

EDITORIAL

Trump's move should not hit India-Iran ties

US President Donald Trump's decision on Wednesday to pull out of the Iranian nuclear deal, which his predecessor Barack Obama painstakingly put together in 2015 with America's closest Western allies in the UN Security Council, Britain and France, besides Russia and China, and Germany, can have likely unintended consequences.

We will know more in three to six months how all the other parties to the deal, which regretted and criticised the US decision, are doing in America's absence, and whether the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will still work.

One of the unanticipated results of the deal was on view straightaway, just after midnight Wednesday, as Iranian rockets in Syria apparently attacked Israeli troops illegally occupying Syria's Golan Heights since the 1967 war, and the Israelis retaliated with force, striking Iranian targets in Syria. Does this have the potential to lead to outright hostilities, or will this military exchange only complicate the already fraught West Asia picture, that resembles a tinderbox at the best of times?

The Obama-initiated JCPOA curbed Tehran's march toward production of nuclear weapons in exchange for lifting of sanctions imposed on it over an extended period. This gave Iran's economy relief, and it could once again trade with the world and get investments, and its famed petroleum and gas production was back in business.

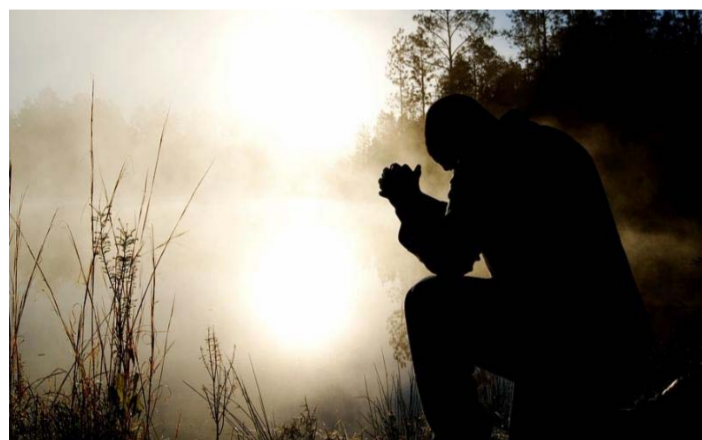
But Mr Trump wasn't happy. He decried the JCPOA as one of the worst agreements ever. He wanted curbs on Iran's missile development, and on Tehran's rising influence in Syria and Iraq and its involvement in the Arab world as it went about fighting ISIS. Only two countries have voiced happiness with the American decision — Israel and Saudi Arabia, both arch foes of Tehran.

Remarkably, the US leader reneged on the JCPOA through the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN atomic watchdog which has set the most stringent safeguards for Iran, has consistently reported Tehran has scrupulously stuck to its side of the deal.

This evidently means the US cannot be relied upon as a reliable partner internationally, and there is a lesson in this for India as well. Mr Trump's America has already reneged on the Paris climate pact and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In light of President Trump overturning the Iran deal, it's not clear how much confidence North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un will have in US assurances when he holds his summit with Mr Trump on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in the coming weeks.

India has a strong regional strategic partnership with Iran, as evident from the Chabahar developments, which impacts India's relations with Afghanistan, and the North-South International Transport Corridor, besides the long-standing hydrocarbons relationship, which had been disrupted by US sanctions before 2015. New Delhi must assert this and find feasible ways for financial transactions with Tehran in light of fresh US sanctions.

Our mortal nature



A human being does not turn spiritual because he thinks about God. If you think about God, you are usually only thinking about survival. Ninety-eight percent of the prayers in the world are "Dear God, give me this, give me that, protect me." This is not spirituality, it is just plain survival. It is just that you are routing your survival through heaven and that is the biggest problem in the country. To take care of simple survival, people are calling upon God and India is a living proof that it has not worked. If you want to survive well, you must just learn to use your four limbs and a few brain cells. So don't think you are spiritual because you think about God. If you think about God when you feel insecure or hungry or when you feel something is going to be lost, that is survival not spirituality.

You think about spirituality only when you are faced and confronted with death. When you know and realise that you are a mortal, when you become aware that tomorrow morning you may be dead, then you wonder what this is all about. You look like a whole, complete human being, but tomorrow morning you may evaporate and nobody is going to miss you. Everything will be fine in the world without you. The flowers will bloom better because you will be manure. So what does this mean? You want to know what is the nature of "Who I am." You want to know where you came from and where you will go. Now a spiritual process has started. So it is always in confrontation with death that a spiritual process starts.

Everybody should visit the cremation ground once in a while just to understand that this is where you will eventually go. You may think that you are going to so many places, you may think that you are educating yourself or that you are working or doing this and that, but your body, without any change in its direction and destination is going straight to the grave. That is the nature of the body.

