

TWILIGHT OF THE GANGS IN UP • JAMES ASTILL ON US ELECTIONS

THE AYODHYA ACQUITTAL • REMEMBERING JASWANT SINGH



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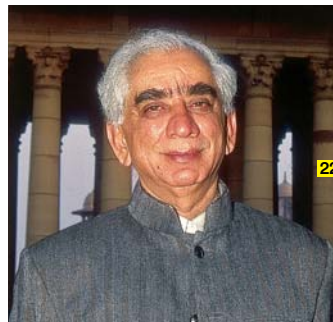
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OPEN MAIL

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

By any criterion, 2020 is *annus horribilis* ('Covid-19: The Surge', October 5th, 2020). The world has never seen such a long crisis that literally eats up a whole year. This might as well be called 'the Long 20th Year'. Human civilisation is scarred by the deep losses of life and property and unending miseries. India's trademark '*jugaad*' too has drawn a blank this time. No one has an idea about how to get out of this mess till the vaccine is out—and after that about how to come out of the social and economic mess. The coronavirus pandemic is 'nature's fury unleashed in free verse'. Possibly even nonsense verse. All predictions have failed so far. Despite over half a year's existence, we know close to nothing about the virus. Every finding about its spread and nature turns out false with the next batch of evidence. Every time there is a palpable drop in the number of cases, the virus comes back with a new challenge. As everytime we scale a new peak, we realise there's a higher point, we are then able to see from where we have reached. Where is the Everest of Covid-19 cases? Like Ulysses, I feel 'maybe the gulfs will wash us down/ It maybe we shall touch the happy Isles.' The only silver lining in all of this is that when communities recognise their interconnectedness, they do not fail to come together. With science anchoring us, we shall win.

Sangeeta Kampani



a day when the recognition of the *amour propre* in women would come first.

Arun Kampani

BETTER LATE

Indian agriculture has finally got its much needed reforms ('The Farmer Unfettered', October 5th, 2020). But opposition parties are still singing to an old tune and failing the country and its farmers. They have not understood that when it comes to the new farm legislation, 'God is in the details'. There is nothing in these laws which calls for agitation. These only help make more lucrative options for India's beleaguered farmers who have become resigned to the exploitation of *dalals* and *mandis*. The issue is simple: if I want to sell my produce in the market—offline or online—I should have no problems with where and how I get the best price. Both the options are now open for farmers. Farmers are being grossly misled by opposition parties. That is the real tragedy of Indian politics today. The Government should talk to the farmers directly.

Ashok Goswami

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THE BOOK OF THE HINDUS

Bibek Debroy is one of our best contemporary scholars and a true polymath ('A Dirge for Desire', October 5th, 2020). He wears multiple hats of economist, Sanskrit scholar and translator and with élan—as was evident in his piece on the many Gitas of Hindu theology, specifically the Kama Gita. I do tend to take a contrarian stand on the popular claim, made by Debroy too, that Hindus do not have a primary holy book and I have written about it myself. The Vedas are accepted by all Hindu texts as foundational by stating that '*vedokhilo dharmamoolam*' (the Vedas are the root of all dharma).

Ramakrishnan Srinivasan

WOMEN IN THIS WORLD

We in India can fully relate to Mehr Tarar's essay on women and the sheer maiming of the female personality behind the veil of 'honour', something that shamefully occurs in both the countries ('No Country for Women', October 5th, 2020). But the good thing is that we are beginning to see an attitudinal change in the new generation which is sensitive to gender issues. I am sure women will build on this positive change further and as Kaifi Azmi said so eloquently, '*kadr teri is tareekh ne jaani hi nahi/ tujh me sholay bhi hain, sirf ashqfishani hi nahi*' (There is a lot more to women than tears). Hopefully, we will see



By S PRASANARAJAN

THE HOUSE OF JASWANT SINGH

HONOUR IS THE word that recurs in the self-expressions of Jaswant Singh. *A Call to Honour*—a nod to his idol Charles de Gaulle—is what he calls his memoirs, in which a dutiful nationalist strikes a fine balance between ancestral morality and territorial affinity. It was “a call that had to be honoured”, whether it was the formation of India’s first right-wing government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee or managing the aftermath of the Pokhran nuclear tests of 1998 or breaking out of the behavioural traps of Third Worldism and anti-Americanism. He served as a “caravaneer”—he could not resist a resonant archaism borrowed from the desert—of a moment in India’s life that required “re-routing from the unrealistic idealism of a past that was long gone to the needed realism of a new, demanding and an impatient age, between the fixities of a handed-down wisdom and the needed dualism of our times.” When I met him in his office in South Block in 2000, he was the foreign minister who loved to quote the Gita to explain the nature of his job. It is rooted in *smriti*, he told me, the meaning of which can’t be fully captured by the English word ‘memory’, and, in the Gita, it appears in the first canto when Krishna counsels Arjuna. Seventeen cantos later, Arjuna tells Krishna that he has regained his *smriti*. “It is the function of foreign policy to enable the nation to regain its national *smriti*,” he said in that measured baritone. *It was a call that had to be honoured.*

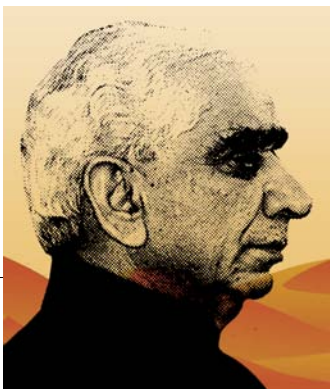
Reading him, one realises that he had the first intimations of that call when he grew up in the House—that is what he calls it, always with a Capital H—in the Rajasthani village of Jasol, in Mallani, today’s Barmer. He failed to represent Barmer in Lok Sabha and the defeat would remain a bitter aftertaste in his political life that began as a national calling and ended as a personal humiliation. He would never recover. The House from where he inherited the moral grammar of Mallani was “built by time”. The House, a work in progress, signified “age and ancientness”, always echoing “a stone-mason’s hammer and chisel”. Keep moving, keep building—that was the House ethos. “And wherever we went, there was just one injunction that accompanied us, as a task and responsibility: ‘It is the name of this House...Remember!’” Lest-I-forget—and it alone determined the pace of the remarkable

journey of an officer, a gentleman, an administrator, and, in the end, a lone man whose sighs and sorrows went unnoticed in the other House that shaped his political life.

The inflection points in the journey were exhilarating as well as demoralising; they were also a nationalist’s hard choices. It was exhilarating when he was Prime Minister Vajpayee’s chosen man to bring India from the residual fog of the Cold War to the sunset of anti-Americanism. As India’s interlocutor in a transformative period, he enjoyed every moment of it, making a few American friends along the way. As our uber diplomat JN Dixit once told me, he was “India’s first public-school educated, anglicised foreign minister after Nehru.” The refinement helped when India needed a language freed from ideology. Then there was Kandahar—the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 and the hostage exchange. It was painful pragmatism that took him to Kandahar. For some, it was surrender to terror. He was the man in the sordid picture, and the picture never revealed what raged within him.

And then came the misread book, *Jinnah: India, Partition, Independence*, which angered some nationalists because he argued that “Jinnah did not so much win Pakistan as the Congress leaders Nehru and Patel finally conceded Pakistan to Jinnah, with the British acting as an ever helpful midwife.” The Patel part was blasphemy. He did not exonerate Jinnah. The book traced the evolution of a man who began as a national constitutionalist, peaked as a Muslim separatist and ended up as the creator of Pakistan and a rhetorical secularist who would be defeated by his own creation. Singh was the second Hindu nationalist haunted by the Quaid-i-Azam. He would be banished for thought crime. He was not for recanting; honour didn’t allow him. Public life for him did not mean compromising on the moral inheritance from the House in Jasol. He would return to the House in his own metaphorical ways, most memorably as a writer, and even as a solitary soldier who hoped his party would indulge him for once. The battles never ended.

I remember that evening in Jaisalmer many summers ago. Relaxing after a hard day’s campaigning, he pointed to the sandy vastness and reminisced about a childhood enriched by the mystic desert. Maybe that howling expansiveness of freedom prepared him for the harsher realisations of a life far from the House of Jasol. ■



INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

THE COVID-19 pandemic may have rendered tens of millions redundant, but one set of people whose fishy business seems to have seen phenomenal growth in these past six months is telemarketers/conmen. Not a day passes without someone coming up with a new way to try and coax gullible people with their smooth-tongued spiel into parting with their hard-earned money. Posing as Good Samaritans, they exploit an ingrained sense of greed of potential victims. The latest con apparently is to trap people into buying expensive life insurance policy on the pretext of reviving their long lapsed policies. The modus operandi is simple. The caller has nothing but your good at heart, introducing himself as an executive of a major bank which had issued the policy you completely forgot all about. He has accidentally discovered that after purchasing the policy, you did not to pay premium in the subsequent years. Told you don't really recall such a policy, the caller reels off its number, date of purchase, maturity, etcetera. Yes, he can help. Reviving the policy on which you had shelled out, say, Rs 50,000 as first premium, would entail buying a new policy which will enable you in reviving the old, long-forgotten policy. Motivated by the urge to save your original Rs 50,000, you shed all scepticism. Soon, an agent is at your door, ready to sell a brand new policy. This policy would earn the agent virtually the entire amount you pay as premium by way of commission. As the days pass, you find you are saddled with a new policy but there is no sight of the conman who had promised to help you salvage the old policy. The caller and the agent have done



the vanishing act. In any case, there was no old policy to begin with. He had worked on natural human gullibility to recover lost investment. Now you are stuck with an actual policy to keep which active, you are expected to regularly pay premium—unless you want to write it off as a dead loss.

How do I tell this tale of deception in such detail? Well, a friend almost fell for the con until at the last minute he got suspicious and threw out the agent. The ubiquity of mobile phones has multiplied the telemarketing frauds a million times. Speaking for myself, on an average, I get a couple of calls daily trying to interest me in some property in Noida or Gurugram. Indeed, owning a vehicle too has become a source of nuisance, with well-established car distributors/service garages harassing you about 'due service-tuning,' or about renewal of the annual insurance, etcetera. Efforts to block such pesky calls through service providers have proved futile. Maybe, the telecom regulator can take a call to ensure that citizens are not troubled by ceaseless unsolicited telemarketing. Or, there could be a mandatory registration of telemarketers to curb their ever-growing numbers.

As things are, housewives barely able to string a sentence straight, and with their tiny tots bawling in the background, rudely intrude into your day offering auto or other cheap loans on behalf of major private banks. Technology should aid citizens, not become a tool of harassment.

THE ROLE DYNASTY plays is not restricted to politics or Bollywood alone. It is a powerful impulse to pass on the baton, as it were, to one's own next of kin, regardless of the field of human enterprise. I was recently struck by the fact that for as long as I can recall whenever newspapers mention Khan Market—yes, the same of Modi's Khan Market Gang fame—it is one Sanjiv Mehra who is listed as head of its market association. Mehra has been the head for about two decades. Before him, it was his late father. A little curiosity led me to find out about the head of the traders' body of Connaught Place where I have gone for morning *adda* with fellow scribes and a smattering of politicians and lawyers for nearly three decades till the advent of the Metro and chaotic traffic overwhelmed us ageing Cona coffee addicts. Here again, the president of the New Delhi Traders' Association has hailed from the same Bhargava family for over two decades. Before Atul Bhargava, his father was the president for as long as one can recall. Now, this is in no way meant to disparage the role and popularity of either Mehra or Bhargava. Not at all. It is just to point out that the lack of a competent leader outside a single dynasty is not the exclusive headache of the Congress alone. ■

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MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

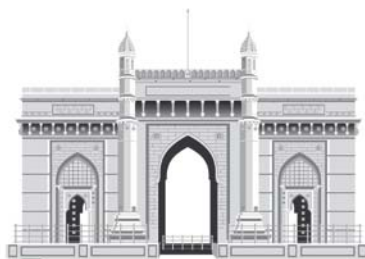
Anil Dharker

DURING THE PANDEMIC, every day is the same and every day is different. It's different because news from the front is up one moment and down the other, raising our hopes and dashing them in turn. It is the same because six months into the lockdown, our routines are set. Breakfast, lunch and dinner at home. Six months with only the family for company 24x7, enough time to discover whether you like them or not. As the resident wit said, 'Could someone tell me if the second quarantine would be with the same family, or we get to exchange?' You discover the art of conversation, after making a house rule prohibiting any discussion about the coronavirus.

But what else is there to talk about? Unless it's politics, and that at present is even more virulent. So you speak about the pandemic, recalling wryly how early on a study by researchers at Singapore University had predicted that by May 29th the world would see 97 per cent of the cases disappearing, with 100 per cent gone by December 8th. For India, the 97 per cent figure was to happen by May 15th. In case you wondered, these data-driven predictions gave these precise dates for 2020, not next year.

Another little nugget: a cough ejects a few thousand droplets at 80 kmph, while a sneeze sends out tens of thousands of droplets travelling at over 320 kmph. Lewis Hamilton would be proud. Here's a helpful hint: if there's a crowd at your local grocer's, start coughing. You will soon have the store to yourself. Apologise to the shopkeeper now cowering behind the counter, say you are leaving right away and what's the discount?

However, things aren't as bad as they seem. They are worse. Kevin Outterson, Director of Social Innovation on Drug Resistance and Professor of Health and Corporate Law at Boston University, has some things



to say that you would rather not hear in the morning. Another infectious disease crisis threatens humanity, he says, and that's the antibiotic-resistant bacteria and fungi we are developing due to antibiotic overuse. Because of this, superbugs (probably wearing their underwear outside their clothes) are thriving. They now kill 7 lakh people each year. The WHO warns that the death toll could reach 1 crore per year by 2050. One consolation is that many of us wouldn't be around then; the other consolation is that no one any longer believes the WHO.

However, Outterson, who must have grown up resenting Innerson, is serious about what he says. Worse, he has the qualifications to do so, being the executive director of CARB-X (Combating Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria Biopharmaceutical Accelerator). He basis his pessimism on the fact that there is very little funding of anti-microbial innovation, and that in the last two decades, researchers have developed just two completely new kinds of antibiotics. To emphasise his point, he says that 40 years ago, there were 18 pharmaceutical companies pursuing new antibiotics; now there are only three.

For your next conversation stopper, just say 'superbugs'.

THIS MIGHT BE an odd time to think about the 2020 World Happiness Report, an annual worldwide survey. On the other hand, it might be just the right time. The No 1 country is Finland and has come out on top for

the third year in a row.

This comes as a surprise to most people, especially the Finns themselves as a *New York Times* report tells us, because they pride themselves on their stoicism. So much so, that they have a word for it, 'sisu'. It's a question, researchers of the report say, on how you define happiness. Don't go by smiling faces or whoops of joy, but how satisfied people are with their lives and their confidence in always finding someone around—perhaps a neighbour—who they can reach out in a crisis. That's real happiness.

Finland is followed by Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland and Norway, all the countries you wouldn't expect to be there by looking at native faces. On the other hand, Americans, who seem outgoing and friendly, are 18th on the list, dropping from a high of No 11 in 2012. The pandemic has done that—an American is distrustful of his government to tackle the pandemic, fearful of losing his job and instead of helping his neighbour, rushes to the supermarket to stock up on all available toilet paper.

Where would India be placed in the report? You know the criteria. Take a guess.

DID YOU KNOW that 'the carriage of pets on airline flights in the passenger cabin is subject to the approval of the commander of the flight'? I found this out quite recently through a report about an Air India flight from Mumbai to Kolkata. It seems there were 'pressurisation' issues in the cargo hold, so all nine pets booked to travel there had to be offloaded for their own safety. Fair enough. Four other pets were booked to fly in the passenger cabin for which their owners had paid Rs 2,100 each. All four pet owners had valid documents, but only one was allowed to fly. This was a dog, while the other three were cats. It seems the commander doesn't like cats. ■



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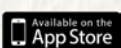
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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

No End to Crimes against Dalits

ATROCITIES AGAINST DALITS often don't make headlines unless they are extremely brutal as the one that was reported of the 19-year-old girl from Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, who was treated first at a hospital in Aligarh and then in Delhi where she died from her injuries 14 days after her gangrape by a group of upper-caste youth. While the class and caste bias of the country's English-speaking newsrooms is notorious in reporting such incidents, there is unanimity among all sections of people that Dalits bear the brunt of feudal crimes and amongst them, Dalit women, compared with other women and even men of their social category, find themselves economically, socially and culturally far more vulnerable. Literature holds the mirror to atrocities committed on Dalit women who were invariably mute spectators to the oppression and brutalities unleashed on them. On the contrary, they were depicted as women forever ready and blessed to bear a child from their upper-caste perpetrators. This falsehood stretches far back to our epics.

Centuries later, the silence of violated Dalit women persists because of the same reason it did in the ancient past: due to the impunity of their aggressors or the system where women, even preteens, are considered fair game for sexual and physical harassment of all kind. Modern laws are in place to combat this scourge, but, as academics Jayshree Singh and Gargi Vashistha note in a 2018 paper: 'The collective forces and the effect of feudalism, casteism, and patriarchy have made their [Dalit women's] lives a living hell. An overwhelming majority of them live under the most precarious conditions.... They are still living in the dark age of savagery. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public attention, which

is compounded by their gender.'

Although any concrete data on caste-related sexual violence is not available in India, the latest reported figures are along expected lines: Crime against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Dalits) saw an increase of over 7 per cent and 26 per cent respectively, in the year 2019 compared to 2018, according to the 2019 annual report by the National Crime Records Bureau. It adds that with 11,829 cases, Uttar Pradesh recorded the highest number of crimes against SCs.

The young lady from the Valmiki caste from Hathras who died on September 28th wasn't even given a decent cremation that her family would have wanted. According to several interviews with her parents, police locked up the family members in their house and burnt her body against the family's will in a post-midnight funeral in a field in the presence of officials. Police have justified the act, saying it was an administrative priority to contain any untoward incident. The family and several Dalit scholars that *Openspoke* to claim it is tough to buy that argument because attacks against Dalit women follow a pattern—the age-old notion that their body is not theirs and that they belong to

those among the upper castes who want to enjoy them—and therefore, what was done to the her dead body follows codes of entrenched Brahminical patriarchy.

BR Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, understood the need to measure the progress of a society by the progress its women achieved. He has been critical of Manu's low assessment of women, Ram's own treatment of his wife and even Buddha's views on women. He also spoke about women's equal rights in opting for a marriage and livelihood. For a man influenced by the civil liberties movements in the West and yet mindful of the bestial nature of caste-related sexual harassment of Dalit women, he worked towards legal recognition of women as equal

The Indian Penal Code has put in place just laws, and an assault on Dalits attracts stringent action, but enforcement of these laws is far from satisfactory, as testified by the rapes of Dalit women, and the insensitivity with which upper-caste men continue in their old ways. While it is true that women of all castes end up being victims of toxic masculinity that is prevalent all over the world, in India, though, the worst victims are the Dalits because of their marginalised existence



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

citizens with a right to divorce and inheritance. The forces that were against his efforts back then, through the Hindu Code Bill that he introduced in Parliament, had equated his endeavour to the draconian Rowlatt Act.

Ambedkar knew only too well how the feudal Indian male used the flawed reasoning of women being ‘impure’ in order to subjugate them, control their right over their own bodies, and to strip them of individual freedom and agency. This propaganda allowed males to justify their crimes on the female of the species.

As mentioned earlier, this deeply entrenched patriarchy and casteist supremacy that dominate today is as old as the scriptures. Historian Nayanjot Lahiri dwells on what PV Kane had penned in his *History of Dharmasastra*, drawing attention to Chapter 25 of the book in which talks about punishment of ‘adultery and unlawful intercourse’ in ancient India. Punishment for the rape of a woman from the same caste is confiscation of the perpetrator’s property; besides, his sexual organs would be chopped off. If the victim is from an upper caste, the rapist would be executed. But if the woman is from a lower caste, the rapist will be given ‘half of the punishment’, but nothing is clearly spelled out, suggesting that the punishment would be flexible. All this goes on to prove how punishments for rape varied from caste to caste in those ‘glorious’ days of India.

The Indian Penal Code has put in place just laws, and an assault on Dalits attracts stringent action, but enforcement of these new laws is far from satisfactory, as testified by the rapes of Dalit women, and the insensitivity with which upper-caste men continue in their old ways. While it is true that women of all castes end up being victims of toxic masculinity that is

prevalent all over the world, in India, though, the worst victims are the Dalits because of their marginalised existence. Besides, as Sharmila Rege, scholar and sociologist, points out, the Dalit movement itself has become ‘masculinised’ while people championing women’s rights view women as a homogenous group. This trend, academics note, has led to both movements refusing to address caste and gender intersectionality in general, notwithstanding stark evidence.

