



## Rescuing IL&FS

Bailing it out is one thing, but how did the debt pile-up go unnoticed for so long?

The Centre's move to supersede the Board of Directors of the troubled Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services (IL&FS) has come not a day too soon. By explicitly stating its intent to "ensure that needed liquidity is arranged for IL&FS from the financial system", the Centre has sent out an unambiguous message to the markets that it will not allow the company to fail. In fact, a lot of the turbulence witnessed in the debt and stock markets last week could have been avoided had the government acted earlier. Any rescue plan for the beleaguered company obviously had to begin with replacing the existing management that was responsible for mismanaging its affairs. The annual general meeting of shareholders of IL&FS on September 29 had approved a rights issue of ₹4,500 crore and a debenture issue of ₹15,000 crore. But which lender or shareholder would commit to extending support to the company when it was defaulting regularly and the same set of people responsible for the mismanagement continued to be in charge? Against this backdrop, a change in management and the appointment of experienced people – such as Uday Kotak, who has rich experience in the finance sector; G.C. Chaturvedi, former bureaucrat and non-executive chairman of ICICI Bank; and G.N. Bajpai, former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India and the Life Insurance Corporation – should lend confidence to lenders and investors.

The company is listed as "systemically important" by the Reserve Bank of India, and with over ₹1,15,000 crore of assets and ₹91,000 crore of debt, it is too big to fail. The interlinkages between IL&FS and other financial sector entities such as banks, mutual funds and infrastructure players are too strong and the company would have taken them all down with it if it were allowed to fail. At this point, the problem appears to be one of liquidity and not solvency – it is a classic case of over-leveraging, and an asset-liability mismatch caused by funding projects of 20-25 years payback period with relatively short-term funds of 8-10 years. There is a felt need here for long-term finance sources for infrastructure projects. The LIC and some insurance companies are the only domestic sources and they too do not lend beyond 10 to 12 years. The Centre and the RBI should look at ways to deepen the debt markets where infrastructure players can borrow long-term. It also needs to be analysed how a company listed as "systemically important" managed to fly under the radar with misgovernance. The debt pile-up due to over-leveraging did not happen overnight. How did the RBI, as the regulator, miss the goings-on? Are the shareholders, which are well-known institutions, guilty of misplaced faith in the management, or were they negligent? Finding answers to these questions is as important as rescuing IL&FS.

## Up in the air

North India faces a big test this winter on measures to reduce burning of crop residue

The onset of the winter season has come to be associated with toxic atmospheric pollution in north India. This year will be a crucial test for a scheme piloted by the Union government to address the winter haze. While road dust and pollution from heavy vehicles are primarily responsible for the noxious pall that sets on Delhi and other urban centres, the burning of paddy stubble by farmers to clear their fields for the next crop is considered to be responsible for 20% of the smog. To address this, and under directions from the Supreme Court-constituted Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority, or EPCA, the Centre is partnering with Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to provide farmers with a range of mechanised implements to clear their fields of paddy crop residue to prepare for sowing wheat. There is a 50% subsidy to farmers, and a 75% waiver to cooperative societies, agencies that rent out equipment, farmers' interest groups or gram panchayats to buy such machines. States have got nearly ₹650 crore to help farmers buy subsidised equipment such as Happy Seeder, paddy straw choppers and Zero Till Drill. Punjab, which of the three States has the largest acreage under paddy, has a target of procuring 24,315 machines by October 15. A task force, headed by the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and comprising Environment Ministry officials and Chief Secretaries of these States, have been meeting since January to prepare for the winter.

