

Suu Kyi's cowardly speech



THE de facto leader of our next-door neighbour, Aung San Suu Kyi's address on Tuesday surprised no one. She echoed the same old rhetoric that has been used time and again to displace the Rohingyas. The use of carefully crafted semantics in her much-awaited public speech on the mass exodus of Rohingyas that began in late August lent a softer tone to Myanmar's otherwise hostile attitude. She reinforced her government's commitment to restore "peace, stability and rule of law", invited her foreign friends to "join us in our endeavours" and said that visits can be arranged so that those who have chosen to stay back in their villages can tell the world why they have not fled. Her speech would give one the impression that the Myanmar government is finally taking a conciliatory approach to resolving the crisis—that is, if you ignore the multitude of baseless assertions disguised as facts and figures.

As journalists, aid workers, volunteers, and law enforcement officials in Bangladesh duly do their part to bring some relief to the refugees who have witnessed more violence than anyone should in a lifetime, Suu Kyi presented "facts" concocted by her government that basically sent the message "it's not as bad as it looks." Making sure to not once refer to the refugees as "Rohingya", with the exception of using the word only when talking about ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army), Suu Kyi and her government want the world to know that the term "Rohingya" must be used only when referring to a terrorist group. Forget citizenship—terrorism is the only thing that the Myanmar government is willing to attribute to the *entire* Rohingya population.

A list of the numerous claims made by Suu Kyi has been compiled and debunked by CNN. This includes her assertions that "the great majority of Rakhines have not joined the exodus" and "50 percent of the villages of Muslims are intact." Her conscious choice of not using the word "Rohingya" and referring to them simply as "Muslim" makes it hard to verify whether she is talking about the Rohingyas or the state's entire Muslim population. She also said that Muslims

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have access to the same education and healthcare services as the non-Muslim population, which we know is an outright lie unless you think the hundreds of reports documenting the discrimination and dispossession of the Rohingya population over the years are all false.

But Suu Kyi's complete disregard for truthfulness was perhaps displayed by her assertion that, "Since the fifth of September, there have been no armed clashes and there have been no clearance operations." Analysis of

satellite imagery by Amnesty International revealed that Rohingya villages were burnt even after September 5, and photos taken after that date by different agencies and photojournalists of this newspaper from the Bangladesh side of the border show columns of smoke rising from villages (including those of Maungdaw district). Without full investigation into the origin of the fires—Amnesty International termed it Myanmar government's "scorched-earth policy"—Suu Kyi's claims, which

of its own with a third of the country under water, the exodus of more than 400,000 Rohingya refugees at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is the last thing we needed. With refugee camps bursting at the seams and relief efforts haphazard at best, tackling this humanitarian disaster is proving to be unimaginably difficult.

But the plight of the Rohingyas has always registered sympathy in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government's courageous move to open

commitment, or rather the absence of it, is meaningless in the face of the enormous human tragedy on the other side of the border. With our back against the wall, we *had* to open our borders. And we did the right thing.

Refugee arrivals might have slowed down to a trickle but the real work has only just begun. Aid agencies are overwhelmed. The conditions are dire. Camps are overpopulated, with families cramped in makeshift tents that leak during the rain making it impossible to sleep. Children are going days without food. People wait in long queues only to return empty-handed. The water, sanitation and health situation is just as abysmal. Now that the focus has somewhat shifted from the macro to the micro i.e. from the unprecedented influx of Rohingya refugees to the herculean task of actually dealing with the crisis (containing spread of diseases, coordinating aid, etc.), new issues are surfacing every day.

But despite all that we have done and are doing, Suu Kyi, in her first public speech since August 25, far from acknowledging the need to work with the Bangladesh government and the latter's concerns as a nod of respect, chose to denounce "all human rights violations"—straight out of the "All Lives Matter" playbook. Suu Kyi's speech was not only "disappointing" but also cowardly. It towed the typical line of "we have to look at both sides", completely oblivious to the power dynamics at play: the national army versus a dispossessed population.

