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Nickeled and Dimed



Illustration by Gowri



Celebrity Culture

By Prerna Vij



Image Source - The Asian Age

Sushant Singh Rajput was found hanging at his residence in Bombay on 14th June. What was simply reported as a suicide by the police in their preliminary investigations – slowly turned into this huge media trial where several well known actors and politicians were blamed for the murder of Sushant and for their nepotistic tendencies in an industry as cutthroat as Bollywood. Sushant's then girlfriend Rhea Chakrabarty was caught in this crossfire. With several media outlets, especially the RepublicTv headed by Arnab Goswami aired several episodes demanding probe into the supposed involvement of Rhea in the death of her boyfriend, the police as well as the Narcotics bureau was quick to jump into action.

Rhea was walked through a vicious media trial- her private messages were made public. Her family was hounded for details. She was bullied online by some of the biggest name in the industry including the controversy clad Kangana Ranaut. The NCB then placed her in 14 day custody of the basis of prima facie evidence present that said that Rhea had helped procure marijuana for Sushant and should therefore be reprimanded for that. The quantity of the said marijuana was both miniscule and inconsequential and as the texts pointed out- had been demanded by Sushant himself for recreational purposes.

Now the facts of the case are both hazy and vary with the stories you read online. Even the reports issued by the investigating officers themselves are based on prima facie evidence. It is clear that this trial is happening because it is convenient. Convenient because it is coming at a time when the country has more pressing issues that deserve more time on prime time. Convenient because it is far easier to blame something tangible for the suicide and not the abysmal state of affairs concerning mental health facilities. This trial led to the consequent bullying of Rhea and several other actresses online. Including and not limited to Ali Bhatt, Sonam Kapoor, Deepika Padukone all of whom were vocal when Sushant died and made space for the fans to grieve for someone who had truly had an impact on the film industry. I think aside from the obvious link that the media found it easier to scapegoat women for something that was an obvious failure by the larger administrative structure- it also exposed a far more pervasive problem- that of celebrity culture. The fact that there is some internal pedestalisation of people simply because they are good at what they do. The media is highlighting this trial because the participants of the trial are people who are 'important' because they create art that is public. Does that and should that on principle make them 'morally better' than any of us? That the fact they are simply known by many people, make them people who must and should always be pedestalised for what they say and do otherwise?

The media trial has morphed into a 'war on drugs'. Kangana Ranaut believes that bad mental health is the outcome of consuming drugs. While there are many scientific claims as to why that is untrue, we must realise that by previously platforming these individuals, the words they now say are both taken seriously and accorded more attention. And while that may be an obvious byproduct of their very public profession, this has yielded several problems over the course of time where people like Kangana have been given a free pass to simply spew vile hatred. Where there is a dangerous mixture of Bollywood and politics with several actors and actresses commanding seats in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The Sushant case was simply one of the many which were blown out of proportion simply because of the fact that he was well known. This displays an acute misunderstanding of the way mental health is both understood and accepted in our country- but it also ensures that this culture of pedestalising celebrities makes it almost impossible for any trial that is conducted on them to be one that is fair and free of externalities. That their public personas and characters are so often conflated that it makes it hard for public to distinguish. This happens to the point where Deepika Padukone is being dragged through the media for the very well acclaimed movie 'Cocktail' where she played a drug addict and alcoholic. At what point do you stop this conflation and treat these celebrities as humans with the capacity to fail. That their ability to portray a character on screen does not warrant that they should be accorded the same platform everywhere.



Ms. Devika Dahiya, Founder, The Trunk Door

By Vanshika Mittal

Ms. Devika is based out of Chandigarh and has worked and associated herself in the fields of education, public relations, communications, and marketing for over 10 years. She started her venture The Trunk Door which establishes direct contact between the weavers and the consumers with the aim of providing the weavers with their fair share of deserved profits from their art without compromising on the quality of the product received by the consumers.

Q. Who does your venture, The Trunk Door aim to target, and in what sense does it provide help to them?

A. The Trunk Door aims to bridge the gap between the weaver and the end consumer since all the products listed are sourced directly from the producers, in this case, the weavers. Here then we target individuals looking for products in terms of high quality, design, and affordability which are delivered to their doorstep, especially in these times, when leaving your house isn't particularly safe. Our products range from home décor including quilts, bed sheets, and bed covers to hand-blocked cotton suits. The material and the dye used in the production are all organic consisting of vegetable oil and are free from chemicals. The venture, therefore, is very environment friendly and sustainable. Our community stands at 50-60 weavers which includes 20-25 weavers from Rajasthan, 5-6 weavers from Kutch, Gujarat, 6-7 weavers from the outskirts of Lucknow, and about 15 from the south who engage in kanjivaram and making silk saris.



Q. What is your pricing model? Did you face any difficulties with the investment in the beginning? If yes, how did you tackle those?

