



Warm in Washington

PM Modi and President Trump exceed the muted expectations for their first meeting

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first meeting with President Donald Trump, concern had grown about the future course of the bilateral relationship, particularly whether Mr. Trump would maintain his predecessors' commitment to its strengthening. These worries rested on Mr. Trump's re-writing the equation with Europe, reversing the American stand on China and in West Asia. They were also fuelled by his harsh words on trade tariffs, immigrants and climate change, an issue on which he specifically targeted India. Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump have put many fears to rest, their meeting marked by personal bonhomie. This was reflected in Mr. Modi's attempt to engage Mr. Trump's family, perceived to be an important power centre in the White House. He invited his daughter Ivanka Trump to an entrepreneurship summit in India. Her husband Jared Kushner was a part of the delegation-level talks. Importantly, the India-U.S. joint statement has exceeded expectations, with an emphasis on the need for Pakistan to stop attacks on India launched from its soil, and for China to forge its Belt and Road Initiative taking into account India's concerns on territorial and sovereignty issues. Equally important has been the continuity in the India-U.S. strategic partnership goals, albeit with a softening of the tone on China's actions in the South China Sea. Mentioning North Korea, West Asia and Afghanistan, the statement talks of a "growing strategic convergence" between the two countries and a shared vision on world affairs. That neither side brought up the phrase "shared values" or took questions from the media may be seen as a departure from past meetings, but it is not a divergence from the views and preferences of both leaders. It may even indicate further convergence between them.

However, while the two leaders were able to establish a common understanding of global issues, the joint statement indicates that many bilateral issues are yet to be resolved. The insertion of an entire section titled "Increasing Free and Fair Trade" is a veiled attempt at putting the Trump administration's concerns on bilateral trade on the front burner – for example, with references to "balancing the trade deficit", "protecting innovation", and "increasing market access" in areas where American industry has been most critical of Indian policy. While these bilateral issues were articulated, others were not brought up, including India's concerns on the immigration process and H1B visa curbs, and Mr. Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, which will leave India's climate change financing handicapped. It is to be hoped that these will be raised in the near future. All things considered, a good beginning appears to have been made during Mr. Modi's maiden meeting with Mr. Trump. It is now for them to tackle the more substantive bilateral issues.

The Marawi siege

Manila will have to use military force and offer talks to stop IS advances in the Philippines

The city of Marawi in the south of the Philippines has been engulfed by a deadly, ongoing siege since late May, when government forces began to take on heavily armed militants linked to the Islamic State. Local media estimate the death toll to be above 300. Over 200,000 residents have fled what has effectively become an urban battlefield. While Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte quickly declared martial law across the island for 60 days, some say the blame rests with the political leadership for ignoring the rise of the IS, and especially Mr. Duterte's decision last year to reject a ceasefire offer from the Maute group. Now this group is on the front lines in the fight against the Philippine military in Marawi. Marawi is on Mindanao, the country's second largest island, rocked by armed insurgency for years. At the heart of the conflict is Mr. Duterte's mission to capture or kill Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the Abu Sayyaf Islamist group who was named emir of the "Caliphate" in Southeast Asia by IS boss Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2016. The situation in Marawi does not inspire confidence: rebels still control key areas, they have set up checkpoints on bridges and their snipers have occupied local minarets. When the army fired mortars or RPGs, battle-hardened militants, reportedly including foreign fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia, are responding with similar armaments. Worse still, many civilians remain in the area, complicating the calculus of any planned government assault.

While the siege of Marawi will draw Mr. Duterte's attention beyond the brutal drug war that his government has waged, its political significance has echoed throughout the region and beyond. IS jihadist publications and videos have painted Singapore as a target, with two attacks against the city-state reportedly foiled. Similarly, Malaysia faced its first IS attack last June when a grenade injured eight people at a nightclub near Kuala Lumpur. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia is concerned that IS members could easily traverse the poorly policed waters between itself and the southern Philippines. While the U.S. no longer has military bases in the Philippines, its military advisers and intelligence analysts have been deployed to aid the efforts of Mr. Duterte, notwithstanding his anti-American jibes. U.S. President Donald Trump may have found common cause with Mr. Duterte in fighting Islamic extremism, yet the nature of the beast is quite different in the two countries. For Mr. Duterte the priority is to bring the battle to a quick, decisive end, and if necessary, to resume negotiations with some groups that had earlier held out the promise of ending hostilities. Tackling the humanitarian crisis created by this conflict depends as much on these negotiations and on relief efforts as it does on ending the long neglect of Mindanao.