Syed Gulrez Hoda, former IAS officer who has set up two high schools in Bihar’s West Champaran district to address the menace of girl children dropping out when they enter high school, tells *Open*: “There is a very strong sense of caste superiority in Indian villages, especially in states like Bihar and UP. Caste is the big elephant in the room. Democracy has given the lower castes rights, but that has made old power elites angry. There is reaction to upper-class hegemony and there is also counter-reaction from the *savarnas*,” he avers, emphasising that the reason why girl children drop out of high schools is that they are located far from their homes and they fear being raped on the way and back. “Which is why we [Hikmat Foundation] have started high schools for them closer home,” adds Hoda. He agrees with most sociologists and economists who say that the upper castes resent the equalising tendencies of democracy and that is the root of all these problems. He talks about the concept of *varchasva* (referring to power and social domination) among the elites of yore.

Like old habits, that sense of superiority refuses to go away. Denied or delayed justice makes matters worse. ■

By ULLEKHNP

IN MEMORIAM • SP BALASUBRAHMANYAM (1946-2020)

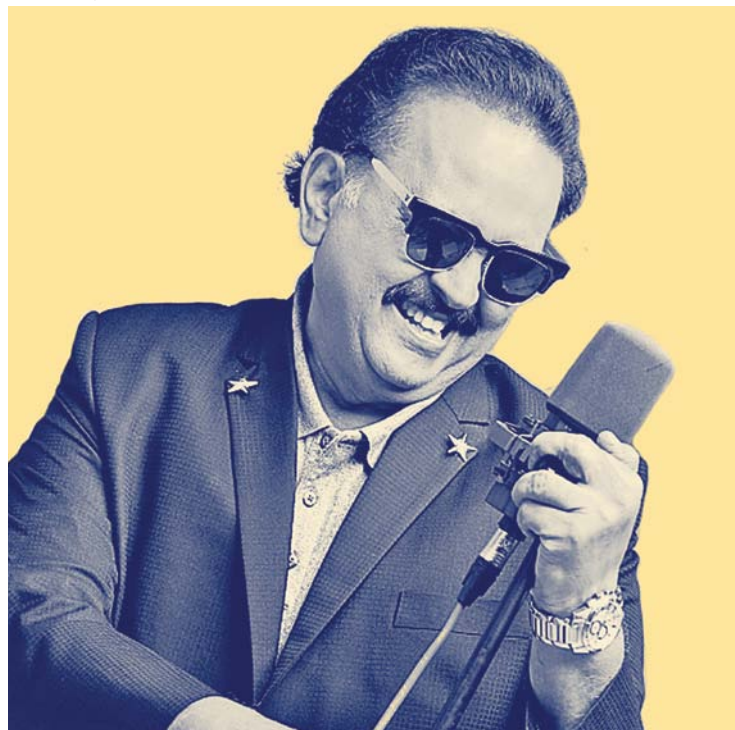
A VERSATILE VOICE

His 40,000 songs became the background score of the lives of millions of listeners

NO PIECE OF MUSIC, however strictly notated, is entirely predetermined. A song exists as a dialogue between the constant of the compositional idea and the change that is the singer's interpretation and improvisation of it. A playback singer, in particular, is capable of appealing to several layers of the listener's attention with the way he or she carries the attitude of the piece. SP Balasubrahmanyam's greatness lay in his ability to convey raw human experience—the contentment of a happily married man in *Samsaram enbathu veenai* (*Mayangugirala Oru Maadhu*, 1975), the defiance of the working-class hero in *Raman andalum Ravanam andalum* (*Mullum Malarum*, 1978), a husband's longing in *Kadhal rojave* (*Roja* 1992). SPB breathed life into compositions without letting his musical virtuosity overtake the dramatic roleplay, and this made him the presiding sound of Tamil and Telugu film music for half a century. The words 'prolific' and 'versatile', so often used to describe SPB's prodigious output of 40,000-plus songs, don't begin to describe his influence over listeners for whom his voice was the background score of their lives, and who are now flooding the internet with tributes and playlists in the wake of his death at the age of 74 after hospitalisation with Covid-19.

From his debut in 1966 in the Telugu film *Sri Sri Maryada Ramanna* to a yet-to-be-released song from Rajinikanth's upcoming *Annaathe*, SPB's long and busy career serves as a barometer for the musical tastes of the times. Having entered films when the song was a catalytic narrative force and fuel for a character's exploration of his consciousness, SPB flexed his vocal cords for some difficult compositions by MS Viswanathan and KV Mahadevan before teaming up with his friend Ilaiyaraaja to sing some of the most popular songs ever in film history. The pair reinvented the romantic melody at the

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



apex of their powers, introducing rhythm, a folksy simplicity and a tingling sense of anticipation, in film after film.

"SPB's strength was light-hearted romantic numbers, where there was a certain playfulness, a levity, and almost dandyish decoration. It came very easily to him," says film writer and historian Vamanan. "But he could effortlessly handle any composition you gave him—and he was lightning fast, which became important. During the opening years of Ilaiyaraaja, when there was a certain romance in the air, SPB naturally became the man to belt out the maximum number of hits." Vamanan rates his songs between 1967 and 1980 as his golden period in Tamil—that would include the best of Viswanathan, Mahadevan and SP Kodandapani, SPB's godfather in films, who had believed in him before anyone else did. Besides voice-acting and acting, SPB wore the composer's hat for a few films, including *Unnai Charanadainthen*, a 2003 Tamil production by his son SPB Charan. It features a song about friendship—*Natpu natpu*—where the roles are reversed, with MS Viswanathan singing and SPB and Ilaiyaraaja joining in.

The singer Srinivas, who worked with SPB on several films and albums, calls him the "Bhishma Pitamaha" of Indian film music. "He was the opposite of controversial," Srinivas says. "As a co-director at the ISRA (Indian Singers' Rights Association), I have seen him reconcile issues at close quarters—he didn't believe in wasting time on conflict," says Srinivas, who was to record a devotional song with SPB upon his return from hospital.

People who knew 'Balu Sir' speak of his irrepressible wit and zest for life. "I have to wear a helmet to your recordings," SPB would joke to composer Ramesh Vinayakam, for whom he had a soft corner since launching his career in 1986. "He considered me a demanding composer. We had our share of fights—I would insist on precise timing for a certain *sangati* and he would say I was too finicky. But it would always end well—sometimes with him boxing my ears," says Vinayakam. He was training to be a chartered accountant when an assurance by SPB was all it took for him to give up the profession and plunge headlong into music. The duo collaborated on devotional music albums and Telugu film songs, but Vinayakam regrets not composing a Tamil film song for SPB. For fans, too, notwithstanding the overwhelming legacy SPB leaves behind, it is the music he had yet to make that has settled on the mind like a shadow. ■

By V SHOBA

ANGLE

THE UNARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

Why India does not see US-style presidential debates



By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

EARLY MORNING ON September 30th, as US President Donald Trump slugged it out with challenger Joe Biden in the full glare of his country and the world, it was evident why India would never see a debate of that sort anytime soon. Over there, the debate tells the electorate—mostly the undecideds who occupy the middle—just who are on offer. There was the aged, fragile but poised Biden being bullied by a pugnacious Trump and voters could decide exactly what kind of country they looked forward to. Which persona wins depends on their wisdom but both have equal chances of coming out with more votes than they went in. In India, that is not true.

Take Narendra Modi. Before he became Prime Minister, in the lead up to the 2014 elections, he was asking Manmohan Singh for an open debate and was met with stoic silence. Just before the 2019 election, it was Rahul Gandhi who was asking Modi to have a debate with him and this time it was Modi's turn to ignore him. It is easy to guess why even if he is a better orator.

Indians, essentially, look at their prime ministers as kings and the politicians know it. For a king to enter into a debate is to demote himself to being prime minister. He is giving his challenger legitimacy as a successor king. It makes them look equal and how is that a good idea before an election. What does a sitting prime minister stand to gain by openly exposing himself to hostile

questions and accusations? Enduring it is loss of face. Retaliating in kind is giving up dignity. Any debate will be as being before the worst news anchor in a rigged interview televised in every channel.

And what can he defend either? In India, good policies translate to loss of votes. The latest example are the reforms in the agriculture sector, which gives more freedom for farmers to sell and market produce without taking anything away, but is now seeing widespread agitation by those farmers themselves. Meanwhile, terrible policies like demonetisation, which leaves the economy in tatters, reap a bonanza like the Uttar Pradesh victory. There is no logical defence for all the exigencies of India's electoral policies. In an open debate, unlike a television interview, refusal to answer a question is no escape and repeated attempts at it signifies weakness—God, as it is said, cannot bleed. Plus, with anti-incumbency, the main reason why parties lose power, there is nothing that a prime minister can say that can be an answer to the voters' boredom.

The only reason for a sitting prime minister to be ready for a debate is if popularity has sunk so badly that the election is almost lost and the only option is to use the debate to pull a miracle out. Until then, the subjects must only be given as much as that they are ready for. They don't really mind. When they have decided they need another king, it is not a debate that they base their decision on. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

LOOPHOLES

A story this week in *The New York Times* revealed that the US President Donald Trump has been a chronic tax dodger, who despite being a billionaire, only paid \$750 in federal taxes for years. But to castigate him for this is missing the point that it is legal. Deaths and taxes are certainties in life, but tax loopholes stand right beside them. The more complicated a system, the more it is going to be exploited for loopholes and it will be legitimate to do so. And vice-versa. A simpler tax system, for example, where the rate is low, brings in more revenues because most people want to pay a fair share if it is reasonable and easy. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'By closing loopholes and lowering rates, you could increase the efficiency of the tax code and create more incentives for people to invest'

BEN BERNANKE
FORMER CHAIRMAN, US FEDERAL RESERVE



By Keerthik Sasidharan

The Sounds of Our Discontents

Dumb furies in the age of social media

IN 2009, AN Australian scientist Charles Lineweaver and colleagues published a paper in the *Astrobiology* magazine called ‘Signatures of a Shadow Biosphere’ where they made a tentative case that ‘aliens’ may already be living on earth. By ‘aliens’, they did not mean ‘Men in Black’ or ‘ET’ but rather ‘weird forms’ which rely on different biochemistries and progressively span out in a ‘hierarchy of weirdness’. They conjectured that these forms could be living in extreme conditions—deep ocean vents, volcanic interiors and so on—and have evolved as distinct ecological forms or they could be biochemically merged with known lifeforms which makes them difficult to distinguish. For at least a century or more, this idea that there are other forms of life has had many iterations—from vast transnational search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI) projects to Japanese horror cinema—and they are usually motivated by two distinct causal arguments.

One, the sheer immensity of what is unknown—less than 1 per cent of microbial life has been studied—forces upon us epistemic humility. More starkly, we simply don’t know what we don’t know. Lineweaver describes these vast chasms of ignorance using an evocative image: ‘Imagine the surface of the Earth, and imagine if you had only explored 1 per cent of it. But that 1 per cent was spread out all over. So you can imagine if you’ve only explored 1 per cent of the ocean, you might not have seen Australia or New Zealand. That seems to be the situation we’re in with microbial life.’ The other motivation is the gargantuan time scales involved when we talk about the universe. There is a general consensus that earthlike planetary objects began to form nearly 9 billion years before our solar system began, which in turn means, by the weight of probabilities, sites with other types of life most likely abound somewhere. Faced with these two ways of conceptualising ‘weird’ lifeforms, we are perhaps surrounded by ‘alien’ forms that have diverged from the tree of life which we can look for only through heuristics and a careful assembly of painstakingly collected evidence. Till we find something, we remain afloat in a vat of cosmic emptiness.

Nearly 60 years before Lineweaver and others published their paper, Italian-American physicist Enrico Fermi was

already joking about these probabilities when he met fellow scientists Emil Konopinski, Edward Teller and Herbert York in the summer of 1950 at Los Alamos, New Mexico over lunch. Among other things, they discussed two separate events that had then been reported: one, trashcans had gone missing from the streets of New York; and two, there was a spate of UFO sightings in America that summer. With a wink and nod, Fermi argued that the *New Yorker* magazine—which had then run a cartoon showing aliens stealing trashcans—could indeed be right. A parsimonious scientific explanation demanded that the smallest number of variables be used to explain the maximal number of observations. Fermi reasoned that the universe was vaster and older than the time it would take for an alien civilisation—little green men—to arrive on earth. But this obviously was contradicted by evidence, or rather by a lack of evidence. Fermi famously then asked, ‘Where is everybody?’ Over time, as measurements about the universe’s vastness improved and as man’s speed of travel improved, this openended question acquired the colour of a paradox. It has since then been called Fermi’s Paradox, of which there are now strong, weak and proto versions. What is constant in all of them is the underlying sense of absence.

More recently, Chinese science-fiction writer Liu Cixin offers us a concept called ‘the dark forest’ that sociologist Luo Ji voices in his novel. He asks us to imagine a dark forest in which there is nothing but quiet. An observer could very well think that there is no sign of life there and we could interpret that as an empty forest. Instead, Liu offers another way to think about this absence of sound. He suggests that perhaps the forest is full of life, but it is also full of predators who emerge at night. Every living being in the forest therefore avoids emerging out at night in fear and out of self-interest. The question that Liu leaves us wondering about is simple but stark: how should we characterise the universe—as an empty forest or a dark forest full of predators.

In all of the above—from Lineweaver’s ‘weird’ lifeforms, Fermi’s absentee aliens to Ciuxin-Ji’s dark forest—the motif of absence, a negative presence, that vast silent magisterium has enabled us to draw the contours of not just what is out there but also forced us to inspect in detail what is present within. We can do this within the context of astrophysics, biology or

science fiction. But these questions about what silence or absence means in our mental models of the world has been with humanity for much longer. We have called this absence of evidence, this non-being by different names: silence, absence, emptiness, void and others depending on the hour and need. Any effort to speak of silence forces us into a linguistic cul-de-sac from which we don't know how to back out satisfactorily. French philosopher George Bataille wrote in the early 20th century that 'the word silence is still a sound, to speak is in itself to imagine knowing; and to no longer know, it would be necessary to no longer speak'. This idea that knowledge is intimately tied to sound, to our abilities to

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

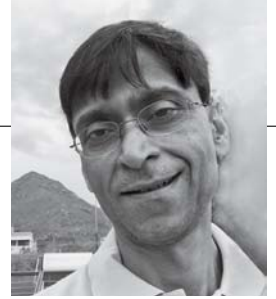


Gossip and vitriol, harangues and grandstanding that were previously limited are scaled up to global proportions, which in turn produce disquiets that have non-local roots and foreign cures. It is as if the detritus of our private worlds now steadily spin themselves into a fury and attach onto our spectral presences that flit across social media platforms to consume and be consumed by it

articulate our inner voices, is perhaps most influentially seen in the opening word of the Quran, which begins with the word 'iqra' or 'recite'. In the Quranic epistemic world, it was only by speaking aloud the words and signs of God that we could claim to know something. Without such utterance, such an effort to communicate, what awaits us is a great envelope of a silence—or a 'veil of ignorance'. Much of human history has been an effort to break away from this vast canopy of silence, or non-knowing, under which man has lived. Thus when Swiss theologian Max Picard writes that 'silence is as much part of history as noise; the invisible as much a part of history as the visible', it doesn't come across as strange but merely as a statement of fact.

The irony, of course, is that we live in an age that doesn't know how to find 'silence' or its variants. On the one hand, meditation classes and silent retreats flourish with professionals paying thousands of dollars in fees to experience silence and to learn the analytics of stillness. A lucky few, such as the travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, who ended up at the St Wandrille, a Benedictine abbey in northern France, discover natural repositories of silence in religious orders and eventually immerse in their structured quiet. This quest to find silence ought not to be surprising. In the oldest of human traditions, we see silence is exalted, often because of its abilities to facilitate an introspection. In the Mahabharata, the blind king Dhritarashtra learns from his charioteer-counsel Sanjaya that one of the names of Krishna is Madhava, which we are told is 'because of his silence'—a name that we learn from Bibek Debroy is born from a relatively obscure etymology: the 'ma' of Madhava comes from the word *mauna*, or silence, and *dha* from *dhyana*, or meditation. In some Yeshivas of the Jews, they observe what is called '*Ta'anit dibur*', or a fast of speaking. If man is a glutton in a world full of words, then silence is means to temper his appetite.

In contrast to these traditional understandings of the importance of silence, our lives are today filled, not necessarily with more sound, but rather with more white noise and accompanying dumb furies. Gossip and vitriol, harangues and grandstanding that were previously limited are scaled up to global proportions, which in turn produce disquiets that have non-local roots and foreign cures. It is as if the detritus of our private worlds now steadily spin themselves into a fury and attach onto our spectral presences that flit across social media platforms to consume and be consumed by it. The psychological, and in due course political, consequences of this are still too early to fully recognise. If newspapers and commercial printing precipitated the breakdown of old norms of cohesion and instead facilitated the construction of 'imagined communities' and nation-states thereafter, what does the steady disintegration of our inner silences now portend? Perhaps a growing suspicion towards foreigners amid us, loneliness in crowds and, ultimately, an omnipresent fear that predators are among us—all of which prepare grounds for authoritarianism in all its guises. ■



By Makarand R Paranjape

The Swami and the Himalayas

The revelatory journeys of Vivekananda

THERE IS SCARCELY an aspect of Swami Vivekananda's dazzling but brief life of less than 40 years that has not been studied. Yet his Himalayan connections demand further exploration. (Swami Vivekananda, 1863-1902, was one of the most powerful and influential makers of modern India. My study, *Swami Vivekananda: Hinduism and India's Road to Modernity*, HarperCollins, 2020, tries to demonstrate this at length.) Not only because his relationship with these majestic snow mountains was complex, multi-layered and enduring, but because some his major, lifechanging spiritual experiences occurred amidst the heights of Uttarakhand and Kashmir. (This is the first in a series that is an attempt to snapshot those crucial and momentous events in the Vivekananda's Himalayan sojourns because they continue to reverberate in the national consciousness to this date.)

The best place to start exploring Swami Vivekananda's special relationship with the Himalayas is, however, Kerala, in the deep south.

In his 'Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda', KS Ramaswami Sastri recalls the nine days Vivekananda stayed at his home in Thiruvananthapuram in December 1892. The Swami was accompanied by a Muslim attendant and, at first, himself taken for a 'Mohammedan' (bit.ly/3mZyamm).

Sastri, then 14 years old, recalls how one morning, when he was studying his textbook, Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava*, he was asked by Vivekananda, "Can you repeat the great poet's description of the Himalayas?" Sastri recited the verses, so well-known, that open the Mahakavya (great poem):

*astyuttarasayām diśi devatātmā himālayo nāma nagāḍhirājā |
pūrvāparau toyanidhivigāhya sthithaḥ pṛthivyā iva mānadaṇḍaḥ || 1.1 ||*

The couplet may be rendered thus: 'In the northern direction, forming the heartland of Gods, stands the overlord of snowy mountains, Himalaya, like a measuring rod of earth thrust betwixt eastern and western oceans.'

Vivekananda remarks, "Do you know that I am coming after a long stay amidst the sublimity of the Himalayan scenes and sights?" So saying, he asks the boy to repeat the opening verse,

this time also explaining its meaning. When Sastri does so, Vivekananda says, 'That is good, but not enough.' Then, repeating the couplet in 'his marvellous, musical, measured tones', the Swami explains:

"The important words in this verse are *devatātmā* (ensouled by Divinity) and *manadanda* (measuring-rod). The poet implies and suggests that the Himalaya is not a mere wall accidentally constructed by nature. It is ensouled by Divinity and is the protector of India and her civilization not only from the chilly blasts blowing from the arctic region but also from the deadly and destructive incursions of invaders. The Himalaya further protects India by sending the great rivers Sindhu, Ganga, and Brahmaputra perennially fed by melted ice irrespective of the monsoon rains. Manadanda implies that the poet affirms that the Indian civilization is the best of all human civilizations and forms the standard by which all the other human civilizations, past, present, and future, must be tested. Such was the poet's lofty conception of patriotism."

This extraordinary explanation not only underscores Vivekananda's great erudition and deep study of classical Indian literature, but, even more remarkably, his love of the Himalayas as a symbol of India.

To Vivekananda, India was one—from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Sastri reminisces, 'I felt thrilled by Swamiji's words. I treasure them even to this day, and they shine in my heart even now with an undimmed and undiminished splendour.'

After Sri Ramakrishna's death on August 16th, 1886, Vivekananda had stayed mostly at the Baranagore Monastery for two years, consolidating the order of young *sanyasins* (renunciates) that he founded. His itinerant days began 1888, taking him all across the country, as a wandering monk. That year, he had reached as far as Rishikesh in today's Uttarakhand, but had to return because he contracted malaria.

But in 1890, Vivekananda set out again. So eager was he 'to see the snow-capped Himalayas', that he did not tarry in the sacred city of Varanasi. Instead, he predicted to his host, Pramadadas Mitra, "When I shall return here next time I shall burst upon society like a bomb-shell, and it will follow me like a dog!" (bit.ly/3l27aBW).