Reports, however, suggest that many farmers, particularly those with land holdings of less than 5 acres, remain sceptical of the efficiency of these machines. Among their concerns is whether these machines will affect productivity. Many have told officials that they are worried there could be damage to the soil. Therefore, just making technological tools available may not be enough; there needs to be proactive engagement to both persuade and reassure farmers. Ironically, it was technology that contributed to the problem in the first place. The rising cost of labour nudged farmers to adopt mechanised equipment that, while efficient, left behind much longer stalks of paddy than what the traditional practice of removing them by hand did. The greater availability of machines and the zero-tolerance policy need to be seen as works in progress to derive lessons on how to refine the crop-clearing process in an ecologically sound manner. There must also be a sense of proportion, as 80% of the atmospheric pollution in Delhi in winter draws from sources other than burning stubble. Given Delhi's geography, low wind speeds and a spike in local pollution (from vehicles, biomass burning, firecrackers, etc.) raise the particulate matter count dramatically during winter. To be effective, the fight against pollution must necessarily be broad-based.

# The voice that is great within us

The crises in Indian democracy and in global politics send one immediately to consult Gandhi



ANANYA VAJPEYI

Truth, Satya, was the central axis of the Gandhian system of thought and practice. For Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, everything turned on Truth – satyagraha, swaraj, ahimsa, ashram, brahmacharya, yajna, charkha, khadi, and finally, moksha itself. In a fine introduction to a new critical edition of the Mahatma's *An Autobiography* or *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Tridip Suhrud, closest to Gandhi among all contemporary scholars, lays out the intricate web of ideas arranged around the axial principle of Truth: "Truth is not merely that which we are expected to speak and follow. It is that which alone is, it is that of which all things are made, it is that which subsists by its own power, which alone is eternal."

In a recent interview, Mr. Suhrud points out that Indians today continue to have "the need that he should always be available to us. When there is a crisis in our collective life, we expect Gandhi to provide an answer." Both of Mr. Suhrud's insights – that Truth is the key to Gandhi's philosophy, and that we rely on Gandhi even decades after his death and long after his supposed lapse into political irrelevance – are essentially correct. I started making a note of the crises in Indian democracy and in global politics that sent one immediately to consult Gandhi.

### Truth alone triumphs?

The ongoing controversy in the United States about the proposed appointment of Federal Judge

Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court as the nominee of the Republican Party, even as he stands accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford, in 1982, when they were both teenagers, hinges exactly on the truth of her testimony versus his defence. Only one can be true. As became clear in the Senate hearings on September 27, the palpable veracity of Professor Ford's account over Judge Kavanaugh's denial would likely still not change the Republican Party's nomination of him (the outcome of the proceedings, including an FBI investigation, is pending as this article goes to press).

Effectively, the U.S. appears on the verge of replacing Truth with perjury as an acceptable value, even in the apex court of the criminal-justice system, shaking the very bedrock of American constitutionalism. When Truth is rendered negotiable and dispensable, the balance of justice – in this case, between genders and between political parties – is disastrously upset. The scales tip wildly without any kind of mechanism to orient men and women or Democrats and Republicans back into an equitable relationship with one another within a shared political context that ought to be egalitarian and fair.

Like other democratic institutions in the Donald Trump presidency, the U.S. Supreme Court seems poised on the verge of destruction. Arguably Americans, too, could have recourse to Gandhi, though perhaps not in the way that we in India might. Mr. Suhrud describes how Gandhi strained to hear the "small, still voice" within himself, the voice belonging to one he called "antaryami", "atma" or "God" – an inner prompt, the self as a guide and a compass – so that he could keep moving ever closer to Truth.



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

It was this voice that he followed, sometimes to the bafflement of others who could not hear it. This was the voice that made him undertake life-threatening fasts his health wouldn't permit; withdraw from active politics at the most crucial junctures of India's anti-colonial struggle; leave factual errors and narrative inconsistencies in texts he wrote after readers had pointed out obvious mistakes; and, most difficult to understand, embark on life-long ordeals of a sexual nature, involving not just his own celibacy and asceticism, but also that of his wife Kasturba, his fellow Ashramites, and his sons and their families.

