



## Untenable

M.J. Akbar should have resigned.  
Or else, asked to go

The Minister of State for External Affairs, M.J. Akbar, should have done the only right thing in the circumstances – resign. This was the only course to limit the already significant damage to the high office he holds. His legacy in Indian journalism would also have been better served had he quit first and attempted to defend himself legally or otherwise later. Unfortunately, he chose not to. Upon his return to Delhi from an overseas official trip on Sunday, he went on the offensive by dismissing the long string of charges of sexual harassment made against him by former women colleagues as a tissue of lies. He chose to spin an unconvincing web of conspiracy around the sudden spate of the #MeToo disclosures over the last week. Mr. Akbar's basic theme: with elections round the corner, these charges are motivated. There is a second, more specific line in his attempted defence – one that suggests that the gravamen of the charges is vague and unsubstantiated. While it is true that not every one of the dozen or so women have claimed they were physically assaulted, the overall picture they have painted is that of a systematic pattern of sexual harassment. Their stories range from suggestiveness and innuendo to outright molestation. Together they make for sad and worrying reading, but at least a couple highlight how far he seemed willing to go. Ghazala Wahab, now executive editor at *FORCE* magazine, has written of repeated molestation at his hands in the mid-1990s when he was her editor at *Asian Age*. Majlie de Puy Kamp, now a New York-based reporter, has spoken of how a decade later he forcibly kissed her, when she was 18 and interning with him.

Mr. Akbar's conspiracy theory that the #MeToo charges have settled upon him because elections are now looming is weak and totally unconvincing. He has no political heft and a conspiracy to tarnish him and secure his speedy exit from the Narendra Modi government would have left it none the weaker. Now that he has decided to dig his heels in, the focus cannot but shift to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Why wasn't his resignation demanded and secured on his return to the Capital? Surely, the Prime Minister had more than enough time to sift through the charges, take stock of Mr. Akbar's alleged misdemeanours and conclude whether he should continue in the Cabinet. By failing to immediately force him to step down, Mr. Modi has sent an unfortunate message about his government's attitude to harassment and the protection of women in workplaces. He has appeared as if he is standing behind Mr. Akbar and will be perceived by many as having failed India's women.

## Resisting resistance

India needs to strengthen and implement regulations on antibiotic misuse

Even as antibiotics lose their efficacy against deadly infectious diseases worldwide, it seems to be business as usual for governments, private corporations and individuals who have the power to stall a post-antibiotic apocalypse. In a recent investigation, it was found that the world's largest veterinary drug-maker, Zoetis, was selling antibiotics as growth promoters to poultry farmers in India, even though it had stopped the practice in the U.S. India is yet to regulate antibiotic use in poultry, while the U.S. banned the use of antibiotics as growth-promoters in early 2017. So, technically, the drug-maker was doing nothing illegal and complying with local regulations in both countries. But such reasoning is self-defeating, because antibiotic-resistance does not respect political boundaries. Of course, the country that stands to lose the most from antibiotic resistance is India, given that its burden of infectious disease is among the world's highest. According to a 2016 *PLOS Medicine* paper, 416 of every 100,000 Indians die of infectious diseases each year. This is more than twice the U.S.'s crude infectious-disease mortality-rate in the 1940s, when antibiotics were first used there. If these miracle drugs stop working, no one will be hit harder than India.

This is why the country's progress towards a tighter regulatory regime must pick up pace. Consider the three major sources of resistance: overuse of antibiotics by human beings; overuse in the veterinary sector; and environmental antibiotic contamination due to pharmaceutical and hospital discharge. To tackle the first source, India classified important antibiotics under Schedule H1 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules 1945, so that they couldn't be sold without prescriptions. Still, Schedule H1 drugs are freely available in pharmacies, with state drug-controllers unable to enforce the law widely. As far as veterinary use goes, India's 2017 National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance did talk about restricting antibiotic use as growth promoters. Sadly, no progress has been made on this front yet, allowing companies to sell last-resort drugs to farmers over the counter. The 2017 document also spoke about regulating antibiotics levels in discharge from pharmaceutical firms. For instance, Hyderabad's pharmaceutical industry has been pumping massive amounts of antibiotics into local lakes, rivers and sewers. This has led to an explosion in resistance genes in these waterbodies. Still, India is yet to introduce standards for antibiotics in waste water, which means antibiotic discharge in sewage is not even being monitored regularly. As the country takes its time to formulate regulations, the toll from antibiotic-misuse is growing at an alarming rate. According to a 2013 estimate, around 58,000 newborns die in India each year due to sepsis from resistant bacteria. When these numbers mount, India will have no one to blame but itself.

