

• WEST BENGAL

Unwanted new broom

IT SEEMS TO BE THE SEASON FOR top-level resignations from blue-chip higher ed institutions. Soon after the highly respected public intellectual Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Dr. Arvind Subramanian, former chief economic advisor of the BJP/NDA government, put in their papers at the ambitious, privately-promoted Ashoka University in Delhi NCR on March 15, Dr. Anju Seth, the first woman director of the vintage top-ranked Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (IIM-C, estb.1961), sent her resignation letter to the prime minister's office and IIM-C's board of governors. The board is chaired by **Shrikrishna Kulkarni**, the great grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and former managing director of Paragon India and founder-president of Future India.

In her resignation letter dated March 21, Seth accused Kulkarni and the board of "misgiving and denigrating her publicly." A highly qualified alumna of Delhi University, IIM-C itself and awarded a Ph D in business strategy by the Stephen M. Ross School of Business, Michigan University, USA, Seth was recruited from Virginia Tech (USA) where she is a tenured professor of business management, in November 2018 for a four-year term.

"I am deeply anguished at not being able to fulfil this mandate and help turn around IIM-C to a world-class institution with a distinctive Indian heritage. This situation has arisen because of a breakdown in confidence escalating over the past four months between me as director and CEO and you (Kulkarni) as chairman of the board. To the best of my ability, I have been conducting my responsibilities as director and CEO in the best long-run interests of the institute with a focus on urgent reforms, forward-looking decisions and in the interest of all stakehold-



Seth: sweeping reforms agenda

ers," wrote Seth in her resignation letter accused by the *Economic Times*. Although Seth's resignation letter went viral on social media, Kulkarni, members of the board of governors, and faculty have maintained a studied silence on the issue.

Nevertheless, according to off-the-record conversations with faculty and alumni it's clear that Seth swiftly transformed into a new broom in a tearing hurry to sweep this essentially faculty-run institute clean. She discerned "open breach of government guidelines in matters of procurement and recruitment of personnel" and "legacy issues related to lack of transparency or accountability, misuse of public funds, a weak financial situation," and charged Kulkarni and the board with "undue interference" which impeded her reform initiatives.

But Seth's aggressive reforms agenda not only choiced off the board of governors but also the faculty of this vintage B-school which is routinely ranked with IIM-Ahmedabad and IIM-Bangalore as the best B-school in India.

Quite clearly neither this widely respected B-school's board nor its faculty believe that IIM-C needs urgent and radical "urgent reforms". Last December 40 of IIM-C's faculty wrote to the Union education min-

istry complaining that under Seth's leadership, there was "decline in academic and research environment" and "systematic undermining" of the academic council, the institute's principal curriculum framing and governance body.

Evidently, the board and faculty have no regrets about Seth's resignation a year before her term which was scheduled to end in January 2022. On March 24, the board of IIM-Calcutta named **Subir Bhattacharya**, the senior-most faculty member, as the director-in-charge and promptly constituted a search committee to recruit a new director.

"One hopes that this time round, the board won't recruit an academic from a foreign university, no matter how eminent. Most of these imports tend to be tenured professors in American universities where there is no retirement age. They take leave of absence to make an impact in India in a hurry. They have little understanding of local conditions and culture of institutions that hire them and like bulls in a China shop, recklessly disrupt well-established institutions," says a retired senior board member of IIM-C who has been monitoring the "big dust up" in IIM-C with "very amusement".

That's useful advice IIM-C's newly-constituted search committee would do well to bear in mind.

Rishabh Mukherjee (Kolkata)

• MADHYA PRADESH

Unprecedented verdict

DESPITE 'RAGGING' — AN ANCIENT initiation ritual during which new entrants into schools and colleges are teased and bullied by seniors having been banned by the Central and state governments and inviting the wrath of the Supreme Court — acts of ragging are punishable by fines of up to Rs.50,000, jail terms ranging from six months to ten years

— this brutal rite of passage, refuses to die out.