A. Our ultimate priority is the mutual interest of the weaver and the clients, hence we strive to provide quality products at very affordable prices. One can say that we have unmatched prices in the market. In terms of income, we did face some challenges in accomplishing the first hundred orders. In fact, convincing people to adopt this sort of a method still is not very easy. Consumers are hesitant due to the lack of physical presence which limits their physical understanding of the fabric. With every additional order, the process does become a little easy as we hear back from the consumers and their good experience. However, with the true potential of my weavers, I am confident that the venture needs to expand way beyond my family and friends.

Q. How can the Indian government intervene to tackle these existing problems and provide support to the weaver community?

A. While the government has policies for the textile industry in India, there still exists a gap in providing benefits to the weavers. This can be especially seen in the lacking technology that the trade has today. Resources such as electricity, transportation channels, and even water are heavily required for sustaining a livelihood in this sector. Another issue arises when while there exist schemes to aid this community, they are not communicated directly to them. There can be a systematic bottom-up feedback approach incorporated to involve more and more traditional art and weavers in conversations and solutions to bridge the gap. This will allow access to a support system not just temporarily but for generations to come.

Q. How has your venture impacted your view of traditional livelihoods and the people who depend on them? Could you please talk about some of the craftsmen that you are in touch with and who provide supplies to you?

A. The traditional indigenous handloom sector is abundant in talent. There are many communities practicing art forms and traditional designing that are not very widely popular since they have not been exposed to a technologically advanced environment where they could make their work known. This also becomes the reason behind 'dying art'. For example the Kutch work or the blue pottery from Jaipur. While generations of weavers have been practicing this art, the upcoming youth gets educated and wishes to settle in the city and enroll in a job rather than carrying forward this skill since it does not pay them very well.

This is what I have mainly understood – that while financial stability is a problem, weavers face several other obstacles and need a definite support system in place to tackle those too. My friends from abroad seem a lot more aware of traditional Indian art and express more interest in exploring it. I want to bring focus on this importance and make consumers value the weavers' art. We welcome weavers from all over India and from all art forms because we are not here to only sell products but also revive the dying art and make the consumers more aware.

Abdul Khatri is one weaver that I am in touch with. He mainly engages with the Ajrak hand block printing on different materials. The problem lies in the lack of services in his hometown – the outskirts of Bhuj. There are no courier services or transportation. To earn their livelihoods, the entire family travels almost 100-200 kms all the way to the Rann of Kutch in order to supply their new products every season. This effort that they exert while incurring extra costs is what actually moved me to start this venture.

Another weaver, Islam is actually a national award winner for his art of making sarees. This is in irony to the conditions that he lives in – mainly due to the lack of income he receives for his work. The bridge needs to be built so that such talent gets the recognition it deserves.

While these are just two profiles, there are many such weavers who work day in and day out, they have even worked for the big brands in the market, yet they or their talent is nowhere to be recognized.





Currencies During Crisis

By Shalu

As the Covid-19 outbreak kicked off to engulf the entire globe, market uncertainty that followed led investment to resort to the flight response. Capital fled from the volatile soft currencies towards the safe haven of currencies that are a more reliable store of value. Reduced global demand and consequent crashing prices further weakened currencies of major commodity-exporting countries such as Russia, Mexico, and Brazil. The US Dollar, the world's dominant currency being on one side of 88% of all trades, soared high, especially against the Emerging Market Economies' (EME) currencies. The movement was induced by the Coronavirus risk-off that led investors scurrying for the greenback. The pattern is consistent with the Global Financial Crisis 2007-09 when even currencies of the countries that were not at the centre of the crisis depreciated against the three hard currencies namely, the US dollar, the Japanese yen, and the Swiss franc. High risk aversion levels and consequent capital flight prompted the depreciation. However, the destination countries of this capital flight were also major crisis-affected countries. So, within a year or so after the crisis as risk subsided, the flows reversed and so did the depreciation. The reversal for the COVID crisis in progress has been initiated, however the timeline and magnitude are yet to be observed in full.

Pandemic and the Forex pains and gains: Who won and who lost?

Relative valuations of the world currencies are pertinent to the economic health of a country. The exchange rate movements and misalignments not only hold implications for international trade mainly through relative import prices but also play an instrumental role in financial market risk and return assessment. Furthermore, the Central Bank's monetary policy decisions particularly involving interest rates and inflation targeting are influenced by currency valuations.

Between 19 January 2020 and 25 February 2020, the early phase of the Covid-19 outbreak dollar strengthened against Latin American currencies with Mexican Peso depreciating around 2%, the Brazilian Real around 4.5%, and the Chilean Peso around 5%. Asian Economies also weakened with the Malaysian Ringgit and Singapore Dollar depreciating 4.5% and 4% respectively. The biggest fallers were the EME currencies of the Russian Ruble which depreciated by over 6% and the South African Rand which weakened by around 5%. Russia is a heavy oil export-dependent country with China as its biggest export destination and South Africa also saw a massive fall in exports to its most significant trading partner, China. Large commodity exporters and Economies with close links to China including the Advanced Economies (AEs) also witnessed currency depreciation as the Australian dollar depreciated by 4% and the Canadian dollar by 2%.

