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Nagpur, Friday, 10.3.2023

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OPINION

Drug seizure

Drug cartels succeed in slipping a much larger amount to India

The seizure of 61-kg heroin worth ₹425 crore by the Coast Guard and the Gujarat anti-terrorist squad (ATS) from an Iranian boat in Kutch district has again turned the spotlight on drug smuggling through the state's ports. Several such recoveries have been made over the past year and a half, with the Gujarat authorities establishing that the drugs were mostly meant to be supplied in Punjab. In October 2021, a huge consignment of 2,988-kg heroin had been seized at the Mundra Port. In September 2022, a Pakistani boat carrying 40-kg drugs had been intercepted; the Gujarat police had found that drug traffickers lodged in jails of Amritsar and Kapurthala had used mobile phones to order this contraband from Pakistan. Even a cursory glance at the list of interceptions in the past few years indicates that India's northwest coast along the Gulf of Kutch has become particularly vulnerable to the drug cartels using the Arabian Sea route for narcotics smuggling.

These frequent, large narcotics seizures are indicative of a substantial increase in sea-based drug trafficking from the northwest coast of India. This is problematic for India on several fronts. First, in all likelihood, drug cartels succeed in slipping through a much larger amount than what is seized by the authorities. Second, while traditionally infamous for being a transit nation, the increasingly massive amounts of drugs entering the country indicate that India has transitioned into a key narcotics destination. The increasing use of the Gujarat sea route by narcotic smugglers is worrisome for Punjab, which has been ravaged by the drug menace in recent decades. Even as the BSF is thwarting attempts to push drugs into the border state through drones, the Punjab government needs to work in close coordination with Gujarat's agencies to deter drug syndicates from using ports for their nefarious purposes.

Union home minister Amit Shah has repeatedly articulated the Centre's resolve to crush the drug scourge across the country. He has also red-flagged the close link between drugs, black money and terror financing. Even as Shah is scheduled to flag off a pan-Punjab 'Nasha Mukti Yatra' from Amritsar later this month, the Centre needs to go all out to help the state fight the tough battle against drugs; the Gujarat government can chip in by cracking down on smugglers with a Punjab connection. Another issue that calls for inter-state cooperation is the smuggling of liquor from Punjab to the presumably dry state of Gujarat. A thorough probe is required to expose the nexus between racketeers and officials to uncover links, if any, between drug smugglers and institutionalised industrial-scale bootleggers.

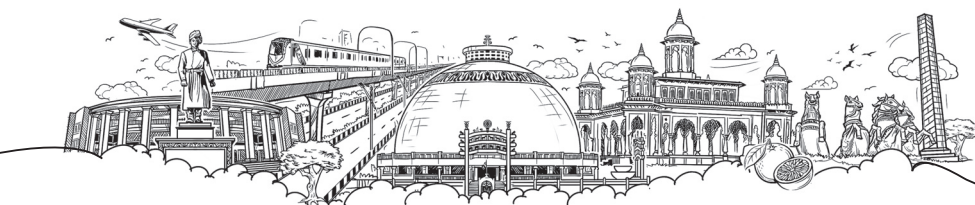
Beyond rhetoric

Removing gender discrimination calls for ground action beyond rhetoric

International Women's Day is an occasion to reflect on their current status and the issues that impede their empowerment. In the Indian context, it is still a work in progress. There is a need to close the gender gap across all these spheres. Catchy slogans like 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' may have helped in promoting public awareness about girl child education but the ground realities pertaining to women's education, safety, security and equal opportunities at workplaces are far from encouraging. The atrocities against women are on the rise while the conviction rate continues to be poor. At 21%, India has one of the lowest female participation rates in the workforce across the world. It is less than half the global average. No matter which cluster of countries one compares with -- high income or low, highly indebted or least developed -- India comes off worse. The dismally low labour force participation rate can be attributed, at least partially, to the restrictive cultural norms regarding women's work, the gender wage gap and the lack of safety policies and flexible work offerings.

The sharpest decline has been in the case of women from marginalised groups. The labour force participation rate, which includes those who are employed as well as those who are as yet unemployed but seeking work, is one of the important indicators that reflects the economy's active workforce. Despite growth in the economy and the working-age population in India, the participation of women in the labour force has been declining. According to the World Bank, India women's participation in the formal economy is among the lowest in the world -- only parts of the Arab world fare worse. This is an alarming trend when seen against the backdrop of increasing crime against women and widespread gender discrimination.