Even close and loyal associates like Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel were often confounded by Gandhi's actions and decisions; more sceptical and antagonistic peers like M.A. Jinnah and B.R. Ambedkar couldn't make sense of his motivations at all. In his monumental new history, *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World, 1914-1948*, Ramachandra Guha delves deep into these knotty episodes, where the voice of the Mahatma's interior conscience and the compulsions of nationalist politics pull in opposite directions, and no power on earth is able to steer Gandhi away from his self-charted path towards Truth.

Mr. Guha calls Gandhi's move to have his young grand-niece Manu sleep next to him, as he travelled through ravaged Hindu and Mus-

lim settlements in Bihar and Bengal during the height of communal violence on the eve of Partition, "the strangest experiment". No matter what the reactions of his colleagues, for Gandhi it was not strange, precisely because it was one of his 'experiments with truth' (in Gujarati, *satya na prayogo*).

### Home and the world

Of late, many musicians in south India have faced vicious attacks from rightwing Hindutva groups for singing hymns and psalms, thereby allegedly hijacking "Hindu" Carnatic music for "Christian" evangelical aims. This despite the fact that the violin, central to the Carnatic system in modern times, is a European gift to Indian music, and both Christian and Muslim religious lyrics and poetry have been a constitutive part of the Carnatic repertoire throughout the 20th century, if not before.

Gandhi made great use of the Bible in his prayers, teachings, writings and Ashram liturgies. He was often accused of being a crypto-Christian. However, he flatly refused to give preference to the Vedas over the Bible. Mr. Suhrud quotes from Vol. 31 of the *Collected Works*: "He is no *Sanatani* Hindu who is narrow, bigoted and considers evil to be good if it has the sanction of antiquity and is to be found supported in any Sanskrit book."

Outside India but not far from it, Indologist David Sulman has been reporting consistently on the brutal violence of hardline Zionist settlers as well as the Israeli army against unarmed Arab shepherds and villagers in the Jordan Valley. Mr. Guha delves into Gandhi's difficult correspondence with philosopher Martin Buber and the intellectual J.L. Magnes in 1938-1939, just before the Kristallnacht. Gandhi advised European Jews to relocate to Palestine and make it

their homeland only with the cooperation and goodwill of native Arabs, and not otherwise. This appalled even sympathetic Jews like Buber and Magnes, who had admired and supported Gandhi at the time of the Salt March in 1930, before the Nazi takeover of Germany.

How could Gandhi oppose the Zionist project, with Jews being sent to death camps in Hitler's murderous regime? But now the tables are turned, and a rightwing Israeli state under Benjamin Netanyahu seems hell-bent on exterminating the Palestinians. Gandhi's counter-intuitive Truth informs the civil disobedience, passive resistance and non-violent protest of both Arab and Jewish activists who oppose the continuing occupation and takeover of dwindling and defenceless Palestinian territories by bellicose Israeli forces.

The multilingual translator, editor and interpreter Suhrud (who works in all three of Gandhi's languages, Gujarati, English and Hindustani, and has earlier produced a critical edition of *Hind Swaraj*), and the historian and biographer Guha (who has already written two other massive books in the past decade, about Gandhi in the first phase of his life, and about postcolonial India, "after Gandhi"), have together provided ample materials this year – leading up to the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth in October 1869, and the 70th anniversary of his assassination in January 1948 – that we can continue to consult Gandhi on all manner of issues that may trouble our individual or collective conscience. It might have been "small" and "still" in his own perception, but even today, Gandhi's is the voice that is great within us.

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## At Sabarimala, walking the extra mile

With all women allowed into the temple, the infrastructure has to be carefully revamped



K. JAYAKUMAR

The path-breaking verdict of the Supreme Court striking down the exclusion of women in the 10-50 age group from the Sabarimala temple in Kerala might have put to rest the long-raging question of gender discrimination. But that is not the end of the story. Several aspects of the pilgrimage have rested on the premise that there are no women around. Now that the situation is set to change, considerable flexibility and sensitivity are required to bring about a radical transformation in the management of Sabarimala.