The magnitude of these impacts intensified drastically in March as the COVID outbreak submerged the world, leading to lockdowns, reduced global demand, and disrupted global supply chains. Consequently, the market panic set in. Mexican Peso, Russian Ruble, Brazilian Real, and South African Rand depreciated by 17.5%, 16.7%, 13.7%, and 13.1% respectively in the month of March. Amongst the Advanced Economies, the Australian Dollar, Canadian Dollar, and Great Britain Pound also weakened against the greenback by 6.25%, 5.68%, and 3.93% respectively. During the same period, the Japanese Yen and Swiss Franc remained stable against the Dollar, even appreciating slightly and hence strengthening against the other currencies, illustrating the investor confidence towards these hard currencies in times of crisis. Besides the economic consequences of the health crisis, there has also been evidence that changes in the number of cases and deaths in the US have had a positive impact on USD/EUR, USD/Yuan, and USD/LivreSterling volatility. To stabilise the domestic currencies, central banks engaged in Forex market intervention and USD swaps in both EMEs and AEs.

Setting aside Dollar performance against soft currencies, it has been weakening against the major currencies of the Euro(7%), Swiss franc(6.1%), and Pound(6.92%) over the last three months(27 May-27 Aug). The underperformance of the dollar can be attributed to the interest rate cuts and increased liquidity arrangements for the international monetary market through currency swaps as a part of COVID responses. The dollar dominance however stands as it remains the world's major reserve currency despite its current weak stance which might change as health and economic crises subsides.

At home scenario: The Rupee and RBI stance

Indian rupee which opened at 72.2 against the dollar in March ended at 75.6 by the end of the month with foreign investors pulling out \$14 billion from the country and despite the sharp depreciation, it still outperformed EME peers due to relatively lower external debt and net international liabilities among other factors. The week ended March 20 witnessed the biggest fall in forex reserves since 2008 by \$11.98 billion and the RBI likely sold \$1.8 billion in the two weeks ended April 10 to ensure dollar liquidity and defend the rupee. However, since then RBI has been accumulating foreign exchange reserves. For instance, over the three weeks ended August 7, India's reserves increased by \$52.9 billion, out of which foreign currency assets amounted to \$44.7 billion and gold hoardings for \$7.5 billion. This is one of the reasons why the rupee was relatively weaker compared to its EME peers despite the soft dollar and high FDI inflows after April. The rupee averaged at 76.2 during April, 75.6 during May, 75.7 during June, 74.9 during July and as of 27 August, it stands at an average of 74.7 against the Dollar.

The Way Ahead

The trading volume of the Foreign Exchange Market stood at the US \$6.6 trillion per day in April 2019, with the FX market claiming the title of the largest financial market in the world. The market is highly volatile and Coronavirus has been illustrative of its susceptibility. Another recent development has been the area of Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) as China and Sweden already have CBDC projects in testing in 2020 and more central banks are considering hybrid systems where CBDC is cash like direct claim on the central bank and private sector manages customer-facing activity. The idea and the possible policy tools it can generate have potential. Meanwhile, the current crisis is still in progress and as we move towards vaccine solutions and global economic recovery, the currency movements would be interesting to note.



UN Security Council and COVID-19

By Amisha Singh

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is an international institution responsible for maintaining global peace and security. Born out of the outcome of the Second World War, it comprises fifteen members, out of which five members are permanent, and each member has a vote. The UNSC plays a key role in determining the existence of a threat to peace and acts of aggression. It mediates in cases of dispute and can even resort to imposing sanctions and authorizing the use of force to restore international peace and security.

In the recent past, we have seen the rise of infectious diseases and their ability to spread rapidly, causing global pandemics or epidemics in certain regions. A lot of literature has been produced about the connection between diseases, which have the potential of turning into pandemics, and threats to international security. Infectious diseases have the ability to disrupt socio-economic and political relations worldwide. As a result, the UNSC has played a key role in the past, by pro-actively tackling diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, SARS, etc. However, the Council has faced a lot of criticism and backlash in the last couple of months for its inertia with respect to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UNSC had expanded its mandate in September 2014 to effectively combat the Ebola crisis in Africa. In the UNSC Resolution 2177, the Council characterized a public health issue – specifically a communicable disease – as a threat to international security and highlighted the need for an enhanced and coordinated regional and international response due to the uniqueness of the threat. With this resolution, the concept of ‘securitization of health’ became popular and has been the major reason for the criticism of the UNSC in the current CoronaVirus pandemic.

US-China feud and a silent Security council

On the 11th of March, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the CoronaVirus as a pandemic, which was a matter of global concern since late November, 2019. During March 2020, China held the presidency of the Security Council, as a result of which the matter went unaddressed until the presidency was transferred to the Dominican Republic in April. The origins of the virus were traced back to China; consequently, the United States of America wanted China to be held accountable on an international platform. Following the demand of the US, a proposal was drafted by Tunisia, on behalf of the non-permanent members, which escalated the situation further. This caused a feud between the two countries and led to the constant postponement of any meeting of the Security Council or rejection of the proposals put forth by member nations.

