



By extension

An NRC for Tripura will risk creating new fault lines in the State

Just three months after the final draft of the National Register of Citizens for Assam was released, the Supreme Court has tagged a petition seeking a similar process for Tripura. The petition now tagged to the As-sam case was heard by a bench headed by the Chief Jus-tice of India, Ranjan Gogoi, on Monday. The petition-ers, a group of activists from Tripura, sought a process to identify illegal migrants and deport them from the State. They maintained that the influx amounted to “ex-ternal aggression” and that they have turned the tribal people into a minority in their own native land. Much of the migration into Tripura occurred before the creation of Bangladesh. The petition takes recourse to the 1993 tripartite accord signed by the Government of India with the All Tripura Tribal Force that asked for the repa-triation of all Bangladeshi nationals who had come to Tripura after March 25, 1971 and are not in possession of valid documents authorising their presence in the State. In fact, the petitioners go even further than the terms of the accord to demand that the cut-off date for the recognition of migrants should be July 1949, based on Article 6 of the Constitution. These demands must be contextualised in the light of the developments in Tripura over the last four decades. As early as in 1979, after years of struggle, the tribal people of the State had gained special autonomy provisions, the institution of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council and recognition of their spoken language, among other assurances. Since then, the empowerment of the coun-cil and the protection of tribal rights have steadily erod-ed the significant tribal versus non-tribal differences that once existed in the State.

Over the last three decades, multiple insurgent groups have ended violent struggles – either quelled by force of law or as a result of conceding vital demands for preserving the gains made by earlier tribal strug-gles. The judicial-bureaucratic process of hearing a pe-tition to seek the deportation of long-settled migrants is fraught with problems, not dissimilar to those already being faced in Assam. The question of what awaits the four million people whose names did not figure in the final NRC draft, and have been given a second chance to prove their antecedents, still hangs in the balance. Not-withstanding the fact that the NRC process in Assam has an overall popular legitimacy across most political parties, there is no answer to how the deportation pro-cess could (or should) proceed. Embarking on any such bureaucratic exercise without considering its deep hu-manitarian impact will only create new fault lines – es-pecially in a State like Tripura where there is no such unanimity of views on the NRC process. It will undo years of work to bring about a reconciliation between Bengali-speaking and tribal people. The Supreme Court should be cognisant of this while hearing the petition.

Bolsonaro’s Brazil?

The country’s political economy looks all set for a rightward shift

The far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro could not have got closer to Brazil’s presidency in a more convincing manner in the first round of elections, that took place on Sunday. The former army captain who belongs to the Social Liberal Party notched up 46% of the vote, only a few percentage points short of cross-ing the 50% needed for an outright victory, in a multi-cornered contest. In a graphic illustration of the sharp polarisation in Latin America’s largest country, he left his nearest rival, Fernando Haddad, of the Workers’ Party (PT), who garnered 29% of the vote, far behind. If that were not enough, the elections also put paid to speculation that the right-wing radical may not secure adequate representation in the new legislature. Mr. Bol-sonaro’s party has won enough seats in Congress to al-low him greater latitude to influence the course of the next government, should he win the run-off on October 28, as is expected. Mr. Haddad has a tough fight on his hands. A lawyer and an economist, he espouses more moderate economic positions than either Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva or Dilma Rousseff, former Presidents and the architects of generous welfare programmes. But an electorate that has seen the downfall of several main-stream politicians since the Operation Car-Wash investi-gations into political patronage and sleaze, views Mr. Haddad as representing a corrupt and compromised es-tablishment. Moreover, the PT was at best reluctant to throw its weight behind him; it waited until the courts rejected Mr. Lula’s candidacy, weeks before the polls.

Mr. Bolsonaro, despite his long experience as a con-gressman from Rio de Janeiro, has gained from the per-ception of being a political outsider. Ahead of the elec-tions, he reinvented himself as an economic liberal, promising to reform the bloated pension system that al-legedly has been gamed by the more privileged. Inves-tors prefer to give Mr. Bolsonaro the benefit of the doubt for now. His popularity has also occasioned com-parisons to other populist leaders around the world. His admiration for the country’s military dictatorship during the 1960s-1980s is well-known. The presidential frontrunner has made no secret of his misogynistic, ho-mophobic and racist opinions. Many of these positions may be watered down to widen Mr. Bolsonaro’s appeal before the final polls. But so far, his trigger-happy in-stincts have not sufficiently troubled voters, whose tol-erance for venality has worn thin over these years. They may, for instance, count on him to pass legislation to ease environmental restrictions and to crack down on crime. Mr. Haddad may consider moderating his party’s stance, but will be mindful of risking the aliena-tion of his core constituency, the poor.

