

# The paradox of institutional silence

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

**T**HE paradox of silence is that it only accentuates the sound of things you may not want to hear. The silence I am talking about here is the institutional refusal to acknowledge, let alone address an unsavoury truth. If this truth happens to be the sexual harassment of an employee, save a rare handful, most institutions will look the other way, leaving the victim exposed and humiliated. For Constable Halima Begum of Mymensingh's Gauripur thana, who, according to her diary entry, was allegedly raped by a fellow colleague, the humiliation and torture was compounded when the officer in charge allegedly refused to accept her complaint. On April 2 she set herself on fire in the barracks of her police station, to escape forever, the pain of her ordeal.

According to her father, who found the diary, she has apparently given details of her rape, accusing a sub inspector which she said, had told her to accompany him on a raid where a female Yaba trader would be arrested and hence a policewoman was required. But this was just a pretext, she wrote, to get her alone and then rape her. In her diary she has said that when she went to the officer in charge to get redress he turned her away. The OC when asked by the BBC correspondent covering the incident, denied that she had come to him with such an allegation, instead he said that the concerned sub inspector had complained that Halima had been blackmailing him. There have been allegations that Halima had some sort of a relationship with the accused but this is refuted by her father. He says that Halima had just joined the thana in Mymensingh last December - around three months before her death. She had even conceded to getting married according to her family's choice. Earlier, he says, she had always said 'later' whenever her marriage was brought up; her dream was to become a high ranking officer and serve in a peace keeping mission abroad.



SOURCE: BOMBAYCHAMBER.COM

It is not ironical or implausible that a law enforcer would be the victim of a crime committed by another law enforcer. That's because the victim is a woman and no matter how efficient she is or what her credentials are, that is always what she will be to many of her colleagues. Thus while we are overjoyed to see women in the police force, standing side by side to guard the streets or taking part in dangerous operations, how much do we really know regarding their treatment by their male colleagues? According to a Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative 2016 report, more than 10 percent of women in the police have faced some form of sexual harassment. That is not insignificant considering the small percentage of women in law enforcement (around 6 percent) compared to their male counterparts, in the first place.

Sexual harassment, whether subtle or blatant, is something many working women are familiar with. It could be using lewd language or cracking sexually loaded jokes in front of a female colleague, it could be unwanted texts or calls, it could be blatant ogling and objectifying comments, it could be intentional physical contact that would be brushed away as 'accidental'. Or it could be worse - indecent proposals and then rape if they were refused. Despite an apparent zero tolerance policy when it comes to sexual harassment in most public institutions, the culture of silence and impunity makes sure that on paper, there is no trace of such crimes. Since the victims are almost always women in a male dominated workplace and the culprits are men in superior ranks or have ties with those in influential positions, it is unlikely that they will have the courage to report these

incidents. In the case of Halima who, according to what she wrote in her diary, was brave enough to report the rape, she was turned away. She was a constable, lower in rank to the sub inspector she had accused which in any case made it more likely that her plea for redress would be ignored.

Such silence has a way of spreading since other victims of sexual assault will be reluctant to report their nightmare knowing that nothing will be done. And if institutions like the police force do not take such complaints/allegations seriously and punish the culprits instead of protecting them, it does more than just mar their public image. It weakens the institution from the inside by corroding the morale of other women employees making them less trustful of their superiors and male peers. It sends out the message that it is okay to objectify female colleagues, make passes at them, that it is possible to get away with even sexually assaulting them. It may provoke women in the forces to quit and prospective women candidates to never join.

Although the percentage is small, in the last few years, there are more women than ever joining the police force which they view as prestigious and fulfills their desire to serve their country. They have also proved their commitment, intelligence and efficiency in this profession, proof of the fact that the police force needs more women. All the more reason for strict enforcement of a zero tolerance for sexual harassment.