The United Nations Secretary General’s call for a global ceasefire, to ensure all efforts were made on the humanitarian front, went unnoticed by the UNSC for nearly four months. Being at loggerheads with each other, the United States and China blocked the draft resolution, which called for a 90-day humanitarian pause in conflicts worldwide in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. The feud was initially about holding China accountable for the pandemic and later took the form of the reference to the WHO in the Council’s resolution. This came in the wake of the Trump Administration’s disbelief in the WHO’s abilities and the cancellation of funding of the organization by the States. China, on the other hand, responded by providing additional funding to the health institution.



Image Source - The New York Times

As a result of the ongoing feud between the two nations, UNSC faced major criticism for watching the pandemic from the sidelines and turning down proposals to help organize a coordinated response in light of the unprecedented public health emergency. Some UN leaders had termed this pandemic as the biggest international threat in over 75 years and highlighted the need for an immediate response from the Council to ensure that the Secretary General’s calls for help do not go unnoticed. Richard Gowan, UN Director at the International Crisis Group said: “The Council sent out a signal of symbiotic disunity which I think is resonating quite wildly.” Distressed at the SC’s inaction, some members of the UNGA collectively proposed a resolution expressing support for a strong and unified response to the pandemic. The role of the UNSC became extremely crucial because it was felt that securitizing the issue would result in better mobilization of global resources in a more efficient manner while placing actionable safeguards which were reserved for traditional security threats – taking a similar stance to what was taken in the Ebola epidemic in 2014.

It was only after 111 days of the Secretary General’s call for a worldwide ceasefire that the UNSC passed a resolution on 1st July 2020, declaring an immediate cessation of hostilities in all situations and ensuring unhindered and sustained delivery of humanitarian assistance. By then, 10.3 million cases had been reported across the globe with over half a million lives already lost to Covid-19. The lack of agreement among members of the Security Council highlighted the intrinsic shortcomings of the Council and brought them to fore yet again. The permanent membership of countries and the right to veto decisions again proved problematic in effective decision-making. The reason for the delay in passing the resolution is because the two antagonistic permanent members had a major disagreement on a number of things and the veto power they possess, would have made any early attempts at passing the resolution futile. Further, lack of representation in the Council has resulted in the strategic and political interests of only a few being taken seriously, while lesser importance is given to far more pressing matters. A case for the few and by the few!

The failure of the Security Council to respond to the ongoing pandemic at an early stage raises major concerns about the sustainability of the current architecture of global security. Moreover, this has led critics to question the overall structure, membership, and veto power of the P-5 countries. The Council has been criticized majorly in the past for its more than tepid performance, but such criticism has only escalated in light of the coronavirus pandemic. Obviously, the UNSC in its present form is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring peace and stability.



Breaking The Italian Code

By Deepanshu Singal



Image Source- Al Jazeera

Demarcating the Terminologies

The terms "refugees", "asylum-seekers" and "migrants" are used interchangeably several times. However, they have distinct meanings and one can draw a lot of inferences from their usage in policy documents. Amnesty International defines a "refugee" as someone "who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. This is different from an "asylum-seeker", who is someone "who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim."

Although the living conditions of asylum seekers and refugees are similar and not top-of-the-class in the host countries, the acceptance of asylum-seekers as refugees impacts the rights they enjoy. Asylum-seekers have a human right to seek asylum and hence be allowed to enter a country to seek asylum. However, it is their acceptance as refugees, which gives them the right to international protection. Hence, the demarcation between the two terminologies is extremely important. Despite the lack of an internationally recognised definition of "migrants", Amnesty International simply understands it as "people staying outside their country of origin, who are not asylum-seekers or refugees." This usually refers to cases where individuals have travelled from one country to another legally. All three terminologies are often aggregately understood as "immigrants".

The Italian Illusion

Like most of the European Union members, Italy too claims to be open to all immigrants and that it is committed to integrating them into Italy irrespective of their origin country, religion, or diverse cultures. At the same time, it is also committed to protecting its population from threats that "illegal immigrants" may pose. In 2017, Italy adopted the Law 46/2017 formulating new immigration and border policies and control measures for asylum-seekers who landed on Italian shores in 2016 in great numbers. Through the law, the Italian government toughened its stance on sending "illegals" back to their home countries and not just expelling them. Simultaneously, they expanded the existing detention facilities by almost quadrupling them in number. The government's commitment to speeding up the asylum-seeking process and cutting down on "red-tapism" has led to a reduction in the jurisdictional guarantees that are provided to the refugees. This, however, compromises the right to international protection of refugees and the right to appeal the denial of asylum in the first instance, making them more vulnerable. Moreover, to avoid the "empty wait", they could be used to carry out "unpaid public utility" work. The silver lining to this is the claim that by cutting down on unnecessary processes, the government could now direct more funds into humanitarian work and make the process more transparent. Hence, the law seems to be illusory owing to its abstraction from reality.