In an unprecedented judicial verdict on February 5, a sessions court in Bhopal sentenced four women pharmacy students of the RKDF Medical College, Bhopal, to five years imprisonment for abetting the suicide of a first-year student following continuous ragging. Additional sessions court judge Amit Ranjan also imposed a fine of Rs.8,000 on the convicts.

According to the prosecution, the convicted students mentally and physically tortured **Ankita Sharma** driving her to suicide by hanging on August 7, 2013. In a suicide note, the deceased named the four senior students and also indicted the college management for not paying heed to her complaints and failing and neglecting to stamp out this humiliating practice.

Shortly after Sharma's tragic suicide, a PIL (public interest litigation) was filed by a medical student in Indore, and the Madhya Pradesh high court served notice on the state government to implement the Raghavan Committee's report (2007) and Supreme Court directives to curb ragging in education institutions statewide. The PIL petition listed corrupt practices including ragging that are rife in 23 medical and 15 dental colleges of Madhya Pradesh (pop.73 million).

Admitting the PIL on September 2, 2013, a division bench comprising acting Chief Justice K.K. Lahoti and Justice Subhash Kakade served notices on Barkatullah University, Bhopal, the district collector and RKDF Medical College, where the accused students and the deceased were studying. However, neither the Congress (Dec 2018-March 2020) nor the incumbent BJP government has addressed the ragging ritual which is practised widely across the state.

According to data compiled by the Aman Movement, which manages an anti-ragging helpline for the Delhi-based University Grants Commission, although ragging cases in higher education institutions countrywide have

fallen sharply from 40 percent in 2009 to 4 percent, 132 ragging complaints were filed in MP in 2019. This is the highest number of complaints filed from any state since the Aman Movement started receiving complaints a decade ago.

To curb the incidence of this pernicious college initiation rite which often has serious consequences, educationists and human rights activists are calling for specific anti-ragging legislation from the state government on lines of the Maharashtra Prohibition of Ragging Act, 1999.

"Andhra Pradesh has its own state legislated anti-ragging law, titled Andhra Pradesh Ragging Prohibition Act, 1997. Consequently, while Andhra had only 29 ragging complaints last year, in MP, 132 ragging complaints were registered. There is a need to have a state enacted anti-ragging law," says **Deepak Gour**, a Bhopal-based lawyer.

Clearly, an idea whose time has come.

Aditi Maheswari (Bhopal)

► KARNATAKA

Reopening dithering

EVEN AS SEVERAL PARTS OF THE country are bracing for a second wave following a massive surge in Covid-19 cases, parents of primary school children in Karnataka (pop.63 million) are divided on the issue of sending their children back to school.

An online survey conducted last month (March) by the Vidyarthigala Nade Shaleya Kade (VNSK, 'Students' march towards school'), a Bengaluru-based NGO comprising educationists, doctors, teachers, and parents, indicates that 82.24 percent of households are in favour of commencement of on-campus classes for primary school children in the next academic year beginning July 2021. Of the 3,165 parents interviewed, a majority of 2,603 wanted schools reopened for primary children.



On the other hand, another study conducted by LocalCircles, an online platform, indicates that 72 percent of households in Bengaluru and 62 percent statewide are unwilling to send their children to school until a substantial percentage of the state's population is vaccinated and the Covid-19 pandemic subsides. The LocalCircles online survey covered 9,687 respondent households countrywide including 1,971 in Karnataka. These households have incomes of above Rs.3 lakh per annum.

Dr. V.P. Niranjanaradhya, senior fellow at Universalization of the Equitable Quality Education Programme of the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, and prime mover of the VNSK survey, says the two surveys reflect the differing aspirations of low-income and high-income households.

"The majority of sample respondents in our survey comprised low-income families. Government *anganwadis* and primary schools provide a safer environment for children than their cramped homes in crowded localities. Moreover, children are assured of a free mid-day meal in government *anganwa-*