

# An assault on India's institutions



**AWAKENING INDIA**

IN India's Karnataka state, the governor is favouring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to form a government, despite an opposition coalition having won more seats in the state legislature. The ongoing controversy has drawn attention to the way in which a constitutional position has been reduced to serving the political interests of India's ruling party.

Strong public institutions that operate above the cut and thrust of the political fray are vital to any democracy. Yet in the last four years, every such priceless institution in the world's largest democracy, India, has come under threat, as the BJP's assertive Hindu-chauvinist government works to consolidate its own authority.

Leave aside governors (the BJP asked all to resign to make way for political appointees soon after its 2014 election victory) and start with the judicial system, which has come under scrutiny since January, when the Supreme Court's four most senior judges held an unprecedented press conference to question Chief Justice Dipak Misra's allocation of cases. Misra, their comments implied, was assigning cases to his preferred judges, presumably (though this was never stated) in an effort to secure outcomes favouring the government.

Three months later, several opposition parties circulated an impeachment motion against Misra in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of parliament. After the Rajya Sabha's chairman, Indian Vice President Venkaiah Naidu, rejected the motion, two MPs asked the Supreme Court to challenge that decision. But Misra named a bench seemingly favourable to him to hear their appeal—prompting the MPs to withdraw their case. Misra may be safe, but the judiciary's image has taken a beating from which it will not easily recover.

The reputation of India's Election Commission (EC)—which has a decades-long record of conducting free and fair

elections, despite comprising largely retired civil servants appointed by the government for fixed tenures—also took a severe blow last year. In a break from its Code of Conduct, the EC's BJP-appointed then-chief, Achal Kumar Jyoti, announced the dates for elections in Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat 13 days apart, even though the two states normally go to the polls simultaneously. The EC claimed that it delayed the announcement on Gujarat so that the electoral Code of Conduct (which would restrict government spending in the state) would not impede flood relief. But most Indians believe that the BJP pressured the EC to delay the announcement as long as possible, so that it could attract voters with last-minute giveaways that had nothing to do with flood relief. The Gujarat government and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi subsequently announced several such schemes. Former election commissioners

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unanimously condemned the EC's decision, to no avail.

Making matters worse, the EC decided in January to disqualify 20 Aam Aadmi Party members of the Delhi Legislature on technical grounds—an action that could have benefited the BJP if by-elections to their seats



PHOTO: AFP

had followed. The Delhi High Court overruled that decision, calling it “bad in law” and “violating principles of natural justice.” But, as in the case of the judiciary, the damage was done: what was once the impartial custodian of India's democratic process has—under BJP pressure—distorted its role, weakening its standing among Indians.

The list of increasingly discredited Indian institutions continues with the Reserve Bank of India. The disastrous demonetisation process of November 2016 spurred widespread criticism of the RBI for failing to perform its fiduciary duties. To be sure, the RBI did not appear to have been properly consulted when the BJP made its decision. Nonetheless, it roundly failed to anticipate the problems that the scheme would cause, and to use its autonomy to improve implementation and minimise negative effects. Instead, the RBI issued 138 notifications about the demonetisation process over 70 days, with each new announcement amounting to a tweak of an earlier declaration about, for example, how much money could be withdrawn and by when. It was as if the RBI had been reduced to a puppet, with the BJP government pulling its strings.

In January of last year, the United Forum

of Reserve Bank Officers and Employees wrote to the government to highlight “operational mismanagement,” which they argued had “dented the RBI's autonomy and reputation beyond repair.” The silence of the RBI's governor, Urjit Patel, reduced him to a lamb. But, in this case, the “silence of the lamb” was cannibalising the RBI itself, with—yet again—long-lasting consequences.

Modi's government has been similarly willing to politicise security institutions. For example, in appointing Lieutenant General Bipin Rawat as Chief of Army Staff, the government bypassed two higher-ranking generals, flouting time-honoured principles of seniority. Moreover, the government has repeatedly used the military in its political propaganda, making public operational details that previous governments had kept secret (such as announcing a “surgical strike” on terrorist bases in Pakistani-controlled territory). During the recent Karnataka state elections, Modi himself flagrantly exploited the Indian military for his own short-term ends, by denouncing India's first prime minister for allegedly having insulted two army chiefs from the state, though this never occurred.

The Delhi police and the federal investigative agencies—in particular, the Central Bureau of Investigation—are not safe

from politicisation either. The CBI has even been described as a “caged parrot” under the BJP, with its work, once considered the gold standard in Indian crime-fighting, now often viewed as politically motivated. The Right to Information Act, intended to ensure transparency and accountability, has been hollowed out by government foot-dragging, and a national Ombudsman, or Lokpal, has not yet been appointed, nearly five years after a law was passed to create the position.