### Ground realities

Agencies of the Kerala government and the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) already have their hands full in restoring normalcy in the area that was affected by the flood-swollen Pampa river before the annual pilgrimage begins mid-November. With less than six weeks to go, the court ruling only introduces multi-dimensional consequences. The shrine is about 5

km inside the forest, and the difficult terrain is accessible only by foot. It offers basic facilities. However, accommodation at the Sannidhanam, where the shrine is located, is woefully inadequate. The dozen buildings and a few sparsely furnished cottages, that were built by sponsors nearly 50 years ago, offer accommodation to not more than 3,000 pilgrims at a time. Several thousand (male) pilgrims converging at the shrine normally huddle on sheets or mats spread in open spaces. Constructing more buildings now to accommodate more pilgrims, especially women, is not an available option, as land available with the TDB is quite limited. Now, to demand additional forest land for all this is tempting but not the most viable option in the long run.

### Notes from the master plan

The Sabarimala Master Plan, which is premised on the acceptance of Sabarimala as a forest shrine located in the Periyar tiger reserve, does not contemplate the construction of new blocks at the Sannidhanam. Rather it advocates the demolition of all unnecessary buildings. The principle is to limit accommodation at the Sannidhanam by developing a base camp at Nilakkal and encouraging satellite camping centres en route. From



the base camp, entry into Sabarimala is regulated. This way, pilgrims will have a smooth darshan and exit.

However, this is easier said than done. A growing number of pilgrims and the basic limitations thwart any such ideal scenario. In fact, the whole pilgrimage is regulated by the holy 18 steps that lead to the sanctuary. Steep and narrow, they permit only a maximum of 90 persons in a minute. Even if entry is permitted throughout the day, the total number cannot be more than 1.2 lakh pilgrims. As the temple is not kept open 24 hours, this will effectively limit the number to around 50,000 – a small percentage of the number of pilgrims reaching Sabarimala every day. Thus queues are unavoidable. Under the Master Plan, queue complexes have been built for a comfortable waiting period but these have not been integrated properly

with pilgrim management strategies. This has often led to a tedious wait, with little room for free movement – a factor that has often been the single largest cause of deaths. After the judicial verdict, there will have to be a considered decision about intermingling versus segregation of male and female pilgrims in these queues.

### Winds of change

Today, policing at Sabarimala is more in the nature of crowd control than pilgrim management. With larger numbers of women pilgrims expected now, having women police alone will not help. The style of policing has to change drastically. The law and order approach till now, primarily because of its all-male nature (unruly at times), is no substitute for professional policing. The change has to be from one of control and regulation to that of facilitation and safety.

A new accommodation policy needs to be framed, toilets segregated, women staff engaged and several gender-specific requirements planned and provided for. With meticulous planning and professional management, using existing infrastructure is possible. However, the existing managerial and administrative ethos is inadequate to meet these challeng-

es. Solutions can be found by admitting deficiencies and showing a willingness to embrace unfamiliar changes.

The TDB will be well within its rights to seek from the Supreme Court a preparatory time of a year before Sabarimala can be made gender-sensitive. The judgment has to be seen as an opportunity to change archaic practices and attitudes and usher in a new management culture. The TDB has to absorb the ramifications of the order and undertake planning with foresight. It will be a tragedy if this judgment becomes cause to undertake additional construction at the Sannidhanam. Large-scale modifications of existing buildings, a re-engineering of processes and much-needed training of staff in housekeeping, office management and counter management, etc. are the major tasks the TDB cannot shy away from. With the entry of women now a legally recognised right, its implementation has to be elegant and foolproof. Inadequate safeguards and preparations will only make a mockery of the verdict and validate the worst fears.

