

OPINION

Relevant for: Indian Polity & Constitution | Topic: Rights Issues - Human Rights and NHRC

It's heads-up time again, beginning with the Top-10 issues for 2019 flagged by the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB), a London-based advocacy group. While it is important for us in India to track global trends in this necessary arena, it's also important to question some assertions, and traces of a white-man's-burden approach to analysis.

Yes, Myanmar is a top-of-the-mind instance of appalling human rights violations, from genocide and displacement to "reduced freedom of expression". But surely it doesn't merit a solo display under one of the Top-10 issues titled "Embedding International Standards in New Democracies".

Relatively new democracies in its South-East Asian neighbourhood continue to be flagrant violators of human rights in every aspect, including business. Relatively older South Asian democracies, too, including India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, besides "younger" Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan. Not a word. Nor a word on older European and American democracies complicit in violations through wars in the Middle East and businesses across the world. Not a word on Russia. It may pin down Myanmar, but it doesn't absolve others.

The only matter that this country-specific cause célèbre offers as object lesson to others, as IHRB's list points out, is the possibility of the European Commission suspending Myanmar's tariff-free access on grounds of human rights violations. It's tricky, though, as it could affect apparel workers in Myanmar, but "unfortunately have no impact on the wider problems in Rakhine (the Rohingya issue) and elsewhere".

"Promoting Rights Through Sport" is authored by David Grevemberg (each Top-10 issue is elaborated by practitioners), who is the CEO of the Commonwealth Games Federation. Grevemberg highlights empowering work his organization has undertaken. He also makes this confusing assertion: "The Commonwealth family was a bulwark in the fight against South African Apartheid in 1970s and 80s."

"Commonwealth" has historically meant the wealth and resources of all of Britain's colonies were common to Britain, which for long condoned Apartheid. Little "common" benefit exists today across its former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, beyond the abomination of the tag and deification of British monarchy at such games.

Other issues in the heads-up are suitably reactive and proactive. "Eliminating Gender Discrimination Within Workplaces and Across Wider Society" is worth every capitalization and necessary to repeat through the down cycles of #MeToo. "Defending Rights Holders Challenging Power" is crucial to ensure governments and business leaders don't view the calling out of "actions or inactions" of those implicated in human rights abuses "as enemies, but instead as vital and legitimate actors in our shared society".

"Safeguarding Rights of Workers on the Move"—migrant workers—is literally the lifeblood of this most global of activities. Indeed, I would even suggest that, instead of focusing on often-flat please-all, glib listings, organizations like IHRB publish deep-dives through "Year of the ..." reports to create enduring awareness and influence change.

"Measuring Performance to Move Shareholders" champions the necessity of businesses measuring up on a human rights index. Readers of this column would recall its tracking the progress of the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark. Even with implicit pitfalls like a "best in

class” approach that can push a company to tart itself up though tick-marks and public relations, it’s pathbreaking. (I shall discuss the 2018 rankings in a subsequent column.)

“Forging Remedy in Post-Conflict Scenarios” is surely worth deep dives with Colombia and, closer home, in Nepal, and the Naga conflict in India—which this column investigates.

“Harnessing Technology to Respect Rights Across Trade and Transport Chains” is a nascent field, equally practical and philosophical in its construct. And “Ensuring Dignity While Building Infrastructure” intersects with migrant labour and gender issues, and could do with clearer pitch and deeper dive.

But what does one do with “Upholding Rights in the Face of Massive Investments in Emerging Economies”, a China-is-Peril point that criticizes the adverse financial, environmental, political, geopolitical and human rights fallout of its Belt and Roads Initiative, among other things? China will tinker where it needs to, get away with it where it can—just like most businesses.

This column focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights and runs on Thursdays.

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