



Oldest friends

India needs to stand firm on its deep engagement with Russia in coming months

India-Russia summits have traditionally been short on time and ceremony and big on productivity. Russian President Vladimir Putin's 22-hour visit to Delhi last week was no exception. On Friday, the two countries announced a number of agreements, including a \$5.43 billion S-400 Triumf missile system deal, a space cooperation arrangement to put an Indian in space, and an action plan for a new nuclear plant. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Putin also addressed a business summit, in an attempt to diversify ties and increase bilateral trade, currently below \$10 billion. Much of the fresh momentum in bilateral engagement will come from the energy sector. Though the two sides didn't announce an agreement between ONGC Videsh and Gazprom as expected, several billions of dollars worth of investment and energy deals are in the pipeline. Significantly, the agreements discussed during Mr. Putin's visit have geopolitical implications. The signing of the S-400 air defence system deal, for instance, is of far greater consequence than its size. It denotes India's desire to deepen defence cooperation with Russia; also that it is prepared to do this despite U.S. warnings that the deal could attract sanctions. That this deal comes just a month after India signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) for better interoperability with the U.S. military is a sign that India will not be forced or even persuaded into putting all its eggs in one strategic basket.

New Delhi's assertion of "strategic autonomy" and desire for multipolarity will be seriously tested in the coming months. For one, it chose to sign the S-400 deal, but resisted concluding other major defence deals with Russia on helicopters, stealth frigates and assault rifles, which Moscow will no doubt push for. More defence deals with Russia will make it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to give India a waiver from sanctions under CAATSA, its legislation aimed at curtailing defence and energy dealings with Russia, Iran and North Korea. Washington has already reacted to the S-400 deal, making it clear that any waiver will not be on a "country" basis, but on a "transaction-by-transaction" basis. In any case, accepting a waiver will implicitly commit India to reducing its intake of Russian military hardware. Both on CAATSA and on the U.S.'s proposed sanctions on Iran that go into force on November 4, India will need to make some tough decisions. It is one thing to reinforce long-standing and close friendships as Mr. Modi did during his annual summit with the Russian President this month, and with the Iranian President earlier this year, or with the U.S. President last year – the situation can be much more complex when friends expect you to choose between them.

Too easily offended

The Konark temple case shows some penal provisions are handy tools of harassment

The Supreme Court's observations, while denying bail to defence analyst Abhijit Iyer-Mitra, to the effect that he incited religious feelings in a video posted on social media, were out of place in what was a bail hearing. Such endorsement by the Court, which observed that Mr. Iyer-Mitra would be "safer in jail", in response to his counsel's plea that he feared for his life, was less than appropriate. Sending someone to the "safety" of a prison is no answer to questions raised by a prosecution under stringent laws that involve restrictions on free speech on grounds of maintaining public order and tranquillity. In a video post against the backdrop of the Konark temple, Mr. Iyer-Mitra had made some comments that were clearly satirical in nature. While it is entirely possible that his remarks offended some people, it is laughable to assume his intent was to sow discord or create religious enmity. The State police contended otherwise, charging him with outraging or wounding religious feelings and, quite mystifyingly, alleging that his remarks were directed against the "Odia people". On cue, the Odisha Assembly is now probing whether his satirical jokes constitute a breach of privilege of the House. Mr. Iyer-Mitra's arrest in New Delhi by a police team from Odisha for his comments and some other tweets is another instance of the rampant misuse of two sections of the Indian Penal Code – 153A and 295A – on the charges of promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion. However, a magistrate denied the police permission to take him to Odisha on transit remand, and instead granted him limited bail until September 28 on the condition that he join the investigation by that date. His petition for regular bail has now been rejected by the Supreme Court.

The entire episode flags a larger concern: provisions that ought to be invoked only under serious circumstances – a grave threat to public order and tranquillity, for instance, or, in the case of Section 295A, when a purported insult to religion has been done with malicious and deliberate intent – are being misused in a routine manner. When the onus is on the prosecution to show there was criminal intent either to provoke disharmony or deliberately offend religious sensibilities, it is simply wrong to invoke these sections for everything that someone finds objectionable. Irreverence or even bad taste is not a crime. A mere response suffices; the use of prosecution and arrest are unjustifiable. Such an attitude will only make for an intolerant society consisting of easily offended individuals. In a mature democracy, the casual resort to criminal prosecution for perceived insults to either a religion or a class of society ought to be actively discouraged. In fact, the case must serve as yet another prompt to begin the process of reading down Sections 153A and 295A.