K. Jayakumar is a former Chief Secretary of Kerala and the first Chairman of the high power committee for implementing the Sabarimala Master Plan

## 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.

### Two Gandhis

It seems futile to fit Gandhiji's personality into metaphorical slots (OpEd page, "Gandhi: a fox or a hedgehog?" October 1). His beliefs, convictions and ideas spanned both the proximate and the universal. His 'hedgehoggy' grounding in morality was a compass that directed and determined the scope of his thoughts and actions and was informed by a fox-like understanding and appreciation of life's realities and contemporary values. He was one of the few leaders in history who saw no contradiction between the spiritual and the temporal. For him, using the right means to achieve the right ends was a non-negotiable principle. We can only look at him with awe and wonder mirroring what Albert Einstein said: "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever

in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

### Temple verdict

Predictably, the Supreme Court verdict on the Sabarimala case has evoked mixed reactions. It is a fact that a vast majority of women in Kerala who are devotees of Ayyappa will not be inclined to defy the age-old custom, and moreover, would have already endorsed/concurred with the dissenting voice of Justice Indu Malhotra. Implementation of the Supreme Court's verdict will be too onerous a task. Venturing into its implementation may lead to heated arguments and counter-arguments, resulting in bitter social strife and tension. One is sure that devotees who ardently believe in the age-old customs and traditions of the temple will

be pinning their hopes on an inevitable review petition.

C.G. KURIAKOSE,  
Kothamangalam, Kerala

While I respect the verdict, I express my deep disappointment that the decision has been taken without considering all relevant aspects. I agree with the lone dissenting judge and am of the opinion that the judiciary perhaps does not have the authority to overrule an age-old spiritual practice. There are bound to be petitions filed challenging different practices in different temples. One waits to see how the judiciary will direct normal and traditional functions. I am aware that there are a few temples where men are not allowed. What happens there now?

K.L. BHASKARAN,  
Coimbatore

Age-old practices need to be continued with due respect to religious and

cultural aspects. Issues such as security, the terrain and environment and facilities are of importance in a pilgrimage. No woman who understands these pressures will create fresh problems for herself and other pilgrims.

LAVANYA VIJAYAKUMAR,  
Chennai

If and when the judiciary 'assumes the authority to decide the essentiality of religious practices', one should expect a host of litigations on almost all practices in various temples. Whether the court is prepared for the eventuality and whether it can do justice is anybody's guess. A visit to Sabarimala is not like a visit to many other temples, Guruvayur for example. One makes a 'pilgrimage' to Sabarimala. There are certain strong beliefs on why it should be undertaken and how. Participants follow strict lifestyle, which include not only celibacy, but also food

habits, physical and mental cleanliness, and behaviour, all believed to be as advised by Ayyappa himself. The genuine reason for restrictions on women, though now interpreted as discrimination, is evident. On the whole, the petitions and the judgment are attempts to achieve something difficult to find.

P.R.V. RAJA,  
Pandalam, Kerala

### Ugly truth

The report on families from the Mehtar community in Rajasthan village still being forced to undertake manual scavenging is shocking (Page 1, 'Sunday Special', "Four years after Swachh: cleaning excreta for roti, September 30). It is preposterous that officials are under pressure to misrepresent facts on the ground in order to suit the government's propaganda. Both the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights as well as the SC/ST commissions should

conduct independent inquiries into the additional finding of discrimination faced by children from this community in school.

FIROZ AHMAD,  
New Delhi

### Despite the win

Team India's recent triumph in the Asia Cup was far from satisfactory, given the supremacy of the side, as the Men in Blue were stretched till the final delivery of the match by a resurgent Bangladesh (Editorial, "Cup of surprises", October 1). With the next ODI World Cup less than a year away, India is yet to solve its middle order blues, which is vital if India is to win the cup again. Given the crushing defeat that India suffered against England in the last Test series, our batsmen will be tested yet again in the friendly English seam bowling conditions.

R. SIVAKUMAR,  
Chennai

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