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Holistic Approach to Fight Crimes Against Women

In my previous column, I discussed the issues with the Ordinance, stipulating death penalty in cases of rape of minors under 12 years of age, that has recently been proposed by the BJP Government and promulgated by President Ram Nath Kovind. I commented on how the measures proposed under the Ordinance essentially take the easy way out and may be a case of the cure being more harmful than the disease. In this week's column, I will propose certain steps that can help tackle the important issue of reducing crimes against women.

The current scenario: While the entire focus of the Prime Minister and the Government is on Karnataka and on campaigning, the recent horrific rape in Jharkhand has once again brought to light the crucial issue of women safety. Currently, India has a variety of laws that are aimed at protecting the rights of women, including strict penalties for crimes against women under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Although against a horrific and despicable backdrop of violent rapes and cases of sexual assault, the past few years have especially seen a spate of amendments to the criminal laws of our country to tackle this problem. Statistics, however, do not hint that these measures have contributed towards any meaningful improvement in

the situation. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics indicate how crimes against women increased over 8.7 per cent between 2014 and 2016. Another troubling trend is the increase in instances of domestic abuse. A primary reason for the steady increase in the number of crimes against women is the lack of focus on gender sensitisation. Therefore, the foundation of any approach, that is aimed at tackling these violent crimes, must first focus on the issues faced by women. Secondly, it must be grounded in the belief that women must be treated as absolute equals in society.

Gender sensitisation: The term 'gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender sensitisation is a practice of making people aware of such prejudices and roles that the society has attributed to both males and females and the primary purpose of gender sensitisation is to make people aware of such prejudices and differences between males and females. As stated above, while theoretically, there are a number of laws and programmes that are aimed at improving the status of women and reducing instances of crime against them, numbers on the

ground show that such measures have unfortunately not shown tangible results.

A large reason for this chasm between theory and practice is the lack of gender sensitisation programmes and conversations around gender in our country from the stage of drafting of legislations to the point of implementation of policies. Gender sensitisation programmes, however, should not be limited to the Government or the state but must be encouraged across age groups, ie, from children to adults and across forums and institutions (right from schools to offices).

To better understand how gender sensitisation can be useful specifically in the context of reducing instances of crime against women, one can look what the numbers tell us. For example, in order to ensure safety of women, it is important that women feel comfortable enough to report instances of violence against them. However, Indian police estimate that only four out of 10 rapes are reported. One of the reasons behind this abysmally low reportage is that currently, women are ashamed of being victims of such brutal crimes because they fear being ostracised and criticised by their family, their community and society as a whole.

Instead, men and women must be aware of

how in cases of rape or other forms of violence against women, there is no blame that can be attached to the victim. It is also imperative that women feel safe to approach the State or their family/communities for guidance and support and not be ridiculed. Another example where gender sensitisation is required is at the time of drafting legislations to protect women. I have discussed this in greater detail in my previous column where the Ordinance could do more harm than good. Therefore, Governments need to apprise themselves of ground realities and avoid quick fire measures.

Words to action: There is no denying that in most cases of rape or assault on women, there is a set of standard lines expressing grief and anguish that are surely getting worn out. Unfortunately, lack of ambition of moving from ephemeral words to tangible action is not only limited to comments to the media and the public but extends to the Government and the executive as well.

For example, with respect to police reforms, various committees and commissions have noted that police officers are overburdened and ill-equipped to conduct investigations in a professional manner. One of the recommendations that

have been suggested is training the police officers on modern investigative techniques. Another important change that must be introduced is the establishment of specialised investigative units within the police which will solely deal with investigation of crimes as opposed to law and order issues.

These changes will undoubtedly help the police achieve a higher conviction rate with respect to crimes against women. This is pertinent to note in light of the Ordinance, which provides for a shorter period for investigation but completely ignores the manner in which investigations are conducted. This is akin to putting the cart before the horse because it will almost certainly result in fewer convictions due to a weak case by the prosecution against the accused.

Another example is that of 'One Stop Centres' (OSC). This was an initiative that was announced by the present Government in 2015 to ensure that women, who are victims of rape and other forms of violence, can access the police and medical help at one place. While this is a noble cause, as per reports and accounts available online, hospitals that are required to maintain such OSCs are either unaware of the requirement to maintain or have not set up the rel-

evant infrastructure in accordance with the guidelines that have been set in place. RTI inquiries that have been made in relation to this initiative too do not indicate any real focus on this initiative since its announcement.