Misogyny in a modern idiom

The attacks on girls and women every day are symptomatic of a deep malaise



KRISHNA KUMAR

Where curriculum designers fear to tread, film directors take relaxed, bold strides. Few will consider ghosts and witchcraft as suitable topics for a textbook. Killing of women on the suspicion that they are practising witchcraft occasionally figures in the news. Such episodes may be on the decline, but witches and ghosts continue to shape the deeper layers of the collective social mind.

The power of 'Stree'

The idea that women have secret powers which they are prone to using for evil purposes, including revenge, is common enough to make the recent film *Stree* successful at the box office. It deals with witchcraft in a comic mode without trivialising it. It frames witchcraft in a modern idiom, using it to throw light on gender disparity and injustice. It is a remarkable achievement in that it entertains without demeaning the subject as a sign of backwardness.

The core theme of *Stree* is the fear of women. Several men participate in the story, and they all come across as being scared of a woman who happens to be a ghost. This rare portrayal of male behaviour points towards the roots of misogyny. When secretly held fear is mixed with desire, it results in loathing. Fantasy of sexual conquest by brute force is of-



FILE PHOTO/ANIL KUMAR

ten a logical product of this mixture of emotions.

A new social reality

Stree has come at a time when a sick ethos pervades many parts of India. This ethos is marked by the everydayness of rape. Over five years ago, after the so-named 'Nirbhaya' episode, criminal laws and procedures were revised, raising the hope of containing crimes against girls and women. That hope has receded even as rape has become routinised. Every morning, numerous incidents of rape are reported in newspapers. Many of these incidents involve young men getting together to rape a woman. The term 'gang-rape' is used for such incidents, the word 'gang' suggesting an organised, well-planned crime. This usage conceals the spontaneity and speed with which those who commit the crime came together when they spot a potential victim.

The idea of noticing an opportunity to rape together reflects an awful reality. The police can hardly cope with this kind of commonplace social reality. The new commonplace status of rape, including collective rape, as a crime that can

occur anywhere, any time, is what distinguishes the current cultural landscape. Conquest over a woman forms the central theme of this cultural condition. Even if the victim is a child, the sense of conquest over her remains relevant to understanding the new male perspective.

Stree acquires its unique relevance from this larger, sinister milieu. It wraps the roots of misogyny in a ghost story. The story is located in Chanderi, the little town of Madhya Pradesh famous for its silk saris. A female ghost visits the population annually and abducts men, leaving their clothes behind. Inscriptions on doors asking the ghost to come 'tomorrow' and wearing women's dress are among the tricks that the menfolk try for protection from the ghost. They are ultimately rescued when a young ladies' tailor agrees to serve as a medium to confront the ghost. The woman who persuades and prepares him has studied witchcraft and aspires to gain the powers of the ghost.

Rich narrative

The narrative is rich with layers of meaning and possibilities of multi-

ple interpretations. Its theme and message remain paradoxical but the intent is clear: to generate a discourse around the fear of women. That indeed is the heart of misogyny. The psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, had indicated as much in his classic on childhood in India, *The Inner World*.

The core analysis Mr. Kakar offers in this book focusses on the upbringing of the male child. Psychoanalytic insight combined with an examination of myths and folklore demonstrates how sons end up, by the time they become adults, feeling hopelessly dependent on their mother who, at a deep layer locked in early childhood memories, frightens them. The son's early experience also impairs his ability to relate to women as equals. Perceptions of women as a danger nourish the mythology of celibacy at one level and cultivate a general distrust of women at another.

Although *Stree* does not directly deal with violence against women, it gives plenty of clues about its origins. The language and lore of the world of young men come across as entertainment, but it also reveals how distant their constructions are from real girls and women. Belief in women's evil powers drives the story to a satisfying end where the townsmen put up a statue with the inscription, 'Protect us, O Stree'. Underneath this message lies the fear that the female ghost might continue if greater respect is not shown to women.

Disconnect in the classroom

Matters that this film manages to talk about cannot be imagined in a

classroom at school or college. Educational institutions usually deal with gender issues in a text-book mode, preaching equality and mythologising modernity. In the typical ethos of a social science classroom, no engagement is possible with male attitudes towards women either. Nor can the terror internalised by girls at an early age be acknowledged and discussed. Lessons on gender disparity mention prejudices and stereotypes, but they seldom include the ones embedded in religious practices and festive rituals.

After a typical gender sensitivity workshop, everyone feels content and pleased. No attempt is made to examine why aggression and violence against women are increasing despite the growth of education.