Counting the strides

Without a religious and economic challenge, any emancipation of Pakistani women will be, at best, partial



S. AKBAR ZAIDI

No one would deny that Pakistan is a particularly misogynistic country, where patriarchal relations and attitudes discriminate heavily against women. Killings in the name of some medieval notion of 'honour' meant mainly to control women's sexuality and choices in terms of marriage, supposedly archaic 'tribal' customs of exclusion from public assembly, participation and representation, fatwas against women's deportment and behaviour, or even against their constitutional right to vote as citizens, are all frequent episodes in the life of the Pakistani woman.

Not surprisingly then, that Pakistan has been ranked very low in the Gender Gap Index, with only Yemen being worse off. These facts about the position of women in Pakistan are often related to social and cultural norms, where 'Islam' is said to blame for women's backwardness, or the fact that the Saudisation of Pakistan over the last few decades has meant that the hijab or the abaya worn in parts of Islamic West Asia by women have become the sartorial choice of many women in Pakistan. Such essentialising fits in well with the stereotypes which abound about a supposedly Talibanised Pakistan.

Transformation despite odds
Yet despite such images and happenings, much has changed in the social, cultural and demographic position, and lives, of women in Pakistan over the last two decades. Despite patriarchy, institutional and state prejudices and restrictions, even something called 'culture' and 'religion', women are



changing their condition, and redefining social sensibilities.

Two facts from the data are surprising. One, that in some key categories women perform unexpectedly better than men. And two, that the rate of change in women's improvement is faster/higher than that it is for men – that is, women are improving their situation faster than are men. Data from girls' and boys' enrolment also show that girls' enrolment at the primary school level, while still less than it is for boys, is rising faster than it is for boys. Girls enrolment at the primary school level increased by 34% between 2002-03 and 2011-12, while in the same period, it increased only 13.5% for boys. What is even more surprising is that this pattern is reinforced even for middle level education, where there has been an increase of as much of girls education by 54%, compared to that for boys by 26%. At the secondary level, again unexpectedly, girls participation has increased 53% over the decade, about the same as it has for boys.

At higher levels of education, at universities and at professional colleges too, the increase in the participation rates for boys far exceeds that for girls. A quite astonishing figure is for university education enrolment between 2003-04 and 2014-15. Boys' enrolment at univer-

sity level had increased by 258% over this decade, but for girls the increase in these ten years had been 432%! Girls were 42% of total university enrolment in 2003-04 – in 2014-15, it is estimated that there are more girls enrolled in Pakistan's universities than boys, 52% compared to 48%. In fact, by 2011-12, there were more girls enrolled in universities than boys.

Political inclusion

In 2001 and 2005, in an earlier model of elected local government under the then President, General Pervez Musharraf, 35,000 and 25,000 women, respectively, were elected and nominated to Pakistan's third tier of government – local bodies – even from so-called remote regions, giving women a public and political status and identity for the first time ever in such large numbers.

Moreover, numerous laws aimed at protecting Pakistani women have been passed in Parliament over the last five years, perhaps most surprisingly in the supposedly conservative province of the Punjab. These include laws such as the Protection of Women Against Violence Act, laws against harassment, the provision of safe houses for women, raising the marriage age for girls, the setting up of provincial Commissions on the

Status of Women, and many more. The Benazir Income Support Programme, an unconditional cash transfer scheme to poorer women, has also helped provide some financial relief to over 5.4 million women. While there has been much justifiable criticism of many of these interventions by feminists and women's groups since they do not go far enough and are not always implementable, one cannot deny the fact that some changes have been made. The fact that clerics and large sections of the male public have protested vehemently against many of these laws, suggests that they do provide a possible opportunity to address, if not alter, some of the huge structural and attitudinal biases against Pakistani women.

Other initiatives, such as the 'Women on Wheels' (women riding scooters provided by the Punjab Government at heavily subsidised rates), women taxi drivers, women's marathons, are perhaps more symbolic and affect a small section of women, but the fact that they have been actively supported by provincial governments despite considerable male conservative opposition, are also trends which suggest some small attitudinal shifts. Feminist scholar Afiya Shehriano Zia has argued that such interventions have "challenged the gendered social order and feminised the landscape of public spaces in unexpected and secular ways".

There are other changes taking place as well, and concern the growing mobility of women to enter public spaces as employed working women, to be activists, to leave their patriarchal homes for some hours to face different types of challenges and social constraints. The electronic media and access to mobile phones and communication, has also cut across gendered and class barriers, although still highly gendered and inequitable, they allow girls and women access to means of social

engagement (even with men) which did not exist a few years ago. The emergence of women as role-models depicted on urban billboards and in social media – from cricketers, to scientists, academics, writers of fiction, mountaineers, pilots even of fighter jets, an Oscar-winning film-maker, to a young girl receiving the Nobel Peace Prize – help in breaking the older stereotypes of women being relegated to domesticity.