This seems to be a classic move of the current administration where the focus is on announcing bombastic changes but there is little or no follow-up on such initiatives. It is hardly surprising then that the abysmally poor numbers on the ground reflect the costs of these insincere efforts.

Ultimately, the root of the problem of violence against women in our country is our ignorance or blatant disregard for the issues that are faced by them. Therefore, in order to make strides towards reducing instances of violence, the need of the hour is to focus our efforts on sensitising, educating and informing the public in order to start chomping away at the root of this poisonous tree. At the same time, however, we must buttress these efforts by implementing measures and guidelines that are already in place rather than drafting new guidelines or legislations. There is no doubt that the measures discussed above will take time to bear fruit but if there is any problem that deserves our time, patience and energy, it is this one.

Treating the Unesco Syndrome

In 2017, UNESCO added Kumbh Mela under its list of Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) which was adopted in 2003. In 2016, yoga was added to the same list of this Convention. In both cases, the agency under the Ministry of Culture, which handled the nomination process and submitted the completed nominations, was the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Both, yoga and Kumbh Mela have been added to the 2003 Convention's 'Representative List' which is meant for intangible cultural heritage that is well looked after by communities (as defined under this Convention) and the state party (which means the country); whose future is in no way threatened.

These two additions in successive years to the UNESCO's culture list (which now has 13 'elements' of ICHs from India) signal the need to take into account several considerations concerning how our culture and heritage are viewed administratively and popularly. Likewise, it signals that the activities of the Ministry of Culture need careful scrutiny, and most importantly, we must be alert to the assimilation of a very recent internationalist invention to label knowledge and practices, some of which reach far back into our historical record as a civilisation.

In the late 1990s, with the 1972 World Heritage Convention already over 20-years-old, UNESCO commenced discussions on practices which celebrated and enabled the transmission of knowledge (values, techniques and meaning). This culminated in the 2003 ICH Convention which was ratified by India in 2005. Whereas, the World Heritage Convention is seen as a heritage embodied in structures, natural landscapes and tended landscapes; the ICH Convention is seen as encouraging the recognition of knowledge — the ways in which it is coded, the manner in which it is transferred between generations, the meanings and values attached to such codes, forms of transmission and their enactments. One is for built or natural form; and the

other is for an abstract concept.

India has 36 listings under the World Heritage Convention (28 cultural sites, including monuments and structures, seven natural sites, one mixed site) and is, therefore, more conversant with this mode, considering the built (or landscape) cultural heritage.

Of the 13 Indian intangible cultural heritage elements, several can readily be identified with what the ICH Convention considers intangible, such as Sankirtana (the ritual singing, drumming and dancing of Manipur), the Buddhist chanting of Ladakh, Chhau and the Kalbelia folk songs and dances of Rajasthan. Moreover, there were 23 elements nominated during 2010-12 to the ICH Convention's representative list which have not yet been considered for listing.

In a hurry to get as many of India's ICH 'elements' pushed into the showcase list of the UNESCO's ICH Convention (there is another called the urgent safeguarding list to which India has not submitted a single nomination), the Ministry of Culture and its autonomous organisations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Indra Gandhi National Centre for the Arts have overlooked both the important considerations mentioned earlier and have also overlooked the effects of not correcting some fundamentally weak areas of the ICH Convention.

This writer's association with the UNESCO 2003 ICH Convention is almost a decade old, and ever since 2011, he has provided training and advice to a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region on how the Convention can positively assist in their identifying, documenting and safeguarding endogenous knowledge systems and associated traditions and practices. This, the writer has done, keeping in mind the objectives of what UNESCO calls a "normative instrument" — ie, its cultural conventions, including the 2003 ICH Convention — which do not necessarily coincide with the objectives of the Ministry of Culture, or arts. And, therefore, especially while ap-

proaching fundamental concepts and terminologies, one must particularly be sensitive to not deliver an abstract 'international' package into a local environment thus, displacing local means of describing knowledge, its value, functions, contributions to social and community identity and terminologies.

Unfortunately, neither the Ministry of Culture nor the Sangeet Natak Akademi or the Indra Gandhi National Centre for Arts have invested serious efforts to determine the correspondences between the international terminologies and the concepts of a 'normative' cultural instrument such as the UNESCO 2003 ICH Convention and Indic systems of knowledge and worldviews where there is no distinction between tangible and intangible. According to the writer, there is one fundamental difference: That the living practices that form our intellectual and artistic heritage are not compartmentalised, as is done by the UNESCO cultural Conventions (including also the 2005 Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions).