Then there's the façade of not fearing "international scrutiny" which is simply another rhetorical tool to dismiss legitimate criticism. Why did Suu Kyi then fail to be present at the UN General Assembly if there's nothing to be afraid of? Her "well-thought-out" speech, laced with lie after lie, goes to show that Myanmar's intentions with respect to the Rohingyas are not going to change anytime soon. And we shouldn't fall for it.

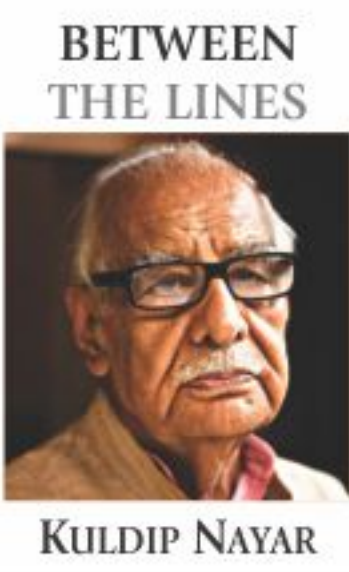
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PHOTO: KEYSTONE

INDIA'S WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL

Steps to empower women



BETWEEN THE LINES

FOR some reasons, mainly male chauvinism, the Women's Reservation Bill has not yet been passed by parliament. It was introduced in the Lok Sabha for the first time in 1996 when the then Prime Minister, Deve Gowda, was in office. As in the past, the bill was marked by high drama and hit roadblocks in each of its outings in Parliament before the historic measure cleared the first legislative hurdle in 2010.

The bill called for reserving 33 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and all state legislative assemblies for women. As per the draft, the seats were to be reserved for women on a rotation basis and would be determined by draw of lots in such a way that a seat would be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections. The draft stated that reservation of seats for women would cease to exist 15 years after the commencement of the amendment Act.

In fact, the 108th Constitution Amendment Bill, or what was popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, completed 21 years of being in existence last week on September 12. In all these years, it managed to get only the assent of the Rajya Sabha, thus far. In the last two decades the bill has seen much drama in both houses of parliament, clearly aimed at scuttling the measure, with some members even attempting to physically attack the then Rajya Sabha

chairman Hamid Ansari to disrupt its tabling.

The battle for greater representation to women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies was routinely punctuated, thanks to frayed tempers and war of words among members which, at times, got physical ever since different governments tossed around the bill passed for various reasons without success.

The bill, however, failed to get the approval of the house and was instead referred to a joint parliamentary committee. The committee submitted its report to the Lok Sabha soon after and in 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who headed the first National Democratic Alliance government, reintroduced the bill in the Lok Sabha. After M Thambidurai, then Law Minister, introduced the bill in the House, a Rashtriya Janata Dal MP snatched it from the Speaker and tore it into pieces. Thereafter, the bill lapsed every time the House was dissolved and was re-introduced by the government of the day in 1999, in 2002 and 2003.

Unfortunately, however, over the years a number of male parliamentarians have opposed the passing of the bill, leaving it in its current state. Even though the Congress, the Left and the BJP were heard openly pledging support for the bill, it just couldn't be passed in the Lok Sabha. No doubt, the Vajpayee government was certainly dependent on other parties for survival in 1998, which many political observers often suggest was the reason for not being able to assert itself.

However, after the 1999 mid-term polls, even though Vajpayee came back to power, the mandate was for the

National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which won 303 of the 544 Lok Sabha seats. This time Vajpayee was pushed into a situation where he had to keep all the parties together. Yet, given the support from the Congress and Left, the bill would have sailed through the House had it been formally put to vote. But that was not to be.

Just before the Lok Sabha elections in 2004, Vajpayee blamed Congress for stalling the bill and said that the BJP and its allies would pass the legislation after getting a decisive mandate in 2004 elections. In 2004, the UPA government had included it in the Common Minimum Programme, which said: "The UPA government will take the lead to introduce legislation for one-third

reservations for women in Vidhan Sabhas and in the Lok Sabha." In 2005, BJP announced complete support for the bill.