Absence of left politics

While there is much to celebrate in how women are moving into public spaces and confronting and overcoming the huge male conservative backlash, these are as yet unfinished and hard fought struggles. Many of these developments have taken place due to the process of unstoppable modernity, bringing in its own new and different contradictions, while some, such as the secular struggle for fair compensation by lady health workers, have relied on collective action, a rare phenomenon in our age. Agentive forces have played a critical role in key battles. However, with the middle classes now dominating Pakistan's political and social spaces, their focus and agenda remains issues which matter to such groups – governance, corruption, religious revivalism, electoral reform. And with the absence of any sort of left politics in Pakistan, must any meaningful and substantive gender equality be left to inevitable capitalist development? Clearly, without challenging the consequences of a despotic capitalism and religiously-constructed social and gendered identity, any sort of emancipation for working people, and for women in particular, will remain, at best, partial.

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Pieces of a complex solution

The success of the bankruptcy law will depend on the jurisprudence that develops under the IBC



RESHMI KHURANA

Over the last year, barely a week has gone by without a regulator announcing new measures to help resolve India's problem of large and mounting non-performing loans/assets, or NPAs. These announcements are usually accompanied by endorsements from the government, as determined reminders that the resolution of the NPA problem is on the top of the government's mind. Then why does India's war on NPAs seem intractable? And why have Indian regulators not yet resolved a case that can be showcased as an example of what the recent regulatory measures can achieve?

The latest announcement came from the Securities and Exchange Board of India which said that companies that are pursuing acquisitions as part of resolution plans approved under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC) would be exempted from open offer obligations typically applied under Indian takeover regulations. This came on the heels of another announcement earlier this month by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), stating its decision to focus on 12

stressed accounts, totalling about 25% of the current gross NPAs and referring them to the IBC immediately. Prior to that, the government had cleared an ordinance to amend the Banking Regulation Act, giving the RBI more powers to direct banks to resolve bad loans.

A tough task

These measures, particularly the RBI's direct involvement in referring cases to the IBC, do well to add attention and urgency to the NPA resolution efforts. However, they do not address some of the underlying characteristics of the Indian economy and the banking sector that make NPA resolution a Sisyphean task in India.

Take, for example, the fact that Indian banks need to accept significant haircuts to resolve the NPA cases as several of them are in sectors where market conditions are in a slump, such as steel, power and textiles. In this environment, it is difficult for banks to find suitable buyers of distressed assets at desired valuations.

The government will require immense political will to allow bankers to take the necessary haircuts (which will impact profitability negatively), without bankers fearing that their decisions will be questioned or investigated in the future.

The tight resolution timelines envisaged under the IBC cannot be achieved if bankers do not have the



commercial flexibility and the autonomy to sell distressed assets.

Promoters can be a hurdle

Another issue not addressed by the recent regulatory changes is what role promoters play in delaying NPA resolution. The majority of businesses in India remain under the control of their founding promoters. A quick glance at the 12 cases mentioned earlier that have been selected for resolution by the RBI confirms that this rings true for these cases as well. In India, business continuity and turnaround of distressed assets require the ongoing involvement of promoters, which makes them a key stakeholder in any NPA resolution. Unlike more developed markets, in India, bankers cannot make significant management changes in distressed companies as promoters closely control key aspects of a business such as relationships with suppliers, customers and regulat-

ors. It becomes critical that promoters should agree to and be involved in any resolution process. However, the RBI does not regulate promoters and other shareholders, and hence cannot force resolutions on to them. Promoters understand this conundrum and have used it to their advantage in the past.

How ready is the framework?

Then there is the question of whether the institutional framework within which the NPAs will have to be resolved is ready to handle this complex task. This framework includes the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), the adjudicating authority for corporate insolvency cases under Section 60 of the IBC. It also refers to the network of 'insolvency professionals' (IPs), a special class of professionals, who will be appointed by the NCLT and in charge of managing the debtor company, whilst being accountable to the committee of creditors and the NCLT. The severe capacity constraints of the NCLT in handling the present and past backlog of cases is well recognised. It is also unclear how long it will take the NCLT judges to ramp up their understanding of the complex bankruptcy environment to allow them to handle the cases in an expedient and fair way. Regarding IPs, it is critical for the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India to quickly develop a robust way to select the most qualified IPs. Apart

from their technical capabilities, it will be crucial to ensure that the IPs are truly independent and do not allow promoters or other key stakeholders to manipulate the resolution process in any unfair manner. India has a mixed track record of regulating professional services, and the quality and independence of the IPs is critical to the successful implementation of the IBA.