# Journalism after #MeToo

The Indian newsroom must be made safe and equal for women – or it will lose all credibility



MEERA SRINIVASAN &  
ANANTH KRISHNAN

Over the last week, Indian journalism has finally been forced to confront what has long been its dirty secret. Going by the numerous agonising accounts of women journalists, about some male colleagues and editors abusing power and crossing the line, it appears that sexual harassment is no media outlet's exclusive story.

With such prevalence, testified credibly by many of our own, the need for introspection and corrective action is urgent.

### Open secrets

While the rest of the country may have been left shocked by the disturbing allegations, from at least 10 women, aimed at veteran journalist – and now Minister of State for External Affairs – M.J. Akbar, not a single reporter, in all likelihood, batted an eyelid in newsrooms across the country. On Sunday, Mr. Akbar, who returned from a week-long trip to Africa, denied the allegations terming them “baseless” and said he would take legal action against accusers. A week after a flurry of allegations against him began emerging, the government and the Ministry of External Affairs continue to maintain deplorable silence, casting doubt on the likelihood of any process of inquiry.

For the brave women outing their past and present predator-colleagues or bosses, it cannot be easy. The incidents are bound to revive disturbing memories of being assaulted by power and toxic masculinity. Among those who have come forward, former *Asian*

Age journalist Ghazala Wahab shared a distressing account from 1997, of being allegedly harassed by Mr. Akbar when she worked for him. Just as troubling was Ms. Wahab's recollection of how her superiors, including senior women colleagues at the paper, responded to her account, saying it was “entirely her call”. As Ms. Wahab wrote, “I was alone, confused, helpless and extremely frightened.”

Nothing can be more disillusioning than this for a young journalist beginning her career with hope and idealism – and it should worry us that in 2018, across newsrooms, responses to such cases may not be very different. Which is why many women ultimately choose to leave their jobs, or seek employment elsewhere, when they confront inappropriate behaviour from their colleagues.

The Editors Guild of India, in a statement, said: “The newsroom in our profession is a relatively informal, free-spirited and hallowed space. It must be protected.” Many of us, journalists, too like to think of – and perhaps even romanticise – our workplaces as being sacred, liberal spaces unbound by constraints. Sadly, what these cases have shown is the exact opposite.

### Understand the moment

Women journalists coming forward to put out their stories – when they have nothing to gain, and much to lose – has now triggered a long overdue self-reflection in Indian newsrooms. However, this is only the start. Naming and shaming perpetrators could be cathartic for the victims, but may not, by itself, lead to any radical change in the outmoded ways that many newsrooms still function.

Indian news organisations are by no means unique in being slow to crack down on inappropriate – in some instances, criminal – be-



haviour in their workplaces that still remain hostile for women. Yet newsrooms are faced with particular challenges.

Where do news organisations go from here? An obvious starting point is to implement, in earnest, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which superseded the earlier 1997 Vishakhia guidelines. Further, we need to broaden our reading of the “workplace”, to include the field when a reporter travels with her colleague on assignment, or even a co-worker's vehicle. Organisations must provide safe transport for women on late shifts. As the Network of Women in Media, India said in its statement, editors must ensure that stories are not privileged over the safety of their staff.

Second, there is an urgent need for effective internal complaint committees (ICCs). All journalists must be made aware of the ICC and the option to file a complaint there. While setting up these committees, organisations must be mindful of internal power structures that often load the dice in favour of those wielding more power.

