



Midnight rumble

The Centre, which has been dragged into the CBI mess, has a lot of explaining to do

The abrupt replacement of Alok Verma as Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation, albeit as an interim measure, is the culmination of a series of murky events that must deeply embarrass the Centre. What was perceived as an unseemly internal tussle among top officers of the premier investigating agency has morphed into a full-blown conflict between the Centre and Mr. Verma. It is one thing if Mr. Verma had merely challenged the legality of his dismissal. But he more than hinted at interference in his functioning. The suggestion that the Centre's action was meant to protect certain people has led to charges that he was removed because he was politically inconvenient. The Centre may like people to think it behaved with a measure of even-handedness by divesting both Mr. Verma and Mr. Asthana of their powers, but the action of the new acting director, M. Nageswara Rao – who has transferred many officers investigating cases against Mr. Asthana – exposes where its sympathy lies. This has raised the question whether the government is adopting strong-arm tactics against Mr. Verma, despite his tenure and independence being protected by the law.

The Central Vigilance Commission, in its order divesting him of his office, has said that since the atmosphere within the agency had become vitiated due to a factional feud, it had to intervene. It also charged Mr. Verma with not making available the records and files sought by the CVC in connection with a corruption complaint against him – an approach which it held was wilfully obstructionist. The sordid controversy has raised the important question of whether the statutory changes aimed at insulating the CBI Director's office from political and administrative interference are adequate. Section 4B of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act assures the Director of a two-year tenure and makes it clear that he cannot be transferred except by the high-power committee – comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of India – that appointed him. The Supreme Court will address the question whether the 'interim measure' amounts to unlawfully curtailing the Director's tenure. It will also examine whether the CVC's power of superintendence has been rightly invoked in the present case. But there are immediate and arguably more serious dimensions to this crisis. And it revolves around how to repair the image of a CBI riven by a nasty feud, how to protect its independence, and how to address the mess contributed by a government that should have acted much earlier to resolve the controversy rather than let it attain the ugly dimensions it did.

The long march

#CaravanaMigrante puts issues in the U.S. mid-term elections in sharp relief

The winding caravan of more than 7,000 migrants from Central America through Mexico has become such a political hot potato that it is likely to thrust the immigration issue to the forefront of the U.S. mid-term elections, barely two weeks away. Already, President Donald Trump, who has not been shy about translating his conservative views on immigration into harsh policy measures, has fuelled fears that the caravan may harbour terrorists from West Asia; he has also attacked Mexico for not stopping the "onslaught". This, besides the usual sloganeering around "illegal immigration" that will purportedly steal American jobs and threaten the security of an otherwise peaceful American society. In truth, most members of this caravan, not by any means the first of its kind but certainly one of the largest in recent history, are either economic migrants seeking escape from grinding poverty in places like Honduras or fleeing persecution, trafficking or gang violence in the region. Unlike previous such caravans, whose members numbered in the hundreds and which dissipated along the way or upon reaching the border, this one has gathered momentum from sheer media attention and support from advocacy groups. It is not going away any time soon. This puts candidates from both the major parties in the U.S. in a tricky position. Democrats are wary of committing too much political currency to the caravan or undocumented migration as a phenomenon, given the prevailing mood in the country. And the Republican mainstream harbours concerns about the strident anti-immigrant rhetoric against the caravan, and what it stands for, emboldening far-right groups associated with racism and Islamophobia.

At the heart of the shrill debate on immigration is the weight of history. Americans can never get away from the fact that they are and will probably always be a nation of immigrants. As President, Barack Obama took a hard line on undocumented worker deportations, whose number soared through his two terms in office. But he sought to toe a moderate line when it came to delaying the deportation of childhood arrivals, and policed borders with a relatively light touch. Mr. Trump, contrarily, has made every effort to deliver on his radical campaign promise to ban Muslims from entering the U.S., although he faced numerous legal setbacks in that mission, and then made even immigration hawks squirm over his decision to separate undocumented child migrants from their families. Ultimately #CaravanaMigrante will seek to cross that line in the sand which Mr. Trump and his supporters hope will one day become a high wall. Liberal-progressive Americans who hope that these asylum-seekers will not be rudely rebuffed at that point will have to regroup and focus their energies on the November campaign and use any newfound power they win in Congress to chip away at the immigration agenda of the Trump machine.

An 'anti-national' regulation

Silencing of academics from criticising the government denies us a vital safeguard against despotism



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

The university in India is morphing under external pressure. How it will end up should be a matter of concern for all Indians and not just its denizens. This is so as universities are a source of new ideas for human advancement, hold a mirror to society, and act as a bulwark against authoritarianism. At least that is the idea behind setting them up at public expense.