Reading between the rankings

A university’s culture is its most valuable resource. Feeding a repressive culture bodes ill for India



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

Two recent developments draw our attention to the state of India’s universities. The first is the release of the annual ranking of the world’s univer-sities by the *Times Higher Educa-tion (THE)*. The other is an announcement by the Prime Mi-nister, as reported in the press, which has an even closer bearing on the future of higher education here.

The newcomers’ signal

While university rankings are to be taken with a pinch of salt and should not elicit knee-jerk res-ponses, that they are broadly indi-cative may be seen from the latest edition. The universities placed at the top all have breadth in the range of disciplines offered and have been recognised as centres of knowledge production for de-cades, if not for centuries. The ranking of India’s universities has some elements that were predicta-ble and others that came as a surprise.

Thus, while the Indian Institute of Science topped, as usual, the list of Indian institutions that made it to the global top one thousand, three very new ones improved their ranking considerably. These are IIT Indore, which finished ahead of most of its ‘founding five’ sisters, the JSS University, Mysuru and the Amrita University, Coim-batore.

To get a definite idea of what contributed to the higher rankings of these universities we would need to study the indicators cho-sen by the *THE*, but that, though located in smaller cities, they

could lead the three universities of Calcutta, Madras and Mumbai, set up in the mid-1800s and with a large number of students on their rolls, is surely of interest. We would be advised to not cling to the data that the said institutions are relatively new, leaving them more nimble, for the universities ranked highest by the *THE* are over eight centuries old. So it would seem that there is something these three institutions in question are doing which leaves them ahead of a very large number of much older Indian universities. It should prove useful to pursue this line of thought.

Almost exactly at the time the *THE* rankings were released, there was held in Delhi the ‘Conference on Academic Leadership on Edu-cation for Resurgence’, jointly or-ganised by University Grants Com-mission, All India Council for Technical Education and the In-dian Council for Social Science Re-search, among other institutions, and attended by over 350 Vice Chancellors and representatives of the universities. This is a powerful grouping indeed.

Delivering the inaugural ad-dress, the Prime Minister an-nounced that the government would make available ₹1 lakh crore for infrastructure in higher edu-cation by 2022. The Prime Minister is also reported to have emphasised the importance of the Indian Insti-tutes of Management Bill of 2017 granting autonomy to the IIMs. He correctly pointed out that this meant that the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) will no longer dictate their curri-cula. Somewhat earlier the govern-ment had announced a list of ‘in-stitutions of eminence’, the idea underlying which was that they are now free to set their own rules and regulations. While the freeing of universities from external con-trol and increasing their resource



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base is for the better, the question is whether these moves can by themselves raise higher education in India to the desirable global level.

There are two aspects that need acknowledgement from a survey of the state of higher education in India. First, the rankings, though imperfect, suggest that Indian un-iversities are lagging in their re-search output. This by itself should be worrying, but another aspect, namely the migration over-seas even at the undergraduate level, suggests that not even the dis-semination of knowledge here is considered good enough by In-dians.

It’s not about money

The estimated flow of income overseas due to fees paid to fo-reign universities is around \$2 bil-lion. Surely, resources cannot be the barrier to providing world-class teaching in India? University teachers are paid well enough and the availability of material is no longer a problem, with highly af-fordable Indian editions of the best international textbooks.

The crucial factor is the absence of the norms internal to the Indian university that enable desirable outcomes with respect to teaching and research. Among these norms would be an expectation of excel-

As the rupee spins downwards

The government’s measures for arresting the rupee’s slide have failed. The approach needs a rethink



PUJA MEHRA

In the unenviable sequence of conceptually-flawed economic policies - to which also belong demonisation and the Goods and Services Tax’s (GST) rate structure and collection system – the latest is the government’s re-sponse to the rupee’s fast-paced depreciation.