The key word, however, is “effective”. Workplaces that foster environments that are hostile to women who speak up render an ICC meaningless. Very often, those who complain about their discomfort are readily branded “trouble-

# Helping the invisible hands of agriculture

With the 'feminisation of agriculture' picking up pace, the challenges women farmers face can no longer be ignored



SEEMA BATHLA & RAVI KIRAN

October 15 is observed, respectively, as International Day of Rural Women by the United Nations, and National Women's Farmer's Day (Rashtriya Mahila Kisan Diwas) in India. In 2016, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare decided to take the lead in celebrating the event, duly recognising the multidimensional role of women at every stage in agriculture – from sowing to planting, drainage, irrigation, fertilizer, plant protection, harvesting, weeding, and storage.

This year, the Ministry has proposed deliberations to discuss the challenges that women farmers face in crop cultivation, animal husbandry, dairying and fisheries. The aim is to work towards an action plan using better access to credit, skill development and entrepreneurial opportunities.

### Data and reality

Yet, paying lip service to them is not going to alleviate their drudgery and hardships in the fields. According to Oxfam India, women are responsible for about 60-80% of food and 90% of dairy production, respectively. The work by women farmers, in crop cultivation, livestock management or at home, often goes unnoticed. At-

tempts by the government to impart them training in poultry, agriculture and rural handicrafts is trivial given their large numbers. In order to sustain women's interest in farming and also their uplift, there must be a vision backed by an appropriate policy and doable action plans.

The Agriculture Census (2010-11) shows that out of an estimated 118.7 million cultivators, 30.3% were females. Similarly, out of an estimated 144.3 million agricultural labourers, 42.6% were females. In terms of ownership of operational holdings, the latest Agriculture Census (2015-16) is startling. Out of a total 146 million operational holdings, the percentage share of female operational holders is 13.87% (20.25 million), a nearly one percentage increase over five years. While the “feminisation of agriculture” is taking place at a fast pace, the government has yet to gear up to address the challenges that women farmers and labourers face.

### Issue of land ownership

The biggest challenge is the powerlessness of women in terms of claiming ownership of the land they have been cultivating. In Census 2015, almost 86% of women farmers are devoid of this property right in land perhaps on account of the patriarchal set up in our society. Notably, a lack of ownership of land does not allow women farmers to approach banks for institutional loans as banks usually consider land as collateral. Research worldwide shows that



women with access to secure land, formal credit and access to market have greater propensity in making investments in improving harvest, increasing productivity, and improving household food security and nutrition. Provision of credit without collateral under the micro-finance initiative of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development should be encouraged. Better access to credit, technology, and provision of entrepreneurship abilities will further boost women's confidence and help them gain recognition as farmers. As of now, women farmers have hardly any representation in society and are nowhere discernible in farmers' organisations or in occasional protests. They are the invisible workers without which the agricultural economy is hard to grow.

Second, land holdings have doubled over the years with the result that the average size of farms has shrunk. Therefore, a majority of farmers fall under the small and marginal category, having less than 2 ha of land – a category that,

some”, “fussy” or “thin-skinned”, discouraging others from raising similar concern. #Metoo is perhaps the antithesis of due process – but conversely, it is by strengthening due process that we can even begin to address this crisis institutionally.

### Call out harassment

The spate of reactions from some (usually male) quarters to the allegations that have surfaced now, suggesting that the women “trivialise” more aggravated cases of sexual harassment involving physical violence, is a stark indication that we still have a long way to go in understanding what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. This, despite the fact that sexual harassment – even by law – is defined as not just “physical contact and advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures” but also “making sexually coloured remarks” or “any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature”. Harassment comes in many forms and varying intensities. Dismissing some of it as “harmless flirting” or as “jest” trivialises the issue. Raising it doesn't.

Without doubt, there is a need for proactive sensitisation, even within the “all-knowing” media. The 2013 Act lists organising regular workshops and awareness programmes as part of the employers' duties. But Indian workplaces – not just newsrooms – are utterly inadequate on this front. As journalists with over a decade's experience in different newsrooms and speaking to journalists across the breadth of the Indian media, our sense is that sensitisation is non-existent. Lewd jokes are commonplace in many newsrooms. So is misogyny.