The pandemic has only worsened the situation, impacting women disproportionately because a majority of them work in informal sectors, characterised by lower-paying and less secure jobs, income volatility and the lack of a robust social safety net. One of the key indicators of gender equality in a parliamentary democracy is the extent of women's representation in Parliament. The present Lok Sabha has only 14% women MPs while the Rajya Sabha has 11% representation. Increasing the representation of women in Parliament would have an enormous impact on what issues are raised and how policies are shaped. Besides, it would create room to reform and revise discriminatory laws against females. The Women's Reservation Bill must not be allowed to languish. Political parties should not only reserve 33% of their party tickets for women in parliamentary and state elections but also reserve at least 33% of their organisational positions for them.



Democratic deficit more pronounced

Foundations of our republic are predicated on a just exercise of people's power by ruling dispensations



Dr Ashwani Kumar

The captivating Republic Day parade earlier this year showcased the nation's soft and hard power, messaging the world of its arrival on the global scene. President Droupadi Murmu's customary address to the Houses of Parliament during the Budget session unfolded the government's ambitious agenda and a shared national aspiration to join the ranks of developed nations in the near future. But the truth of India's declining democracy has taken the sheen away from an otherwise impressive story of the nation's significant accomplishments.

Recurring reports about constitutional transgressions interrogate the depth and quality of our democratic engagement. In recent days, the questionable expunging of parliamentary statements of Opposition leaders, disruption of the Prime Minister's speech in the Rajya Sabha, the disproportionate penalty of suspension imposed on an Opposition MP for recording the House proceedings, and exceptions apart, the nauseating puerilities of the people's representatives have denuded Parliament of its institutional sanctity. The suicide of an eighteen year old dalit student in one of the country's premier educational institutions because of 'unbearable distress', allegedly on account of caste discrimination and the reported beating of a sixteen year old class XI dalit student by his principal for the vice of drinking water from the latter's bottle, is a painful reminder of the persistence of historical and social inequities.

The conviction and sentencing by a court in Uttar Pradesh of a sitting MLA of the Opposition party for a



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two year jail term in a fifteen years old traffic blocking case, is perverse on its face, considering the disproportionality of the sentence and its resultant consequence of depriving an elected member of his seat in the state Assembly. The oppressive reality of prosecutorial processes is writ large. As the wheels of justice grind on, careers are destroyed, reputations ruined and souls scarred in an unending saga of irremediable humiliation. Despite the Constitution's libertarian promise, the nation was aghast when the highest court decided to suspend the bail of a disabled accused charged with sedition at a special sitting on a court holiday. Such illustrations of institutional malaise point unmistakably to an eroded edifice of India's constitutional democracy.

But nowhere is the democratic deficit more pronounced as in the quality of our political discourse. This was amply demonstrated once again following the recent arrest of a Congress party functionary on the tarmac of Delhi airport. The vitriol and cataloging of past abuses hurled by political functionaries

against each other is a grim reminder of a democracy debased. The political language of our times, steeped in hypocrisy and intense personal animosities reflects the narrowness of our politics and vitiates it further, infracts the dignitarian promise of the Constitution and is destructive of the broader social accord.

We know that language, culture, imagination and histories are united in a tight embrace. The elegance of the spoken word, not its decibel, adds weight to the cause and enables leaders to engage with the people on the defining challenges of the age. Our venerated founders espoused their lofty ideals in prose and verse invested with soaring idealism and emotion that galvanised the nation in pursuit of larger causes. Their language mediated between the heart and the head. Indeed, the strongest criticism of injustice and malgovernance, as also expressions of fervent hope for national renewal, are best reflected in the depth and dignity of the medium. The language of democracy is one of accommoda-

tion anchored in moderated thought and rational persuasion. It is not about hurting sensitivities but respecting them and recognising that political adversaries are not personal enemies to be mocked and crushed.

Democracy, after all, is not about a strong man imposing his will "over the wreckage of the universe". It is premised on a search for the middle ground and rejection of extremes, an objective best subserved through elegant communication. The spoken words and speeches of leaders provide the benchmark of democracy. The standing of our public figures is tested through their utterances which also tell us who we are. Evidently, therefore, India's diminished democracy can be resurrected only through an ennobling political discourse defined by civil conversation founded in reason and faith in the power of decency to make a difference.