Breaking the Code

The claims about inclusion and tolerance of immigrants are far from real. The treatment of asylum-seekers travelling across the Mediterranean Sea, on overcrowded and "un-seaworthy" boats, is egregious. Its draconian decrees put the asylum-seekers at more risk and increase their precariousness. Moreover, these policies prioritise and attach legitimacy to Italians and European nationals over anyone else, which is contrary to their inclusion claim. It is interesting that an anti-immigration deal was signed between Libya and Italy, and extended recently. It supports the Libyan coastguard in intercepting refugee boats in the Mediterranean, headed towards Italy. These are then taken back to Libya, where people are exposed to horrifying and unimaginable suffering. It also reflects on the Italian neglect and apathy towards these asylum-seekers and points towards its hypocritical claims of being an immigrant-friendly country. The intention behind such empty claims ought to be decoded. Providing posthumous citizenship and 'dignified burials' to those who died in rabid boats while crossing the Mediterranean, highlights how these western states politicise immigrant death to gain the reputation of the "well-wisher" or the sole "Messiah" of those fleeing their home countries. This effaces colonial histories of prejudice and violence to which these nations were subjugated and builds on the idea of the "white man's innocence" as a good-Samaritan. It brings out the contrast between the inclusive law and the xenophobic reality.

The entire immigrant issue is treated as a tool in the game of gaining power and influence. It is imperative to break the codes and point out the hypocrisy in state behaviour and policies concerning this. The issue of immigration is real and to handle it efficiently – states need to incorporate a more nuanced outlook to policy rather than focusing on superfluous propaganda only aiding in reputation building.



SC Judgement On Prashant Bhushan Justifying Contempt Of Court

By Aman Khullar



Image Source - The New York Times

Find full story on our website.

Criticising democratic institutions like the judiciary, bureaucracy, and the government is a fundamental right and necessary to keep their powers in check through public accountability, but does Bhushan's tweet qualify as criticism? I'm inclined to disagree. Criticising the judiciary would constitute questioning or object to a court proceeding or a particular verdict. Questioning a court verdict on its merits seems a plausible and constructive way to criticise the court. However, Bhushan's tweet has effects and implications that go beyond simply criticising the court on the aforementioned ground. The tweet does the job of a malicious accusation which blames the Supreme Court of being a co-conspirator in the destruction of democracy over the past six years. His exercise of freedom of speech, as a mere opinion, inflicts significant harm on the public confidence and integrity of the judiciary. It is important to keep in mind that Bhushan is a senior advocate of the SC, and his views have a wide readership and credibility in the public sphere, hence, the lack of magnanimity in the verdict.

The verdict reads, "It(the tweet) has the tendency to shake the confidence of the public at large in the institution of the judiciary and the institution of the CJI and undermining the dignity and authority of the administration of justice." This statement narrows down on the harm caused by Bhushan's tweets. The supreme court is the highest institution of justice in a democracy, deemed independent of any other institution of power. Accusing the apex court of partaking in the destruction of democracy has a detrimental effect on the image of the court. Such accusations inflict serious harm on the public confidence in the judiciary. Bhushan's public expression of this particular opinion impairs the public perception of the judicial system. Malicious and false accusations of such kind do no more good than allowing one individual to express their opinion and, consequently, damage the stature of the judiciary in society.

Bhushan's expression of such an opinion, or anyone else voicing similar opinions, can deter millions from approaching the court as a result of their deplorable belief in the judiciary. A common citizen, educated or not, would receive a senior advocate's opinion with a degree of optimism and, subsequently, alter their perceptions of the judicial system by adding beliefs of a broken, partisan institution. In this case, where Bhushan's accusation on the SC's involvement in the destruction of democracy holds no merit or truth, finding him guilty for his comments on the court is justified considering the harm it inflicts on the public confidence in the judiciary.

People condemning the court's judgement have been swift to point out that upholding a citizen's freedom of expression is paramount and duty of the court. They believe that this incident is an example of the court's arbitrary use of its power to silence criticism. Though it's intelligible that people are outraged at a high profile case where their freedom of expressing criticism is at stake, it is important to consider the damage such opinions have on the public opinion at large and the ease and trust with which a citizen seeks justice.

An essential component of John Stuart Mill's theory of freedom of expression was the Harm principle which states that for an action "to constitute harm, an action must be injurious or set back important interests of particular people, interests in which they have rights." To analyse and understand the court's reasoning for convicting Bhushan, referring to the Harm principle is instructive. Restricting Bhushan's freedom of expression in this matter is justified due to the harm it inflicts on the public confidence at large. The court explains that "the trust, faith, and confidence of the citizens of the country in the judicial system is the sine qua non(essential) for the existence of rule of law." The validity of harm on public confidence and the resultant inhibition of exercising one's right to justice is considerable, especially when the accusations hold no merit.