There is another fundamental difference and that is the religious and spiritual core that breathes life into our intellectual and artistic heritage. But this, in the 2003 Convention, is not a consideration. That is why we find in the text of the yoga nomination file that there is not a single mention of 'yoga' being one of the systems of Hindu philosophy and also not that it is an 'Upaveda'. Its description instead includes "Yoga is a time honoured Indian holistic system of personal, physical, mental and spiritual wellness" and "Indian mythology traces the origin of yoga to the God Shiva".

With yoga having become popular in the West several decades ago; and as today it is known and followed worldwide, it is yoga's 'universal' (to employ a preferred cultural convention term) trait that is more favoured in descriptions than its Vedic and later Vedic origins. Giving such an emphasis is naturally less feasible with the Kumbh Mela, which is described in its

nomination file correctly as the largest human gathering in the world, but is qualified strangely as "a congregation of pilgrims mostly Hindus" and further with "the festival though particularly revolves around the Hindu rituals and mythology, it is in reality, an all encompassing, religiously tolerant and inclusive festival".

The use of phrases like these that are agnostic in nature or at best religion-neutral may have to do with the perceptions held by the Ministry about the outlook towards practices and knowledge systems held by the 2003 ICH Convention. Examining the yoga and Kumbh Mela treatment for this Convention, the perception which appears to have been held is that the religious or spiritual aspect of practices and knowledge systems must be muted and that their textual interpretation will gain in validity only if adequately glossed through gender, inclusiveness, tolerance and caste/equality.

In my view, the listings of yoga and Kumbh Mela in the representative list of the 2003 ICH Convention brings several adverse consequences.

First, by the listing, an entire system of philosophical thought and practice has been reduced to 'ICH'. Identifying and safeguarding ICH is good and benefits, especially, traditional cultivation, handicrafts, hand weavers, rural household industries and the festivals and social practices associated with them. But Indic intellectual, artistic and customary heritage is far more often than not considerably greater than the very recent, rather Eurocentric vision which formed the Convention.

Second, the 'success' of these two listings is likely to encourage both the Ministry and the State Governments to proffer what they consider candidate ICH elements to the 2003 Convention in a race for recognition. This writer's experience with countries that have done so is that the effects on the tradition bearers of ICH are more negative than positive. A UNESCO listing inevitably means encouraging a hierarchy in which the listed ICH — such as the 13 from India — are accorded a status superior to those unlisted, provincial or local. In the absence of a national or state means of according

equal recognition to our vidyas, kalas, natya and nritya, arts humble and mundane — all of which are a source of identity for their participants, listing becomes a liability.

Third, professionalism that UNESCO circulates to countries concerning the mechanics of its Conventions and the minutiae of its nomination and reporting processes tends to be mistaken both for knowledge about culture and how to document that knowledge. The two are completely different — one concerns a country's cultural, knowledge, practices and built or natural forms; the other concerns an inter-governmental process. This is the most adverse consequence for it causes entirely endogenous viewpoints and tools (definitions, vocabularies, values and meanings, roles, sciences major and minor) to become subordinate to what is a detailed administrative manual. If not guarded against stringently, within the course of two generations, the very modes of perceiving our extraordinary diversity of intangible cultural practices and forms will have been replaced.

Eyes raised heavenwards

Tell me what you read and I will tell you who you are", an old dictum which could be more accurate than the predictions of soothsayers and astrologers. Though millions of books are churned out regularly, one book that keeps people ever interested in it and which gets printed in hundreds of languages throughout the world is the Bible. The Bible itself is a collection of books and has two main parts — the Old and the New Testament, written over a period stretching approximately 2,000 years. It is neither a collection of books that record precise historical details nor is it a book of science. The Bible records people's faith experiences based on some historical events that took place in and around their lives. It continues to inspire faith and change people for the better. One, however, some-

times comes across certain passages in the Bible that may appear fictitious, but are not so. One such passage that would be read in the churches today giving reason to celebrate one of the important Christian feasts is the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is celebrated each year on the 40th day after Easter. In some of the European countries it is a national holiday providing opportunity to people to go to church. It always falls on a Thursday, though in India it would be celebrated on the coming Sunday. The Bible describes the Ascension thus: "...While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God." Another Bible passage that adds one more detail as Je-

sus was lifted up in the sky: "Two angels appeared to them (disciples) and asked them why they were gazing into heaven. Then one of the angels said, 'This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him going into heaven.'"

For those of us struggling with faith in matters divine, Jesus' resurrection is itself difficult to believe. And now those who see everything from scientific angle would find the Ascension event absolutely unbelievable. Seen, however, with the eyes of faith, the ascension of Jesus into heaven is actually a bridge that he builds for us to arrive at our final destination — heaven. Throughout his life he had taught people to live in such a way that God's kingdom having a divine vision be established on earth.