The celebration of the republic cannot be complete as long as our politics remains limited by narrow partisan perspectives and is driven by those whose projected concern at pervasive injustices is largely suspect, given their obsession with a compulsive pursuit of power for its own sake. The foundations of our republic are predicated on a just exercise of people's power by ruling dispensations of the day and on the Opposition's fearless pushback against the abuse of power.

The challenge for those who aspire to lead the nation in the fullness of its glory in these momentous times, is to imagine and consolidate a political universe rooted in the collective assertion of our moral judgment that answers the call of good conscience.

The author is senior advocate of Supreme Court & former Union law minister. Views expressed are personal.



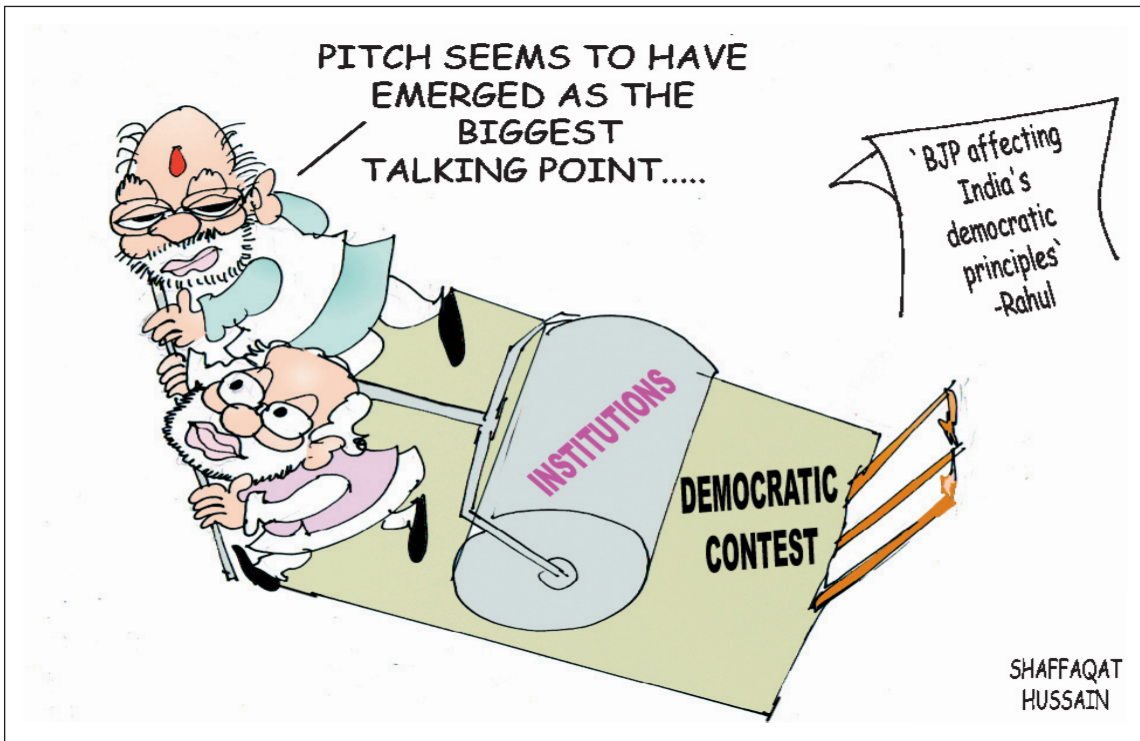
YOUR LETTERS

Plan water distribution properly

Following the High Court order, it was decided by the Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Municipal Corporation to supply water after a gap of three days to 60 per cent of the city and after five days to the rest, with the schedule being reversed after 15 days. Yet, this schedule is not being followed. Apparently, the water supply to all the localities has been delayed by two days. The citizens are worried as the summer is round the corner. The water crisis is somehow managed in winter and monsoon but the problem becomes severe during summer. Seemingly, from March to May, the demand for water is at its peak and the supply at its lowest, compelling the citizens to suffer. However, with abundant water available at Jayakwadi, authorities should plan distribution properly to ensure that the citizens are supplied with enough water at regular intervals.

Azib Shaikh,

Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.