While education has improved the distribution of eligibility and job opportunities for women, it has made little impact on male aggression and self-righteousness. The potential that education has for improving male sanity has been severely hampered by the unprecedented and easy access provided by digital devices to pornography, including child pornography. The situation is quite dire. A helpline was set up by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) as a facility for children who have been abused. It was inundated by callers looking for pornography. Apparently, the state apparatus has no immediate answers to offer for a social phenomenon growing at a wild pace.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of NCERT

Shifting the burden of shame

In its choice for Peace Prize this year, the Nobel Committee has empowered the narrative against sexual crimes



VEENA VENUGOPAL

In conferring the 2018 Peace prize, jointly, to Nadia Murad, a former sex slave of the Islamic State (IS), and Denis Mukwege, a Congolese gynaecological surgeon who helps raped war survivors, the Nobel Committee has placed itself at the centre of the raging #MeToo movement by calling for a change in the narrative to shift the burden of shame away from survivors of sexual crimes.

Dr. Mukwege, who has been treating patients as young as 2 and as old as 70 who have been brutalised by soldiers and guerrillas, has been an outspoken activist calling for an end to using women's bodies as weapons in war. But in baring her face to the world, Ms. Murad has made it impossible to look away from the suffering of sexual survivors in conflicts. Ms. Murad, now 25, was barely out of her teens when she, along with some 3,000 other women of the minority Yazidi community in Iraq, were taken away as sex slaves by the IS.

In her book, *The Last Girl*, Ms. Murad describes not just the abject cruelty and complete violation that the IS inflicted on their sex slaves but also the efficient bureaucracy that was set up in order to reward their fighters with access to women's bodies as well as prevent the escape of the slaves.

Murad's story

Until the IS arrived, Ms. Murad lived in Kocho, a village of Yazidis, off the valley of the Sinjar mountains, the centre of the community. Yazidism is an ancient monotheistic religion, with an oral history that predates Islam. There are only about a million Yazidis now, with conversion into the religion not accepted. Yazidis have been persecuted several times in history, including by the Ottomans and Saddam Hussein's Baathists. When the IS took control over Mosul and established its Caliphate, it declared Yazidis, who do not have a holy book, to be Kuffar, non-believers, making it legal to murder Yazidi men who refused to convert to Islam and enslave the women. The IS has elaborate written protocols on the buying, selling and care of these slaves (*sabaya*), including complex valuation models such as what made a girl more or less valuable, which fighters



AP/FREDERICK LORIN

would get a *sabiya* as an incentive and who would have to pay.

Ms. Murad describes her ordeal without flinching – the brutality, the gang rapes as punishments for trying to escape, and sometimes even the bewildering romance that older men tried to infuse into their relationships with young slaves, dressing them up and posing for photographs as though with a partner or spouse. Ms. Murad was moved from house to house, city to city, as she was bought and sold several times, her value decreasing with each transaction. At one point, she was even held in a room at a check point, available to any IS fighter who happened to pass by.

She managed to escape, eventually, through a combination of grit and luck, and was ultimately reunited with the parts of her family that remained. In what has been described as a genocide, the

men in the village were shot dead minutes before young women were taken as slaves and the older women killed. Ms. Murad lost her mother and several siblings. However, returning women weren't usually received very well. Virginity is highly valued in the community and the shame of the crimes done to them cling to the survivors.

It is here that Ms. Murad truly found her courage. While in the refugee camp, and more vociferously after she arrived in Germany, she decided to speak out about the crime, to flash a light on the violence that was inflicted on them, instead of internalising the shame for things that were no fault of survivors. She recounted her experiences in great detail all the way up to the United Nations and in doing so, to a large extent, helped lift the cloak of shame from the bodies of the survivors and lay it instead on the shoulders of the perpetrators.

Another time and account

Putting her face to the story makes Ms. Murad's experiences real and indisputable. In another account of wartime rapes, a journalist wrote an anonymous account of the eight weeks, from April to June 1945, when Russian soldiers took

control of Berlin. The book, called *A Woman in Berlin*, recounts, in a rather calm manner, the terror of anticipating that Russian soldiers would violate women in their own homes, and the rather practical way in which the women dealt with life when that fear became a reality. They bargained with the soldiers for rations, cigarettes and even protection from other soldiers. The book caused outrage when it was published as having "besmirched the honour of German women", and immediate efforts focussed on uncovering the identity of the author or proving it to be a false account.

Ms. Murad leaves no one with that choice. In videos of her talks, she stands diminutive, yet firm, her long dark hair framing her fragile face. It is impossible to deny the truth of her experience. It cannot be easy for her. Ms. Murad asserts that each time she recounts her story, she has to relive it. But in hearing her, believing her, and now in honouring her, the message that goes to the survivors of sexual violence everywhere is certainly that while they have to deal with the burden of their memory, they can at least shed the weight of its shame.

