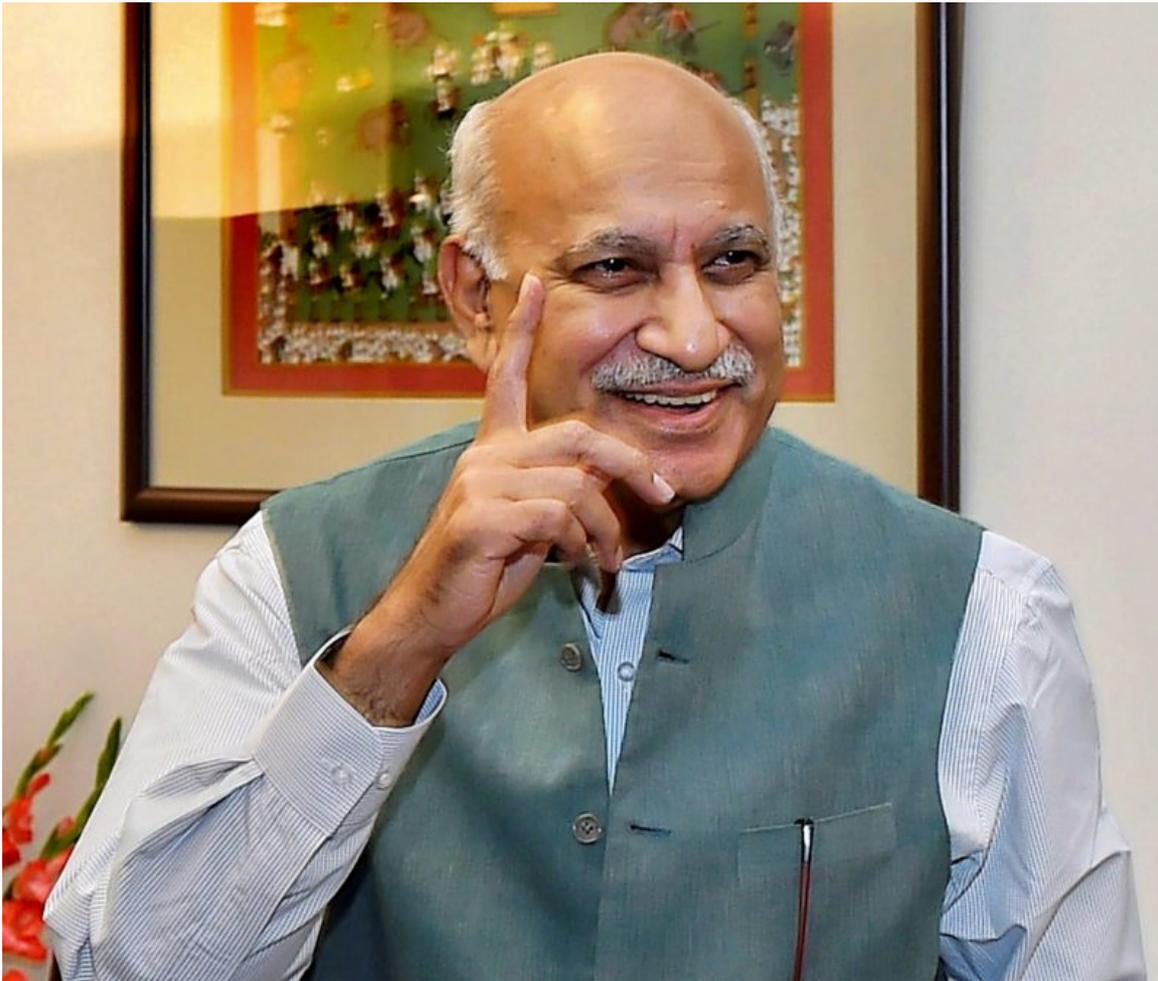


# India's foreign office could not afford a man like MJ Akbar: Nirupama Rao on ThePrint

NIRUPAMA RAO • 17 October, 2018



File image of MJ Akbar | PTI

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**Foreign offices are projectors of the national identity and character. M.J. Akbar's continuation in office would have been awkward to explain.**

**T**he resignation of union minister of state for external affairs M.J. Akbar is a welcome development. His continuation in the post was untenable, for the reason that the allegations about his exploitative behaviour when he was one of India's leading editors could not have been ignored.