For almost a decade now they have been subject to unaccountable governance by India's higher education regulator, the University Grants Commission. However used they may have become to the meddling, nothing could have prepared them for the most recent diktat. This one requires employees of publicly-funded universities to be subjected to the Central Civil Service (conduct) rules governing Central government employees. Now, Central government employees are prohibited from writing critically about the government and making joint representations. So the latest regulatory measure would be a blow to India's national prestige today and its health in the future. The silencing of academics is taken to be both a sign of backwardness and incompatible with democracy. But it is more than just how the world sees it, for stifling freedom reinforces the backwardness of a society.

The West and history

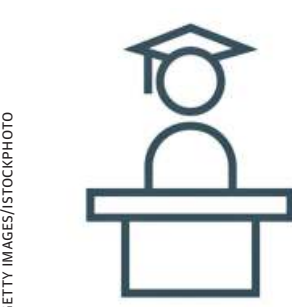
The argument that universities need adhere to a code of conduct is incontestable. All associations

need codes of conduct to prevent chaos. Further, taking democracy seriously would make it incumbent upon them to adopt codes in keeping with its norms. Thus universities need to follow codes maintaining respect for the autonomy of its members, ensuring fairness in the evaluation of performance of students and teachers, efficiency in the conduct of everyday business, and accountability in the wielding of power by the administrative authority.

However, there is no place in the university for a code that bars criticism of the government. When interpreted broadly in its application, such a regulation will prevent the achievement of the very goals imagined for the university. The idea that teachers exceed their brief when exercising their freedom of expression is dictatorial in its essence. Hitler and Stalin epitomised this mindset. Some German professors valorised Hitler's racial 'theories'. It led to the departure to the U.S. of some of Europe's best minds, including Albert Einstein. Stalin's politically-motivated views on genetics were championed by his 'scientist' Trofim Lysenko, setting Soviet science back. Russia's dissidents did not have the luxury of leaving for America, having to head eastward to Siberia, involuntarily of course. Germany has recovered from the efforts of Hitler while the territories of the former Soviet Union have been less fortunate, showing us some of the dangers from muzzling universities.

Intellectual life abroad

As India is a democracy, it would be of interest to see how the leading universities in other democracies regulate the intellectual life of their faculty – that is, if they do so at all. The Massachusetts Institute



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of Technology is ranked first in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranking of the world's universities for 2019. The term 'public intellectual' may have been coined to describe its former professor Noam Chomsky. A world authority in the field of linguistics, Prof. Chomsky has been a trenchant critic of the U.S. establishment for over 50 years. His early work in this genre was *At War with Asia*, which attacked American intervention in Southeast Asia at a time when the Vietnam war was raging and not yet widely unpopular. In a less provocative way, the Harvard economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, had incisively pointed out how the core of the American economy was constituted by 'the military-industrial complex' uncovering also its political power. Galbraith had gone on to have a happy career.

The university ranked first in the Times Higher Education (THE) ranking of universities in 2018 is Oxford. The very reference to it as the 'home of lost causes' reflects its character as a bastion of free thinking. An instance of it that would be of some interest to us in India is that when Gandhi was in England for the Round Table Conferences held during 1930-32 he was, on more than one occasion, the house guest of Alexander Lindsay, Master of Balliol College. At the time Gandhi was virtually at war with the British Empire, hav-

ing been tried for sedition. A quarter of a century later, at the height of the infamous Cold War, the same college elected as its head a historian who was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (it seems not even the communists can forego grand titles).

But perhaps Oxford's most defiant moment was to come, when its members, by a popular vote, turned down the recommendation of an honorary doctorate for Margaret Thatcher, while she was yet Prime Minister, on grounds of her hostility to higher education. This honour had till then been conferred on every Oxford-educated Prime Minister of Britain since the degree had come into being at the University. As a sign of its having acted on principle and not on pique, it may be noted that the only other instance of a similar recommendation being turned down was the one of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was denied the honour for his role in the massacre that accompanied the formation of Bangladesh. It may be too much to expect India's university teachers to display a similar confidence but these examples remind us of the meaning of a university. We invest in universities hoping that they would speak truth to power. If we take this freedom away by invoking irrelevant conduct rules, we deny ourselves a vital safeguard against despotism.

An insightful discourse

Lest we lapse into the defeatist telling that our own universities have always failed us, we may want to reflect on the discourse on India's economic policy some 50 years ago. Then, as Indira Gandhi lurched leftward, and much of the economics profession had not protested much, two economists at Delhi University had chosen to

go against the grain. Jagdish N. Bhagwati and Padma Desai wrote a stinging critique of planning in India. It is not as if their peers supported them strongly in their effort but it is unlikely that they had faced much hostility either, leave alone a menacing government. It was a time of intense debate about economic policy in India and these relatively young economists were able to express an anti-establishment view. It took two decades for it to find a place in India's economic policy. The launching of the economic reforms of 1991 was a 'Bhagwati-Desai moment' in that their central prescription, liberalisation, was adopted.