In 2011, the Niira Radia tapes presented Indian journalism with a glorious opportunity to ask itself tough questions about the cosy

proximity that mediapersons shared with the corporate world and the government. It failed to seize that chance. Many of those journalists have continued in their careers, the outrage long forgotten. For organisations, it soon became business as usual. Seven years later, #MeToo is posing an even more difficult question for Indian journalism. It presents an even greater opportunity for critical reflection and radical change.

The newsroom, for a lot of us, is a space for adrenaline rushes, fierce intellectual battles, excitement, learning and unlearning. Some of us inhabiting it shouldn't have to be preoccupied with being wary and guarded with colleagues. Some of us shouldn't feel less safe, and most importantly, some of us shouldn't be made to feel less equal.

Are we going to let constraint and inhibition, caused by everyday anxiety at the workplace, take our collective focus off telling stories that matter and speaking truth to power?

### Litmus test

We need healthy camaraderie in place of needless caution. Respect, not condescension. We would like colleagues to engage with us, not be patronising. And the fact that we are still having to demand these is telling. We do realise that the media world, after all, despite its many self-righteous claims, is not insulated from the larger, patriarchal world. But as journalists, if we are fundamentally bothered by discrimination in society, as we should be, there is a lot of cleaning up to do in our own backyards.

#TimesUp.

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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.

### The #MeToo whistle

The #MeToo movement in India appears to be mirroring what is happening in the West – of predators in high positions in visible and high-profile professions being named and shamed. If those shamed express genuine remorse for their past conduct, it does alleviate the pain of the victim and gives her partial relief. Unfortunately, one cannot expect this from men in India, used as they are to patriarchal entitlement. It also requires high moral standards and courage to admit wrong-doing. With large-scale social transition sweeping the world and women becoming truly independent, men have to

recognise and adapt to the changes.

MOHANRAJ THANGAVEL,  
Coimbatore

■ The #MeToo movement gaining pace is obviously a right step in the right direction. Whether or not all of these allegations are true is not a matter of concern. What matters is that women are now coming forward without the fear of being ashamed. It is sad that the law and the administration have largely failed us as a democracy.

SHANTANU MISHRA,  
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

### Stubble burning

A paucity of enforcement agencies is a root cause of the hardship being faced due

to stubble burning (“It's a foggy autumn as farmers start burning stubble”, October 14). Last year, the burning led to a severe deterioration in air quality. Despite the backing of the Union Agriculture Ministry, work at the ground level is negligible in Punjab. Most farmers still cite ‘stubble burning’ as the fast, easiest and cost-effective way to clear their fields. A toll free number for complaints along with an app in which a ‘photograph+location’ that could be sent to the authorities concerned can help to curb the issue. Further, satellite monitoring technologies can be made use of.

AVIK SETHI,  
Zirakpur, Mohali, Punjab

■ A comprehensive strategy needs to be drawn up to address this emerging problem. Today, it is Punjab and Haryana, tomorrow it could be other parts of India as air currents do not have geographical boundaries. Even in Telangana, in Nirmal district, farmers can be found burning paddy stubble every year. It is clear that there is no awareness. A uniform national policy is required so that all States understand the gravity of the problem.

T. SAMPATH KUMAR,  
Nirmal, Telangana

### Health care for hamlets

Medical services as far as tribal habitations are concerned are virtually non-existent. Most of the

time one comes across media reports of tribal patients being transported in a primitive manner (such as in a *doli*) to reach the nearest health centre. In spite of numerous technological developments in medicine and the mushroom-like growth of corporate hospitals, health care for the marginalised and weaker sections continues to be neglected. It is unfortunate that health care has a predominantly urban focus. Why does the corporate sector not come forward and adopt tribal areas (“Medics on motorbikes provide SOS service for remote villages”, October 14)?

J.P. REDDY,  
Nalgonda, Telangana

### Kolar's water distress

There are many pertinent questions that come to mind (“Ground Zero” page, “A parched land, in a sea of sewage”, October 13). I cannot comprehend why a drought-hit, semi-arid district such as Kolar still adheres to water-intensive agricultural practices such as horticulture and eucalyptus plantations. Indiscriminate and ill-regulated sinking of borewells will only exacerbate the problem. While the matter is sub-judice, any solution that is found should consider all such aspects of this complex ecological issue.

Dr. YOGA VASISHTA V.,  
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

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