



Retrograde move

Punjab's proposal to provide for a life term for sacrilege is excessive and undesirable

The Punjab Cabinet's decision to amend the law to make acts of sacrilege against the holy books of major religions punishable with life imprisonment is retrograde and fraught with undesirable consequences. It may also set off a needless flurry of legislation in the rest of India to pander to different groups. The current proposal is a slightly expanded form of amendments passed by the Punjab Assembly in 2016, specifically aimed at curbing acts of sacrilege targeting the Guru Granth Sahib. The Centre had then returned the Bills, saying that protecting the holy book of only one religion would make it discriminatory and anti-secular. The proposal now cleared by the Cabinet aims to also cover the Bible, the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita. In specifics, the law will introduce a new section (Section 295-AA) in the Indian Penal Code after India's own 'blasphemy law', Section 295-A, which criminalises "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings". As prior permission of the Central or State government is needed to prosecute someone under such sections, a consequential amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure will be required. The earlier Bill was introduced by the Shiromani Akali Dal government following allegations of desecration of the holy book. Opposition to the Bill was then limited to the question whether holy books of other religions did not warrant the same protection. None seemed concerned about using religious sensitivities to score political points.

Is there any necessity for a fresh provision to protect religious books from damage, insult and sacrilege, when Section 295-A itself covers it? While upholding its constitutional validity in 1957, the Supreme Court had clarified that the section "punishes the aggravated form of insult to religion when it is perpetrated with the deliberate and malicious intention of outraging religious feelings". It is true that one limb of any blasphemy law, as Section 295-A can be termed, is aimed at preserving public order; and miscreants can fan disorder and tension by malicious acts such as damaging or desecrating a holy text. This can be invoked to jail someone for three years. Providing for a life term for the same offence in relation to religious texts would be grossly disproportionate. 'Sacrilege' itself is a vague term, and would render the section too broad. There is a history of misuse of laws aimed to protect religious sentiments, and those that seek to punish persons who promote enmity between different groups. They have a chilling effect on free speech, and give a handle to anyone claiming to be outraged to pursue vexatious prosecutions. There is a case to read down Section 295-A and Section 153-A of the IPC that give scope to prosecute people in the name of protecting the feelings of a section of society. There is no case whatsoever to enhance jail terms.

From Ithaca

As Greece celebrates its exit from bailout plans, its creditors must chip in

On Tuesday, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras chose Ithaca, home to Odysseus, the protagonist of Homer's epic, and the place to which he returns after a decade of being lost at sea, to announce the end of Greece's "modern-day Odyssey". The country has exited its third and final bailout since 2010, having borrowed €289 billion (\$330 billion) from a 'troika' of lenders, the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank, over a period of eight years in order to retrieve itself from the brink of financial collapse. In return, Greece undertook structural reforms, submitting itself to a controversial and painful austerity programme. The economy shrunk by a quarter, unemployment was at 28% (50% for those under 25 years of age), government spending was slashed as were salaries and pensions, hundreds of thousands of Greeks emigrated and a third of the country fell into poverty. Yet the path is far from clear and the road is long. Greece owes a staggering 180% of GDP in debt. Also, as part of the bailout conditions Greece will need to maintain a 3.5% primary surplus (a budget surplus prior to interest payments) until 2022 and then around 2% until 2060. The IMF has warned that such budget surpluses are rare. It is especially challenging for a country that has just emerged from a decade of economic strife and austerity and has an ageing population. There are concerns that they will constrain Greece's ability to grow and pay off its debt. While several of the required reforms were initiated during the bailout period, a lot remains to be done. This includes greater flexibility in the labour market, simplified licensing processes for companies and banking reforms to help clean up the non-performing assets on banks' balance sheets (individuals and companies that could not pay back loans); almost half of all outstanding loans of banks are now NPAs. The tax system will have to be reorganised so the tax base is widened and the bulk of the tax burden does not fall on the middle class.

Greece's Eurozone creditors agreed in June to a softening of debt repayment terms, including extended maturity periods, delayed interest payments and buffer funds to stabilise and ease the country's re-entry into financial markets. Yet, the IMF, based on its assessment of risks and bleaker longer-term growth projections that differ significantly from the European Commission's projections, has cautioned that Greece is at risk of getting stuck in a debt trap with onerous surplus conditions having to be maintained. These conditions imply restraints on government spending programmes that could, for instance, be used to stimulate growth. The country's creditors need to consider reducing the mountain of debt, so Greece stands a solid chance of emerging from what has been a modern-day odyssey.