In 2008, the Manmohan Singh government introduced the bill in the Rajya Sabha. Two years later on March 9, 2010, a huge political barrier was overcome when it was passed by the House in spite of high drama and

scuffles between members. The BJP, the Left and some other parties came together with the ruling Congress to help pass it in the upper house.

Seven years have passed since that moment when top women leaders from the three major parties—Sonia Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj and Brinda Karat—gave a rare moment to media photographers

by walking hand in hand in impromptu celebration of that historic occasion. And yet, in 2017, it has still not seen the light of the day, simply because the political will to help make it a law has been lacking in the lower house. The UPA II government, in spite of having 262 seats in the Lok Sabha, too couldn't make it happen, citing the same excuse of being in a coalition.

Fortunately, the BJP does not suffer from that handicap. The party has the strength and can pass the bill. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also determined to get the legislation on his table. But I would be surprised if the bill becomes an act. Male parliamentarians in all parties do not want to share power with women. They do not treat them with dignity at home, they believe that women should not be empowered beyond a limit.

True, Modi for the first time has appointed a woman as the country's Defence Minister. This is a huge departure from the past. But both defence and foreign affairs going to women is definitely a bold step taken by Prime Minister Modi. These are indications of a positive thinking on Modi's part.

My only hope is that Modi would stay as determined as he is today to have the bill passed in parliament. Some people say that this is a measure only to get the votes of women with the 2019 general elections beckoning. Whatever the reasons, the women would be able to play an important role in the affairs of India if they are in substantial number in the Lok Sabha.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



ILLUSTRATION: SORIT

WG SEBALD

Vertigo
GERMAN WRITER AND ACADEMIC

How I wished during those sleepless hours that I belonged to a different nation, or better still.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Noted traitor	7 Folder type
1 Highlander	34 Relaxing site	8 Togetherness
5 Block, as a river	35 Binary base	9 Former Spanish coin
10 Knight wear	36 Carnival city	11 Fix shoes
12 Plain silly	37 Recipe units	14 Wood-working tools
13 Recroom game	40 TV's DeGeneres	19 Leto of "suicide Squad"
15 Mess up	41 Burn a bit	20 Tidy
16 Plopped down	42 Marsh plants	24 Razor sharpeners
17 British verb	43 Reduced amount	25 Learn completely
18 Something you shouldn't quit		26 Stab
20 Artery problem	DOWN	27 Prone
21 "... and — a good night"	1 Like some communities	29 To give an example
22 Turner of movies	2 Ark's landing site	30 Tosses
23 Baseball's PeeWee	3 Beginning stage	33 Rx amounts
25 Odometer unit	4 "Very funny!" in a text	35 Addition column
28 Personnel	5 Losing plan	38 Went first
31 Surrounded by	6 Curry on TV	39 Motor need

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

HEEL	SLAPS
ELBA	CAPRIS
LION	ACTONE
MONDALE	CUD
STYMIES	TOA
INS	LOUT
STINT	PARSE
PANE	CON
IMP	POODLES
CAL	IMPLODE
ELAINE	INGE
SECRET	NEAR
SEEDS	ERRS

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

YOU LOOK TIRED. I'VE BEEN ON MY FEET ALL DAY. WE LOVE OUR SOLDIERS. SUPPORT OUR TROOPS. GO ARMY! I CAN'T GOOF OFF IN FRONT OF THIS SUPPORT!

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

RANDY FROM WORK GOT A SKI BOAT. WOW, GOOD FOR HIM. MAYBE WE SHOULD... IF THE NEXT WORDS OUT OF YOUR MOUTH AREN'T "...GO OUT TO DINNER THIS WEEKEND," THIS CONVERSATION IS NOT GOING TO END WELL.