When the crude prices-current account deficit-rupee macroeco-nomic equation had started be-coming unfavourable, the govern-ment’s early arguments focussed on external factors outside its con-trol: oil prices, U.S. Federal Re-serve’s interest rate policy, turmoil in the international currencies, etc. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), fighting a solitary battle, de-fended the rupee in the forex mar-ket by dipping into its \$425 billion stockpile of reserves. Roughly \$25 billion was spent between April and September. Yet, the rupee went from about 65 to a dollar to more than 71 to a dollar. The RBI intervened thereafter very selec-tively, probably recognising the fu-tility of resisting the slide.

The penny dropped then. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, accompanied by the ministry’s mandarins, chewed over the current macroeconomic stress at a meeting last month that went on for more than two hours. RBI Governor Urjit Patel’s advice was heard, not heeded. Afterwards, as-sorted measures aimed at slowing the depreciation were announced. They related to hedging risks, short-term borrowings, foreign portfolio investments norms, li-mits on foreign investments in cor-porate bonds and restrictions on ‘non-essential’ imports.

Jaitley’s reassurance

Mr. Jaitley reassured markets that the fiscal correction target would be met without a cutback in capi-tal expenditure. Yet, it did not change market expectations. All in all, the response measures could not turn the tide. The depreciation continues unabated. 75-to-a-dollar is within a hair’s breadth.

That the measures failed is not surprising. When holding \$400 billion in reserves has not arrested the depreciation, how can tinkering around for \$8-10 billion in in-flows stop it? A durable solution would be to attract stable, long-term capital, not hot money chas-ing arbitrage differentials.

The move to raise the import tar-iffs on select ‘non-essentials’ con-fers protection on local industries with competitive disadvantage vis-a-via imports. But were the items really chosen through serious ana-lysis of the current account deficit? Import duties were ratcheted up on washing machines, but only on those ‘less than 10 kg’. Can the go-vernment explain why it considers imports of washing machines ‘10 kg and more’ essential? This is so-cialist-era redux. The rupee’s tumble has brought out the controlling tendencies that were retired in the 1990s.

Why have markets not bought the government’s reading of the macroeconomic situation?

The government has defended its macroeconomic management as exemplary, saying that the ru-pee’s troubles are due to interna-tional developments beyond its control – rising U.S. interest rates and global crude prices. But these short-term difficulties have touched what are traditional vul-nerabilities. The twin (fiscal and current account) deficits get stressed whenever crude prices surge or there is a dollar-invest-ments sell-off. A bout of rupee vo-latility follows. The markets are readjusting their expectations of the twin deficits. The depreciation under way is confirmation that



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things have not changed, as is evi-dent from the frequent use of stop-gap plugs rather than long-term fixes. In the four years since 2014, the NDA government has reduced the fiscal deficit by just one per-centage point, despite the huge bonanza from the fuel taxes.

The policy, as conceived, was to tax when crude prices are low, use the proceeds so raised to balance the fiscal books, and whenever prices rise, reduce the tax rates. Done right, it could mitigate retail prices volatility and fiscal imba-lances. But the government dithered on expenditure reforms, and so its dependence on the fuel tax-es has grown. For example, Mr. Jaitley’s maiden budget had pro-posed urea prices decontrol, al-though he did not mention it in the speech. The plan was aborted in 2015.

A Finance Minister’s options narrow in an election year. Caught

matter, something that is less as-sured in India. Secondly, it is un-likely that in a leading world un-iversity there would, directly or indirectly, be an attempt to pre-surise a teacher to change her as-sessment of a candidate’s perfor-mance. The autonomy of a teacher is both a value in itself and de-signed to contribute to the larger goal of excellence in the produc-tion and dissemination of know-ledge. In India this value receives little recognition and its crystalli-sation is thwarted, irrespective of the ideological persuasion of the regime governing the university.

The invasion within

It is not as if the idea of the univer-sity as a space of freedom and in-tellectual responsibility has re-ceived universal acceptance globally. However, the best regard-ed universities of the world today yet harbour some of the norms which ensure that they remain ahead. Culture may be difficult to measure but when its meaning is reduced to norms as the rules of the game, it is easy for us to see what is missing here.

No amount of hand-wringing over India’s place in the world un-iversity rankings or pumping re-sources into infrastructure build-ing can help if the culture is not conducive to creativity. Its culture is a university’s most valuable re-source. Feeding a repressive cul-ture bodes ill for the future of our universities and, therefore, India’s place in the world of knowledge. Rightly we rue the fact that Nalan-da, an international university that had flourished in India over a mil-lennium ago, was destroyed through foreign invasion. Today our universities may be being des-troyed by our own short-sighted-ness.

