

comment

THINK IT OVER
Fashion is a form of ugliness
so intolerable that we have to
alter it every six months
OSCAR WILDE



WORD OF THE DAY
SCREENAGER
A young person who has grown up
with, and is hence comfortable with
screens such as TV and computers

Dialling the correct code

The acquisition of Zain Telecom will help Airtel create a new business template

Sunil Bharti Mittal's acquisition of the Africa operations of Zain Telecom for \$10.7 billion is the latest episode in the great Indian takeover. Coming as it does when international capital markets have not yet fully recovered from the worst crash in living memory, Mr Mittal's ability to raise \$8.5 billion for the acquisition is testimony to India's rising export of frugal engineering. Zain loses money in Africa despite its customers running up telephone bills twice as large as Airtel users. Mittal's game-changing outsourcing skills — Bharti Airtel has hived off most of its core telephony operations, making it one of the least expensive telecom service providers in the world — could help turn Zain around. Particularly for a company that has 42 million customers in the continent against the 33 million Airtel added in India last year in an intensely competitive market.

Mr Mittal has led the surge in telecommunications investment in India that ought to top \$80 billion in the five years to 2012. Indian mobile telecom companies have, in the process, signed up 545 million customers of which Airtel has 125 million, but the easy money is behind them. Every new subscriber brings \$4.9 of business a month to Bharti Airtel and this number is falling precipitously as India's telecom network spreads from its cities to its villages amidst a bruising price war. Africa, where one in three persons has a cellphone but runs up a monthly bill of \$8, thus offers Mr Mittal a chance to dip into a revenue pool that he is accustomed to converting into profit. This explains Mr Mittal's continuing obsession with the African market, where he was prepared to pay 40 per cent more for each MTN customer before talks with the South African telecom company broke down last year over ownership issues.

In a way, the writing is on the wall for Mr Mittal and his tribe. The money in emerging telecom markets remains in voice traffic while mature networks are seeking extra dollars from data. India is poised to auction radio frequency for third-generation telecom services like high-speed internet access and streaming video. But on current indications telecom companies that land the extra spectrum will use it to unclog their networks to carry more voice traffic from even more customers. Mr Mittal is fervently seeking out the billions at the bottom of the pyramid — he has taken his company to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh — and Africa should give him the scale to create a new template for an industry at the crossroads.

Let it flow free

Daily baths harm the environment, says a study. In India, we love them more than French perfumes

It is no longer clean, to be clean.

A new study by the US Environment Protection Agency suggests that waste from showers and baths that include gels, shampoos and other skin products seem to find their way into water supplies, even into drinking water. Apparently, even birth control pills and traces of anti-depressants end up in drinking water.

Now we who live in the sultry climes of India are not likely to take too kindly to having to restrict our bathing activities. Many of us are serial bathers, barring a few who may have seen the horror of *Psycho* and are chary of stepping into the shower too often. Cleanliness, we were told as children, is only next to Godliness, but clearly the green fundamentalists will have none of that. We are now told that active pharmaceutical ingredients may have a longer lasting impact on the environment than bodily secretions. So, we guess, that we have no other option but to restrict our bathing activities to the bare minimum. Now this may go down well in our metros given that we hardly have power, which means no water, for the greater part of the day. However, this could mean a quantum jump in our use of chemical products like deodorants.

So, apart from adding to greenhouse gases, we will also be polluting our water sources. Well, there's not much choice, is there? Either we envelope ourselves in the best that the French perfumers can offer or we just jump into the shower. But then again, it takes enormous amounts of clear water to create the best of perfumes of the likes of Chanel etc. So perhaps, aqua fresh is the best bet for the likes of us who can really not afford to douse ourselves in upmarket scents everyday.

Lower the barriers

Reservations will help shake people out of their ignorant prejudices against women in politics and open the way for a much bigger pool of political talent

Learned from reading the Indian press recently that the Upper House of the Parliament had passed a Bill reserving 33 per cent of the seats in Parliament for what the press described as the 'fair sex', or more evenhandedly, the 'fairer sex'. Given that this Bill entitles women to at least a third of the most-powerful directly-elected positions in the country, one might want to believe that this was a reference to women's superior commitment to justice. But I suspect that it had a lot more to do with the aesthetics of their bodies.

The passage of the Bill was not easy and its prospects in the Lower House remain fraught. Its opponents — inspired no doubt in part by concerns about the effects of spending too much time in the unhealthy confines of the Parliament on feminine beauty (and the social order) — tied themselves into knots explaining that they really did not have anything against reservations for women, just the particular type of reservation that was being proposed. The Bill's supporters held on to the moral high ground, insisting that women deserve representation commensurate with their presence in the population (but then why not a quota for those born into poor families, who are clearly also under-represented?). Very little of the argument, on either side, had to do with what I consider to be the central questions: do reservations work? Do they actually empower women? What do they do to the quality of governance?