Here arises the question of what responsibility we owe to the supreme court. Do citizens have a responsibility to upkeep the confidence in or image of the judiciary? Primarily, we can posit that citizens have the responsibility of exercising their rights judiciously, being mindful of the effect it may have on other's interest in exercising their own rights. Additionally, there is also a sense in which the judiciary is placed on a higher pedestal than other institutions in a democracy, justifiably so. One may criticise the government in all possible manner on its failures, shortcoming, negligence, etc. The first part of Bhushan's tweet mentions the destruction of India's democracy over the past six years. This claim, though irrelevant here, is one concerning political debate. Expressing criticism over the destruction of democracy by the government is completely justified, rather essential to make the citizens' voices heard and hold the government accountable. However, considering the stature of the judiciary in a democracy is important to gauge the rationale behind making an exception for the sort of criticism that Bhushan articulated.

The verdict mentions, "the Indian judiciary is not only one of the pillars on which the Indian democracy stands but is the central pillar. The Indian Constitutional democracy stands on the bedrock of rule of law." The judiciary is the last resort for a citizen seeking justice and protection from the government or their fellow citizens. Accusing the supreme court of destroying the system or ideals that it exists to protect is harmful to public sentiment and confidence and, hence, amounts to contempt of court.

River Interlinking

A Confluence of Ignorance, Ideological Misconception, and Irreparable Environmental Damage

By Adit Shankar

Find full story on our website.

At the outset it would perhaps be useful to demarcate two different terms that this article will be using: The first is inter-basin water transfer/river linking (in the Indian context), which refers to channeling water from one river basin to another by connecting them through a network of canals, barrages etc. The second is water diversion, which is simply the extraction of water from one drainage basin to areas outside of it through canals and underground pipe networks. While the second phenomenon is not the same as the first, the consequences both these projects entail are quite similar. An examination of the latter will prove helpful to our understanding of the former as well.



Image Source - The Caravan

A Flawed Logic

The rationale behind the inter-basin water transfer project has been rather arithmetic. Basins are divided into ‘surplus’ and ‘deficit’ basins through a simple subtraction of the available water quantity and the usage requirement in its drainage area. Further, it is postulated that basins that are prone to flooding can be connected to those that are prone to drought, which will ‘equalise’ the water quantity between them, mitigating both floods and droughts. Counterintuitively, climate change is used to buttress this logic on the basis of the simplistic notion that “wet regions get wetter and dry regions get drier”. Hence, it is said that interlinking rivers could not be more urgent and lucrative, precisely because of climate change.

The last notion is not borne out by the evidence at all; both ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ basins have experienced a change in rainfall patterns, water availability etc. in different directions. Climate change transforms the meteorological phenomena that interact with different geographies and biomes to produce complex changes that cannot be reduced to such maxims.

However, even more alarming is the logic of surpluses and the related argument about flood control. Life on earth would be much easier if ecological phenomena could be understood in terms of simple arithmetic; but, for better or worse, rivers are not arithmetic. They constitute ecosystems that are not simply the sum total of the water they carry, but exhibit several geological, biological, and environmental dimensions. Hence, the very idea of a water surplus is suspect; ‘human’ need that may itself be incorrectly approximated neither captures the aquatic systems a river supports, nor the long-term phenomenon of silting that nourishes drainage basins with sediments and nutrients. Moreover, the almost commonsensical notion of the water cycle implies that water does not simply ‘get wasted’ by entering the sea.

The idea of flood-drought mitigation, too, is based on the flawed categorisation of rivers into flood- and drought-prone. This misses out on the fact that floods and droughts are often seasonal occurrences—rivers that otherwise remain dry throughout the year could also induce floods during the monsoon, but that is not enough to pigeonhole them as ‘flood-prone’. Moreover, when the floods do occur, the capacity of these ‘river links’ would fall far short of the excess water held by these rivers to make a significant contribution. Further, it is often observed that within the same drainage basin, one rivulet may be flooded while other areas still are experiencing drought. Diverting water from such basins could exacerbate droughts rather than reduce floods (I emphasise that the project is intended to be an inter-basin rather than an intra-basin transfer. While the latter encompasses a natural geomorphological process and all small-scale water diversions within a river basin, the thrust of the project is in the former direction, as illustrated in the first article of this series, to connect entirely different drainage basins).

While the above are crucial conceptual flaws with the idea of an ‘interlinking’ project itself, the potential consequences of such a project serve to reinforce some of its problems. The following sections will provide an account of these consequences through relevant global examples.



Universalisation of Women Helpline Scheme

By Sanjana Hira

Taking notice of the alarmingly high rate of crimes against women in India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development has implemented schemes to reduce violence against women. Some of these include the 'One Stop Centres', 'Universalisation of Women Helpline Scheme', and the 'Mahila Police Volunteers Scheme'. They all come under the Nirbhaya Fund Framework – a non-lapsable fund for projects and schemes that pertain to the safety and security of women.