Vivekananda travelled extensively in the Himalayas, go-

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HIMALAYAS WAS COMPLEX, MULTI-LAYERED AND ENDURING. SOME OF HIS MAJOR, LIFECHANGING SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OCCURRED AMIDST THE HEIGHTS OF UTTARAKHAND AND KASHMIR. THE BEST PLACE TO START EXPLORING HIS SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HIMALAYAS IS, HOWEVER, KERALA, IN THE DEEP SOUTH

ing on foot from Nainital to Almora, thence to Rudraprayag, Srinagar (Garhwal), Tehri, Mussoorie, then back to the plains via Rishikesh, Hardwar and Dehra Dun. There were two notable incidents in this period that bear emphasis.

Towards the beginning of their Himalayan sojourn, the group stopped near a watermill by a stream in Kakrighat, 40 km from Nainital. Under an ancient peepal tree, Vivekananda sat totally absorbed in meditation. When he came to, he declared to Akhandananda, "Well, Gangadhar, here under this banyan tree one of the greatest problems of my life has been solved."

(Gangadhar Ghatak, or Gangopadhyay, was Swami Akhandananda's pre-monastic name. In those days, Swamiji too went by other names, including Vividishananda; Vivekananda became his stable moniker later.)

This was one of his great realisations, jotted down in Bangla in his notebook:

"The microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same plan. Just as the individual soul is encased in the living body, so is the Universal Soul in the Living Prakriti [Nature]—the objective universe. Shivā [i.e. Kālī] is embracing Shiva; this is not a fancy. This covering of the one [Soul] by the other [Nature] is analogous to the relation between an idea and the word expressing it: they are one and the same, and it is only by a mental abstraction that one can distinguish them. Thought is impossible without words. Therefore, in the beginning was the Word etc.

This dual aspect of the Universal Soul is eternal. So what we perceive or feel is this combination of the Eternally Formed and the Eternally Formless' (bit.ly/3c16kHx).

Later, Swamiji would deliver his famous lecture on the same theme, 'The Cosmos: The Macrocosm', in New York, on January 19th, 1896.

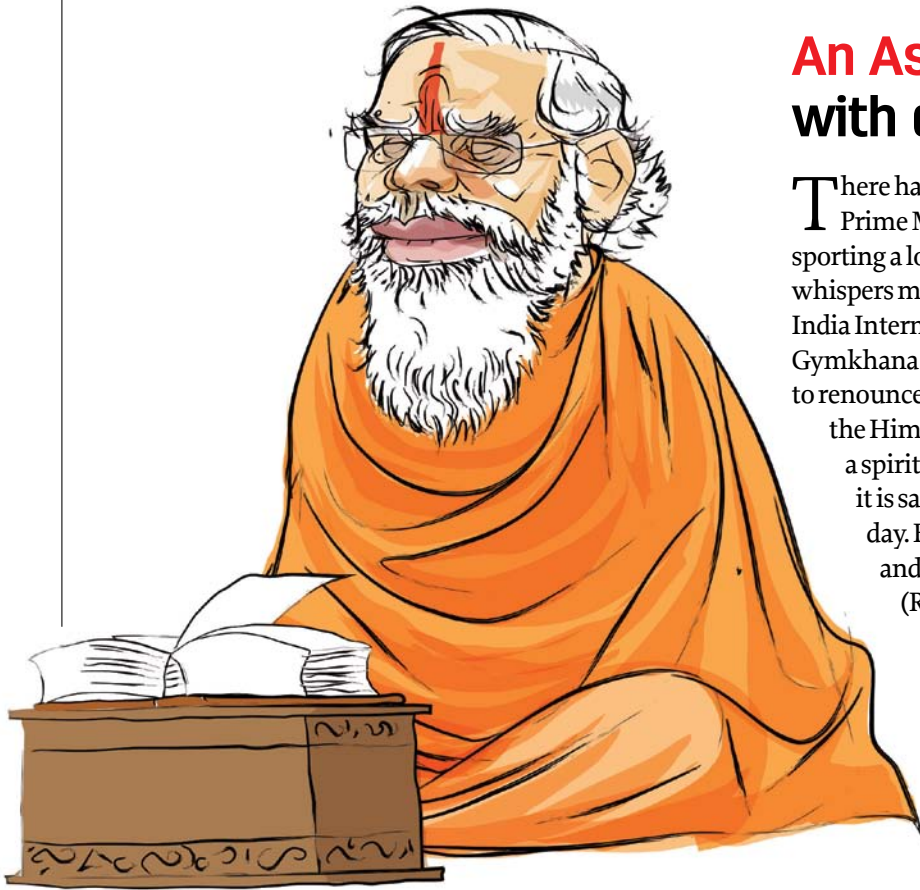
During this journey, Vivekananda received a telegram informing him of the suicide of his sister. As Sister Nivedita puts it: "[N]ews reached him, of the death, in pitiful extremity, of the favourite sister of his childhood, and he had fled into the wilder mountains, leaving no clue... it seemed that this death had inflicted on the Swami's heart a wound, whose quivering pain had never for one moment ceased. And we may, perhaps, venture to trace some part at least of his burning desire for the education and development of Indian women, to this sorrow.

Though these wanderings in the hills suited him temperamentally he was forced, as it were, to descend once more to the plains to engage with the toils and troubles of the suffering masses.

Later, he remembered renunciation and freedom of the 'stern ascetics' of the Himalayas: I saw many great men in Hrishikesh. One case that I remember was that of a man who seemed to be mad. He was coming nude down the street, with boys pursuing and throwing stones at him. The whole man was bubbling over with laughter, while blood was streaming down his face and neck. I took him and bathed his wound, putting ashes (made by burning a piece of cotton cloth) on it to stop the bleeding. And all the time, with peals of laughter, he told me of the fun the boys and he had been having, throwing the stones. 'So the Father plays,' he said' (*The Master as I Saw Him* by Sister Nivedita, Longmans, Green & Co, 1920, pp 98, 243-244).

In the same spirit, later in life, he declared in his letter of July 9th, 1897 to Mary Hale, one of his spiritual sisters, 'May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls: and, above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.'

(*To be continued*) ■



An Ashram with a View

There has been a lot of chatter ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi began sporting a long grey beard. According to the whispers moving through the circles of the India International Centre and the Delhi Gymkhana Club, Modi would at some point like to renounce all power and move to an ashram in the Himalayas. He has been known to have a spiritual bent of mind, someone who, it is said, reads the Bhagavad Gita every day. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) will have none of it. They understand that Modi remains essential. Even for the 2024 elections, no one can replace him. But the gossip continues. It is said that Modi is quietly getting a small ashram built at Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand.

LANGUAGE POLITICS

There is a little more than meets the eye in the anti-Hindi movement Kanimozhi has been trying to build up in Tamil Nadu. After the AYUSH ministry sent some circulars on Covid-19 in Hindi, Kanimozhi started a campaign against the use of Hindi in several districts. Many believe her brothers Stalin and Alagiri are competing to be the party's face for the state elections next year. Kanimozhi hopes to use this movement to emerge as something of a consensus candidate. Stalin isn't quite pleased, but he can't publicly criticise the campaign. Many Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) insiders even wonder if a movement based on language politics is still relevant in the state considering how exposed the average Tamilian is to Hindi thanks to social media.

Sidhu's Googly

The reason behind Navjot Singh Sidhu's departure from the BJP in 2016 was not unhappiness with the party but because he did not get along with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leadership. Although he joined the Congress in 2017, he is known not to get along with Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh either. Sidhu has, however, continued to keep in touch with Narendra Modi. With the breakup of the BJP's alliance with the SAD, everyone is keenly watching whether the former cricketer with the sharp tongue might once again jump ship and return to the BJP.



Hale and Hearty

Rumours about his health have continued to pursue India's Home Minister since he returned from hospital. Although Amit Shah has fully recovered and is back home at 7 Krishna Menon Marg, the rumours have not let up. Recently, it was being said that he had left for the US for treatment when he was actually attending an event on the Northeast via videoconferencing. A few days later, a WhatsApp group of home ministry correspondents began to light up with questions as to whether he had been readmitted to AIIMS—untrue again. Shah has apparently told his officers not to worry.

Reshuffle on the Cards?

BJP President JP Nadra may have signed off on the recent list of the party's national office bearers, but it is believed the names were finalised by Home Minister Amit Shah. There are big exclusions, such as Ram Madhav, Anil Jain, Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, P Muralidhar Rao, Uma Bharti, among others, but Shah's close associate Bhupender Yadav has made it as general secretary. There is now speculation that a Cabinet reshuffle is on the cards. This could take place before the upcoming Bihar elections and Madhya Pradesh by-elections. Jyotiraditya Scindia has been waiting for this moment. Could Modi bring Ram Madhav, not a Rajya Sabha member yet, into the Cabinet too? The RSS, however, is believed to be not so keen on the idea.

Karnataka Twist

There is an interesting side story to the recent rejig of BJP office-bearers. Karnataka's RSS man and the BJP's National General Secretary BL Santhosh is believed to have played a key role in the entry of the new inductees, especially two significant individuals from Bengaluru, CT Ravi and Tejasvi Surya. The former is the minister for Kannada and Culture and a member of the Vokkaliga caste. The latter is the 28-year-old first-time MP from Bengaluru South and national head of the BJP's youth wing. Neither is known to get along with Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa. This is curious because there is a state cabinet reshuffle on the cards.

Marriage Counsellor

Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has found himself in a peculiar position, that of resolving a marital discord. MP and Bollywood actor Anubhav Mohanty reportedly has a bitter marriage with actress Varsha Priyadarshini. He has approached the court seeking to dissolve his six-year-old marriage, but Varsha has filed another complaint of domestic assault and extra-marital affairs. The acrimony between the couple has grabbed headlines and often spills over on to social media. Patnaik is believed to have told Mohanty to resolve the rift as soon as possible.



DIDI'S SAINIKS

Even when rumours of a BJP-Shiv Sena patch-up were making their way through Delhi, after former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis met the Sena's Sanjay Raut, in West Bengal, something else was unfolding. Sena's West Bengal head Ashok Sarkar has gone on the offensive against Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar. He issued a statement saying the Governor is behaving unconstitutionally and that he can't speak against an elected state government. Bengal's Sainiks have even started a campaign against Dhankhar. The grapevine is now abuzz with talk of Uddhav Thackeray being in touch with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

After the Ayodhya Acquittal

It is time for India to move on

By Siddharth Singh

THE 2,300-PAGE JUDGMENT by Special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Judge SK Yadav, exonerating 32 individuals accused in the Babri Masjid demolition case, has led to predictable heartburn and anger among many. It is a fact of life that judicial decisions between contesting parties lead to winners and losers. But judgments on political events of great import magnify the sentiments of loss and victory. Although in the present case there were no public signs of jubilation, let alone any victory celebration. In contrast, the sense of loss and anger is palpable among political leaders and analysts of a certain persuasion.

It is a counterfactual exercise to ask what would have happened if the verdict had been different and delivered during the tenure of a 'secular' government. One can never know, for that is the nature of a counterfactual. But one can surmise that the equation of losers and winners would have been reversed. There would have been ample commentary on secularism being vindicated; India being a country run according to the rule of law and the happy glow of robust constitutionalism. All of them are being denied today.

The facts of the case are too well known to be repeated. But it is sufficient to note that one of the charges against the accused before the trial court was that of conspiracy to commit a crime, in this case the demolition of the mosque. This was under Section 120B of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). There were other charges as well: incitement to violence (Sections 153A and 153B of the IPC) and unlawful assembly (Section 149). Of these, the ones on unlawful assembly and incitement to violence should have been the easiest to prove. There was, so to speak, plenty of evidence in the form of recordings of events on December 6th, 1992 as also press reports of the event. The court rejected the evidence on this score. The investigating agency did not get this evidence authenticated to the extent

necessary for it to be considered by the court. This aspect of the case and the trial proceedings have attracted little attention and have evoked relatively muted reactions.

On the matter of conspiracy, however, all hell has broken loose. The fact that LK Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and others were present on that day at the site in Ayodhya is, *ipso facto*, considered sufficient to attract charges of conspiracy by virtually everyone ruing the verdict. The argument made in pressing this line of reasoning proceeds in two steps. In the first step, it is said that the Supreme Court had in two different cases in 2017 and 2019 held the demolition of the mosque to be a crime and had, back in 2017, revived the conspiracy charge. Then there were the conclusions of the MS Liberhan Commission of Inquiry that pinned individual culpability on 68 individuals, from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to the local additional superintendent of police at Faizabad. In the second step, in light of the first one, the trial court should have drawn 'reasonable' inferences from the facts and circumstances of the case to conclude that a conspiracy had indeed been hatched to demolish the mosque. In making these claims, the usual riders of benefit of doubt if the evidence is not overwhelming, the fact that evidence of conspiracy is always circumstantial, and other escape clauses

are affixed to the overall claim that the 32 accused should have been held guilty. In making this claim, these arguments come perilously close to the political argument that the BJP and the Sangh Parivar are responsible for the trials and tribulations of Indian secularism.

That is not how Indian courts work. If court W says that crime X happened at place Y on date Z, that does not mean a trial court has to take these at face value and not evaluate the evidence presented to it. By saying adhere to what court W says, one comes very close to the Chinese communist notion of justice: if a person in power recites some 'facts' then facts they become. In the event, the

THE CBI SHOULD BE FREE TO APPEAL TO A HIGHER COURT. THAT IS BEST LEFT TO IT AND NOT THOSE WHO BERATE THE 'ABSENCE OF CLOSURE'. BUT IT MUST BE REMEMBERED THAT THE ATTEMPT TO PAINT THE 32 ACCUSED AS GUILTY AND KEEPING THE CASE OPEN FOR DECADES IS PURE POLITICS. NOTHING CAME OF IT AND THAT WAS NOT DUE TO POLITICS BUT THE ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE



LK Advani greets the media at his residence in New Delhi, September 30

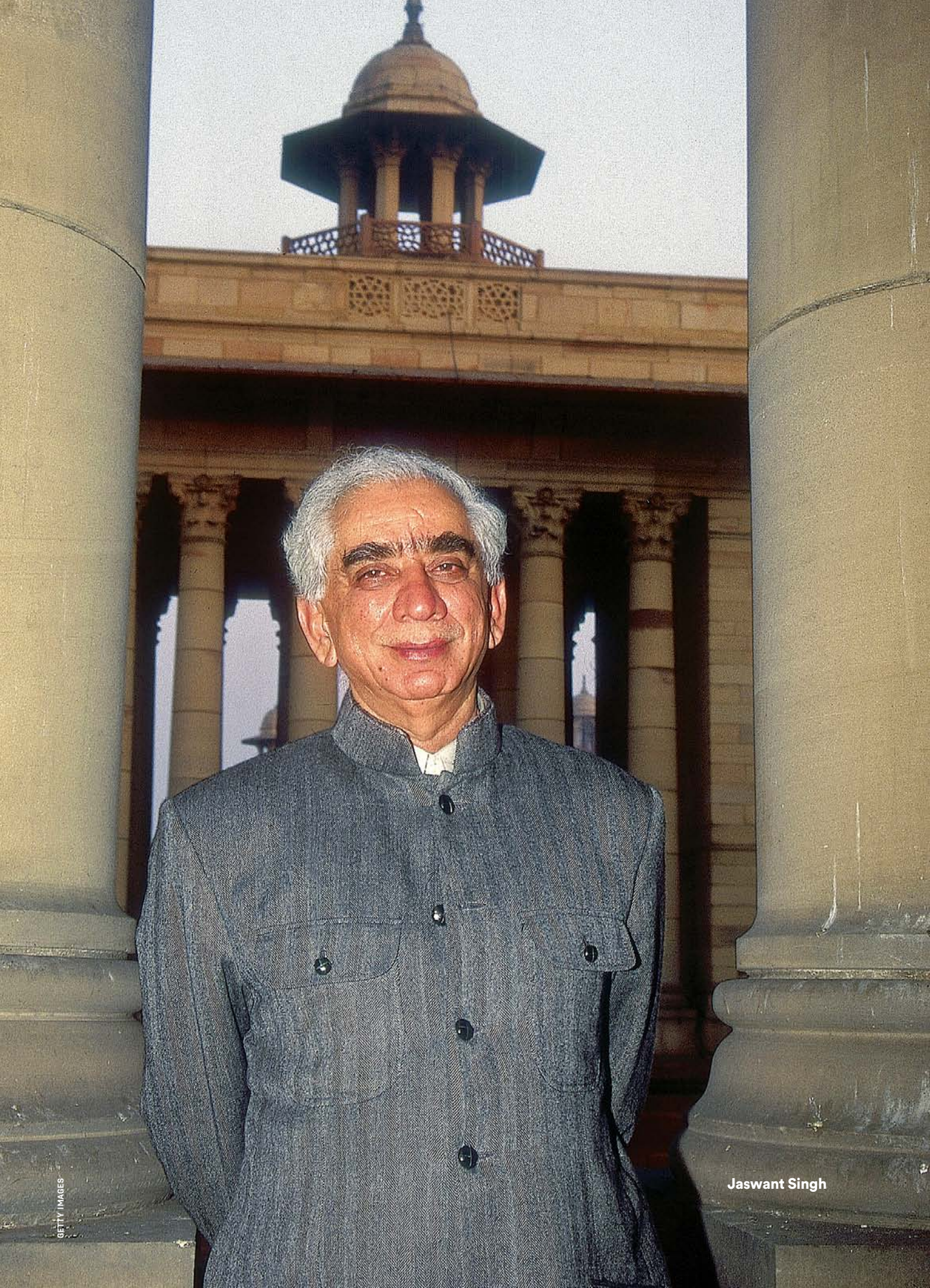
court in Lucknow proceeded as any Indian court does: it evaluated the evidence and found it wanting.

Conspiracy by definition is hard to prove. In this case, the allegation was that the accused, including Advani, met on December 5th, 1992 at the house of Vinay Katiyar—another accused—to plan the demolition the next day. This charge fell through in the absence of evidence. It is this aspect of the case that has drawn maximum ire from the secular crowd. The demolition of the mosque and so-called majoritarianism in India are cited as examples of ‘mob rule’. Surely, demanding that a court hold the accused guilty in the absence of corroborating evidence, too, is a mob desire even if the mob is suave and sophisticated.

Only the fringe will celebrate the manner in which the mosque was brought down. But it is also a fact of contemporary history that all paths to a negotiated settlement or agreement were blocked by those who wanted to uphold ‘secularism’ at any cost, even if it spelled doom for this variant. There were enough moderate Muslim and Hindu leaders who could have come to an agreement and sorted out the matter. Anyone who recalls the period between 1992 and 1995 will know that there were endless ‘formulae’ bandied about to resolve the issue: from prime ministers to godmen and from clerics to leaders, everyone tried to get out of what was undoubtedly a difficult

situation but one which was not closed to the possibility of any agreement. But that was not allowed to happen. The political polarisation being witnessed today is not due to hatred among Indians but because a certain ideology and beliefs are held to be illegitimate. The slow boil in Indian politics since then has been about democratic assertion and not about a ‘majority community’ trying to suppress a ‘minority’. That distinction founders on numbers alone. The danger to India’s social fabric does not come from a majority trying to suppress a minority but from the ideological use of declaring one community and its beliefs illegitimate in the India of a certain imagination. The trouble is that India is imagined by its people and not a mob of ideologues who decide what is acceptable and what is not.

The best thing that can happen is for the country to move ahead by accepting the verdict. Yes, the CBI should be free to appeal to a higher court if not all the way to the highest one. That is best left to it and not those who berate the ‘absence of closure’. That process of appeals is not illegitimate by any stretch of the imagination. But it must be borne in mind that the attempt to paint the 32 accused as guilty and keeping the case open for decades is pure politics. Nothing came of it and that was not due to politics as some have alleged but due to the absence of evidence. ■



[JASWANT SINGH]

1938-2020

Time Stands Still for a Gentleman

By MJ AKBAR

WHAT OPTIONS DOES memory have except to be selective? Too much debris floats on time. Who wastes memory cells on the irrelevant of the transient? Equally, memory can be magnetic, chiselling the dross out of a cherished experience and etching it on a second layer of consciousness.

The one thing I can recall, without a shade of doubt, about my last conversation with the gentle and sagacious Major Jaswant Singh Jasol, coincidentally on the day before he slipped into a coma, was that it was not about politics. It was about books. He seemed to be among books even when he was not in his tompacked office, for knowledge always hovered in the air, leavened by happy wit and nuanced analysis.

We enjoyed discussing a future book far more than dissecting a past one. Every book one writes waits for years in the mind, the embryo forming and reforming, sometimes still, sometimes kicking. Conversation was a dais for debate, exploration, a re-valuation of horizons. His true pleasures were reading, writing, music and intelligent conversation. Jaswant Singh dressed every difference in that quiet and characteristic smile of his, a signature of an intellectual who might, on a rare occasion, be provoked into anger but would never descend into the pitfall of rancour.

He only ever got angry for one reason: when he felt honour had been besmirched. His strong sense of honour was embedded in the moral and civilisational philosophy of India. It was never a borrowed construct. It was an inheritance from family; from the culture of his beloved land, Jasol, and the dunes of the Rajasthan desert; from the ethos of a proud people; from the blood of ancestors; from personal convictions that were the gravitational centre of his physical and spiritual being. Success or failure or the long fallow spaces in between were the shifting sands of life. Honour was immutable. It belonged to the ages.