Tilting at windmills

Donald Trump's trade war ignores the complexity of world supply chains and glosses over issues within U.S. industry



RAVI ARVIND PALAT

In U.S. President Donald Trump's simplistic world-view, slapping tariffs on the U.S.'s main trading partners – Canada, China, the European Union, and Mexico – will reduce U.S. trade deficits, bring back well-paying manufacturing jobs, and make America great again. This has such populist appeal – some 73% of Republican voters support the tariffs according to a PEW Research Center poll in July – that pro-trade Republicans in Congress have largely been silent on the issue.

Trade with China

Since China, for instance, exported some \$505 billion worth of goods to the U.S. last year but imported only \$130 billion, Mr. Trump assumes that China could not match the escalation in tariffs since it has a weaker hand. In April, he tweeted, "When you are already \$500 Billion DOWN, you can't lose."

This approach simply ignores the complexity of global supply chains. It also glosses over underlying problems with the U.S. industrial structure. These changes, rather than globalisation, are responsible for the stagnation of average U.S. wages in real terms for almost 40 years.

Non-Chinese owned companies account for almost 60% of Chinese exports to the U.S. Much of this consists of very specialised parts required by U.S. factories to make a variety of products ranging from

out-board motors for boats to computer routers. Since these non-Chinese companies cannot easily relocate their operations to other countries, the net result is that the burden of the tariffs will be felt by consumers in the U.S. The Trump administration's imposition of a 20% tax on washing machines in February led to its price going up in U.S. stores by 16.4%.

U.S. imports from China also include products which contain parts made in other countries. The Peterson Institute for International Economics estimates that 87% of computers and electronics, which constitute the largest share of Chinese exports to the U.S., includes parts and financing from other countries like South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. itself. So not only does this limit the negative impact on Chinese manufacturing practices, it also affects other countries. Even before Mr. Trump imposed a 10% tariff on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods in July, South Korea's exports of cars and consumer electronics to China fell substantially.

According to Professor Mary Lovely of Syracuse University, U.S. merchandise exports from China account for only 3% of Chinese manufacturing revenue. And the impact of tariffs on a potential reduction of these exports is further diminished by a 7% fall in the value of the Chinese currency. Beijing also has more than \$1 trillion in foreign currency reserves to cushion the brunt of a trade war with Washington.

The retaliatory tariffs China has imposed on U.S. products have also had a negative impact on German car producers in the U.S. where BMW has its largest factory in Spartanburg, South Carolina rather than in its home country. By



raising duties on soybeans and pork, it has struck at Mr. Trump's key constituencies of support in the U.S. midwest. Beijing's tariffs even hit Kentucky bourbon to increase pressure on the Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell who represents that State.

Similarly, the 25% tariff imposed on Mexican steel exports to the U.S. has had no impact on the Mexican automobile industry. The northern Mexican city of Matamoros produces 90% of all steering wheels used in U.S. vehicles and the city is also the largest producer of windshield wipers in North America. Instead, these tariffs by raising the cost of production compelled U.S. companies to reduce employment!

Internal worries

No tariff can overturn the cost advantage Mexico has over the U.S. in labour costs. The national minimum wage there is a little over \$4 a day while the average worker in the U.S. automobile sector earns \$18 an hour. In effect, as Gao Feng, a Chinese government spokesman, said, "The U.S. is opening fire on the world, and on itself too."

Second, the focus on trade crucially ignores changes in the U.S. corporate structure and industrial relations over the last 30 years which have led to the phenomenon of extreme inequalities in in-

come and wealth in the country. Ever since U.S. President Ronald Reagan launched an assault against the air traffic controllers' union in 1981, trade unions have been in retreat. In the years that followed, legislation and the courts have made it easier to fire union organisers, to use scabs to break strikes and for employers to campaign against unionisation of workers. As a result, less than 7% of private sector employees today are unionised, compared to a third in the 1950s.

Meanwhile, as Professor Robert Reich, Secretary of Labour under U.S. President Bill Clinton, notes, "anti-trust enforcement has gone into remission" and it has become easier for large companies to merge and form giant oligopolies. At its peak in the mid-1990s, there were 8,000 publicly traded firms in the U.S. stock market. In 2016, there were only 3,627.

Recently, Apple became the first company to have a \$1 trillion valuation and today just 30 companies reap half of all profits produced by all publicly traded companies. In 1975, the corresponding figure was 109. Half of all the gains registered by Standard & Poor's 500-stock index was delivered by just five companies: Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Netflix, and Alphabet, the parent company of Google.

The greater concentration of capital allows the giant oligopolies to raise prices which takes more of a worker's pay cheque. Fewer companies means workers have less choice of employers and so have less bargaining power. Antipoaching and mandatory arbitration arrangements further weaken labour's hand. Moreover, the focus on short-term profits leads firms to use their capital to buy back

shares, driving up share prices to benefit shareholders and top managers who have an increasing percentage of their compensation in company shares.