I find the authors' approach to the economy incomplete, and have argued in a national conference at the Central Sikkim University earlier this month that the subsequent quarter century in India does not validate their thesis, despite its salience in certain spaces. But the point is not whether the freedom these two young Indian economists had in the 1960s has yielded commensurate fruit. The point is that they had had the freedom to challenge the then dominant position on Indian economic policy, and that this did have an impact.

No government at the Centre since 1991 has questioned the rationale of the reforms advocated by them. And, incidentally, Jagdish Bhagwati is now an enthusiast of the economic policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi! Only time will tell us of the effect on the production of knowledge of the new conduct rules being contemplated for our public universities, but surely they are not in the national interest.

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The prince and the kingdom

Under Mohammed bin Salman, there has been an incremental erosion of Saudi Arabia's strategic power



STANLY JOHNY

In April 2018, while in the U.S., Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that he would "encourage the power of law" inside the Kingdom. "We would like to encourage freedom of speech as much as we can, so long as we don't give opportunity to extremism," he told *The Atlantic*. Six months later he himself faces questions about the horrific murder of a dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. This contradiction perhaps explains how Saudi Arabia is functioning under MBS, as he is widely known.

After moving to the front of the line to the throne, MBS has promoted himself as a social and economic reformer who could lead the Salafi kingdom to the 21st century. American journalist Thomas Friedman called MBS's reforms as Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, but the reality has been more complex. MBS is no radical prince. Rather, he appears to be reckless and power-hungry, having launched some reforms in the pro-

cess of centralising huge powers in his hands. Khashoggi's murder should be seen in this larger context.

The way Khashoggi was murdered has been a shock even to supporters of the Crown Prince. Riyadh maintains that it was a rogue operation that went bad – a feeble argument which even his ardent supporters would find hard to buy. In MBS's dictatorial world, it's unimaginable that a rogue intelligence officer would despatch a hit squad to Turkey – a country with which Saudi Arabia has a tense relationship – in order to confront a 59-year-old *Washington Post* journalist known to be critical of the Crown Prince. MBS can't easily shrug off responsibility for this incident. The larger question is: why should Saudi Arabia carry out such a horrific, reckless and risky operation in a foreign country? Leave aside the moral argument, given Saudi Arabia's appalling rights record. Didn't the perpetrators think of the diplomatic consequences? Perhaps they are used to getting away with disastrous policy decisions.

The purge

MBS, a monarchist to the core, had promised his people to loosen the grip of the conservatives on culture and liberalise the economy further to make it less dependent on oil. But this was the means to



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wards power and influence in the larger power struggle within the palace. MBS may have allowed women to drive and cinema halls to open, but he has also gone after every potential rival in the palace. In effect, a purge was carried out, last year, in the name of fighting corruption and to take control over all arms of the security establishment. While the important targets were confined to a luxury hotel for weeks, dozens of other critics and clerics were incarcerated in unknown places. In that move, MBS tasted absolute power. State institutions caved in. Even his father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, remained a mute spectator.

MBS's vision is of a stronger monarchy that uses fear at home and maintains an aggressive foreign policy. But most of his foreign policy decisions have been counterproductive. As Defence Minister, he has been the main architect of the war on Yemen, which has

yielded a humanitarian catastrophe. Yet, Saudi Arabia has never been held accountable for its actions. On the contrary, it has U.S. support.

The same recklessness was visible in Riyadh's blockade last year against neighbouring Qatar. Initially, it said Qatar was supporting terrorism in the region and made a host of demands for the blockade to be lifted, including shutting down the Al Jazeera television station and severing ties with Iran. Ties remain tense as Qatar has rejected the demands.

In November 2017, Saudi Arabia detained Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh, from where he announced his resignation. Weeks later, he returned to Lebanon and the office of the Prime Minister. This August, Saudi Arabia recalled its Ambassador to Canada and froze new trade and investment after Canada raised concerns over the arrests of women rights activists in the Kingdom.

A miscalculation

All these incidents have three things in common. One, the Saudis have not been perturbed about the results of their actions. In other words, they are not strategic. Two, MBS, despite promises of reforms, appears to be extremely intolerant of any criticism. The response is to be disproportionately

aggressive. Three, he continues to enjoy a sense of impunity, thanks to the solid support from the Trump administration. It is no wonder then that the Saudis miscalculated the consequences of the Khashoggi murder. They chose the wrong place and underestimated Turkish intelligence.