Jaswant Singh's English diction, enveloped in the deep bass of his voice, was born on the upper pastures of princely India; to this he added, in his social mores, the twinkle of an Army officers' mess. People often felt, though few would actually tell him, that he was too 'British'. Wrong. He was British Indian Army rather than British. I often felt that the sartorial flaps he sported over both shoulders of his quasi-military bush-shirts were symbolic of the epaulettes he would have achieved had

he stayed on in the Army.

He was designed by nature to be a general in command of ideas and strategies in a vast theatre of operations, born or reborn during any moment of history. I can imagine him at the drawing board of an evening tent in Mahabharata, deep in conversation with Lord Krishna; or leading the forces of Emperor Ashoka to Takshila and the Indus; or a Charles James Napier sending a one-word message back to headquarters after the victorious march through the deserts: *Peccavi*, the Latin for 'I have sinned', a pun upon 'I have Sindh'. Such a glorious literary jest epitomises Jaswant Singh.

He led from the front. There was no other place for a leader. This was why, as Foreign Minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Government, he took the extraordinary decision, on December 31st, 1999, to travel to Kandahar with the three terrorists being exchanged for 155 Indian hostages on the hijacked Indian Airlines flight. That decision became controversial but he never regretted it. His conscience would not permit him any other course. He could not send any other person into such peril without risking his own life. His manners and his style sometimes struck a slightly discordant note in the earthy discord of democratic politics, but if he was at ease with his conscience, he was at ease with the world.

His most notable passage of diplomatic arms was with Strobe Talbott, Bill Clinton's friend and representative in the talks with India after Prime Minister Vajpayee's courageous decision to declare India a nuclear power. Not only did Jaswant Singh persuade the Americans that it was in their mutual interest to recognise that India would not be confined by the shibboleths of previous administrations, but by the end of it all he and Talbott became very good friends. The world changed, and Jaswant Singh was among those who brought about the change.

The world has always changed since Adam was cast out of Paradise. Time stands still only in Paradise. Six years ago, time paused for Jaswant Singh. Now time stands still for him. ■



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A Requiem for My Boss

By TCA RAGHAVAN

MEMORIES AND EVENTS jostle for space when I think about Jaswant Singh. I joined his office in early 2000—soon after his return from Kandahar and the IC-814 hijacking, and left about three years later, in early 2003, to take up my posting in Islamabad. During this time, Jaswant Singh was External Affairs Minister, holding charge concurrently as Defence Minister for some time and, from mid-2002, he was Finance Minister. After 2003, Jaswant Singh's role, for me, shifted from that of an immediate boss to one of mentor, guide and friend. I was in regular touch, witnessed his fortitude through different downswings and always marvelled at the exemplary standards he set for himself and all those who came in contact with him.

More than his portfolios and his many achievements in public life, the memories that most endure are of his varied interests, his deep sense of service, his fierce loyalties and, most of all, of a highly cerebral and sophisticated mind. Much of the latter came from a self-imposed regimen of reading and learning. I remember a letter he had once received seeking some early background details on his schooling. He scored out on the draft reply a sentence that began 'I was educated at Mayo', and substituted it with 'I was schooled at Mayo, I educated myself!'

He had an insatiable appetite for books on many subjects. Biography and military history would possibly top the list. But there was alongside a great interest in the peripheral and tangential. On hearing that Munshi Devi Prasad of Jodhpur, a long forgotten historian, had in the late 19th century penned a biography of the Mughal noble Bairam Khan, he was determined that it be republished. A copy was finally located in the British Library in London and thereafter republished with an introduction by Jaswant Singh. He had numerous other books to his credit and the lesser known ones tell you a great deal about how he had prepared himself for high office. A 2006 book comes most to mind in this regard—*Travels in Transoxiana*. This was, in the main, a diary he had kept as a young MP while travelling across Central Asia. In the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), he would often surprise many by drawing on this vast store of accumulated knowledge—possible only for someone who had thought long and deeply about India's external policies.

But there were other interests apart from books. Perhaps the love for horses came from his early years in rural Jodhpur and then his background as a cavalry officer. If official events intruded upon weekend afternoons—which they very frequently did—his personal staff would be subjected to a barrage of sarcasm about sadists who fixed meetings in such a way that a polo match was missed! He would frequently ride himself—usually at the crack of dawn. But his was very much an educated patrician's interest—because reading about horses was as important as riding them.

Yet, for all this, he remained an earthy and grounded figure. I remember clearly his frequent warnings that 'governments do not understand the implications of their intervention', and he would often speak about the vast disconnect between the metropolis and the village, the city and the countryside. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he used to write a column broadly along these lines in *The Indian Express* called 'District Diary'. This was published as a book in 2001 with the same name and remains a record of a thinking person's reflections on the issues that emerged from the massive urbanisation that was already engulfing us.

In the MEA, he had a big-picture view of India in the world. This translated into a set of specific agenda points—strengthen relations with the US, invest in the relationship with China and Russia, do not let relations with Pakistan get too deeply into a rut, cultivate the Gulf states and Iran, regain our sense of Central Asia, assert India's maritime interests, India's history was an asset in its present engagement with the world, etcetera. This big-picture view of the world was, I believe, what enabled him to think outside the box and to lead rather than be guided by precedent. In my reading, our policy gave the best outcomes with the US. Here, a great deal of credit must devolve on Jaswant Singh for bringing the Democrats around post-May 1998 and, further, building on that momentum with a Republican administration following George W Bush's election in late 2000. When a full history of India's engagement with Afghanistan in this century is written, his role, beginning with the Bonn process, will emerge with clarity.



Jaswant Singh and Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil in Kandahar, December 1999

ON THE OTHER hand, the greatest frustration came from Pakistan. He was in the front seat of the well-known roller coaster—the Lahore Summit, Kargil, IC-814, the Agra Summit, the attack on Parliament and Operation Parakram. He missed the grand finale of the NDA's Pakistan policy that took place in Islamabad in January 2004 because he was then Finance Minister. But in the rest of the sequence, he was quite literally at the centre of things. He received the most criticism for IC-814 and the terrorist handover and, to some extent, for the Agra Summit as well. I think both sets of criticism will be tempered by a more even-handed reading of history in future. In Kandahar, he took the bullet on behalf of the Government for what was clearly an impossible situation. In Agra, he was confronted with the depths of Pakistani irredentism as equally by the depths of its insecurity and mistrust that it could not take a good deal when offered one. But his basic approach was fundamentally sound and despite the repeated letdowns and consequential breakdowns in Pakistan policy, Jaswant Singh showed no rancour or bitterness but a pronounced and profound realism. Some of this realism was informed by realpolitik. I recall once, after a long conversation with then US Secretary of State Colin Powell, he wondered whether he should be spending so

much time discussing Indo-Pak relations with others rather than India's relations with them. This loud thinking was, I realise, reflective of the clarity in his mind that efforts to establish some kind of stabilising diplomatic process with Pakistan must be persevered with, no matter what the provocation was. The realism was also informed, however, by a deep reading of subcontinental history in the 20th century. There is a sentence in the final pages in his book on Jinnah that begins: 'There are now no more points to score; all have already been scored....' The sentence is about 1947 and Partition. But for Jaswant Singh, this was a thought-out general position. During my years in Pakistan, his advice always was that the point was not to win arguments, or establish rhetorical points, but to reach agreements. In his autobiography, he also wrote candidly about the pressures of being foreign minister in the aftermath of the attack on Parliament and these bear repetition today when neither has the threat receded nor the onus on us to make diplomacy our principal instrument, both of defence and offence.

'...I faced two, really three, challenges. The internal was the most taxing, for it involved carrying conviction with colleagues. This sapped my internal resolve and resources. An adjunct of this was to carry the three service chiefs with me, also

Jaswant Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2002



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JASWANT SINGH'S BASIC APPROACH WAS FUNDAMENTALLY SOUND AND DESPITE THE REPEATED LETDOWNS AND CONSEQUENTIAL BREAKDOWNS IN PAKISTAN POLICY, HE SHOWED NO RANCOUR OR BITTERNESS BUT A PROFOUND REALISM



convincingly, and to get them to recognize ‘restraint’ [in that context] as a strategic asset, for avoiding conflict...There was then the external challenge. I had to carry conviction with and thus carry the opinion of the international community. At the same time, India had to contain Pakistan diplomatically and yet continue to defeat terrorism on the ground. The third challenge was to convey the country’s mood, to contain its belligerence, its desire for revenge and retaliation, but to give it a sense of achievement, of having diplomatically defeated the enemy.’

Jaswant Singh often described the MEA’s vast daily output of telegrams, briefs, notes, position papers, dispatches, etcetera, as a paper factory. But the MEA was exemplary compared to the ministries of defence and finance—their officialese was more pronounced, the files thicker and decision-making infinitely slower. In dealing with the vast domains of these ministries, he would often quote Viceroy Curzon: ‘of a gigantic quagmire or bog, in which every question that comes along either sinks or is sucked down and unless you stick a peg with a label over the spot at which it disappeared, and from time to time go round and dig out the relics, you will never see anything of them again.’

Jaswant Singh made a near fetish about quick disposal, and that papers or files should not remain more than 24 hours in his office. This is a near-impossible standard for a minister’s office and made even more unlikely by his near-compulsive need to polish the language of anything that came his way. Replies to Parliament questions were particular targets and I remember my fingers would itch to snatch away the pen from

his hand as he made changes to draft after draft. Yet, for all this, he was very self-contained in parliamentary work. I remember the surprise in the Ministry of Finance when it was announced that the Minister would not require briefings before Question Hour and that in case some factual information was needed, the officer concerned would be called. His long years in Parliament had given him a sense of it and what was needed of him to satisfy members’ questions. “I know my tribe,” was a constant refrain to suggestions that he needed more briefings. But I realise now that this approach was also grounded in a fundamental self-confidence as equally in a healthy scepticism of official explanations, statistics, etcetera.

Jaswant Singh put enormous effort into his speeches, his writings, and most of all, his books. He took great pride in our long tradition of political figures who intervened also in public debates on history, culture, and so on. I think the book on Jinnah was a conscious effort to encourage the examination of contentious aspects of our recent history with an open mind. I also like to think that some part of Jaswant Singh was happy that a *book* of his should have led to such a dust-up. ■



TCA Raghavan is a former Indian High Commissioner to Singapore and Pakistan. He was director of the office of the External Affairs Minister and Finance Minister when Jaswant Singh held those portfolios



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By JAMES ASTILL

IS IT REALLY OVER FOR TRUMP?

As America inches towards a November thriller

DONALD TRUMP WAS extremely lucky to win the presidency in 2016. He scraped to an almost freakishly narrow victory in the Electoral College (the idiosyncratic system America's Founding Fathers devised to collate results from individual states) despite having won three million fewer votes than his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. His total winning margin in the three Midwestern states that sealed his shock victory was less than 80,000 votes. Almost anything could have affected such a narrow result—a less damning headline for Clinton in the Pennsylvania press the previous day; a less aggressive Russian social media campaign in support of Trump; a strategically placed rain-shower.

He was the most unpopular candidate ever to capture the White House. He had won much less than half the vote in essentially a two-horse race. To give himself a reasonable shot at being re-elected, in the general election fast-approaching on November 3rd, you might think the President would have tried to expand his support a little. Instead, he has dedicated the past three-and-a-half years to doing the opposite.

By throwing red meat to his right-wing base—by caging the children of illegal immigrants, insulting racial protestors and so forth, even as he hammers away at the Democrats—Trump has made himself the most adored Republican leader since polling records began. Nine in 10 Republicans are all for him. But the Democrats are correspondingly united in fierce opposition. And, as Clinton demonstrated in 2016, there are more of them.

Hardly anyone who did not vote for Trump four years ago has since crossed over to him. He is the only president on record never to have an approval rating above 50 per cent. And given that his Republican coalition—which is older and much whiter than the better-educated, more upwardly mobile and racially diverse Democratic base—is shrinking as a proportion of the population at large, his base-rallying strategy may be doomed to deliver even fewer votes than he scraped to power with in 2016.

This seemingly ineluctable political reality—shaped by demographic forces and how badly Trump has negotiated them—are the political subtext to the turbulence, noise and scandal of his administration. A week after his inauguration, back in January 2017, 43 per cent of Americans approved of Trump; almost four years later, 42 per cent do. It adds up to a picture of remarkable stasis amid the rancour and flux the President so often generates. And it seems all the more remarkable currently given how historically eventful (not in a good way, mostly) the past year in American politics has been.

To note just a few of those events, in January, Trump became only the third president in the 230-year history of his office to suffer the disgrace of an impeachment trial (Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were his forerunners in shame). His offence, which he essentially admitted, was to have tried to arm-twist his Ukrainian counterpart to smear his likely—and, as it has transpired, actual—Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, with bogus corruption allegations. He was acquitted only because all but one Republican Senator (the party's

Joe Biden (left) and Donald Trump in the first presidential debate in Cleveland, Ohio, September 29



THERE IS LITTLE REASON TO EXPECT TRUMP'S FIRST TV DEBATE AGAINST BIDEN TO HAVE MUCH IMPACT ON THE RACE. THAT IS DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE DEBATE WAS WITHOUT DOUBT THE MOST HORRENDOUS POLITICAL DUEL SINCE THE FORMAT WAS INVENTED. TRUMP HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO GO IN HARD AGAINST BIDEN. THAT IS HIS ONLY MODE. BUT NOBODY WAS PREPARED FOR HIS CRAZED PERFORMANCE



previous presidential candidate, Mitt Romney) were too fearful of the party's rank-and-file to vote against the President.

It was by any historical lights a huge scandal. Yet Trump's approval ratings barely flickered during it; and the impeachment has since been almost erased from public debate by the even bigger scandals and events that have followed.

After Covid-19 first showed up in America in late January, Trump initially tried to downplay the dangers of the virus. He dismissed it as his political opponents' "latest hoax". At other times, he assured Americans that it had been successfully controlled. It was a lie. As the chronicler of presidents, Bob Woodward, revealed in his latest tome last month, Trump privately acknowledged the deadliness of the virus weeks before those comments.

As the Covid case-count climbed in New York and other cities, he then turned to blaming local Democratic leaders,

even as he raged against the economically stifling measures they took to contain the virus, and also on occasion offered his own quack medical advice. His management of the most serious public health crisis America has faced in decades could scarcely have been worse.

Over 200,000 Americans have now succumbed to the disease. Some models predict that the death-count could double by the end of the year. And the economic toll of efforts to restrict the virus has pitched the country into another giant crisis. Unemployment, which was at a record low before the pandemic, is at 8 per cent. It is estimated that over half of the thousands of businesses that closed because of the plague will never reopen. Around 100,000 firms have already gone bust.

And how have these calamities affected Trump's political standing? Scarcely at all. Last October, head-to-head polling between the President and Biden showed the Democratic

former Vice President ahead by 50 per cent to 43 per cent. His lead over Trump is almost exactly the same today. The vast majority of Americans appear to have made their mind up about their hyper-divisive President, one way or the other, long ago. And nothing, for better or worse, seems able to shift it.

And still the political gods seem intent on reproofing that point, again and again, with ever more scandals and upheaval. Just the past couple of weeks have provided more controversy than Barack Obama's squeaky-clean administration generated over the course of eight years. Again, to mention just a few highlights, they have recently included the death-in-office of a revered liberal Supreme Court judge, Ruth Bader Ginsburg—and Trump's and his party's decision to ram a hard-right conservative replacement through Congress before the election. This shattered a pre-election precedent that they themselves set in 2016, when another judge died in office, and has therefore outraged the Democrats beyond belief. A surge in cash donations to the centre-left campaign groups—including almost \$100 million in a little more the day after Ginsburg's death—points to how stirred up Democrats are by this. (Republicans would rather have a friendly judge, fighting their corner in the culture wars, than any amount of money.)

Then late last week the *New York Times* published the content of 20 years' worth of Trump's tax records—which

he had tried to keep hidden for, it turns out, understandable reasons. An enormous part of Trump's appeal to Republican voters, back in 2016, rested on his ability to carry himself off as a genius businessman. But that is not what his tax records suggest he is. Having declared losses of almost a billion dollars in the 1990s, after the collapse of his heavily indebted casino business, Trump succeeded in building a new fortune on the back of his reality-TV turn on *The Apprentice*. Yet, playing a successful businessman again turned out to be much easier than being one in real-life.

TRUMP SPLURGED HIS new wealth on golf courses and hotels—which have been leaking money ever since. He has reported losses to the Internal Revenue Service of over \$300 million on his golf courses alone. This has allowed him to pay no income tax in most of the last 15 years. In 2016 and 2017, the years he won and then assumed the presidency, Trump—a self-claimed billionaire—paid \$750 in income tax. He has meanwhile racked up current debts of over a billion dollars—including some \$400 million that he has personally guaranteed and which are due to be repaid over the next four years. No wonder Trump appears so acutely desperate to retain his current job. As soon as he leaves the immunising security of the Oval Office, his private affairs are liable to become even messier than they appear to be now.

Did even that move the needle on his poll numbers? Of course not. Nor did the arrest this week of Brad Parscale, his former campaign manager. Parscale was sacked by Trump in July after failing to pack out a rally for the President in the middle of the pandemic. (The former college basketball star, who is also reported to have issued campaign contracts to companies he owned worth \$40 million, was reported to have been drunk, suicidal and in possession of many guns at the time of his arrest.) So there is little reason to expect an even bigger rumpus this week, over Trump's first TV debate against Biden, to have much impact on the race.

That is despite the fact that the debate was without doubt the most horrendous political duel since the format was invented (to pit Richard Nixon against John F Kennedy in 1960). Trump had been expected to go in hard against Biden. That is his only mode. And, over the months in which he has watched his standing decline, even as Covid-19 has limited his ability to campaign and so try to recover it, his frustrations have plainly been mounting. But nobody, including the President's own debate preparation team, was prepared for his crazed performance.

GETTY IMAGES



THE DEATH-IN-OFFICE OF A REVERED LIBERAL SUPREME COURT JUDGE, RUTH BADER GINSBURG, AND TRUMP'S AND HIS PARTY'S DECISION TO RAM A HARD-RIGHT CONSERVATIVE REPLACEMENT THROUGH CONGRESS BEFORE THE ELECTION SHATTERED A PRE-ELECTION PRECEDENT THAT THEY THEMSELVES SET IN 2016, WHEN ANOTHER JUDGE DIED IN OFFICE



Brad Parscale being arrested in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, September 27



THIS IS NOT OVER. TRUMP IS STRUGGLING AND HIS FAILURE TO REACH BEYOND HIS CORE SUPPORT SEEMS PERVERSE. THE POLLS SHOW NO INCLINATION TO MOVE IN HIS FAVOUR. STILL, THE INTENSE LOYALTY OF HIS SUPPORTERS IS SUCH THAT **TRUMP IS STILL WITHIN STRIKING DISTANCE, WITH A FAIR WIND BEHIND HIM, OF BEING AS COMPETITIVE AS HE WAS IN 2016**

From the get-go, he showed no interest in debating Biden. Rather Trump persistently interrupted and insulted his opponent. He questioned Biden's intelligence and levelled unsubstantiated allegations of corruption at his surviving son. Wholly ill-informed and unprepared, he accused him of propounding the hard-left economic policies of the leftist candidates—such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders—that the moderate Biden defeated in the Democratic primaries. By one count, Trump interrupted Biden 75 times over the course of the 90-minute performance. When the moderator—Chris Wallace of Fox News—complained, Trump started chuntering against him too.

Worse, he also reprised his recent efforts to discredit an election that, it seems clear, he now fears he will lose. Trump repeated during the debate his baseless claim that the mail-in balloting many voters are already favouring due to the pandemic is “fraudulent”. He would not commit to accepting the election result and guaranteeing, if it came to it, a peaceful transfer of power.

Asked to condemn a violent white supremacist group that has already taken to the streets of Oregon and elsewhere in his name, he failed to do so. Instead he called on the group, named

The Proud Boys, to “stand down, stand by”. Its members were triumphantly repeating the phrase on social media within minutes.

The following day, as Republican Congressmen gently suggested that Trump might wish to repudiate his white supremacist supporters more conclusively, the nonpartisan organisation that administers presidential debates announced that it would shortly announce changes to the format to try to keep Trump under control in the two remaining showdowns. Well, good luck to it with that.

This is not over. Trump is badly struggling and his failure to reach beyond his core support seems perverse in the circumstances. It must also be admitted that the polls, for so long unyielding, show no inclination to move in his favour: 94 per cent of likely voters claimed to have made up their minds irrevocably. Still, the intense loyalty of his supporters is such that Trump is still within striking distance, with a fair wind behind him, of being as competitive as he was in 2016. *The Economist's* predictive model currently gives him only a 12 per cent chance of re-election. Just a two or three-point swing towards him could nonetheless dramatically alter those odds in Trump's favour.

Nothing if not predictable, he has clearly signalled how he hopes to effect that swing.