The Germany example

Take Germany as a contrast. Between 2002 and 2008, when the U.S. lost one-third of its manufacturing jobs, Germany lost a mere 11%. How could this be?

Since most German firms are privately owned, rather than buying back shares, they invested their capital in boosting their productivity. German firms include worker representatives on their corporate boards, invest in apprenticeship programmes, and in relevant research and development projects. During the recession of 2008-09, instead of dismissing employees outright, German firms reduced work hours and helped retrain workers. They thus have a deep pool of skilled labour.

When computers and numerically controlled machines are progressively inducted into production, constant upgrading of labour skills is vital to preserve well-paying jobs. Washington has made no systematic effort to upgrade skills. Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, constantly emphasises that his company has shifted production to China not because labour is cheaper there but because it has a much wider pool of skilled labour than does the U.S.

Mr. Trump has neither the vision nor the inclination to address these structural problems of the U.S. economy. Like Don Quixote, Don Trump is merely tilting at windmills.

Ravi Arvind Palat is professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton

Pulling back from the brink

Extraordinary changes are required to prevent a 'hothouse earth' pathway



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

Just when we thought the news on climate change could not get worse, a group of scientists have published a paper in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* deliberating on how the planet might move into a high temperature "hothouse earth" pathway from where there would be no return.

Earth's equilibrium

We are living in a precariously equilibrated earth where the temperature is just right for ecosystems to flourish. The Holocene, which began about 12,000 years ago, is the stable epoch during which *Homo sapiens* settled and developed agriculture and other technological innovations. These led to social and economic transformations, which have brought the world to this juncture. Human activity, supported by the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, led to an increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that are now causing global warming. This time period, the epoch when humans play a dominant role in shaping the earth systems, is being re-

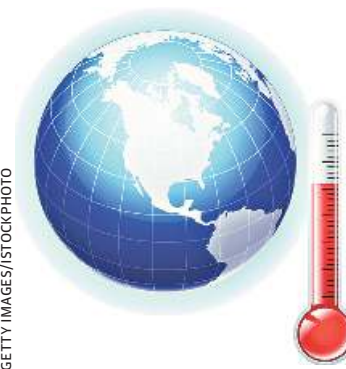
ferred to as the Anthropocene.

The delicate equilibrium of the biosphere/earth system has to do with processes that amplify or dampen warming. For instance, melting of Greenland ice increases open waters that absorb more sunlight and then increase warming and cause further melting. This is a positive feedback. With the increase in carbon dioxide (CO₂), chemical-weathering increases and removes CO₂ from the atmosphere over geological time – an example of a negative feedback. When positive feedbacks become stronger than the negative ones, the system may change abruptly and get pushed out of equilibrium. The earth and its systems have shifted between alternative states through long-term processes over its geological history. Now, it appears we are approaching some critical thresholds.

Tipping point

The paper identifies a threshold beyond which the earth's systems are no longer able to stabilise at intermediate rises in temperature. The authors point out that technology trends and decisions taken in the next decade or two will determine the path of the earth system over the next hundreds of thousands of years.

Many feedbacks respond either continuously or show abrupt change. A geophysical tipping point is a threshold beyond which



a system moves from one stable state to another. This study indicates that crossing a threshold (roughly determined to be about 2° Celsius warmer than pre-industrial times) would lead to the tumbling of a series of tipping points, like a set of dominoes. The destruction of the Amazon forest due to wildfires, the loss of permafrost with warming, the weakening of CO₂ absorption by the oceans or the melting of polar ice caps, among many other slow-moving catastrophes, are examples. The authors provide over a dozen examples of regional climate tipping points. If many tipping points tumble beyond 2°C (as suggested by the scientists), it would irrevocably disrupt ecosystems and societies and there would be runaway climate change, taking us to a hothouse earth.

The authors identify three clusters of tipping-linked cascades, out of human control, that could hap-

pen over time with rising temperatures.

Atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ (now over 400 ppm) are responsible for global average temperatures that are about a degree Celsius higher than at pre-industrial times. To find another time on earth with these levels, we need to go back some 3-4 million years to the mid-Pliocene, when sea levels were 10-22 m higher. The authors consider this stage to remain accessible only if there is a great deal of concerted effort in a remarkably short period.