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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.

Recalibrating ties

India has shown the courage of conviction to sign the S-400 'Triumf' missile system deal with Russia ("India, Russia sign S-400 missile deal after summit", October 6). That neither Russian President Vladimir Putin nor Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to it in their press statements should not be cause for worry. After all, it is a done deal. India also need not bother much about possible American sanctions. The deal also underscores the fact that the India-Russia relationship has stood the test of time.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram
C.G. KURIAKOSE, Kothamangalam, Kerala

Beaten down

Deeply embedded patriarchy, virulent misogyny, and a skewed sex ratio make up the deadly cocktail of Haryana's women-unfriendly culture ('Ground Zero' page, "As they rise, men push them back", October 6). Historically, patriarchy has struck back whenever its authority and unilateral social mores were

challenged by women's empowerment. However, progressive forces have always triumphed over the regressive status quoists with the help of the larger society.

In the case of Haryana, the society there seems chronologically stuck in the past in terms of values and mindsets. A push-back against gender discrimination and sexual violence can only happen if the media relentlessly moulds public opinion and ensures that eradicating these maladies becomes a win-or-lose proposition during elections.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram

I could feel the pain and trauma of the father. That the ghastly crime against his little princess was perpetrated by one of his students is sure to have pierced his heart. The rise in cases of sexual assault against women is cause for concern. I suspect smartphones and easy availability of pornography are key reasons. The decision by the Nobel Committee to honour Denis Mukwege and

Nadia Murad with the peace prize by acknowledging their fight against sexual assault is significant.

T. ANAND RAO, Chennai

Haryana is a State where no matter how much a boy is educated or employed in a good job, the attitude is largely one that regards girls and women to be subservient with no say in any matter. There is no doubt that girls are being educated, but they rarely have a voice when it comes to an important issue even in their family. What is the use of a father teaching his son to respect women when he himself disrespects his wife?

NISHA YADAV, Rewari, Haryana

Missing idols

The case of alleged idol thefts being uncovered in Tamil Nadu, with its epicentre in Chennai, is also a sad reflection on the state of temples and the neglect of culture, which is the USP of Tamil Nadu. In virtually abandoning its stunning temples and allowing the unbridled looting of one-of-a-kind statues and artefacts,

Tamil Nadu is fast losing a splendid opportunity to reap the benefits of its great culture. Well-maintained and secure temples, with light and sound shows using the best technological and scientific tools, could have ensured a steady stream of tourism revenue for the State. Those who govern the State should realise that there are countries in West Asia that are now pouring in several millions of dollars to create large artificial attractions in order to generate new cash streams once all the oil revenue dries up. When Tamil Nadu has abundant cultural resources, why let the plunder continue and deny future generations a great way to learn about their wonderful culture?

JENNIFER DURAININGAM, London

Ghost nets kill

The 'Sunday Special' report, "Picking out silent ghosts in the deep" (October 7), is an eye-opener to the grave and complex threat that discarded fishing nets pose to the marine ecosystem. It defies reason why the government has not yet prepared a national ghost

nets management policy. AYYASERI RAVEENDRANATH, Aranmula, Kerala

Bhura's women

The article, "It takes a village" ('Magazine' section, October 7), clearly shows that progress in India is possible in the hands of empowered and educated women. One is reminded of Gandhiji's words, "If non-violence is the law of our being, then the future is with women."

TALA B. RAGUNATH, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

VC scam

Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit's

statement on alleged corruption in the appointment of vice-chancellors of universities is not such a rude shock but what is disturbing is that when he is so sure of the crime, why has he not initiated any action against those involved? He would not have made such a grave allegation without having solid proof to substantiate his claim. Will he also call for an inquiry against his predecessors who were the final authority in the selection of VCs?

THARCUS S. FERNANDO, Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: In a Weekend column titled "In the theatre of men's lives, women are the props" (Oct. 6, 2018), the word *incredible* should come in place of *incredulous* in the following sentence: "That the 'props' are now complaining is what most men find really *incredulous*."

In the "Data Point" graphic (Op-Ed page, Oct. 5, 2018), UPI has been wrongly expanded as *United Payments Interface*. It should have been *Unified Payments Interface*.

The report headlined "Mutated virus may have killed Gujarat lions" (Oct. 5, 2018) erroneously said the Canine Distemper Virus abounds in local tiger populations in Gujarat. It should have been lion populations.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com