He will continue hammering and slandering Biden. He appears to believe the former Vice President, who at 77 is only three years older than he is, yet he wears his years more heavily, could crack. He will also attack his party, in the perhaps well-judged conviction that the Democrats are only ever a hare-brained left-wing proposal away from a calamitous loss of support.

Very likely, over the next two or three weeks, he will also unveil a long-awaited Covid vaccine (though it will be worth checking the specifics if he does). And Trump will, meanwhile, unforgivably, maintain his attack on the electoral system that is the basis of American democracy.

This is his insurance policy. In the event of a narrow defeat and a protracted vote count—which is likely, given the expected volume of mail-in ballots—he would hope either to bully his way to re-election or, more likely, convince his supporters that he has been robbed by shadowy forces of a legitimate victory. That could cement his hold on the right even in defeat. It is a worrying prospect. Then again, the ugly, febrile next month in America won't be pretty either. ■

James Astill is the Washington bureau chief and Lexington columnist for The Economist. He is a contributor to Open



BROKEN BOLLY



At 10:03 AM, (+91-992-----) 'D' writes: K...Maal you have?
 At 10:05 AM, (+91-961-----) 'K' writes: I have but at home. I am at
 Bandra...
 At 10:05, K writes: I can ask Amit if you want
 At 10:07, Deepika writes: Yes!! Plllleeeassee
 At 10:08, K writes: Amit has. He's carrying it
 At 10:12, Deepika writes: Hash na?
 At 10:12, Deepika writes: Not weed
 At 10:14, K writes: What time are you coming to Koko
 At 10:15, Deepika writes: 1130/12ish
 At 10:15, Deepika writes: Till what time is Shal there?
 K writes: I think she said 11:30 because she needs to at the other
 place at 12





▷ 10A

11



▷ 11A

12



▷ 12A

MOOD

Divided, self-referential in its storytelling, all too keen to celebrate mediocrity, its reputation in tatters and work largely stalled, the Mumbai film industry has hit rock bottom

By KAVEREE BAMZAI



▷ 12A

NARCOTICS CONTROL
BUREAU

▷ 10A

11





OLLYWOOD HAS ALWAYS been fascinated by power—no matter who wields it. In the 1970s, it was Vidya Charan Shukla, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s proxy, who could command that Hema Malini dance at the National Film Awards and Zeenat Aman compère the inaugural function of the International Film Festival. For a non-conformist such as Kishore Kumar, who failed to appear at the Youth Congress music show in Delhi, his songs were banned on radio and TV. The 1980s were all about watching cricket in Sharjah with Dawood Ibrahim while the 1990s were about taking Chhota Rajan’s and Abu Salem’s calls. So it is no surprise today when some leading stars from the industry turn up to take selfies with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Such propinquity is not new. Mumbai cinema has always stayed on the right side of the national narrative—whether it was the nation-building ethos of the Nehruvian 1950s, the angry anti-establishment cinema of the 1970s or the soft Hindu-pro-liberalisation movies of the 1990s. It is embarrassingly grateful for the perks that power can offer—from sinecures of cultural institutions to a seat in the Rajya Sabha. The willingness to be co-opted did not arise with the Modi Government or indeed the BJP. The faces of the current cultural establishment may be new—Prasoon Joshi as Chairperson of the Central Board of Film Certification, Paresh Rawal as Chairperson of the National School of Drama, Shekhar Kapur as President of the Film and Television Institute of India and Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri as cultural representative of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations—but the practice of Bollywood artists willing to play ideologues is an old one.

Blandishments from the establishment have also been a tried and tested tactic. In Yogi Adityanath’s promise of a film city in Uttar Pradesh on 1,000 acres along the Yamuna Expressway, the industry sees a potential to gain up to Rs 3,000 crore for “creat[ing] Indianness in our minds”. The idea is reminiscent of the Development Council under former Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav that intended to bring corporate India closer to Uttar Pradesh.

Whether it is rubbing shoulders with those who matter in

Dubai or Delhi, what is surprising is that Bollywood expects ‘immunity’ in return. Stars who refused to campaign for the Congress in the elections of 1977 were threatened with consequences. Despite all precautions, music baron Gulshan Kumar was assassinated by the underworld. And as Karan Johar has found much to his discomfort, neither a selfie with the Prime Minister nor a Padma Shri from the President could prevent his being cast the arch villain in the potboiler that the unfortunate suicide of Su-shant Singh Rajput on June 14th has become.

Whether by accident or design, the Mumbai film industry finds itself in a drama where nothing is going according to script. Box-office diva Deepika Padukone is made to walk into an interrogation by officers of the Narcotics Control Bureau in full view of cameras, along with younger contemporaries. Hints are dropped about the involvement of an ageing male superstar even as Salman Khan is said to be the primary investor in a management company henceforth dubbed ‘a drug company’, no matter how much he denies it.

Much as the industry would like to hold others responsible for its current woes, Bollywood has largely itself to blame. It is jaded, indulges too often in self-referential storytelling, has three tired Khans who have dominated the discourse for three decades, is responsible for the rise of some inadequately talented star



GETTY IMAGES

Box-office diva Deepika Padukone is made to walk into an interrogation by officers of the Narcotics Control Bureau in full view of cameras, along with younger contemporaries. Much as the industry would like to hold others responsible for its current woes, Bollywood has largely itself to blame

children and still does not create enough movies for the hordes of newbies who want to make it big. Bollywood is in trouble like never before and with cinemas empty owing to Covid-19 is facing an unprecedented crisis of faith. The death of a promising young star has generated a deep sense of revulsion in the public and a collective sense of guilt at not having given him his due has caused a public outcry of unusual ferocity. At the same time, the idea of stardom has been democratised with the rise of streaming services and the diversion of several high-profile movies to the small screen. Led by the imaginative and clutter-breaking Baahubali franchise, south Indian cinema too has exposed Bollywood as its less creative cousin.

Bollywood's inability to speak up for itself hasn't helped, ensuring that those in the industry who do immediately carry

targets on their backs. Anyone remember Karan Johar's home video when he was attacked for casting Pakistani actor Fawad Khan in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* in 2016 immediately after the Uri attack? Or even before that, the profuse apologies from Aamir Khan and Shah Rukh Khan for daring to suggest there was rising intolerance in the country? And yes, who can forget the double apology from both Salman and his father Salim for the former's 2010 remark to a Pakistani news channel that the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai were hyped because the elite was targeted?

In an industry where most leading male stars are either strategically silent or happy to be co-opted as ambassadors for the Government's pet schemes, it is left to a handful of women to speak up. On the right is Kangana Ranaut who has used her crusade to settle, by her own account, personal scores. On the left liberal

side are actresses such as Taapsee Pannu and Swara Bhaskar who remain particularly vocal in their protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), while Deepika Padukone registered her wordless presence at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in solidarity with injured student leader Aishe Ghosh.

Neither has Bollywood done itself any favours by celebrating mediocrity with its awards, mocking the mofussil in its cosy, gossipy chat shows and spiralling into narcissism in its movies. It also remains comfortably numb about its lack of growth, at 2-5 per cent a year. Despite attempts by Aamir Khan in 2000 with *Lagaan* and by Shah Rukh Khan in 2011 with *Ra.One*, the Mumbai film industry has remained stubbornly isolationist, with its

KANGANA RANAUT AT CHANDIGARH AIRPORT, SEPTEMBER 9



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In an industry where most leading male stars are either strategically silent or happy to be co-opted as ambassadors for the Government's pet schemes, it is left to a handful of women to speak up. On the right is Kangana Ranaut who has used her crusade to settle, by her own account, personal scores

international market not contributing more than 10 per cent to the total. Greater revenue comes with greater scale, as Hollywood has shown, with over half of its revenue coming from outside America, especially with its increasing emphasis on diversity. Bollywood's revenues, in contrast, remain a paltry \$1.6 billion, compared with Hollywood's over \$11 billion (its total global box office revenue was over \$42 billion in 2019).

A NEW GENERATION OF stars, who came of age in 2018, and a fresh generation of storytellers whose experiences lie outside the Bollywood bubble may well save the Mumbai film industry, rather than the handful of insiders who believe taking an auto from Bandra to Juhu is the height of struggle. Falling back on star children is always a sign of economic crisis for the industry. Rishi Kapoor made his debut when people were waiting for a star—then Amitabh Bachchan arrived. Throughout the 1980s many star children, such as Aamir and Salman, were given a chance. Then Shah Rukh Khan arrived. Data from media analyst Karan Taurani shows that in 2018, stars such as Ranveer Singh, Ayushmann Khurrana, Vicky Kaushal, Shahid Kapoor and Ranbir Kapoor outdid the over-40 stars in number of releases (46 against 38) as well as box office revenue per film (Rs 136 crore against Rs 108 crore), suggesting there is an alternative for producers, used to making a mere 10 per cent of the total revenue and the possibility of a more open entertainment order.

The bigger budgets and greater freedom offered by over 60 new streaming services also suggest hope. Subscribers to streaming services in India rose to 3.1 crore from 1 crore between the start of the lockdown and June. The money spent on content by streaming services grew to \$600 million in 2019 from \$260 million in 2017. There may be murmurs about threats to creative liberty—as seen in instances of corporate censorship such as the stay on the release of *Bad Boy Billionaires*, a series on businessmen Subrata Roy, Ramalinga Raju, Nirav Modi and Vijay Mallya who have long been in trouble with the law—but streaming services still remain freer than the tightly regulated film and television world.

With cinemas opening in October at half capacity, the industry may well find comfort in doing what it does best—manufacturing a national event with tentpole movies. But with the offloading of several movies to Netflix and Amazon Prime Video during the Covid-19 lockdown and a slow return to production, it is likely that there will not be enough movies beyond January, a gap which Hollywood may well fill, growing their market in one of the world's last bastions of home-grown cinema. As film historian Kaushik Bhaumik points out: "The real story behind all this is as much harassing the Maharashtra government as it is heckling cosmopolitan liberals. This is one way of the state exerting its power over the film industry. Deals will be stuck for many things. The same happened during the shootouts in the 1990s. But Bollywood is in big trouble because it doesn't have the backup plans that Hollywood has to confront the crisis of the death of cinema

Bollywood is jaded, has three tired Khans who have dominated the discourse for three decades, is responsible for the rise of some inadequately talented star children and still does not create enough movies for the hordes of newbies who want to make it big

FOTOCORP



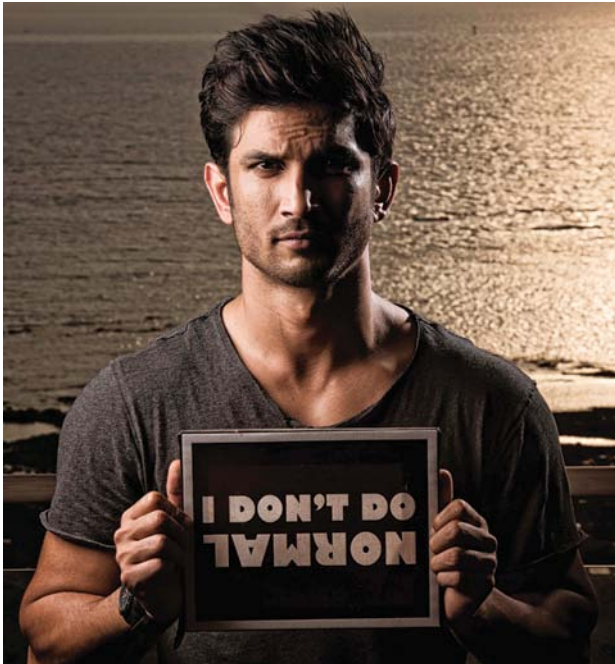
AMRITA SINGH AND DAUGHTER-ACTOR SARA ALI KHAN (LEFT) IN MUMBAI, MARCH 1

in halls, at least for the time being.” Hollywood has already tested the theatrical experience with video on demand with the almost simultaneous release, in cinemas, of Christopher Nolan’s *Tenet* and on Disney+ of the animated *Mulan*. While *Tenet*’s global box office revenue gave it an edge, *Mulan* scored higher on domestic video on demand, suggesting that both experiences can co-exist, if not always in harmony.

BUT FIRST BOLLYWOOD needs to fix itself. It has come apart, says sociologist Shiv Visvanathan, as myth and grammar. “The old oppositions do not work. Violence is no longer heroic, the epic act that Amitabh dreamt of to resolve a social

crisis. It is all pervasive, inventive, endemic and institutional. The imagination of the city as holding together rural and urban is over. The city dominates as a demography but not as an ideology. The small town is offered as an intermediate solution, but it inspires as sociology, as market, but not as myth. The family and the mother are sacred but given domestic violence, this plot does not hold. Friendship and peer groups seem more logical and more important today. The personal and the public have got separated, so there is no Bollywood balance between the two,” he says.

Bollywood tried taking to historical movies to solve the problem. But that genre tries to look at the past as a costume ball, dressed by Sabyasachi and designed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. There is a highlighting of forgotten stories but a failure to



Bollywood has been woefully short in creating surreal dramas, notes historian Gyan Prakash. The absurdist drug drama on news channels makes up for that absence. So Sushant Singh Rajput's death has become an alternative reality that has pushed to the sidelines issues related to the Covid-19 crisis. It is a cynical, concerted campaign of distraction, and it involves us all

create the epic as metaphor. Also, gods in history have become fragmented among caste groups. Bollywood has no answer to technology, no sense of science fiction. Today's song cannot carry itself on its own when script fails, and the script writer as legend has disappeared. He has failed to create a convincing drama where sexuality, desire, the body, and the erotic need an answer.

The myth of youth does not work. They challenge no establishment, they want to be co-opted. Sushant Singh Rajput became famous only as an afterthought. Sadly, the Khans have nothing to offer in the Covid-19 crisis, except a few tepid songs from Salman Khan, clearly bored in his Panvel farmhouse. They have aged happily in their personal life but not as mythical

persona. It is not age alone, but they have degenerated into weaker versions of themselves, points out Visvanathan, mimicking themselves into oblivion. Bollywood should dream the impossible, the contradictory. India as a folk society needs a realism which is unreal. But the dream factory today has become a mere factory. Bollywood has been woefully short in creating surreal dramas, notes historian Gyan Prakash. The absurdist drug drama on news channels makes up for that absence. So Sushant Singh Rajput's death has become an alternative reality that has pushed to the sidelines issues related to the Covid-19 crisis. It is a cynical, concerted campaign of distraction, and it involves us all. "And what saddens me is that if people in the industry hadn't worked overtime to complete post-production, often risking their health, the Covid-19-induced lockdown would have been unbearable for most," says director Hansal Mehta. The industry is being demonised and vilified, he adds, when "all we want is to be secure in our world, whether it is to make a *Singham* or a *Court*."

A T THE CORE OF the current power struggle in Bollywood between the establishment and the New India is who gets to be the storyteller and influencer of the future. As actors become brands, standing for varieties of social values, whether it be dignity, intelligence, athleticism or resilience, they are expected to have a worldview. This worldview is disseminated not only through their movies or social media but also through the issues they choose to put their might behind. As long as these coincide with that of the establishment—as they usually do for cricketers, Bollywood's only rivals in popularity—it is acceptable.

In the 1950s there was an almost perfect union between politics and cinema, between the Gandhian ideals of social equality, Nehruvianism and Marxism, represented by writers such as Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and commercial filmmakers such as Raj Kapoor. Abbas wrote the story and dialogue for Raj Kapoor films *Awara* (1951), *Shree 420* (1955) and the dialogue for *Jagte Raho* (1956), which shaped the actor's Chaplinesque persona. Abbas once wrote of how he had to make minimal compromises during *Awara*, which increased during *Shree 420* and eventually made *Bobby* (1973) almost unrecognisable from what he had originally written. "My story was about a rich boy falling in love with a poor girl. It had an *ayah* and Raj Kapoor transformed her into a governess; he put a refrigerator stacked with liquor in her house. Similarly, the father of the girl, a poor man in my story, was now a well-to-do fisherman with cash in his cupboard." Yet Abbas believed that Raj Kapoor was a powerful engine to carry his thoughts. So, he continued to let him fill the fisherman's cupboard with money.

That is Bollywood's greatest crisis today. What kind of stories should it tell and how? Should it keep filling the fisherman's cupboard with money, show him in his impoverished reality or make him an aquatic superhero who saves the world imploding in computer-generated scenes as in a Marvel movie? ■



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GRASS ROOTS

Marijuana was not considered a social evil in the past and its return to respectability is inevitable in India

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

Photograph by ASHISH SHARMA



A SADHU IN PRAYAGRAJ,
UTTAR PRADESH

MIKE TYSON, AFTER becoming the youngest heavyweight boxing champion and legend, spiralled into a journey of self-destruction, going through life in a maze of drugs, alcohol and sex. To listen to him now, in the podcasts that he appears on and even the one he himself hosted, is to listen to someone who indulged the full extent of his depravities to arrive at a philosophical appreciation of life through regret, religion and family. He is candid about his past and is wont to repeat that he was an addict. Yet, while he has nothing good to say about cocaine or other hard drugs, it might come as a little surprise that a recent business venture is of marijuana—he has a farm cultivating it. Marijuana, according to him, makes him a better human being (he stopped taking it lately only because he is making a comeback fight that needs him to be aggressive). It is not even a narcotic but a medicine in his reckoning. In an interview to *Cannabis & Tech Today* last year, he was quoted: “I’ve been fighting for over 20 years, and my body has a lot of wear and tear,” Tyson explained. “I had two surgeries and I used marijuana to calm my nerves, and it would take the pain away ... But before, they had me on those opiates, and those opiates had me all screwed up.” He wholeheartedly believes that cannabis can help people move away from opioid addiction.’ Tyson echoes what the world is increasingly getting round to. In the US, marijuana used to be illegal, but now a majority of states allow its consumption with a medical prescription. And in 11 states, you can even buy it off the counter.

India remains in an odd in-between relationship with it. For much of history, marijuana or cannabis or hemp or pot or weed or grass or *ganja* or *charas* or *bhang*, as its synonyms and derivatives go, was no more or less a taboo than alcohol. The *Atharva Veda*, whose date goes as far back as 1000 BCE, lauds it in a hymn. ‘The five kingdoms of plants, having Soma as their chief (*çrésthā*), we address; the *darbhā*, hemp, barley, *sāha*—let them free us from distress.’ Periodic glowing references keep occurring in Indian scriptures. The God Shiva is a consumer, giving it legitimacy for lakhs of ascetics across the country to openly smoke it. In the injunctions—the five *silas*—that Buddha gives his followers, the last one is to never be intoxicated. In the community of itinerant *sanyasis* that he belonged to and set up a branch of, it was marijuana that was the usual intoxicant. While the Buddha might have considered it an obstacle to spiritual progress, his very proscription shows how regular its consumption was, otherwise why make a specific rule for it? Its concentration enhancing property has been tapped elsewhere too, besides religion. In engineering colleges, students study after a joint. In the US, many in the Brazilian jiu-jitsu martial art community use it as an aid for sparring.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the British, surprised at

its prevalence in the land that they now ruled, considered the question of whether marijuana was good for India. They set up a commission that looked comprehensively at its use and effects across the subcontinent and produced a massive report of over 3,000 pages stretching over eight volumes. It found for no great harm ensuing from it unless abused. Called ‘Physical, Mental, and Moral Effects of Marijuana: The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report’, the late Tod Mikuriya, an American psychiatrist who was lifelong campaigner for legalisation of marijuana, summarised its conclusions that said: ‘In regard to the physical effects, the Commission have come to the conclusion that the moderate use of hemp drugs is practically attended by no evil results at all...Speaking generally, the Commission are of opinion that the moderate use of hemp drugs appears to cause no appreciable physical injury of any kind. The excessive use does cause injury. As in the case of other intoxicants, excessive use tends to weaken the constitution and to render the consumer more susceptible to disease...In respect to the alleged mental effects of the drugs, the Commission have come to the conclusion that the moderate use of hemp drugs produces no injurious effects on the mind...It is otherwise with the excessive use. Excessive use indicates and intensifies mental instability...Viewing the subject generally, it may be added that the moderate use of these drugs is the rule, and that the excessive use is comparatively exceptional.’

Marijuana easily wove into cultures, India being one the earliest. How did it become a social evil then? Studies have shown greater accidents of people driving cars after taking it. That is, however, also true for alcohol but it does not nearly lead to film actors being arrested or interrogated for allusions to weed in

For much of history, marijuana or cannabis or hemp or pot or weed or grass or ganja or charas or bhang, as its synonyms and derivatives go, was no more or less a taboo than alcohol. The God Shiva is a consumer, giving it legitimacy for lakhs of ascetics across the country to openly smoke it

WhatsApp chats. Long-term use of marijuana, some studies say, could lead to psychiatric issues but the science is not conclusive and there is plenty of debate over it. Meanwhile, no one differs about what hard drugs do to the body and brain over the long term. A few years of cocaine or opiates is guaranteed to hollow an addict out from the inside. In fact, one of the main arguments against marijuana is not about the damage it will do but that it can be a gateway to worse drugs or cigarette consumption. Tobacco, clearly recognised as a killer, remains legal. Marijuana’s main problem is, therefore, one of categorisation—being bundled into the term narcotic. After a tweak in Indian narcotic



in India continue to act as barriers to economic gains. Over three crore people in India consume cannabis. India loses precious revenue by criminalising a substance, which is this ubiquitously used. A study found that in 2018, New Delhi and Mumbai consumed 38.26 metric tonnes and 32.38 metric tonnes of cannabis respectively. It estimated that around 725 crore could be raised in Delhi if cannabis is taxed. This number was pegged at 641 crore for Mumbai.' As cannabis companies in the Western world go for IPOs and scale, entrepreneurs in India, which has abundant natural ability to grow the plant and exploit its commercial potential, are left staring at the opportunities being lost.