Halima's father has filed a case against the sub inspector in question for rape and instigation to commit suicide. A three-member probe body headed by SA Newaji has been formed to investigate the case and the accused is in jail. The investigators are waiting for a postmortem report to ascertain if Halima had been raped although one can only wonder how anything can be ascertained after such a long time, on a burnt body. It is now up to the institution that employed Halima to prove its integrity by carrying out an objective investigation and set an example to the rest of the force and the public by punishing the individual, if found guilty, who has deprived the nation of a bright young policewoman.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Opinion & Editorial, The Daily Star.

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## Did the US just say 'pivot'?



RAVI VELLOOR

**T**HE hand-wringers of the past five months who forlornly expected that wider Asia was poised to be cashed out by an America under President

Donald Trump are probably breathing a bit easier lately.

Although Washington timed it poorly - US Vice-President Mike Pence's visit to Jakarta coincided with the Indonesian capital's frenzied election to appoint a new governor - it is noteworthy that Pence pointedly drove to the ASEAN Secretariat to deliver a key message. The American President, he said, would travel to Asia to attend three important summits: the APEC meeting in Vietnam, as well as the ASEAN-US and East Asia summits in Manila, the Philippines.

That the US was in a hurry to state this so early in the day - the summits are only in November, after all - sends a few reassuring signals, even as the news in some ways was overshadowed by the spectacular election loss of the Chinese-Christian governor of Jakarta.

The first is that contrary to initial expectations, Trump may not be that averse to multilateral diplomacy if it suits his purpose. Secondly, it holds a measure of reassurance of continued American strategic commitment to the South-east Asian region.

A hundred days into his term, there is much that Asia would wish of Trump when it comes to regional affairs. For instance, who doesn't pray that he'd move faster on so many key administration posts that remain unfilled, particularly in the State Department. The American spoils system that gives presidents an opportunity to bestow plum posts also means that key slots in Asia, such as the ambassadorships to Singapore, Tokyo and New Delhi, remain unoccupied. Indeed, with the exception of China,

we do not even have names yet for these positions, not to speak of the confirmation process that lies beyond.

But that is the way the American system functions and we are stuck with it. Meanwhile, Asia perhaps can draw some relief that Trump is showing signs that as he settles into office, the briefings that he shied away from in his initial days are having their impact. National interests, after all, are permanent. Like every new leader in office, he also probably realises that his predecessor wasn't as dumb or ill-advised as he had thought him to be.

For now, ASEAN can take some comfort that after an uncertain start, there has been a flurry of activity vis-avis South-east Asia and wider Asia.

As US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Murphy pointed out last week, his boss, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, has already hosted ASEAN ambassadors, and will be meeting ASEAN foreign ministers next Thursday. Indeed, this will be a second visit in quick time for Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh, also his nation's Foreign Minister, who recently called on Tillerson in the United States.

Interestingly, on the very day that Tillerson hosts ASEAN foreign ministers, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Trump will have their first face-to-face meeting - in New York City, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea, when the US and Australia jointly staved off enemy forces. Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has fervently pitched for America to recognise ASEAN centrality in Asian affairs, and it's a good guess that Turnbull will make the same point when he meets Trump.

All in all, there's a gathering momentum that should, by present indication, go only one way in the months ahead. Clearly, the Japanese and Chinese ambassadors who arranged summits for their bosses are not the only Asian envoys making headway in Washington. Other Asian envoys have been active too. The task

now is to make sure that Asian issues other than North Korea get Trump's attention.

In some ways, the speech Pence delivered last week on board the carrier USS Ronald Reagan as it lay anchored in Japan's Yokosuka naval base had echoes of the one delivered six years ago by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, standing on the deck of another carrier anchored in Manila Bay. In that speech she referred to the South China Sea as "West Philippine Sea", words that prompted Chinese concern and a phone call from a senior Chinese official to Kurt Campbell, in many ways the architect of the US pivot to Asia, to ask what was going on.



Indeed, the US Vice-President seemed to be reading from the Obama administration's playbook and then some. He noted that by 2020, the Pacific will host 60 percent of the US naval fleet, while the Pentagon had already moved F-35 Joint Strike Fighters into Japan. Pence went on to reiterate the US-Japan alliance as the bedrock of its ties with the Indo-Pacific, while putting out a warning that it would not be worth their while for anyone to test Trump's resolve.