Saudi Arabia may still get away as the U.S. is unlikely to sacrifice its strategic relationship with the Kingdom. All sides may be waiting for global shock and anger to subside. But it would be hard to miss the big picture – of how the misadventures of the Crown Prince are hurting Saudi Arabia geopolitically. In Yemen, the Saudis have still not won over the Houthis rebels. When Qatar rejected Saudi demands, Riyadh did not have a plan B. At a time when Sunni Gulf monarchies are supposed to stand in unity against Iran, Saudi Arabia's hostility towards Qatar has only created new rifts within West Asia. It has lost the Syrian civil war and its military and monetary investments there have been in vain. Now, the Khashoggi case is a public relations disaster for a country which wants to be the leader of the Sunni world. There has been an incremental erosion of Saudi Arabia's strategic power under MBS and the Kingdom will have to deal with it soonest.

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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.

Green fire-crackers

The restrictions imposed by the Supreme Court to curb the indiscriminate bursting of ear-splitting and toxic fire-crackers during festivals such as Deepavali are fair, reasonable, and unexceptionable ("SC moves to make festivals less noisy", and "Neither a boom nor a bust for sales", both October 24). The judicial order has done a fine job of balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders such as fire-cracker manufacturers, revellers, the general public, and animals. It is unfortunate that Indians have failed to imbibe even a modicum of civic consciousness to recognise the deleterious consequences of noise and chemical pollution. The impact of the much needed judicial intervention in public interest will depend to a large extent on the willingness to voluntarily restrain habitually

boisterous and reckless festive behaviour.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ One would like to remind the government that one can see crackers damaging the environment not only during festivals such as Deepavali but also during political party meetings and functions such as marriages. The authorities should also look into such issues. Despite the guidelines on the time for "bursting crackers", these are hardly implemented. Voluntary organisations and environmental activists should step in and educate people on the hazards of toxic crackers just as the same stakeholders have succeeded in ensuring that more environment-friendly idols are used in festivities.

J.P. REDDY,
Nalgonda, Telangana

■ The use of firecrackers in many festivals results in great amounts of non-

biodegradable and dry waste such as paper waste, some plastics and cardboard, which all cause soil pollution. Studies have shown that chemical particles from firecrackers contaminate waterbodies as they enter the soil and contaminate the groundwater. These hazards too must be highlighted.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

Health care and costs

The fact is that health care for all is still a faraway concept in India (OpEd page, "The Wednesday Interview" - Indu Bhusan, October 24). Even as a pensioner, term premium towards health insurance to cover both hospitalisation and outpatient expenses – for me and my wife, for example – is an enormous amount. Claiming bills through a none-too-friendly mechanism is another woe we have had to face. The question is, why should we

follow the American health-care model which is devoid of humaneness? If your expenses go beyond coverage, you have to mobilise your own resources. Why don't we adapt the French or Canadian model wherein medicare of every citizen is taken care of by the government? A two-hour docu-film, *Sicko*, captures the inhumane side of insurance-based health care. Why not try and establish more hospitals? Affordable and comprehensive health care is a topic for debate.

N.S.R. PADMANABHAN,
Chennai

India-Pakistan talks

I would beg to differ with India's Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh in his statement in Srinagar, India, that talks with Pakistan can be resumed if terror ends ("Talks if terror ends: Rajnath", October 24). In effect, Mr. Rajnath says that India will not hold talks with

Pakistan but does not want to say so bluntly. In my view, talks must be held whether terror ends or does not end. "Ending terror" may be one

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a front-page report headlined "Why are media regulators soft with scribes, asks SC" (Oct. 23, 2018) the expansion of NBSA and IBF were wrongly given as *National Broadcasting Standards Authority* and *Indian Broadcasting Federation*. They should have been *News Broadcasting Standards Authority* and *Indian Broadcasting Foundation*.

The opening sentence of "How queer-friendly is your medic" (Metroplus Health, Oct. 22, 2018) described a transman as a woman who identifies as a man. It should have been assigned female at birth, but identifies as male.

Here is a clarification on the article "NCCR develops system to estimate, predict flooding within Chennai" (Oct. 21, 2018, S&T page), based on a communication from Subimal Ghosh (Associate Professor, IIT Bombay), who is the project leader for the Chennai flood warning system:

The project was funded by the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India. IIT Bombay led the project with IIT Madras, IRS (Anna University), IISc Bangalore, National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting, National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), India Meteorological Department, Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services and IITB as team members. The core operational system has six modules that were developed and validated by different participating institutes.

The integration of the six modules was performed by IITB and all the codes developed by IITB were transferred to NCCR. Such a system needs to be maintained on a long term basis, and NCCR took the responsibility. NCCR developed the web-GIS based interface C-FLOWS to disseminate the product to the stakeholders.

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