Imagine if alcohol had never existed and suddenly someone invented it in 2020. The government notices accidents of drunk drivers go up. Wife beatings increase and the poorest often go blind because of spurious liquor. All the things that do happen now. What would be the response? It would declare alcohol a narcotic. It would criminalise its use. But because of alcohol's long history with mankind, it remains stubbornly legal and governments participate in its commerce, many states in India surviving mainly on liquor sales. Why treat marijuana any different

While Mike Tyson has nothing good to say about cocaine or other hard drugs, it might come as a little surprise that a recent business venture of his is marijuana—he has a farm cultivating it. Marijuana, according to him, makes him a better human being. It is not even a narcotic but a medicine in his reckoning

laws in the 1980s, it became legally solidified. That is what has given the Narcotic Control Bureau the basis for its current investigation against the Bollywood actors. India, however, merely reflected the world back then when marijuana became decidedly criminal. Since then, the world has re-evaluated. One of the fallouts of that has been a tremendous legal market.

The Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy recently came out with a study on what India loses out by not decriminalising marijuana and how it even impacts the non-narcotic parts of the plant. Its report, as paraphrased in their website, said: 'Despite the historical use of cannabis as a fibre, India contributes a mere 0.001% to the world market for hemp products, which is pegged at \$4.7 billion today. The prohibitionist environment created by the NDPS (Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances) Act, 1985 prevents India from effectively contributing to the world hemp market. As the world cannabis market is estimated to go up to \$15.8 billion by 2027, restrictive policies

when its social effects are far milder?

The actors now being investigated, even if found guilty, are participants in a crime that has no punishment. All they need to do to go free is say they are addicts and will take help. As an *Indian Express* article explained after quoting a section of the NDPS Act, 'In simple terms, if a person is caught smoking weed, he can get immunity from prosecution by undergoing treatment for de-addiction...An NCB official, however, clarified that the immunity can be applied for only once a chargesheet is submitted by the prosecuting agency. It does not have a bearing during the process of investigation.' The sole reason they can be publicly humiliated is because the Narcotics Control Bureau chooses to for whatever ends it is pursuing. India has no choice but to accept the inevitability of marijuana becoming mainstream as has happened in other progressive nations. How would people then look back on the present when the entertainment world has been terrified into a McCarthyite submission by a drug that was not? ■

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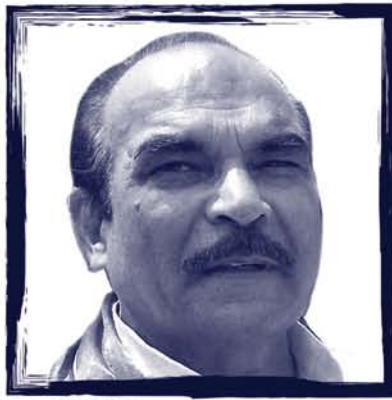
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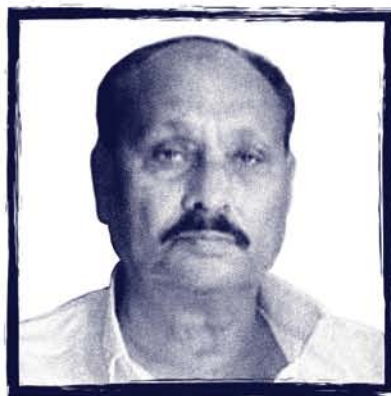


KAMLESH PATHAK

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GANGS



MADAN BHAIYYA



RAMAKANT YADAV



UMAKANT YADAV

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has declared war on organised crime

By VIRENDRA NATH BHATT in Lucknow

On February 14th, 1981, almost 40 years ago, 'Bandit Queen' Phoolan Devi and her gang went on a shooting spree at the nondescript village of Behmai in Kanpur Dehat, killing 20 members of the dominant Thakur community. This gruesome incident in the village, some 170 kilometres from Lucknow, was in retaliation against an alleged incident when two members of the caste—Lala Ram and Sri Ram—raped Phoolan. She surrendered to the police in 1983 and, more than a decade later, became a Member of Parliament from Mirzapur. Phoolan was shot dead outside her New Delhi residence on July 25th, 2001.

Since the Behmai incident, law and order has been the most debated issue in Uttar Pradesh (UP), beginning with the term of Vishwanath Pratap Singh as Chief Minister in 1980. Almost a decade later, VP Singh would take office as Prime Minister in a Union Government led by his Janata Dal. But Chief Minister VP Singh's government in UP had launched a campaign against the dacoits of the Chambal valley spread across Etawah-Agra in UP and Bhind-Morena in Madhya Pradesh (MP), leading to a large number of encounter killings by the police. Many of these were fake encounters, based on alleged atrocities by the dominant Rajput caste against the politically resurgent Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Behmai was a natural progression of caste hostilities unleashed during VP Singh's tenure as Chief Minister. Singh ultimately resigned in July 1981 after the massacre.

In an orchestrated public spectacle in February 1983, Phoolan Devi surrendered to the authorities, laying her .315 mm Mauser rifle at the feet of then MP Chief Minister Arjun Singh. Eleven years later, in 1994, UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav facilitated her release from jail. She was later nominated as a Samajwadi Party (SP) candidate and elected to Lok Sabha.

From 1980 to 2020, the opposition has raised the law and order issue in every session of the UP Assembly through adjournment notices and caused trouble in the House. No political party ever attempted to highlight the reasons for the deterioration in law and order or to analyse whether the challenge to law and order was posed by a churn in society as part of the development process, upsetting the status quo and engendering new social and political faultlines.

These socio-political faultlines are the main reason why—despite the most effective campaign in the last five decades against organised criminal gangs by the Yogi Adityanath government, including the demolition of property and seizure of wealth acquired through crime (running into several billion rupees)—there is no let-up in caste-driven crime. This was demonstrated

most recently by the attack on a 19-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras district who died in a Delhi hospital on September 29th, after suffering major injuries.

Since 1989, after the decline of the Congress and the advent of the Janata Dal government headed by Mulayam Singh in UP, 'jungle raj' has become the most potent political currency in state politics, with most opposition leaders accusing the incumbent government of failing to check crime. The situation turned worse in the 1991 UP Assembly elections when the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) main poll plank was "*Bhaya Mukta Samaj*" (a society free from fear). Riding the Ram Mandir wave after the *kar sewa* in Ayodhya in October 1990, the BJP formed the state government for the first time in June 1991. It was headed by Kalyan Singh. His administration launched a crackdown against criminals who had enjoyed political patronage during Mulayam Singh's tenure (December 1989-June 1991) and many criminals were gunned down in police encounters or put behind bars. The Kalyan Singh government did not last long however, and was dismissed on December 6th, 1992, the day the disputed structure in Ayodhya was demolished.

After a year-long spell of President's Rule, an SP-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) coalition headed by Mulayam Singh took office on December 3rd, 1993. Meanwhile, new political forces had been unleashed in a society already riven by caste hatred. This period saw the rise of caste-based identity politics, following the announcement of the implementation of the Mandal Commission report that advocated reservations in jobs and education for OBCs. At the same time, the BSP's rise championed the cause of the Bahujan Samaj in UP's social matrix. The BSP claimed to represent over 85 per cent of the population, comprising Dalits, OBCs and Muslims. The October 1990 *kar sewa* in Ayodhya contributed a lot to a simultaneous Hindu consolidation.

The most obvious outcome of identity politics is entitlement. Anti-social elements from the Muslim and OBC communities were the major beneficiaries of such political entitlement. Muslims in the world of crime—particularly those with crime syndicate links involving drugs and arms smuggling, enjoyed safe havens in the Nepal-bordering districts of eastern UP like Bahraich, Balrampur, Gorakhpur and Maharajanj—earned the most advantage from the newly unleashed competitive politics of appeasement fuelled by the SP, BSP and the Congress. The dependence of the so-called secular parties on Muslim leaders with suspect backgrounds and deep pockets increased in the following years. The turning points in polarisation and violence came in 1990 and then in 1992.

The SP, however, has been questioning the narrative on law and

order promoted by the Adityanath government since the BJP came to power in UP in March 2017. Ram Govind Chaudhary, leader of the opposition in the UP Assembly, has said: “The government is creating a false narrative about law and order, which has been accepted by the masses. The government says there was a ‘*gundara*’ during the SP’s stint in government where criminals, especially Yadavs and Muslims, were patronised by the ruling party.”

Brij Lal, former director general of police in UP, counters this. He says that since its inception in late 1992, the SP has promoted mafia elements as a considered electoral strategy. He lists a series of incidents of serious crime that occurred under the regimes of Mulayam Singh and, later, his son Akhilesh Yadav, where mafia gangs, particularly those led by Muslim ganglords, were given a free run and police officers were directed to ignore the activities of Mukhtar Ansari and Atique Ahmed, both currently in jail. “The mafia gangs of UP, even in their worst nightmare, had never thought that the police could ever be so ruthless against them. It’s unfortunate that the campaign against organised crime by the Adityanath government has failed to find favour with the media, thanks to the ongoing Narcotics Control Bureau investigations against film stars in Mumbai and other political issues like protests against the agriculture legislation recently passed by Parliament,” Lal rues.

For the last three decades of active political patronage, mafia-turned-politicians acquired huge wealth by forcibly occupying Gram Samaj land (belonging to the village council), property listed as belonging to the enemy and/or evacuees, Waqf property and the land of the poor across the state. They indulged in

illegal cattle trade, including illegal slaughter and smuggling to Bangladesh via Bihar and West Bengal, with impunity. According to Brij Lal, there is a long list of criminals promoted by Mulayam Singh since he became Chief Minister in December 1989. They included names such as Arun Shukla, DP Yadav of Ghaziabad, Kamlesh Pathak of Etawah (currently in jail), Madan Bhaiyya of Meerut, Atique Ahmed of Prayagraj, Mukhtar Ansari and his elder brother Afzal Ansari (currently BSP MP from Ghazipur), Ramakant Yadav and Umakant Yadav, Baleshwar Yadav and Om Prakash Paswan of Gorakhpur, and so on.

There was an incident in 2004, involving Mukhtar Ansari, an Independent MLA lodged in a Punjab jail. As Lal tells it, Ansari’s mobile number was put under surveillance by the Special Task Force (STF) of the UP Police. The STF had specific information that Ansari was about to buy a light machine gun, which could fire 550 rounds a minute, on February 25th/26th, 2004 from Varanasi. The seller was a Rashtriya Rifles deserter. A nephew of Munna Yadav, Mukhtar Ansari’s gunner, was nabbed by Shailendra Pratap Singh, the DSP in Varanasi. A case under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) was registered against Ansari and six others. Now, under POTA, the state government’s approval is mandatory for filing the chargesheet. However, Chief Minister Mulayam Singh refused permission for filing the chargesheet against Ansari. The other five were convicted under POTA. Shailendra Pratap Singh resigned from service in November 2005.

Ansari’s mansion in his native village in Ghazipur district is known as ‘Faatak’ (fortress). Most people knew ‘Faatak’ as the usual hideout for hardened criminals and a favoured meeting place for

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ABOUT 4,000 ENCOUNTERS HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN YOGI ADITYANATH’S TERM. CRIMINALS WITH REWARDS ON THEIR HEADS ARE SURRENDERING TO POLICE. THE STATE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN BREAKING THE MAFIA’S FINANCIAL BACKBONE WITH PRECISION



Demolition in progress at Mukhtar Ansari's house (left) in Lucknow on August 28 and at Vikas Dubey's house in Kanpur on July 4

members of listed mafia gangs. As the story goes, once, the then SSP of the STF, Raj Kumar Vishwakarma, had specific information that Mukhtar Ansari's gang was planning to eliminate his political rival and sitting BJP MLA Krishnanand Rai, from Mohammadabad Assembly constituency of Ghazipur district, and that the gangsters were hiding at 'Faatak'. This was in November 2005. Vishwakarma informed his superiors and asked permission to raid the premises. Permission was denied. The BJP MLA was killed in a shootout and as many as 67 bullets penetrated his body. Six other persons accompanying Rai were also killed. The gangsters used AK47, AK56 and G3 rifles to kill Rai and his men. According to Lal, the G3 rifles were confiscated by the Indian army from Pakistani soldiers during the 1971 war and many Indian army men took unauthorised possession of these. The rifles ultimately reached the gangs of Chambal. The dreaded gang of Noida, Mahendra Fauji and Malkhan Singh, dacoits of Chambal, all possessed G3 rifles that can fire 600 rounds a minute. The UP Police, on the other hand, were equipped with only .303 calibre rifles.

Another instance when Mulayam Singh came directly to the rescue of Muslim radical elements was in January 1993, when Brij Lal himself was SSP of Meerut. Local Muslims had decided to boycott Republic Day celebrations at the behest of Bihar leader and MP Syed Shahabuddin of the All India Babri Masjid Coordination Committee. At Imliyan, close to Meerut, many Muslims had gathered to protest. A hand grenade was lobbed at the camp of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) whereby Havildar Sharma of 11 BN PAC, Ghaziabad, was killed. For the first time, RDX was recovered from the accused in UP. Such a serious incident could have caused a communal conflagration but it was prevented. Five individuals, all Muslim, were arrested and booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA). UP was then under President's Rule. Mulayam Singh became Chief Minister for the second time in December 1993 and soon, the UP government, citing "public interest", moved an application in the district court of Meerut for the withdrawal of the case. The court questioned the public interest angle and the application was rejected. The five accused were convicted and handed a rigorous imprisonment.

Despite his youthful image, Akhilesh Yadav was no different as Chief Minister, according to Lal. He ordered the withdrawal of cases concerning the serial blasts at the Lucknow, Varanasi and

Faizabad district courts on November 24th, 2007. Fifteen innocent people had been killed in the incidents. One of the accused, Khalid Mujahid, lodged in Lucknow jail, was taken to the Faizabad district court for appearance on the date of hearing. On May 19th, 2013, Mujahid died midway to Barabanki due to a heat stroke while being escorted back to the Lucknow jail after the hearing. The Akhilesh Yadav government ordered an FIR and filing of murder charges under Section 302 of the IPC against Brij Lal and retired DGP Vikram Singh. Lal retired from service in November 2014. The court later quashed the case against both officers. During the 2012 UP Assembly elections, Akhilesh had promised in his election manifesto that he would withdraw the cases against the innocent Muslim youth who, as per the manifesto, were framed in false cases. Akhilesh's application for the withdrawal of cases against all the accused in the serial blasts case was challenged in the Allahabad High Court. The court restrained the UP government from taking further action with the contention that the state government alone was not competent to decide on the withdrawal of these cases and that the accused were booked under Union law. Therefore, the Centre's consent was necessary for withdrawal of the cases. In December 2019, after 12 years of investigation and trial, Additional District Judge Ashok Kumar of the Faizabad court, awarded life imprisonment to two terrorists—Tariq Azmi and Mohammad Akhtar—for the November 2007 blast on the Faizabad district court premises. Tarik Azmi of Azamgarh and Mohammad Akhtar of Ramban, Kashmir, were also handed life sentences in the Lucknow court blast case on August 27th, 2018.

Political scientist AK Verma, director of the Centre for the Study of Society and Politics, Kanpur, contends that veteran Congress leader Kamlapati Tripathi had, in 1971, first expressed concern about the entry and assimilation of criminals into politics. Verma says that the last 50-year period could be broadly divided into three phases—criminalisation of politics, politicisation of criminals, and the "mafia-isation" of politics. For all those who matter in the polity—be it in the Mumbai film world, the political class or the corporate world—there was a close nexus with criminals, although only the nexus between politicians-police and criminals was widely known.

According to Verma, Yogi Adityanath is the first Chief Minister, in any state, to launch such an aggressive campaign against organised crime. "This is Yogi Adityanath's brand of disruptionist politics. He is the first Chief Minister, in any state, to have caught

the mafia bull by its horns. The anti-mafia campaign will reclaim lost territory for the state and is a huge step towards cleaning up politics.” He adds: “Yogi Adityanath is doing what a welfare state is required to do. Earlier there was welfare only for criminals. It’s for the first time that the government is actually working for the welfare of the common people.” He posits the Chief Minister’s deliberately showcased policy of war on the mafia and organised crime against the larger public demand for a clean politics. “We need a nationwide campaign along the same lines to uproot the influence of organised crime on society, taking off from Adityanath’s own campaign. That way, this national problem will be battled across states and uprooted successfully; the battle should not be confined to UP alone. The campaign would bring spectacular results if it were to be launched in all big states,” he says.

Verma also says that the success rate of the UP government’s campaign was very high, especially since Adityanath had not targeted the politicians first but chosen, in a calculated manner, to target the nexus of the politician-criminals and the police. Had he targeted the politicians first, he would have faced accusations of vendetta politics, triggering a nationwide furore. Even his own partymen would have been scorched. As the mafia gangs are neutralised and their ill-gotten wealth seized, their commercial buildings taken over and demolished, the other two groups in the chain—the politicians and the police—would automatically fall in line. Persisting with the old ways would mean being unceremoniously ousted, with stringent penalties.

Spelling out the difference between SP and BSP candidates, in this context, one political observer maintains that BSP candidates were drawn from the local elite of all castes and they depend on the Dalit vote bank, making it easy for party supremo Mayawati to exercise control over them. But in the case of the SP, the district leaders were like local warlords with deep pockets and they also controlled the local party machinery. Thus, they were less vulnerable to the party’s disciplinary whip. The BJP, though, has had a different system of operating locally. Some call it a hybrid of the

SP and BSP systems. Yet, the organisation of the BJP, backed by the secretary (organisation) of the RSS, was far better equipped to control party legislators and other divisional leaders.

Mrityunjay Kumar, Adityanath’s media advisor, asserts that UP is making a decisive break with the past on law and order. A deteriorating law and order situation, which had for long been UP’s bane, had reached its nadir during the the SP regime. Adityanath has taken on the menace with full force. This has resulted in the elimination of over 100 and the arrest of over 10,000 dreaded criminals. It has not only broken the sway of anti-socials but also restored people’s confidence in government and police. “Those who accuse the government of pursuing an ‘encounter policy’ should realise that there is no such formal policy. It’s just a matter of giving operational freedom to the police to tackle crime,” he maintains.

According to a senior police officer from the state, the sharp rise in economic prosperity since the reforms unleashed in 1991 and the rise in tandem of mafiosi in politics were not a coincidence. The liberalisation of the economy—particularly the real estate sector—led to a sharp rise in demand for sand, stone and other building materials. The mafiosi focused their attention on the lucrative business of illegal mining and minted billions of rupees during the next three decades.

Under the UPA Government, the finance ministry, on directions from the Supreme Court in 2011, had assigned a study to the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) on the extent of black money in the economy, including its generation and circulation. The report was submitted to the Government in 2012 but never tabled in Parliament. However, the leaked content on mining and real estate identified these sectors as major areas of generating black money and was circulated mainly in opening new educational institutions—engineering, medical colleges and private universities. During the last three decades, a



This is Yogi Adityanath’s brand of disruptionist politics. He is the first Chief Minister, in any

state, to have caught the mafia bull by its horns. The campaign will reclaim lost territory for the state”

AK VERMA

director, Centre for the Study of Society and Politics, Kanpur



UP’s gangs, even in their worst nightmare, hadn’t thought the police could be so ruthless.

It’s unfortunate that the campaign against organised crime has failed to find favour with the media”

BRIJ LAL

former director general of police, Uttar Pradesh

Akhilesh Yadav and Mukhtar Ansari (seated)



AKHILESH YADAV WAS NO DIFFERENT AS CHIEF MINISTER COMPARED TO HIS FATHER. HE ORDERED WITHDRAWAL OF THE CASES CONCERNING THE SERIAL BLASTS AT THE LUCKNOW, VARANASI AND FAIZABAD DISTRICT COURTS

number of private educational institutions mushroomed in UP, particularly in western UP. Many of these are owned by mafia-turned-politicians. One of the most prominent of such institutions is the Global University in Saharanpur promoted by a BSP leader. He is under investigation on Supreme Court orders.

The mafia flourished thanks to the SP's and BSP's open political patronage for their own political ends and vote banks. The two parties not only provided political protection to tainted individuals but also facilitated the mainstreaming of mafia elements by giving tickets for their entry into the state legislature and Parliament. Criminals-turned-politicians like Hari Shankar Tiwari, Virendra Pratap Shahi, Atique Ahmad, Mukhtar Ansari, Vijay Mishra, Uday Bhan Singh, DP Yadav, Madan Bhaiyya, Umakant Yadav, Ramakant Yadav, Sonu Singh, Monu Singh, Pawan Pandey, Aruna Shankar Shukla 'Anna', and so on, did not happen overnight.