In the mid-Miocene (about 15-17 million years ago), CO₂ concentrations were 300-500 ppm and sea levels were 10-60 m higher than today. This is where the earth is possibly headed with continuing GHG emissions. Even if the Paris Agreement of 2015 is implemented and we managed to keep warming below 2° C or even 1.5° C, the risk of a cascade of feedbacks that pushes the earth into the hothouse path may be unavoidable. In order to stabilise the earth, we would have to recognise and then carry out deliberate, sustained action to secure earth systems and also adapt to a warmer world. Some of these feedback effects, such as loss of Arctic ice, could be reversed over a few hundred years, but others such as Antarctic ice would take much longer.

Global emissions have not plateaued, reportedly having risen by

1.4% last year. According to the authors, deep cuts in GHG emissions, increasing carbon sinks, finding ways to remove CO₂ and perhaps even deflecting solar radiation to modify the energy balance would all be needed along with adapting to living in a warmer world.

Case for change

Technological solutions alone are insufficient. Fundamental shifts in social values and economic mores are essential. The changes required and ways to make them in an ethical manner are still being debated, with a lot of uncertainty on whether these can be accomplished.

Given history and the state of the biosphere, some scientists are not hopeful about avoiding the hothouse path. Others like James Hansen believe that it could still be avoided and the earth could stabilise at a rise below 2° C through infrastructural, societal and institutional transformations. Incremental changes along with increasing contributions from renewables and improvements in energy efficiencies would not be sufficient. There should instead be major changes in technological innovation, behaviour, values and governance. This is an unprecedented challenge for humanity.

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist who studies science, technology and policy

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.

Picking up the threads

All would agree that Kerala needs funds for its reconstruction. This is not to belittle the help extended to the State in the deployment of armed forces personnel, the waiver of customs duty and GST on relief materials and an additional allocation of 89,540 metric tonnes of rice and supply of relief materials. But the fact remains that the amount allotted could have been more generous. Reconstruction must get priority over the construction of giant statues and the waiver of loans to corporate behemoths. Anyway, the mammoth task ahead cannot be carried out and completed without the inflow of funds from within and outside India. Reports that the Central government may turn down the offer of aid from abroad is strange. One fails to

understand the logic. Reconstruction should not be subordinated to a false sense of national prestige.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Muruthancode, Tamil Nadu

■ One fails to understand why Kerala is to receive a negligible amount in proportion to the damage it has sustained when crores are to be pumped into a non-existent institution of excellence and unproductive projects such as statues of historical figures. There appears to be a lack of application of mind. It would also be a shame to turn down aid offered by concerned countries ("UAE offers ₹700 crore in aid to flood-ravaged Kerala", August 22).

A. JAINULABDEEN,
Chennai

■ The cartoon (OpEd page, August 22) conveyed what a thousand words cannot describe – the need for concerted efforts to raise a

fallen coconut tree, which depicts Kerala's state at the moment. Apart from the government mechanism that acted promptly, it is also the people who acted without any bias. Unity (as also shown in the cartoon) is the strength of Kerala.

JUJI PANICKER K.,
Chengannur, Kerala

The GP

It is very interesting to note that a parent has opened a discussion on the subject of general practitioners (MetroPlus Health supplement, 'Could It Be That' - "The paediatrician is the new GP", August 20). I agree with her about not finding a good GP and continuing with her existing paediatrician as a GP. And that it is her decision and right to choose health care options.

The GP is a dead or dying species. So one will not find a fresh young doctor choosing to become a GP as a career

choice. But there are some old GPs still practising medicine and doing good work. Why are GPs a vanishing species? There are many reasons. It is no longer lucrative, there are long hours of work, and it is expensive and cumbersome to start a new set-up (as it has licensing issues from at least six departments) as well as competition from one's own colleagues. This is unfortunate as a GP can bring down health costs. The 'GP practice' is being systematically eroded with everyone favouring hospital practice. As we are all taught in training that "rarer diseases are rarer", one need not be afraid of incompetency as far as a GP is concerned. Second, the column refers to a paediatrician who, I am afraid, does not seem to be following the general principles of clinical practice. Though there is no general rule of not seeing

patients beyond a certain age, one should at least follow ethical clinical practices.

Dr. D. MOHAN,
Bengaluru

'Shooting' star

Congratulations to teenager Saurabh Chaudhary on becoming the country's youngest-ever individual gold medalist at the Asian Games. His performance is astounding for someone so young. Jakarta is turning out to be a happy hunting

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the front-page report headlined "Rupee's recovery spurs stock market" (Aug. 21, 2018), there was a reference to Infosys being the first performer among the Sensex pack. Actually, Infosys share happened to be the worst performer among the Sensex pack that day shedding over 3% in its value.

A Business page story, "Maruti unveils new Ciaz" (Aug. 21, 2018), erroneously said that automatic transmission options were priced between ₹9.8 lakh and ₹0.97 lakh. It should have been ₹9.8 lakh and ₹10.97 lakh.

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