This is particularly surprising given that India has had reservations in panchayats and municipalities for more than a decade and these have been extensively studied. About 10 years ago, Raghav Chattopadhyay from Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and my Massachusetts Institute of Technology colleague Esther Dufo asked whether women in panchayats, who got elected because of reservations, were better able to deliver what their female constituents want than their male counterparts? Or were they reluctant stooges for their husbands and fathers, powerless to do anything different from that their male backers would have chosen?

To answer this question Chattopadhyay and Dufo compared villages that were reserved to have a female pradhan with unreserved villages. Since both Rajasthan and West Bengal chose the villages to reserve by lottery, there was no systematic prior difference among these villages. The results show a clear difference in spending patterns. In West Bengal, reserved villages spent significantly more on both roads and drinking water, which were the two things that women most asked questions about in panchayat meetings.

In Rajasthan, they spent more on water, which, likewise, was the subject of most questions by women, which was perhaps even more striking given that many of the women pradhans keep purdah and villagers routinely refer to pradhanpati (pradhan's husband) as the go-to person in the village. The women in power may not show their faces, but they seem to have their hands on the steering wheel.

This, of course, suggests a different concern — perhaps women leaders do exercise power, but do so incompetently. After all they are less likely to be educated and less likely to know the ways of the world. In work with Lori Beaman of Northwestern University, Rohini Pande of Harvard and Petia Topalova of the International Monetary Fund, Chattopadhyay and Dufo look at this question. In West Bengal, households in panchayats reserved for women are less likely to report that they had to pay a bribe to get something done. Using data from 13 states, Kaivan Munshi of Brown University and Mark Rosenzweig from Yale, conclude that women representatives are significantly better at claiming pub-



■ **CALLING THE SHOTS:** A woman sarpanch examines NREGA job cards in Rajasthan

lic resources for their constituency.

But if women are so great why do they need reservations to get elected? The answer, Rikhil Bhavnani of Stanford University suggests, is that most people have no experience of women running things outside the home and, therefore, dismiss the possibility out of hand. Once they have experience with women legislators, the prejudice diminishes noticeably. In elections to the Mumbai municipal corporation, women are five times more likely to be elected in wards that had been reserved for them in the past but were no longer reserved, than in wards with no history of reservation. Beaman and company find the same pattern in rural West Bengal and, in addition, show direct evidence of declining prejudice, though they conclude that it may take two rounds of exposure rather than one to fully get rid of prejudice. The experience is Rwanda, where an initial 33 per cent reservation lead over a few years to a woman majority parliament, is entirely consistent with this view.

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The most important reason why we should want reservations may, therefore, be that they help shake people out of their ignorant prejudices against women in politics and open the way for the country to draw upon a much bigger pool of political talent. Indeed, one might argue that politics is one place where, if this Bill were to pass, we might expect to eventually see more talented women than men just because — the movie *Aandhi* notwithstanding — there is probably less social prejudice against a mother and a wife becoming a politician than a factory manager or a travelling saleswoman.

If this is the right way to think about reservations, then it would be important to have the reservations rotate through across various constituencies so that everyone gets a chance to experience female leadership. And maybe a day will come when people will get so used to voting for women that men will be clamouring for reservations for the (unfair?) sex.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

the poverty line

ABHIJIT BANERJEE



BetweenUs

Pankaj Vohra, Political Editor



Justice delayed is often justice undone

The deposition of senior IPS officer Anju Gupta highlighting the role of BJP leader L.K. Advani during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, can be interpreted as a clear pointer to his involvement. But it is not sufficient to hold him guilty. The conclusion establishing either guilt or innocence can only be pronounced by the relevant court after all the depositions are completed. So, it is premature to comment on the final outcome of the case which is an example of the slow pace at which justice is delivered in our country.

It is not the Ayodhya case alone but several other landmark cases where the law has taken more time than necessary without reaching any conclusion. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots cases are pending in the courts and there is nothing to suggest that the guilty will be punished any time soon. Similarly, in the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim riots, the judiciary is taking its time to come to a judgement. On the whole, the state of our judiciary needs to be examined so that courts do not sit on cases. The problem with cases like Ayodhya, the 1984 riots and the 2002 killings is that a perception has been created about the involvement of certain individuals in the crime. It is difficult to convince people who have prejudged the issues on the merits of the law. In a way, the media have helped to strengthen these perceptions and it is, therefore, not easy for any court to come to a judgement that is different from the commonly held view. It is in this context that it becomes important for the media to understand