Doubt has also been cast on the integrity of the Central Board of Secondary Education after questions for a national school exam were leaked, forcing 1.6 million students to re-sit the test. Similar problems have arisen over admission tests to study law and medicine, as well as exams for clerical positions. At a time when there are far fewer jobs than workers, declining faith in the competitive examination system as a fair means of evaluating students could undermine social peace.

Even the Indian parliament—the “temple of democracy”—has seen its work reduced to a farce, as BJP allies and supporters purposely brought the budget session of the Lok Sabha (the lower house) to a standstill in April 2018. With the BJP-appointed speaker claiming that she could not count heads in the din, opposition parties' motion of no confidence against the government was not even debated.

Such behaviour is being facilitated by an assault on a final critical institution: the free press, which now seems largely to have been cowed by the government's overweening power, not to mention its explicit intimidation and co-opting of mainstream outlets.

If this assault on India's institutions is allowed to continue, the public could lose faith in the system altogether. This would carry incalculable consequences for India's most valuable asset: its democracy.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

# Social laws of upward motion



**SHIFTING IMAGES**

OF late, I have been reflecting on an interesting aspect of our social discourse. These days anyone with a ready access to the Internet and the gift of the gab professes to be an expert on whatever topic is being discussed or has hit the headlines that week! No sooner have you settled into a comfortable sofa at a social event, you hear competing voices debating intricate subjects like Stephen Hawking's research on parallel universes or Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy on the complex relationship between man and Divinity. The conversations often turn into shouting matches where the contestant with the loudest or shrillest voice wins. Needless to say, people cut into each other's sentences with extraordinary confidence—an art that many may have mastered from watching CNN panel discussions!

I am sorry if I come across as being overcritical of these “social doyens.” It's not that I consider myself to be more knowledgeable, but I am a bit peeved that the self-appointed specialists often leave me utterly confused. Their sweeping generalisations have the same effect as fake news... at first sensational, but on deeper reflection, hollow and baseless. An incident at a social dinner has particularly rankled my sensitivities.

A little background is needed here. Since May is Rabindranath Tagore's birth month, I have been re-reading some of his writings, as I do each year. This year I was fascinated by a recurring theme that is embodied in many of his poems and songs: the *bishshoy* or wonderment of life, especially the idea that our very existence in this vast universe—*mahabishwa*—is chance or coincidence. Perhaps these thoughts were partly



ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA SUDIT

inspired by the changes in the landscape with the advent of spring. Nature's beauty has always captivated me, but with age, I have been reflecting more and more about the happenstance that brought me to this beautiful world. Tagore's poetry has also raised my awareness about the fact that nature is not static; it is “orchestral, participatory, musical” and is deeply connected to humanity. The Tagorean landscape listens, feels and emotes. An idea he artfully and elegantly expressed in the poem *The Palm Tree*: The tree imagines it has wings and can wander and travel to the land of the stars, until the wind subsides and its mind returns to its mother—the earth that nurtures and protects it.

These thoughts occupied my mind so completely that I impulsively articulated them at a recent dinner where the discussion had veered toward Tagore. No sooner had I uttered a sentence or two, almost everyone jumped into the conversation with multiple views and critiques of the author's work. One woman in particular embarked on an elaborate lecture

about her recent visit to Tagore's ancestral home in Jorasanko, Kolkata. The discussion, which by now had assumed the proportions of a sermon, morphed into the fashions pioneered by the women of Thakurbari (the house of the Tagores) and their contributions to the cuisine of Bengal. For ten full minutes, the lady dominated the discussion as the ultimate Tagore expert. In the course of the monologue, allusions were made about his romantic relationship with his sister-in-law and conclusions drawn about which particular poems were influenced by this “affair”! Needless to say, the original idea was lost in the haze of salacious information. I was somewhat riled that my conversation was hijacked. But more interestingly, I was overawed by the person's ability to convert her scanty knowledge into a pseudo-intellectual discourse. Wow!

As youngsters, we were nurtured in a culture where intellectual rigour was encouraged and recognised as the main source of knowledge. Most of our learning came from people who

had devoted a lifetime to their field of expertise, and were recognised as authorities. The prevalent Google quick-fix approach would have been sneered at and considered unreliable, or at best incomplete. One of the highlights of my mundane life has been that I spent some time at Tagore's university in Santiniketan where I had the good fortune to interact with personalities who actually knew Rabindranath Tagore. I would humbly listen to these exponents talk about “Gurudev” and tried to probe and learn about the philosophy and writings of the multi-faceted genius. However, I must confess that despite my lifelong relationship with *Rabindrasangeet*, I have only just begun to process and absorb the vastness of his literary and musical treasure trove. In this context, I remember what poet Shamsur Rahman once said to me: “The more you read Rabindranath, the

more you realise how little you understand him.” This sense of humility is something that I always carry with me.