Of course, you have to make allowance for the fact that Pence was addressing a largely military audience. Even so, the message that the US "shield stands guard, the sword stands ready" cannot be ignored. And at every

step of his Asia journey, Pence emphasised that he was constantly in touch with his boss and speaking on his behalf.

Sure, the Trump administration has dismissed the pivot or "rebalance" as the policy of the Obama administration. But clearly, Trump, while working on his own doctrine, apparently sees no issue in continuing with some of the old. Certainly, he shows no intention of tearing up things the way he did with the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Trump has met Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe twice, and more recently, conferred with Chinese President Xi Jinping over two days. Next week, he meets Turnbull. That leaves only one major part in the Asian jigsaw puzzle to patch: India.

The senior-most Trump administration official to reach New Delhi so far has been National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster. India currently is having trouble with both Xi and Trump, although their issues with the former are far more serious. While Obama, and particularly his defence secretary Ashton Carter, coddled India, Trump has proved vexatious for New Delhi.

For now, while it is working on a Modi-Trump summit, New Delhi is not unaware that like Obama and his Democratic predecessor Bill Clinton, many US leaders eventually come round to seeing its strategic value after starting out on a different path.

Abe, who is close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will no doubt use his access to Trump to press for India and for the US to think more broadly of what can be accomplished in Asia. But, as long as Trump's fixation is on North Korea, and that is entirely justifiable for the moment, anything else will have to wait. Beijing knows this, and will be happy to keep Washington focused on Pyongyang, one reason for it to both seem helpful and yet not do too much about the matter. For now, China's decision to adopt a mildly hunched profile before

Trump is working to its advantage.

If the Chinese continue to play ball on North Korea, and lie low on further militarisation of the South China Sea along with some apparent movement on a Code of Conduct with ASEAN, it can expect to have at least the US commander in chief off its back. The Pentagon though is a different matter and it will continue to keep a wary lookout.

China should be aware that Trump's warm glow towards it is mostly transactional and comes from a perception that he is getting his way with Beijing. Should he be thwarted, anger will follow. A US president confronted with repeated political setbacks at home can act like a wounded bear overseas.

What it all adds up to is that unlike Obama's nuanced and multi-pointed rebalance, Trump's approach is likely to lean towards the muscular mould as matches a personality that is more club than rapier. Certainly, there is no denying his flip-flops on so many issues, starting with his recent embrace of NATO and his reeling back of early positions on issues such as labelling China a currency manipulator and the "One China" policy he had questioned.

On the other hand, he has been consistent in his position that Asian and European nations should do more towards their own security and certainly pick up the tab for it.

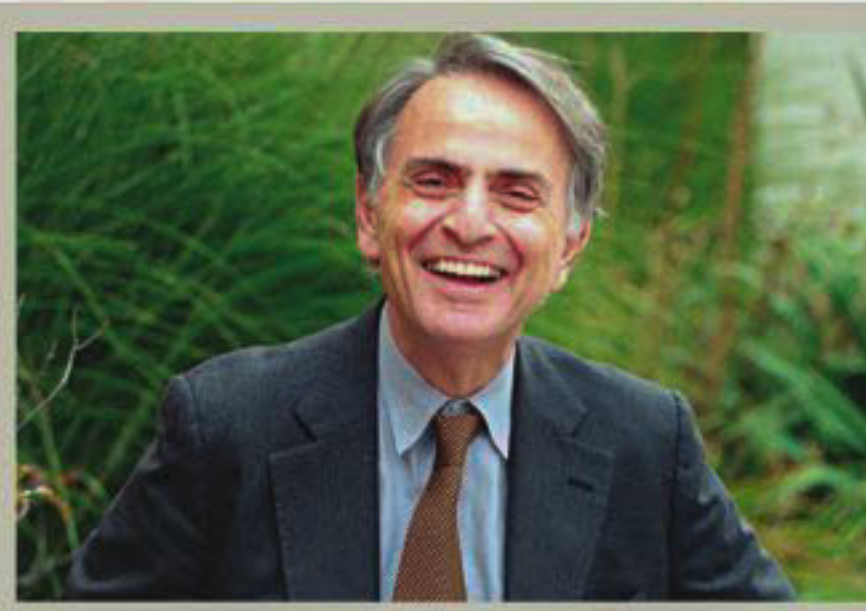
The Obama administration's rhetoric often projected a nobler purpose, for instance, of protecting the global commons. For Trump, it is all about himself, or to be a bit more generous, US interests. As long as the interests of much of Asia converge with his, and there is no reason why they should not, there should be no issue sharing the ride.