ANJU GUPTA'S DEPOSITION IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY STATEMENTS BEFORE THE COURT. TO REACH ANY CONCLUSION ON ITS BASIS IS PREMATURE. THERE ARE MANY DIMENSIONS TO THE BABRI MASJID DEMOLITION CASE

that it should not interfere in the process of justice by pronouncing people guilty before they are actually given such a verdict by a proper court of law which alone is empowered to pass the final judgement. Interference by the media does impact the progress of the case and it is not in the interest of justice. Anju Gupta's deposition is just one of the many statements before the court. To reach any conclusion on its basis is premature. There are many dimensions to the Babri Masjid demolition case. It is true that the BJP leaders and those from the VHP were present there. But it

has also to be ascertained whether the central government then headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao did enough to prevent the demolitions despite being warned of the threat well in advance. In fact, Rao had been cautioned by his Cabinet colleague M.L. Fotedar but somehow did not take adequate measures to prevent the disputed structure from coming down.

The overall case will, of course, take these points into account. The Ayodhya case has been allowed to drag on because of non-cooperation from many quarters as well as the lack of will of the state to prosecute the guilty. The same will be lacking in the Gujarat case as also in that of 1984. These cases have political dimensions and each player wants to obviously extract as much as possible. There are vested interests which have been formed and do not allow matters to move forward. Each time such a case comes up in public purview, someone seems to benefit.

In the latest instance, the Hindutva forces must be pleased with so much focus on the deposition of Anju Gupta. The issue has come alive once again. The point is that, on the whole, the judiciary must act fast. Because justice delayed is justice undone. But it certainly does not mean that a trial by perception should be allowed to succeed whether in cases with political dimensions or those that have social ramifications. The truth is a combination of many facts. This must be clearly understood. The judiciary as a whole must pull up its socks and not behave like other organs of our system. Between us.

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The Congress should handle issues with maturity

This has reference to Namita Bhandare's article *An unnecessary link* (March 26). The needless fracas over the inauguration of the new extension of the Bandra-Worli sealink reflects the immaturity of the Congress. It's ludicrous that the ruling party of the country should waste time bickering over Amitabh Bachchan's presence at the inauguration. The Gandhi and Bachchan families may have their differences but they should have enough sense to deal with them in private and not in front of the whole nation.

Shanti Prakash Karir, via email

Come to the aid of the nation

Ramachandra Guha in *Bind spots* (*History Matters*, March 24) correctly suggested that in view of the rising Maoist movement, political parties should put their mutual differences on the back-burner and rise above votebank politics to find a solution to the problem. It was a pleasant surprise to see Brinda Karat and Sushma Swaraj hug each other following the passage of Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha. That various parties came together to cooperate for the common good of the country is inspiring as such moments in the Indian political arena are hard to come by considering our politicians never look beyond their party affiliations.

Bal Govind, Noida

II

Ramachandra Guha has rightly advocated the need for a political consensus on issues of national importance in these polarised times. If major national parties join hands on issues that threaten the stability of the Indian polity, they would render a great service to the nation. Half of the problems that face our nation today remain unresolved due to lack of cooperation among political parties. The essential reason for being in politics should be to serve the nation opposed to one's own party's interests.

Arvind Dhumal, Jalandhar

It's really a hungry tide

Samar Halarnkar in *The hungry republic* (*Maha Bharat*, March 25) rightly argued that our growth model will not be sustainable if millions of Indians remain hungry and malnourished. Most schemes on job and food security have failed due to misgovernance and corruption. India's leaders and politicians would rather appropriate funds allocated for food requirements than use that money to feed the needy. The success of a country cannot be measured in terms of the number of billionaires it has. A nation can only be considered prosperous when no one sleeps hungry.

R.J. Khurana, Bhopal

Talking through their hats

With reference to the editorial *We're seeing red* (*The Pundit*, March 25), the controversy over Bhagat Singh's depiction in an advertisement is unfortunate. Whether the great martyr wore a turban or a hat or sported a patch of beard or not is immaterial. By indulging in mindless controversies over such frivolous matters is tantamount to disrespecting the freedom fighter. Instead of arguing over turbans and hats, one must show respect by contributing to the progress of the nation.

R.K. Malhotra, Delhi

Delhiites are paying a heavy price

The chairman of the Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, Suresh Kalmadi, has no idea about how Delhiites are paying for the Commonwealth Games when he claims that 'the Games won't cost the country a penny' (*The Games won't cost the country a penny*, March 24). The preparations for the Games have turned Delhi into a dustbowl causing illnesses across all ages, creating traffic jams, not to mention the hike in fuel prices and additional taxes. It's unfair on the government's part to burden citizens with taxes and price hikes.

Vinode K. Mohindra, via email

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