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between voter and market expec-tations, Mr. Jaitley has decided to trim fuel tax rates, accepting a mi-nor revenue loss for a cosmetic price relief. Plus, he ensured state-controlled oil marketers also cut retail prices and absorbed the loss-es. This has destroyed the disci-pline of deregulation being prac-tised since 2010 for a trivial giveaway of ₹1 a litre. The reform reversed had held for the past eight years.

Central bank’s limits

In this situation, the markets looked back to the RBI (in vain) for bringing a pause in the rupee’s slide. The burden of expectations tested the RBI’s commitment to the new monetary policy frame-work. Its mandate is to target infla-tion. Its exchange rate manage-ment duties are limited to subduing rupee volatility. In not hiking the policy interest rate last week, the RBI has remained duty-bound and within mandate.

What the RBI can do, as it has in the past too, is to open special win-dows for the forex needs of crude oil importers. Taking this consid-erable source of demand-side pressures off the forex market could provide the rupee some re-lief.

Puja Mehra is a Delhi-based journalist

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.

Rafale deal

It is significant that when it came to a deal of such national importance, an untested company was roped in as an offset partner and a government undertaking with more than five decades of experience was overlooked (“No pressure to choose Reliance, says Dassault,” Oct.12). We need to know the compelling reasons that made the deal transpire in such hurry and secrecy. A Joint Parliamentary Committee probe needs to be initiated. If the deal was transparent, why is the Centre not interested in an amicable resolution?

D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

On #MeToo

Despite laws aimed at women’s safety, an active

judiciary and the government’s commitment to their empowerment, they are forced to use social media platforms to make us aware of what they went through in the past (“#UsToo,” editorial, Oct.12). This forces us to realise that the mechanisms available are clearly not sufficient to hold the perpetrators to account. The movement should not stop at naming and shaming but move towards making the accused pay for their acts by strengthening the justice system.

POOJA KUMAR,
Pune

The #MeToo movement is empowering women to step forward and take a stand against their oppressors. Shaming the men and making them a subject of

public scrutiny might be a very effective tool against powerful people at a time when the judicial system has not been effective. However, to ensure that this doesn’t lead to a situation where, once you are accused on social media, you are ‘guilty unless proven innocent’, a comprehensive system for booking the culprits and delivering brisk justice to the affected is needed.

KSHTIY MANI TRIPATHI,
Lucknow

Criminals in politics

It is unfortunate that the Supreme Court has left the task of decriminalising politics to Parliament (“Has the SC missed a chance to keep criminals out of polls?” Oct.12). The percentage of parliamentarians with a

criminal background went up by more than 10 percentage points in 10 years, from 23% in 2004 to 34% in 2014. The legislature is unlikely to make laws to debar criminals from contesting polls and political parties will not stop giving tickets to such candidates. And the voters have no choice but to choose between tweedledum and tweedledee. In these circumstances, as opined by former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi, we can only hope that judicial activism comes to our rescue.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad

Manual scavenging

The Indian Railways remains one of the biggest employers of manual

scavengers in the country. Hence, efforts to bring an end to this inhumane practice should start from the government (“Silent and suffering,” Oct.12). The section of people employed includes those from the oppressed communities as well as old people. The Swachh Bharat Mission has clearly failed in this regard. Independent surveys should be conducted more often to get a more accurate idea of this menace. Social audits can also help in better implementation of government measures.

NIDHI CHAUDHARY,
Panipat

Road safety

It is of concern to find that when it comes to Indian roads, ‘green commuters’ – pedestrians and cyclists – are in greater danger

(“Deadly roads,” editorial, Oct.11). Be it is highways or roads in cities and towns, there is lax enforcement of safety norms. The traffic police are not able to punish those engaging in violations like riding on footpaths, jumping signals and talking on phone while driving. Footpaths, where they exist, are not walkable, foot overbridges are used more for advertisements and cycle tracks serve as parking spaces. Corruption in Regional Transport Offices continues to be high. Add to this the poor condition of the roads. Unless these issues are dealt with on a war footing, accidents will continue to happen.

G. PADMANABHAN,
Bengaluru

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