"The free run of the mafia could not have gone on indefinitely; it had to end one day. That day came with the encounter with the Vikas Dubey gang of Kanpur when eight policemen were killed. Vikas Dubey managed to escape but later died in a road accident while being brought back to Kanpur from Ujjain by the UP Police," says the officer. The massacre of the eight policemen, however, did not get the attention of ordinary people and the media. Instead, the media focused on Dubey's death, calling it an outrageous occurrence and raising questions. The media also compared it with the Hyderabad Police's killing of four criminals accused of rape and murder. Those killings had happened, apparently, on an evidence-gathering mission at night. "It is facetious to compare these two incidents. The Telangana killing was clearly a criminal act by the police," the officer points out.

Dubey was a criminal who had a history of challenging the sanctity of constitutional institutions and the judiciary. In the early 2000s, he killed the then Minister of State, Santosh Shukla, inside the premises of a court and was absolved. It made him unrestrained, as was evident in the manner he killed the eight policemen. He seemed to believe that he would not be touched by the authorities. But Dubey did not factor in the resolve of the Adityanath government.

The officer maintains that contrary to the encounter in Hyderabad, Dubey was killed after he tried to escape, taking advantage of the situation as the police van carrying him overturned. Dubey had allegedly snatched the rifle of a policeman accompanying him and opened fire at the police party. Two constables sustained injuries. The police returned fire to minimise further casualties and, in this fracas, Dubey was killed on July 10th. The four accused in the Hyderabad case had no prior charges against them. In contrast, Dubey had 64 criminal cases against him and was a notorious history-sheeter, carrying a reward of Rs 5 lakh on his head.

The matter of the Vikas Dubey encounter is pending in the Supreme Court. Before the court stepped in, the UP government itself had appointed a commission of inquiry. One more member was added on the direction of the Supreme Court. The UP government has also set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) for probing Dubey's crimes, his political connections and other activities, reaching right up to the top from where he apparently drew his 'protection'. Approximately 4,000 encounters have taken place in Adityanath's term.

As a result, many criminals with rewards on their heads are surrendering at police stations while holding up placards. Any mafia gang can be demolished if its financial backbone is broken. The Adityanath government has done it with precision and attacked the illegal financial networks of the mafiosi and the gangs. In a planned manner in western UP, the properties of gangsters such as Badan Singh Baddo, Anil Dujana, Sunder Bhati, Udhan Singh Karnawal, Manish Chauhan, Yogesh Bhadaura and Amit Kasana were attached or demolished. This dealt them a crushing blow. Brij Lal says: "It is only a matter of time before the UP government destroys the empire of the mafia gangs and makes UP a safer and saner place for the common people." ■

WE ARE TURNING THE COVID

AN INTERVIEW WITH MADHYA PRADESH CHIEF



>>
Shivraj Singh Chouhan

CRISIS INTO AN OPPORTUNITY⁷

MINISTER SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN **By ULLEKH NP**

Seven months since he took over the reins of Madhya Pradesh after more than a year's gap when the Congress was in power, Shivraj Singh Chouhan concedes that Covid-19 has been a traumatic experience. He had himself tested positive and had to be quarantined. But the BJP veteran, who was Chief Minister for 13 years from 2005 to 2018, says that his government is fighting the odds to put the lives of people back on track. The situation is improving and he asserts that his party will sweep the bypolls due at year-end in 27 Assembly constituencies. Excerpts:

Ullekh NP: How do you assess your government's Covid-19 response? Are you worried about the rising number of cases in the state? Are you looking at increasing the number of tests?

Shivraj Singh Chouhan: It has been a challenging time not only for our state of Madhya Pradesh but also for the whole country and the world. Right from the moment when I was sworn in (March 23rd), my complete focus has been on preventing the Covid-19 spread and safeguarding lives and livelihoods. The situation is improving. A large number of infected patients have recovered. Today, our health infrastructure is robust enough to tackle the spread of Covid-19. Tests are being conducted in about 78 laboratories. We are also using information technology and artificial intelligence for monitoring the situation.

In Madhya Pradesh, the number of coronavirus tests per million is over 21,000 and we are trying to increase it further. Here, Covid-19 patients are recovering fast. The recovery rate in the state has reached 74 per cent. The death rate has also come down to 1.8 per cent and that is a positive sign. We have to live with this virus for a long time and we have to take all precautions advised by scientists and medical practitioners.

Can you describe your personal experience with Covid-19?

I tested positive for Covid-19 on July 25th, the day the state capital went into a 10-day lockdown. I was the first Chief Minister to test Covid positive. I developed

symptoms of a cough and fever. Being a Chief Minister, you know, I have to work 24x7 for the welfare of the state. I used to hold virtual cabinet meetings from the hospital, so our administrative work was not affected. I interacted with people via different social media platforms and created awareness about the disease while I was recovering.

I made tea myself and also washed my own clothes. Interestingly, all that physical work helped fix the movement of a fractured wrist of mine—something that even physiotherapy could not (laughs).

“**WOHI BHAROSA DUGNI RAFTAAR, BHAJPA KI SHIVRAJ SARKAAR (SAME RELIABILITY AT DOUBLE SPEED, BJP'S SHIVRAJ GOVERNMENT) IS THE SLOGAN WE HAVE CREATED FOR THE BYPOLLS”**

Shivraj Singh Chouhan
chief minister, Madhya Pradesh

During this pandemic, you are pushing for a law to reserve state government jobs only for those from Madhya Pradesh. What are the reasons?

Covid-19 has displaced many migrant workers and many of them had to come back to their home states. The lockdown has impacted the livelihoods of many people whom the state is supporting with financial assistance, food and shelter. We must be concerned about the young people of our state at a time when job opportunities are scarce and when Covid-19 has impacted economic activity worldwide. Keeping the welfare of the state's youth in mind, we have taken an important decision that state government jobs will be reserved for youth who belong to Madhya Pradesh.

We are putting in place the necessary legal framework for this. We are creating a mechanism that will ensure employment to local youth based on their domicile and merit.

We are also working to hone the skills of the state's young people. For this, a Skill Development Park is being set up in Bhopal with the help of some Singapore-based agencies.

Could you elaborate on your government’s ‘Rozgar Setu’? Have you set any targets and how do you expect this programme to help those who had returned due to the lockdown?

We launched the ‘Rozgar Setu’ scheme to help secure employment for skilled workers who returned from cities due to the lockdown. We are the first state to devise such a work plan. We are surveying skilled workers who were employed at industries elsewhere but have now returned. We are identifying/ mapping their skill sets. We are in talks with factories, workshop owners and contractors to ascertain their job requirements. The Rozgar Setu programme provides our skilled brothers and sisters a platform to connect with potential employers. The state government will act as a *setu* (bridge) between workers and employers so that both stand to benefit. It is essentially a ‘matching skills with requirements’ programme.

This will help fulfil the manpower requirement of industries as well as provide employment to workers during the pandemic. Rozgar Setu now has a database of more than 34,200 registered employers and 1,310,186 workers. So far, about 43,700 workers have secured jobs using this portal and around 46,444 workers are in the process of being initiated for jobs identified on this platform.

How confident are you of your party’s prospects in the bypolls? What would be its key slogans?

We believe in the strength of togetherness of our party. Our primary focus is to serve the people and to stand by them in this time of crisis and numerous challenges.

We are very confident of winning all the 27 seats where bypolls are due on the back of the work we have done in the past six months and the 15 years we were in government from 2003-2018. People will give a befitting reply to the corrupt and inefficient regime of the Congress that was in power in between.

The people of Madhya Pradesh have always supported us and they very well know the dirty tricks of the Congress. They failed to deliver on all the promises made to farmers in the name of the loan waiver, to youth in the name of employment, to daughters of the state in the name of community marriage, and so on. The list of their lies is endless. Their tricks stand exposed now.

The BJP is an organisation that has always stood by the people when it came to serving them wholeheartedly and with selflessness. We believe every common man is part of our family. Safeguarding a better future for the deprived and poor sections of society is always our top priority. The people of Madhya Pradesh have

always supported us, showing their trust in us. This was proved in the last Lok Sabha elections.

“*Wohi Bharosa Dugni Raftaar, Bhajpa Ki Shivraj Sarkaar* (Same reliability at double speed, BJP’s Shivraj government)” is the slogan we have created for the bypolls.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has congratulated your government on the quick success of the SVANidhi loan scheme for street vendors. However, others say it is just political posturing ahead of the bypolls. Could you share some details about the planning done to ensure proper and speedy implementation of this scheme in the state?

As many as 8.78 lakh street vendors were registered under the scheme in Madhya Pradesh, with more than 4 lakh vendors having been given identification and vendor certification. The applications of 2.5 lakh eligible beneficiaries have been presented through the portal to banks, of which acceptance has been granted to around 1.56 lakh street vendors of an amount worth Rs 156 crore. Madhya Pradesh stands first in the number of total applications accepted under the scheme, with 47 per cent of these coming from the state alone. We have also launched a similar scheme for rural street vendors. Under the scheme, 8.50 lakh rural street vendors

have been registered and loans have already been disbursed to more than 20,000 of them. The rest will be disbursed soon. These loans of Rs 10,000 per vendor will be given at zero per cent interest.

I would say we were swift in identifying the agony of the street vendors and my administration immediately designed an effective system to enrol and handhold vendors through the entire process. I feel the pain of the vendors whose businesses have been impacted by Covid-19 and we resolved to help them in whichever way we could under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

As I have emphasised earlier, *antyodaya* (uplifting of the weakest section of society) is our prime objective and we will do whatever it takes to improve the lives of people at the bottom of the pyramid.

Why did your government decide to reduce the amount given under the Kanyadan Yojana?

These are all rumours. We haven’t reduced the amount under Kanyadan Yojana and we will continue to pay the amount which was being offered previously by my government. We were the ones to introduce this scheme, which is very close to my heart and it has improved the lives of lakhs of girls in the state.



WE ARE VERY CONFIDENT OF WINNING ALL THE 27 SEATS WHERE BYPOLLS ARE DUE ON THE BACK OF THE WORK WE HAVE DONE IN THE PAST SIX MONTHS AND THE 15 YEARS WE WERE IN GOVERNMENT FROM 2003-2018”

“WE LAUNCHED THE ‘ROZGAR SETU’ SCHEME TO HELP SECURE EMPLOYMENT FOR SKILLED WORKERS WHO RETURNED FROM CITIES DUE TO THE LOCKDOWN. WE ARE THE FIRST STATE TO DEVISE SUCH A WORK PLAN”

REUTERS



A migrant worker who returned from Delhi at Jugyai village in Madhya Pradesh, April 8

Kamal Nath (Congress' Chief Minister) and his party made false promises ahead of the elections in 2019 that he would upgrade financial assistance under the Kanyadan scheme without making the required budgetary provisions. Eventually, they never implemented it.

What are your thoughts on the Kamal Nath government's farm loan waiver scheme? He has challenged you to waive farm loans in 10 days, saying that it is impossible.

The Congress government's loan waiver scheme was a false promise to woo farmers of the state. The Congress promised that it would sign the file on loan waivers right after Kamal Nath's oath-taking ceremony. But it never happened the way it was promised. Kamal Nath could not waive off the loans of all the farmers even in 15 months, under the pretext of many rules and regulations added after the announcement of the waiver scheme. They issued fake waiver certificates to many farmers and turned them into defaulters. They didn't even pay the premium of Fasal Bima Yojana (a government-sponsored crop insurance scheme). I got it done after I returned to power. My government paid a total premium of Rs 2,200 crore.

We, in the BJP and state government, believe farmers are the backbone of the economy. We do not want them to be presented as victims or people with low self-esteem by giving them such false dreams and waiver lollipops. We believe in making them financially strong and efficient.

My government is for the welfare of farmers and we have taken many steps in that direction—interest-free loans, subsidised power, subsidised seeds and equipment, better irrigation infrastructure, Fasal Bima Yojana, among others. Under the Fasal Bima Yojana, my government has paid out approximately Rs 3,100 crore to farmers for the year 2018-2019 and Rs 4,488 crore for the year 2019-2020.

Recently, I announced an assistance of Rs 4,000 per annum to farmers of the state, over and above the Rs 6,000 under PM Samman Nidhi. This will benefit 80 lakh farmers in the state who are beneficiaries of Samman Nidhi. Farmers will now get assistance of Rs 10,000 per year—Rs 6,000 from the Centre and Rs 4,000 from the state. The assistance from the state will be given in two equal instalments of Rs 2,000 each.

The Prime Minister has announced a Rs 1 lakh crore Agriculture Infrastructure Fund to catalyse the creation of post-harvest management infrastructure and community farming assets. Under this, our state has been allocated Rs 12,000 crore. This will help us to modernise the supply chains in agriculture and boost farm productivity.

We also created a record of sorts for the procurement of wheat—No 1 in the country—with over 1.29 lakh metric tonnes from 16 lakh farmers.

Are there any new schemes you are planning to launch for farmers and entrepreneurs?

We have taken many decisions to improve the life of farmers and provide a conducive environment for entrepreneurs to thrive in the state. The ease of doing business rankings have been improving under my government.

Five ultra-modern clusters will be set up in the next three years to promote horticulture and food processing in the state. One of these clusters will be world-class. Like the conventional crops, horticulture crops will also be promoted in Madhya Pradesh.

All efforts will be made to double the income of farmers through the cold chain, value addition and food processing. Only the welfare of farmers can help in realising the dream of Atmanirbhar Madhya Pradesh. We have left Punjab behind in wheat procurement.

The 'Ek Zila, Ek Utpad' scheme of Madhya Pradesh will make the state's products popular abroad. Under the Centre's 'Operation Green' scheme, a 50 per cent subsidy will be given to farmers for transporting fruits and vegetables up to a distance of at least 100 km. Farmers will also get a 50 per cent subsidy in the next three months if they keep their produce in cold storage.

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown have precipitated an economic crisis. To provide a conducive environment for industry to bounce back, boost employment and output, we have announced a slew of labour reforms. The state's new and historic labour reforms will offer multiple benefits: provide a fillip to economic activity, create opportunities for fresh investment, give a boost to job creation, protect the interests of labourers, and convert crisis into opportunity as well as increase transparency. ■

GLITTER IN GLOOM

The gold loan market is cashing in on the pandemic

By NIKITA DOVAL



WHEN JEWELLER BIBEK Rai's phone rang in April, a month into the nationwide lockdown, he was a bit perplexed. A customer was calling to find out when the store would open. Rai ignored the call as an oddity, but soon there were more. Curious, he finally asked one of the callers about the urgency. "All the people who called wanted to sell the gold they had at home including wedding bangles, considered auspicious among Bengalis," he tells *Open*. From his conversations, Rai pieced together that job losses and salary cuts were driving people to sell gold. "Everyone, from those in the corporate sector to small-time business owners and even government employees, has been affected," he says.

Rai's store, in south Kolkata's Bhowanipur area, is nearly seven decades old. He has himself been involved in the business since his early thirties so when he says that he doesn't ever remember a time as bad as 2020, one takes notice. And he is not the only one saying so. From Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu to Jalgaon, Maharashtra to Ahmedabad, Gujarat and Delhi, jewellers speak in one breath when they say it's the worst of times. According to the World Gold Council, in April-June, demand for gold in India plunged by 70 per cent year-on-year.

When Rai was fielding phone calls, Rajesh Anand and his wife Simran, of Amba Jewellers in Lajpat Nagar, Delhi were watching the news with trepidation. Gold prices had begun their climb north and there was chaos in Thailand as people, hit hard by the pandemic, rushed to sell their gold. "Honestly, we were expecting the same kind of rush here also when the lockdown was lifted but eventually it did not happen, not at the scale we were worried about," says Simran Anand, Director, Amba Jewellers. What did happen is that the gold-loan market expanded as crores of cash-strapped Indians faced with loss of livelihoods and mounting expenses mortgaged the yellow metal instead of selling it.

The World Gold Council estimates that Indian households may have 25,000 tonnes of gold worth \$1 trillion, mostly in the form of jewellery. India's relationship with gold needs no introduction. Apart from China, the country is the largest consumer of the yellow metal. It is considered both auspicious and a failproof investment, even when in the form of jewellery. Selling it off to raise funds however remains the last option as a family's sense of worth is inextricably tied to gold. "When Partition happened, what was the one thing people carried with them? Gold ornaments sewn into their clothes. It has and will continue to be our shelter in the storm. Even today it is the only thing that will get you money in the middle of the night if you need it," says Ajay Lalwani, President, Jalgaon City Jewellers Association.

Archana Pathak, a boutique tour

operator in Chandigarh, saw her fledgling business whittle down almost overnight even as her husband, a freelance fashion photographer, struggled. She would soon need money for her child's school fees. "I did not wish to break my fixed deposits and with the market in a free fall, my [mutual fund investments] were as good as redundant. So I did the next best thing, I took out a loan against my wedding jewellery from a co-operative bank." Pathak considers it the best scenario though there is slight discomfort at the thought of having to mortgage her jewellery. The fact that money is in your hand in under an hour, that too with minimal paperwork and at interest rates better than personal loan is a big attraction. The biggest advantage of a gold loan however remains the increased price of the metal. If choosing to sell ornaments, an individual will have to incur loss on the making charges which hover around 20-25 per cent of the total cost.

In August this year, the Reserve Bank of India revised its guidelines for gold loans, increasing the loan-to-value ratio to 90 per cent after seeing the rush. The earlier limit was 75 per cent. Gold-loan companies have been expanding aggressively in the country over the past two years and according to a January 2020 report by KPMG, India's gold-loan market will be worth Rs 4.6 lakh crore by 2022. At the time of the report's publication, it stood at Rs 3.45 lakh crore.

This was however before the pandemic was taken into account. "This year we are looking at a 22-25 per cent increase," says John Muthoot, Chairman and Managing Director, Muthoot FinCorp Ltd. There are many reasons to recommend a gold loan, says Muthoot, citing easy availability but, primarily, the return on investment. "Today against 1 g of gold, you can raise an amount of Rs 3,600. Just a year ago it was Rs 3,000. Gold loans are the best value for money you can get without selling your gold," he says. More than 70 per cent of the company's clients this year are small-business owners, nano companies, as Muthoot refers to these, from fields as varied as retail and manufacturing. "For them, gold loans are the best option, it allows them a chance at re-starting their businesses." Gold loans also allow families the fig leaf of respectability, even if it is for themselves, of having the chance to get back their gold.

In spite of the size of the gold-loan market, only 35 per cent of it is organised, with the rest controlled by unauthorised money lenders, particularly in rural areas from where two-thirds of India's gold demand comes. The unauthorised sector has shockingly high interest rates (some can charge up to 50 per cent) which add further burden on a cash-strapped family. Banks and non-banking finance companies (NBFCs), in contrast, charge between 7 per cent and 20 plus per cent.

Traditionally banks haven't stressed so much on gold loans but now with the rising price of the metal, it is emerging as an attractive

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GETTY IMAGES



An agent processes a gold loan application in Mumbai, September 18

IN SPITE OF THE SIZE OF THE GOLD LOAN MARKET, ONLY 35 PER CENT OF IT IS ORGANISED, WITH THE REST CONTROLLED BY UNAUTHORISED MONEY LENDERS, PARTICULARLY IN RURAL AREAS FROM WHERE TWO-THIRDS OF INDIA'S GOLD DEMAND COMES

form of lending. More and more banks are looking at expanding their services in this field even as NBFCs such as Muthoot and Manappuram woo customers. Manappuram for instance even offered pickup services for those unable or reluctant to come to their branches. When asked if NBFCs are worried about banks expanding into their territory, Muthoot waives away the concern. "There is a huge market for gold loans. Everyone can co-exist," John Muthoot tells *Open*. The focus it would seem is very much on rural areas where traditionally banking and organised loans have not been present on a huge scale.

Gold prices are still high even after having dropped a little in the past few weeks but no one is ready to take any bets on it for the time being. RS Gopal Sithya Jewellers is an almost 100-year-old establishment in Coimbatore. S Balaji, the 50-year old proprietor, tells *Open* even his father is a little taken aback at the leap gold prices have taken. "Whatever sales we had, mostly of small items, also stopped once gold breached the Rs 55,000 per 10 g barrier. Now, everyone is watching. If the price goes down we can expect people to come in but no one is willing to take a bet on when that will happen." Gold is the only asset that has gained since the pandemic began, so much so that at one point people feared it would cross the Rs 60,000 per 10 g. The steep increase is because of the uncertainty due to Covid-19. Gold, not just for consumers but also for investors, has always been a haven and long-term investors internationally have poured money into gold bonds, etcetera, thus driving the price up. And we are still not out of the woods. With cases increasing in Europe even as the UK considers another lockdown, any uncertainty is enough to make the markets nervous. "The markets will also react to the vaccine news. If there is hope in the coming months, expect gold to rally around, perhaps even drop by a few thousands. If not, well, then anything is possible,"

says Shantibhai R Patel, President, Ahmedabad-based Gem and Jewellery Trade Council of India. Besides, jewellers in India are also following the tensions on the border in Ladakh. A whiff of conflict and expect things to become worse, they caution.