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This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.

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### QUOTABLE Quote



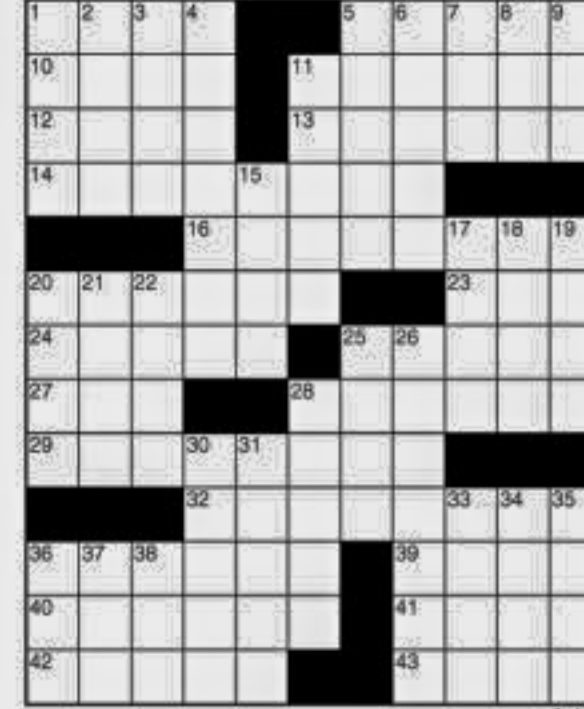
CARL SAGAN

American astronomer, cosmologist, astrophysicist and author

*Just the fact that some geniuses were laughed at does not imply that all who are laughed at are geniuses. They laughed at Columbus, they laughed at Fulton, they laughed at the Wright brothers. But they also laughed at Bozo the Clown.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>          | 32 Man at the wheel | 15 Sty cry              |
| 1 Meadow group         | 36 Extinguish       | 17 Track shape          |
| 5 Knight's quest       | 39 Plane part       | 18 Print unit           |
| 10 Baldwin of TV       | 40 Like some bagels | 19 Spots                |
| 11 Nice setting        | 41 Acceptable       | 20 Take in              |
| 12 Gambling city       | 42 Inclined         | 21 Theater award        |
| 13 Came down           | 43 Workout count    | 22 Nut's partner        |
| 14 Hearty dinner       |                     | 25 Shoots well, in away |
| 16 Refueling breaks    | <b>DOWN</b>         | 26 Franklin's wife      |
| 20 Spring signs        | 1 Complain          | 28 Eccentric            |
| 23 Compete             | 2 Bread spread      | 30 Setting item         |
| 24 Downloadable read   | 3 Departed          | 31 Gauding remark       |
| 25 Treaty goal         | 4 November sign     | 33 Gag                  |
| 27 Suffer              | 5 Lawn make-up      | 34 Kin of PDO           |
| 28 Cowboys' home       | 6 Singer Bonnie     | 35 Florida feature      |
| 29 Business with cages | 7 TV's Curry        | 36 Campaign pro         |
|                        | 8 Drink cooler      | 37 French article       |
|                        | 9 Was a pioneer     | 38 Aunt, in Acapulco    |
|                        | 11 College groups   |                         |



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SCOT PIAST  
TACIT LENTO  
ENEMY ORGAN  
EEL PROTEGE  
PROTEIN LED  
STEIN BAD  
ANGER  
CUR EXITS  
SET PROTECT  
PROTEST JAR  
RIPEN ITALY  
ASIAN CANEM  
YEAS ROSE

### BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