The shallow remarks and judgments made by the lady at the social dinner should have embarrassed her and the audience. But it did not—because we live in a culture where ignorance is not punished, but the inability to promote oneself is penalised. And people who have an aesthetic distaste for making half-informed comments on serious topics are dismissed as ignorant.

The only consolation we have is that in this hybrid culture where facts and fiction are mixed to create half-baked knowledge, a basic law of science is not being defied—lighter objects float while heavier ones go under!

Millia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

## A WORD A DAY



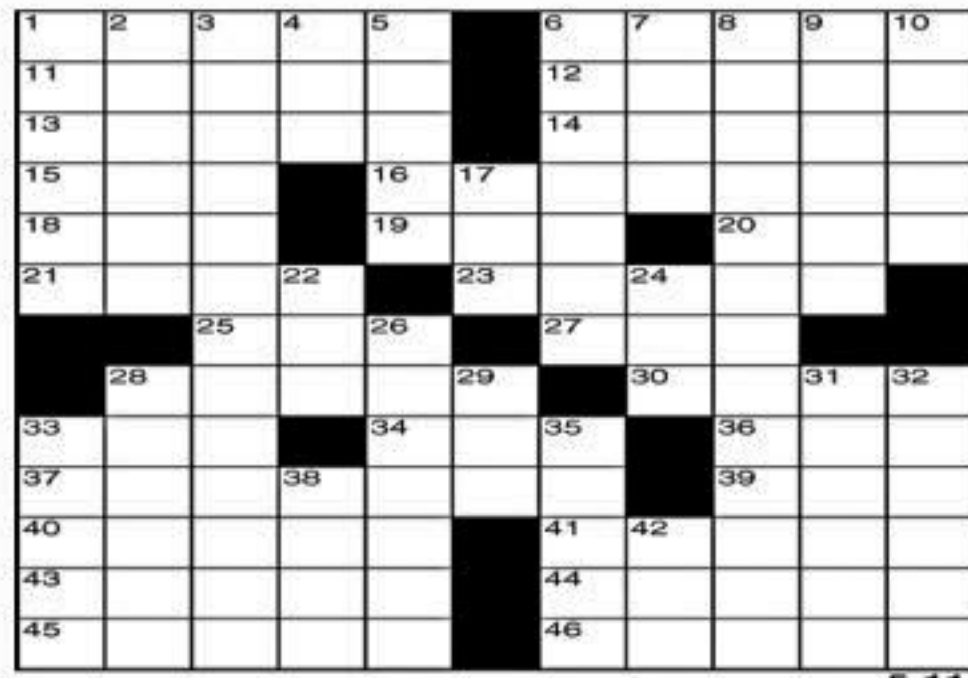
### MONASTIC ADJECTIVE

*Relating to monks, nuns, or others living under religious vows, or the buildings in which they live.*

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                        |                      |                         |
|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>          | 34 Lawn material     | 8 Yuma is on it         |
| 1 Half of a '60s group | 36 Argument          | 9 Rascals               |
| 6 Fires                | 37 Structure         | 10 Made clothing        |
| 11 Limber              | 39 Lyricist Gershwin | 17 Butter bit           |
| 12 Likely              | 40 Wanders           | 22 High hit             |
| 13 Stopwatch button    | 41 Relocation expert | 24 Clock numeral        |
| 14 Jimmy Smits series  | 43 Foot the bill     | 26 Stops                |
| 15 Powerful bunch      | 44 Consecutively     | 28 Felt topper          |
| 16 In the sky          | 45 Hinds' mates      | 29 Mythical flyer       |
| 18 Bustle              | 46 Categorises       | 31 Available, as a flat |
| 19 Fork over           |                      | 32 Tony and Oscar       |
| 20 Stop symbol         | <b>DOWN</b>          | 33 Australia city       |
| 21 Carry               | 1 Singer Carey       | 35 Floor models         |
| 23 Michener book       | 2 Meeting slate      | 38 Accomplishment       |
| 25 Reactor part        | 3 Omaha is on it     | 42 Music's Yoko         |
| 27 Pulled off          | 4 Brewery output     |                         |
| 28 Yarn component      | 5 Party prep         |                         |
| 30 Wee bit             | 6 Spread apart       |                         |
| 33 For each            | 7 Saudi native       |                         |

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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



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The Rex, Bashundhara

“As a doctor, I am always mindful of the safety of my patients as they are my responsibility. Similarly, it is also my responsibility to ensure a safe and secure home for my family, which is why when choosing a developer company, I entrusted bti to provide a safe haven for my family. The reliability and high quality of construction of bti assured me that my family would be safe and sound in our dream home.”

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