty and simplicity. For example: *Beyond the Sky and Earth* by Jamie Zeppa, *A Splendid Isolation* by Madeline Drexler, *Radio*

*Shangri-La* by Lisa Napoli and *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani.

When it comes to the politics of Bhutan, most books come wrapped in a veil of Buddhism and its deep impact on Bhutan, or reverence for the much-loved monarchy. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the present king, incidentally has published a beautiful book of photographs (*Bhutan: Through the Lens of the King*), which contains essays by former diplomat Pavan Verma. Other members of the royal family have also written books or had biographies written, including the former queen, Ashi Dorji Wangmo.

However, readers who do want to delve deeper into history and politics could start with Karma Phuntsho's excellent *The History of Bhutan*, followed by *The Raven Crown: The Origins of the Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan* by Michael Aris,

the late husband of Aung San Suu Kyi. In 1964, Bhutan faced one of its biggest crises, when its Prime Minister Jigme Dorji was assassinated. A gripping account of what followed, including Indian diplomacy at the time, can be found in bureaucrat and adviser Nari Rustomji's *The Dragon King in Crisis*. Another explanation of Bhutanese politics and its reclusive foreign policy can also be found from University of Berkeley Professor Leo Rose in a volume he edited in 1977 called *The Politics of Bhutan*. Above all Omair Ahmad's book is the singular, most up-to-date account of where Bhutan sees itself today. *The Kingdom at the Centre of the World: Journeys into Bhutan* is a must-read.

It seems fantastical that Bhutan has such few books to explain it. Yet, as any traveller to the country will attest, it is also the reason the country remains such an enigma.

## FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 14, 1967

# Naga rebels want peace talks

The Naga underground "Federal Government" has sent a telegram to the Union Government suggesting that the next peace talks with the Government should be held in New Delhi before the end of this month, a spokesman of the underground Nagas announced in Kohima to-day [August 13]. No reply to the communication has been received from the Union Government so far, the spokesman said. The present cease-fire agreement between the underground and the government expires on August 31. Two prominent underground Naga leaders Thinu Seilie, and Muivah, have gone to Europe on, what sources close to the underground describe, as a "political mission".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 14, 1917

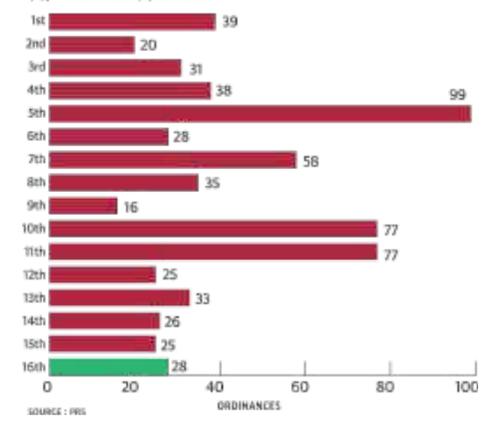
# An educational exception.

An educational exhibition organised under the supervision of Mr. W.C. Douglas, Inspector of Schools of this Circle, was opened this morning [August 13] by Mr. J.R. Huggins, I.C.S., Collector of Tanjore in the presence of a large gathering [at Papanasam]. The exhibition was held in the Government Training School in the Sivaganga Garden, the show divided into sections arranged under different groups. In welcoming the teachers and visitors to witness the show, Mr. Douglas said: The present was the third exhibition of the kind. The last one was held in 1910, the year of Halley's Comet. And he was grateful to say that, though seven years had passed since, they had not to wait for the appearance of another comet at another long interval, for the holding of their exhibition (laughter).

## DATA POINT

### Rise in Ordinances

In the three years of the 16th Lok Sabha, 28 ordinances have been issued at an average of nine ordinances per year. This is higher than the annual average of ordinances issued by the 13th (7), 14th (7), and the 15th (5) Lok Sabhas



SOURCE: PWS

ORDINANCES