Sexually exploitative behaviour can never be appeased or explained away with studious nonchalance, or by saying that as long as no sexual crime (for example, rape) is committed, where's the problem? There is a problem. Any woman will tell you how unwarranted and non-consensual physical advances are traumatic and, very often, leave a devastating psychological impact that lasts through life. The word 'violation' has so many connotations. I need not explain further.

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The women who accused Akbar of inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour must have had just cause to do so. Their accounts are graphic and searing. No man or woman of conscience can ignore them. Society must listen, take note, and make our

workplaces more secure for working women. The jungle cannot encroach on spaces that are meant to epitomise human security and civilised behaviour.

The foreign office of any country that is a proud standard bearer of democracy and gender equality cannot afford to have a shadow fall on its image — the shadow of a controversial senior leader of the institution who has been serially accused of wrongful behaviour.

Foreign offices and their functionaries are reflections of the country they represent — they are on the frontline, projectors of the national identity and character. They cannot hide from unrelenting global scrutiny in times like these. Akbar's exit cannot but be welcomed. His continuation in office would have been awkward to explain even for the best of our spin doctors.

That said, even as the accused in this case exits from a public office, the problem remains. Countless sagas of such exploitation remain unsaid and unrevealed. Many women remain hesitant to talk about their own experiences in this regard, apprehensive about social reaction, or the backlash of making an accusation. The government has policies in place that are meant to protect women against sexual assault or inappropriate advances from their male colleagues. But so many women have kept their silence.

In some cases, the inquiry into such allegations leads nowhere, and is inconclusive. The spotlight of course, remains on the woman indefinitely as the 'accuser', and she is in a sense typecast more as an 'exhibit' than a crusader for justice.

I think it is necessary for male colleagues in the workplace to be much more sensitive to the definitions of inappropriate behaviour or inappropriate conversation with their female counterparts. Regular training modules (many institutions globally require these) and properly ingesting the dos and don'ts are vital.

There are so many men in this world who are caring, decent, genuinely concerned about the welfare of women, and recognise the need for women to be safe and secure in the workplace and outside. They should provide the benchmark to the others who are careless, or blatantly chauvinist and sexist, and/or just insensitive to the problems confronted by women when they leave the security of their families and their homes.

Essentially, men should recognise and respect the sanctity of women and their constitutional right to contribute to national progress and development by pursuing a profession for which they are fully qualified and capable. By that same calculus, men who infringe upon the law-ordained safety, sanctity and security — both physical and psychological — of their female colleagues and subordinates must not be emboldened to indulge in unacceptable advances, because they know there exists a culture of fear or appeasement, brought about by power distance and strict hierarchies. That is a nightmare scenario for any institution.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, seeks to protect women in India from sexual harassment at their places of work. It is the law of the land. The act defines sexual harassment as resulting in violation of the fundamental rights of a woman to equality under articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution of India, her right to life and to live with dignity, and her right to practice any profession, which includes a right to a safe environment free from sexual harassment.

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Also read: [M.J. Akbar is not the only predator, sexual is not the only harassment for woman journalists](#)

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The Akbar scandal and controversy should provide a powerful reason for government, corporate and media house employers within the country to clearly state what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace. There should be strict compliance with training modules that create awareness and acceptance of a strict behaviour code, and to have a zero-tolerance policy towards transgressions of the 2013 Act.

The #MeToo movement is not a female rant. There are genuine reasons for the women of the world to speak out against sexual harassment in the workplace.

The author is a former foreign secretary, and was India's ambassador to the US.

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