The various regulatory changes implemented over the last few months are steps, albeit small, in the right direction. However, the success of the bankruptcy law in India will depend on the jurisprudence that develops under the IBC over the next few months. We have to wait and watch how the various players, including bankers, promoters, the government, IPs, auditors, lawyers, valuers and liquidators, behave in the next few cases. The hope is that institutional capacity will strengthen; there will be greater alignment in the interests of the promoters, creditors and buyers of distressed assets; and, finally, the government and banks will show a strong political will to settle a few cases quickly and transparently. Only then can the value of the distressed assets be maximised and capital and other productive resources get redeployed efficiently.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Paying the price

It should be said that Justice P.N. Bhagwati's legacy is simply one of the many by-products of Indira Gandhi's opportunistic ideological onslaughts, which culminated in the imposition of Emergency ("A controversial inheritance", June 27). India is still paying dearly and heavily for her abject authoritarian and undemocratic acts. She mercilessly ran roughshod over the roots of democratic principles and practices for her personal gain, showing an "I am the state" attitude. Before we revisit Justice Bhagwati's legacy, we must attend to Indira Gandhi's troubling legacy. A huge population of India is below 35 and has no recollection of the Emergency and its events. They must be honestly told all about it.

C.G. KURIKOSSE,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

Sinking by graft

It is unfortunate that Tamil Nadu, once a leading State in India on many fronts, now finds prominence in the news for all the wrong reasons (Exclusive report - "I-T raid unearths huge bribes paid for gutkha sale in Tamil Nadu", June 27). The scandals and money trails related to bribery and corruption appear to have trickled down into a network involving the political class, the bureaucracy and unscrupulous elements with commercial interests. Though all arms of the media are doing painstaking investigation, this scam is bound to be buried while public anger slowly fizzles out. Unfortunately, one doesn't have hope either with the tortuous legal procedures and long-winded justice delivery system.

R. KRISHNAMACHARY,
Chennai

Qatar isolated

The act by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the U.A.E. to sever economic and diplomatic ties with Qatar for a number of reasons needs to be looked at objectively (Editorial - "Mending the rift", June 27). One is sure that Saudi Arabia and its friends cannot stay away from Qatar for long. The honey of Qatar's prospering economy is too lucrative to be ignored. Also, Saudi Arabia gets much of its clout from the tiny country on account of it being a large military base. The anti-Qatar alliance also has its own backyard to clean first before implicating Qatar. Breaking up with Qatar questions their own credibility. But why was such a drastic measure undertaken in the first place? Was it a move by the Saudis to manufacture a problem in the wake of declining oil prices or was it a backdoor move by the U.S.

to step up defence sales? By pitting each of these nations against the other, which in turn could affect Central Asia including Iran, the biggest gainer could be the U.S. which could only be waiting to unroll its 'Right to Protect' model on the lines of the Iraq fiasco.

SHREYANSH JAIN,
Chandigarh

Whither merit

It is shocking that the Tamil Nadu government should pass an order reserving 85% of seats in medical colleges for State Board students though they would be chosen on the basis of the NEET merit list. This amounts to punishing CBSE students; it is grossly discriminatory and robs them of a well-earned seat. A quick calculation will show that there is a strong possibility of, for example, a 2,300th ranked State Board student getting into medical college while a 200th

ranked CBSE student could be left by the wayside. This is violative of Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution. Many hope the order will be overturned.

S. PUSHPAVANAM,
Tiruchi

'Darshan' at Tirupati

The report, "TTD to pay compensation as 'assaulted pilgrim dies'" (June 27), leaves one at a loss for words. A few years ago I was witness to an elderly gentleman ahead of me in a queue being pushed around by the security personnel just when he was about to have a 'darshan' after waiting for hours. His traumatised expression and his pleading eyes fixed on the cruel faces of those who troubled him still disturb me. The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams needs to think about imparting a more humane touch to the

way it regulates darshans. T.V. SREKUMAR,
Puducherry

Out for obstruction

England's Jason Roy given out 'Obstructing the field', invoking Law 37, in the match against South Africa is only the eighth of its kind in international cricket. Len Hutton, Mohinder Amarnath, Rameez Raja, Inzamam-ul-Haq, Mohammad Hafiz, Anwar Ali and Ben Stokes are the others who have got out this way. While Hutton was dismissed so in a Test match and Roy in a T20 International, the other six have been given out in ODIs. The other rare mode of getting out 'Timed out' (Law 31) – if a batsman fails to take guard within three minutes – has not been used until now in cricket.

A.V. NARAYANAN,
Tiruchi

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