Swadharma, Swabhasha & Shiv Srishti

Nikhil Kailas Nangude

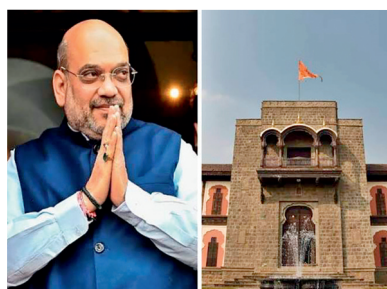
Union home minister Amit Shah's speech at the inauguration ceremony of Shiv Srishti was not given the kind of importance it deserved by the media. Shah, however, touched upon all aspects of Shivaji Maharaj in a fluent style. Although all the political parties show their political loyalty towards Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the late Shivshahir Babasaheb Purandare and the work done by him were not openly supported by all the other political parties except the ruling party. Maharashtra also saw instances when Shivaji Maharaj was admired and revered but Purandare's work on him was denigrated. Thanks to Shiv Srishti and the presence of Amit Shah, this ambivalence has been removed.

Amit Shah presented an apolitical image of Shivaji Maharaj in his speech. While underlining the importance of the Swarajya built by Shivaji Maharaj from scratch, Shah quoted the statement of Yashwantrao Chavan, who had said: "The world is fully aware of what

would have happened to India if it was not for Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The Pakistan border would not have been where it is today; it would have been somewhere very close to your home..." Many people have noted the kind of treatment that was given to Yashwantrao Chavan by the Congress leadership in his last days. By referring to Yashwantrao Chavan's denigration at the hands of the former's own party, Shah used tactics and diplomacy - as in the lines of Swatantraveer Savarkar to silence the Opponents.

No political commentary, no gratuitous mudslinging at anyone. Shah's speech was insightful. It did not reflect the diplomacy and 'Chanakya Niti' implemented by him in Maharashtra. If anything, it is a commentary on the progress of modern Maharashtra, which is being formed by a real Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government. BJP wants 'Shiv-Rajya' or a state ruled by the ideology of Shivaji. Shah's speech made it amply clear that his study of Shivaji's life and work is commendable.

Babasaheb Purandare's life and Shivaji Maharaj are inseparable. Babasaheb Purandare was a biographer who narrated the biography of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj every-



where, be it villages, cities and metropolises. While honouring Purandare, Amit Shah said, "If it was not for Babasaheb Purandare, the number of people who knew Shivaji Maharaj would have been less." Babasaheb Purandare did not get tired while presenting the glorious story of the great king Shivaji Maharaj. Purandare received awards as well as brickbats. However, all the mud slung at Shivaji's biographer was wiped away by Amit Shah. Those who had watched the play 'Jaanta Raja' during their childhood, and yet criticised Babasaheb Purandare only for the sake of opposing him politically, were silenced by Shah.

Unravelling the journey of Balwant Moreshwar Purandare the common man to Babasaheb Purandare the Shivshahir or the biographer of Shivaji Maharaj, Shah

quoted poet Maithili Sharan Gupt as well as Ramayan and Mahabharat to drive home his point. Politicians who are trying to stamp their name on big and small projects should be aware that there is no nameplate bearing Babasaheb Purandare's name anywhere in the first phase of ₹438-crore Shiv Srishti. The forts of Shivaji's time, the occasion of coronation and the escape from Agra have come alive in the Shiv Srishti. Therefore, this monument is not only a life-view cum exhibition of Shivaji Maharaj. So Shivaji Maharaj's life means dedication. He dedicated his life to Swadharma, Swarashtra, Swabhasha and Swarajya. Generally, events held in the presence of political leaders mean self-glorification. But this event was an exception. In his speech, Shah did not play the record of the work done by his government or make any new announcements.

Since Shah's speech had a very little political value, a very important point he made was overlooked. Shivaji Maharaj fought for Swabhasha - this was repeatedly mentioned by Shah in his speech. World Marathi Language Day was celebrated recently.

The author is an entrepreneur and historian.

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Printed at Lokmat Media Pvt. Ltd., Plot No. 192, 207 & 208 MIDC Industrial Area, Butibori, Nagpur and Published by Printer & Publisher Balaji Muley for and on behalf of Lokmat Media Pvt. Ltd., at Lokmat Bhavan, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Post Box No. 236, Nagpur-440 012.

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