The Universalisation of Women Helpline Scheme was implemented in 2016 to provide 24 hours immediate emergency response to women by referring them to the pertinent authorities such as police stations, hospitals, or One Stop Centres. It also operates to dispense information about other government schemes throughout the country that are related to women safety. The Women Helpline (WHL) is integrated with One Stop Centres (OSCs) which provide aggrieved women with access to medical, psychological, and legal support. Women in need of these services can use the WHL to be referred to an OSC. The scheme has universalised all local helpline numbers to the dedicated single national helpline number '181' at the State and Union Territories level.

Services Under the Scheme

Based on the urgency and details given by an aggrieved woman (or someone on her behalf), the helpline responder can refer her to the relevant support services. If it is a dire situation in need of an immediate response, the nearest police station can dispatch a police control room (PCR) van to the caller's location. The WHL can also be used to register complaints about harassment on the phone or online. It also disseminates information about laws, existing schemes, and support programs pertaining to women and any woman requiring information about the same can use the helpline to receive guidance.

Accessibility

The Women Helpline is accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via telephone (including toll-free calls and SMSs) and the Internet (in the form of emails, links on web pages, and social networking sites). It also has the provision to track the location of an individual and trace the call, in case it gets cut off midway or if the situation worsens.

Qualitative Criticisms

While the Universalisation of Women Helpline Scheme has been implemented in 32 states and UTs across India, a press release from the Ministry of Women and Child Development posted on July 12, 2019, indicates that it has not been operational regularly across the years in some states. In Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka, for example, the helpline was not operational till the fiscal year 2018-19, even though the scheme came into action in FY 2016-17 in other states.

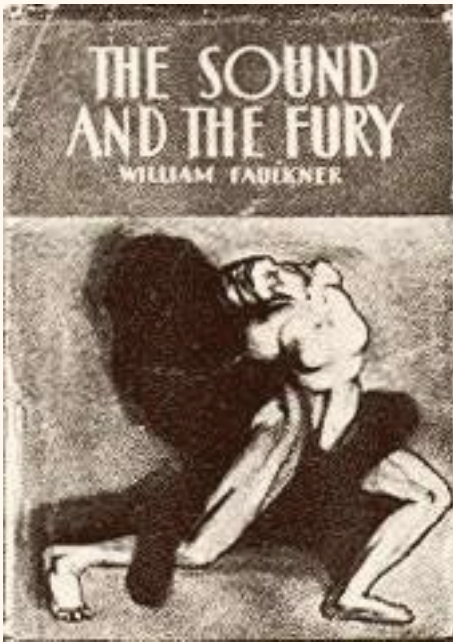
Since the purpose of the scheme is to universalise all calls to a singular nation-wide hotline number, it begs the question – are there enough responders to man the hotline in respective states? A statement provided by Smriti Irani paints a rather sketchy picture of the number of persons employed under the WHL scheme for the past 4 years. Haryana, for example, only has 6 employees working under the WHL – a number that has not increased since it first became operational in 2018. Similarly, Maharashtra started with only 1 respondent in 2016 and now boasts of a mere 8. While Gujarat has 170 employees under the scheme, Uttar Pradesh, a state with over thrice the population of Gujarat and a higher crime rate (as of 2016), only has 98. The disproportionate number of respondents to people living in each state casts doubt about the overall efficacy of the scheme.

Data provided for state/UT-wise sanction, release and utilisation of funds also reflects that many states did not utilise any of the allocated funds. Manipur, Maharashtra, and Lakshadweep did not spend a single rupee of the fund while Delhi and West Bengal utilised only a negligible fraction. In total, 65% of the 20.24 crores administered to the Universalisation of Women Helpline Scheme has been used from 2016-19. However, the state/UT-wise statement on the number of women who have benefitted from the helpline seems to display an upward trend for most states across the years. While the underutilisation of funds is less than ideal, the WHL scheme is still doing better in this aspect compared to some of the other schemes under the Nirbhaya Fund. The Nirbhaya Fund is grossly underutilised (only 9% utilisation overall), with some of its major schemes spending less than 25% of their funds. Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, New Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra received the highest funds from the Nirbhaya Fund but an average of merely 5-7 percent of the fund was utilised in these states. Despite a dismal record of the utilisation of funds, the Centre has been reallocating cash to the One-Stop Centre and Universalisation of Women Helpline schemes every year even in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh that did not utilise any of the money from the previous year.

In the face of the sheer number of crimes against women every day in India, the Centre cannot simply stop at devising schemes and funnelling money into them. While the framework of the schemes has potential, they are nowhere near the maximum capacity at which they should be operating. Clearly, pumping money into these schemes every year does not affect their potency if funds are underutilised and there are no sanctions in place to ensure that they are working optimally. The fund named after the horrifying 2012 rape case that shook the country is being used abysmally and it is the government's duty to warrant proper implementation of schemes and deliver on their promise of making this country safer for women.

Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*

By Snehal Sreedhar



William Faulkner's, *The Sound and the Fury*, is an American classic published in 1929 which adopts the stream-of-consciousness narrative style. It is divided into four sections of which the first one, is narrated by a thirty-three-year-old man called Benjamin (Benjy), who suffers from a mental disability. Although there are a lot of clouded notions regarding the plot, this section focusses mainly on the relationships that Benjy fosters with other characters. Keeping aside the many mysteries of the novel, these relationships are the easiest to figure out. Caddy, his older sister and Dilsey, the care-taker are the only two characters that express deep concern for Benjy. Apart from these two characters, Benjy narrates various incidences from his past and the present that include characters like Luster, who is depicted in the present, whereas T.P and Versh in his childhood. What makes these relationships prominent enough to be standing out amongst the blurred picture that Faulkner presents, is their peculiarity. Such relationships make the overall journey of reading interesting, as we are constantly finding the reasons behind these peculiar relationships. A great example of this would be Benjy's relationship with his mother. Mrs. Compson is portrayed as a self-centered woman who is indifferent to Benjy, despite his disability, which doesn't suggest a motherly attitude toward him. The familial connections that Faulkner thus builds up on, aren't in any way conventional which constitutes a major part of the storyline in itself.

Conventionality is what the author, thus, surpasses in his work, for nowhere in this novel is the reader meeting his expectations as he does while reading other novels. This plays a key role in deciding whether to read this novel or not. Faulkner, one of the most difficult writers of his time, thus, challenges the reader's patience with his novel. Upon reading the first section, we find it difficult to make connections especially between characters and the time period. Usually, the reader expects the author to introduce the main characters from whence begins the storyline. However, this narrative involves only a series of plots that aren't in sequence with respect to the time period, which thus, interrupts the flow in reading and also allows room for confusion regarding the storyline. Even the characters aren't introduced and one can only make deductions about their individual roles based on their dialogues and the work they do. Also, there are characters with exactly the same names ascribed to them, which again makes it harder, as the reader is then compelled to focus on the context in which their dialogues are based. Apart from all the difficulties, the language used by Faulkner isn't hard to comprehend at all. He has used simple and short sentences throughout. However, there are no punctuations being taken care of which also contributes to the text being difficult to understand.



Given that this book exceeds the conventional standards of novel writing, I would definitely recommend it to those who'd like to go beyond meeting their expectations. The novel also urges us to resolve the itch of an unsolved puzzle which makes it further more interesting, owing to the fact that Faulkner doesn't put things straightaway and has left that to the work of a reader. Hence, those bookworms who are willing to challenge their reading capabilities should definitely give this a read. Those who also wish to overcome the monotony of reading a structured book, should find this novel well out of the ordinary.

Constitutional Music

You have read that book by the sage, yes?
 Tried to lick the coarse pulpy page, yes?
 Overwrite and rewrite the articles, please
 We can always tear a sheet in a rage, yes?
 Make sure the cracks are deep, please
 Easy, the pages are yellow with age, yes?
 Try painting the cover orange, please
 We can always force them in a cage, yes?
 You can always get some prerna elsewhere please
 You cannot make this a place to engage, yes?

By Prerna Vij



Illustration by Manya Sachdev

Behind the Scenes: #helpyourhelpers

Poem by: Sharmishtha Ranawat, BTS volunteer

Pictures by: Khushi Arya, BTS Creative head

Project Coपल (Part 1)

जब सब कुछ लगभग ठीक चल रहा था
अचानक आ गई वैश्विक महामारी
और मानो सब कुछ थम गया
जहाँ कुछ लोग सोशल मीडिया
(social media) पर शेफ (chef) बने हुए थे
हजारों लोग आटे दाल को तरस रहे थे



नौकरियां चली गई, धंधे ठप हो गए
हाथों में रोज़ी नहीं मिलती थी
हाथों को मजदूरी नहीं मिलती थी
खाने के पैसे नहीं, महंगे पैड्स (pads) कौन
खरीदता!

हमें इतना कुछ देने वाले समाज के प्रति
हमारा कर्तव्य पूरा करते हुए हमने जागरूकता
फैलाई
महिलाओं को घर पर सैनिटरी पैड्स (sanitary
pads) बनाना सिखाया
जरूरत की पूर्तभी और रोजगार के अवसर भी

जनिकी जरूरत थी, उन्होंने खुद की जरूरत पूरी की
और दूसरों की भी
महिलाएं सशक्त हुईं, जॉब सीकर (job seeker)
से जॉब क्रेटर (job creator) बन गईं
मानवता को आत्मनिर्भर बनाते हुए
मुरझाए चहरे पर मुस्कान सजाते हुए
देशों की राजनीतिक सीमाओं को पार कराते हुए
Behind the Scenes और Kamakhya आगे
बढ़ता जा रहा है
क्योंकि खुशियों की सीमाएं नहीं होतीं।





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