The Indian jewellery market is one of the largest in the world but 2020 is on track to be *annus horribilis*. Jewellery demand in the second quarter of 2020 was a mere 44 tonnes against 168.6 tonnes in 2019 in the same period. "We are not expecting things to change much in this quarter also. Whatever little movement will take place will be in the bullion, gold coin segment as people may want to invest in gold. The only reliable trend to have emerged during this time has been the disposition towards gold loans," says Surendra Mehta, National Secretary, India Bullion and Jewellers Association. Typically, jewellery sales shoot up in the festival season but this time even *dhanteras* and Diwali offer little hope. "There was a time when artisans and jewellery store owners, employees, we all were immune to the lure of gold because we worked with it so much. If need be, we would fly down artists from West Bengal. Jalgaon after all is a gold hub but today the workstations lie empty. From more than 4,000 artisans in the city, we are down to less than a few hundreds. The festival and wedding jewellery market has come to an absolute standstill. The less said about the diamond trade, the better," says Lalwani.

The only work that jewellery stores have right now is people coming for either remodelling old jewellery or selling something. "No one is interested in buying right now. My workforce has reduced from 10 to 5 and we won't know where this will go and end," says Rai. Even with the abating of Covid-19, it will be some time before stability returns to the market and spending power is back to pre-2019 levels. For, while the pandemic may have impacted the economy heavily, slowdown had already set in when the virus unleashed its wrath. ■

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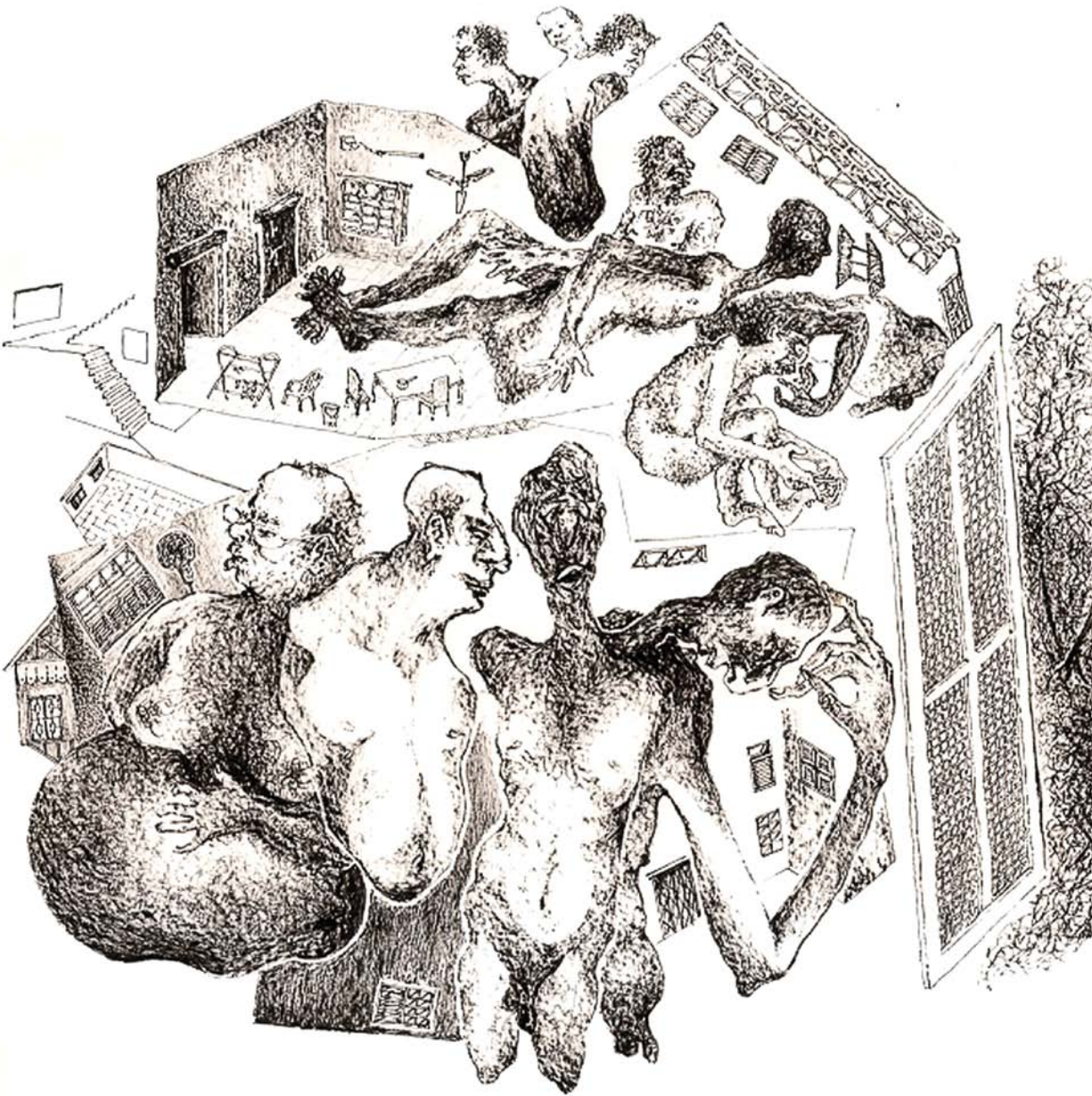
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ART

Between Bodies and



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PARMITA MUKHERJEE

Belonging

A GROUP EXHIBITION
IMAGINES A MULTIPLICITY
OF FUTURES

By Rosalyn D'Mello



●
SHAHKAARE
ZAN (FROM
THE BLOOD
BOOK) BY
ARSHI IRSHAD
AHMADZAI

S

PEAKING ABOUT HER BOOK, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, curator Legacy Russell reminds us about the different existing versions of 'body'. "When someone says to you 'body', what comes to mind?" she rhetorically asks critic Ben Davis during his interview with her. "So many people bring very real and devastating bias into shaping this 'body' and shaping how it should work, who it should serve," she says. These articulations served as a promising gateway through which to access *Seeds Are Being Sown*, curated by Shaunak Mahubani (they/them), at Shrine Empire Gallery, Delhi. Russell reminds us that the violence that inflects our present, especially in connection to Black lives and trans lives, connects, quite literally to the notion of who does and does not fit, and who is and is not defined or read as human. "Those decisions are actually a determining factor for making decisions about who has the right to live," she says, thus raising the question of who is and is not visible. Russell would like us to recognise that the term 'body' is entangled with a discussion of what is and is not 'human', which is itself gendered and racialised, noting that, too often, it is Black bodies, femme bodies, queer bodies that are rendered invisible.

Mahubani's show is poised within the threat of the continuing erasure of non-white, non-heteronormative subjectivities and lives through the intersecting forces of capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Mahubani writes, 'As the colonial project continues to veer its head through neo-liberalism and sectarian politics, the scars of violence and repression get passed down family trees without space or time for healing. These inter-generational fault lines have been continually entrenched by

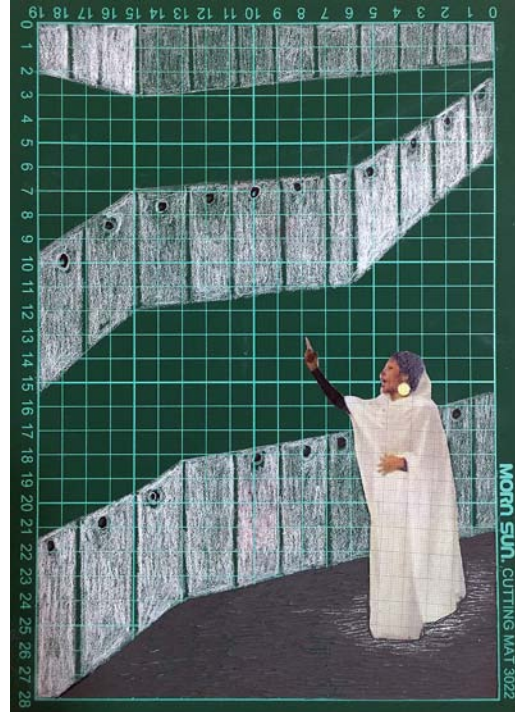
political actors, bringing us to a point when these memories have sedimented into the stones that are being used to build the tower walls of upper-caste majoritarianism.' Mahbubani 'seeds' the exhibition within this ravaged terrain 'between body and belonging, faith and free will', connecting the artistic labour performed by feminist, femme, queer and trans bodies across India, Afghanistan, Brazil, Colombia, Albania and Germany.

The exhibition is the result of Mahbubani being awarded the Prameya Art Foundation's Art Scribes Award 2018-2019, though it is crouched within their self-initiated 'open-ended' series, *Allies for the Uncertain Futures*, initiated in 2016. The previous two iterations, *Towards Resistance* and *Saavdhaan: The Regimes of Truth*, were mounted at TIFA, Pune in May 2017 and Kalakar Theatre, Delhi in October 2018. 'With this exhibition I start the act of turning, looking at antidotes to current anxieties through an organic metaphor,' they tell *Open* in an email, anticipating that the next offering will likely probe the nuances of the ecological.

When I encounter the term 'digital dualism' that Russell plays with, I am drawn to its possible use as a tool by which to navigate the strangeness of art spectatorship in a pandemic-altered world, where the boundaries between the real and the virtual are dissipating even more eerily than when she proposed the term, in her 2012 essay, *Digital Dualism And the Glitch Manifesto*. In her just released book, she apparently prefers the term AFK (Away from Keyboard) instead of IRL (In Real Life). I type an email to Mahbubani from my work table in Italy. They graciously acquiesce to my request for a digital walk through. I receive a Google drive link. I click it and Mahbubani appears on my screen. They are alone, in the white-cube, talking to an absent-present me about their curatorial methodology.

Soon enough, Shrine Empire Gallery's viewing room goes live, allowing me to move closer to the artworks, affording me the luxury of a virtual experience that is by no means glitchless. The page often takes time to load, or my immediate impression of the work's materiality is interrupted by my having to enlarge the image, or I find a certain video is not available for viewing online. I must therefore consult the Google drive link Mahbubani had sent me before. Yet, I derive immense pleasure in the non-immediacy of my struggle for access. 'The glitch is the digital orgasm, where the machine takes a sigh, a shudder, and with a jerk, spasms,' Russell had written in her essay.

Like Russell's theory, Mahbubani's show derives its current from being positioned within the liminal field of desire; from the radicality of coveting that which has been historically denied to the vocalising of suffering without the apologia of victimhood. *Seeds Are Being Sown* platforms the subjectivities of glitched bodies; those typically relegated to the margins of mainstream discourse, or rendered invisible, erased, or disembodied, dis-enfranchised, those that have had to suffer the tyranny of not being spoken to and not being heard, those that defy the constructed ideal of the 'national' or the socially desirable body. Mahbubani contextualises for us a selection of such subversive artistic practices, daring us to



SHAUNAK MAHBUBANI'S SHOW IS POISED OF NON-WHITE, NON-HETERONORMATIVE INTERSECTING FORCES OF CAPITALISM,

question who gets to speak, whose speech becomes audible, to whom, and why; and how to decipher what is made inaudible through the violence of heteronormativity, patriarchy and state-sponsored censorship. In doing so, Mahbubani asserts the pivotal potential of the curator as someone inhabiting the power to render audible the politics of dissent.

INDIGENOUS BRAZILIAN URBAN anthropologist and performer, Pêdra Costa (they/she) configures decolonisation as 'a verb inscribed in bodies, tongues, and orifices as portals'. Their video, *De-colon-ization VI*, queers the term, suggesting its profane link with the body's 'colon' as well as its syntactical connotations as a punctuation mark. In hovering over the trans body's topography, the camera re-appropriates it from the colonising gaze responsible for its aesthetic othering. The performative video's disturbing profundity is amplified in the polyphonous voice-over text, 'The Southern Butthole Manifesto', which calls for an expurgation of colonialist discourse and positions crouched within its exploitative ideological framework. It is read in a range of languages, sometimes one superimposed upon the other, beginning with the soundtrack of the 'dial-up' internet connection. 'We are always collective, never individual,' the text says. 'Our knowledge would never be recognised if they were not appropriated by white and/or Europeanised knowledge and bodies. Our voices are not audible. Thus, we have all the autonomy and authority to found such studies. Try as we might, we will never be authorised as a field of knowledge by whiteness. We do not need its approval!' It's a fitting, anti-colonial way of undo-



● (FROM LEFT) *THE DESTINED LEAD* BY RUPALI PATIL; *POSTCARD FROM KABUL* BY FALANI; *DO YOU SMELL THE RAIN, DROPLETS OF MY SALIVA HAVE GENTLY TOUCHED THE PARCHED SOIL* BY KHUSHBU PATEL

WITHIN THE THREAT OF THE ERASURE SUBJECTIVITIES AND LIVES THROUGH THE RACISM AND PATRIARCHY

ing the horrors of such ‘civilising’ philosophies as propagated under the racist guise of Enlightenment. Costa dares to imagine a future as one which is not centered on the mainstream becoming more inclusive of marginalised voices, but rather involves a complete dismantling of the prevailing white-male/caste-ridden narratives.

Similarly, Rupali Patil conjures the potency of the finger as a bodily appendage capable of demanding accountability. Her mixed-media collage on cutting board pays tribute to the Sudanese activist Alaa Salah, who played an instrumental role in fuelling the revolution that ousted President Omar al-Bashir from 30 years of authoritarian rule. The image of her by Lana Haroun leading a crowd of protesters in a chant became iconic in April 2019. However, expectedly, six months later, in an interview with *Time*, she spoke candidly about how women were being excluded from the attempts to form a democratic government. Hers is a familiar narrative. Womxn’s bodies often perform the labour of dissent only to be rewarded with marginalisation when the desired outcome has materialised. Patil reminds us of the role of womxn on the front lines of historical battles against fascist, authoritarian governments.

The contribution by the anonymous Kabul-based artist who goes by the name Falani reveals her complex navigation of artistic agency as a street artist in a region where access to public space is extremely gendered. We see her pink Dadaist graffiti framed in the background as she poses against it in a flowing black burkha. Falani seems to take refuge in the anonymity that the gendered garment affords and reclaims war-torn territory by tagging it with her assumed name. In

the show is her documentation of her work which travels and situates itself as piquantly in Delhi, where many Muslim women have, in the last year, performed innumerable acts of activist and artistic labour that will be known only to them.

THE TONGUE AS a bodily weapon is evoked in a remarkable watercolour painting by Khushbu Patel in which the muscular organ is rendered topographically, performing as imaginative landscape full of utopic possibility; while the *Blood Book* series by Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai claims the bodily ritual of menstruation, tapping into it as a window for dramatic creativity. All the works in the series are done by her during her menstrual cycle, defiantly exercising her agency to allow for art to emerge from this state of body, and announcing the alternative nature of such an organic subjectivity. Aqiu Thami re-presents disappeared bodies, re-instituting them within public discourse and archives through the Gorkhaland Picture Archive, a collection of images from newspaper archives recounting the indigenous movement for autonomy for Gorkhaland and by using the gallery as a site for commemoration. Every day of the exhibition, Thami instructs the gallery to add a new name to a wall of missing protestors and activists in the Gorkhaland struggle. Daily, the ceremonial herb-mixture, *tite-pati* is burned in memory of the rituals of people fighting for their right to live on their ancestral land.

Even nails are not spared from conveying political resistance. Mahbubani includes *N*A*I*L*S*hacksfactsfictions* in the exhibition, a collective Berlin-based publication that brings together stories of migration while examining the labour that supports the beauty industry and is in turn exploited by it. ‘Nails, the corneous membrane between a self and others. The ‘interface’ between the inner—blemished, mogul nails as a sign of a deficit or an illness in a body, bitten nails or smooth healthy nails—and the outside. A surface, a projection screen for both,’ reads the introductory ‘Nailstories’ by Katja Kobolt.

Seeds Are Being Sown revels in reminding us that even the act of hoping is a form of labour performed by non-mainstream bodies that must constantly play killjoy to mainland narratives. Two text-based pieces, an Urdu poem by Sabika Abbas Naqvi and a letter from Sabina Yasmin Rehman, an indigenous Muslim from Assam, dwell on what it means to inhabit an othered body and subjectivity in a nation that is on the verge of declaring for itself a homogenous identity. Between their interventions and Parmita Mukherjee’s fabulist landscapes, it’s possible to find comfort in the task of imagining futurity. The viewer is entrusted with the responsibility of radically listening to both the spoken and the inaudible, the visible and the yet-to-be-imagined, thus performing as ally and witness, thus investing in the call to dream together, as a collective. ■

Seeds Are Being Sown, curated By Shaunak Mahbubani, runs till October 24th, at Shrine Empire Gallery, Delhi

Mind and Machine

Novels that intertwine artificial intelligence with ethics

By **Arnav Das Sharma**

AROUND THE TIME Tanuj Solanki's third book, *The Machine Is Learning* (Macmillan; 248 pages; Rs 499), was released in June, Microsoft sent out a memo to its employees globally stating that in the next few weeks, it would begin replacing journalists and editors working for its news websites with robots. It was a part of a bigger push by Microsoft to introduce artificial intelligence (AI) in the newsgathering business. This might seem like a scene plucked out of a science-fiction novel. But today, AI has woven itself so intricately into the lives of humans that it can no longer remain chained to the world of science fiction and dystopia. What was considered dystopia in the 20th century is a reality 100 years on.

Solanki's novel, however, isn't alone. It is the latest entrant among a recent few others that have married the issue of AI with ethics. On the face of it, the plot of *The Machine Is Learning* is rather simple. It tells the story of Saransh who is employed at a life insurance company and is tasked with implementing an AI-based system whose ultimate fallout would be to render 556 employees redundant. The novel weaves difficult ethical questions surrounding such a transformation. Solanki isn't a prophet; he is a realist. His novel is not anticipating the future. *The Machine Is Learning* is about the present; it paints a world that on the face of it seems borrowed from the tropes of science fiction. But actually it is a world where the predictions of science fiction have occurred, and we are left making sense of it.

Solanki's novel shares thematic similarities with the English author Ian McEwan's most recent novel, *Machines like Me* (Nan A Talese; 352 pages;

Rs 2,156). McEwan's novel is a difficult beast that refuses easy classification. Set in an alternate timeframe, where the world of the 1980s resembles very much today's, replete with the internet, social media, a world where Alan Turing is still alive and of course a world where robots resemble humans. It is a story about how Charlie Friend, who 'adopts' a robot named Adam and brings him home, slowly begins competing with Adam for the affections of his neighbour, a doctoral student named Miranda. But McEwan, very much like his peer Julian Barnes, is known to tease us with the outer simplicity of his plots, inside which he packs cerebral questions. *Machines like Me* is no exception.

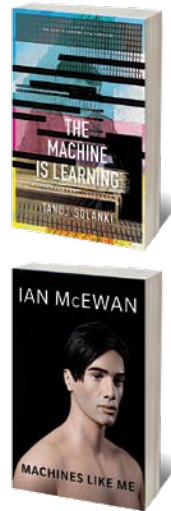
Man's fascination and fear of AI is not new. It is hard to imagine the development and rise of science fiction as a genre, without the presence of AI, or robots, or any kind of machines. At one point in *Machines like Me*, when Adam the robot is first brought home by Charlie, Miranda remarks about how splendid it would be if 'the teenage Mary Shelley was here beside us, observing closely, not a monster like Frankenstein's, but this handsome dark-skinned young man coming to life'. It's a casual observation in the novel, and McEwan doesn't dwell on the apparent similarities between Shelley's monster and this perfect robot who wears the mask of a human. But there is something deeper happening here. It signals continuity, from Shelley down to McEwan (and Solanki as well). First, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was composed during a period which historian

Eric Hobsbawm describes as the age of revolutions.

The French and American Revolutions in the late 1700s had a profound impact on the popular imagination, especially with regard to the relationship between power and those who wield it. But as the effects of these twin revolutions were petering out, Europe was soon confronted with a new kind of revolution—that of technology. A lot of scholarly ink has been spilt on discussing the impact of the Industrial Revolution. But if there is one area

where this impact can be said to be the most profound, it is in the nature of work. The Industrial Revolution and the technological advancements it brought forth changed the way work is both done and imagined. It redefines the idea of labour and the way time is used as a mechanism to regulate and streamline labour. All geared up to achieve one goal: maximum efficiency. 'Efficiency' is a word we encounter a lot here, and it is no coincidence that this word begins to gain currency in the late 16th century, when the idea of European mo-

ernity was slowly being constructed. Transported to the early 19th century, efficiency becomes a buzzword that brings together the essential relationship between machines and energy needed by these machines to produce something. It is not hard to imagine how terrifying these changes must have been to someone living through these. At its heart, *Frankenstein* gives voice to these fears. Fears not so much about machines per se, but what these repre-



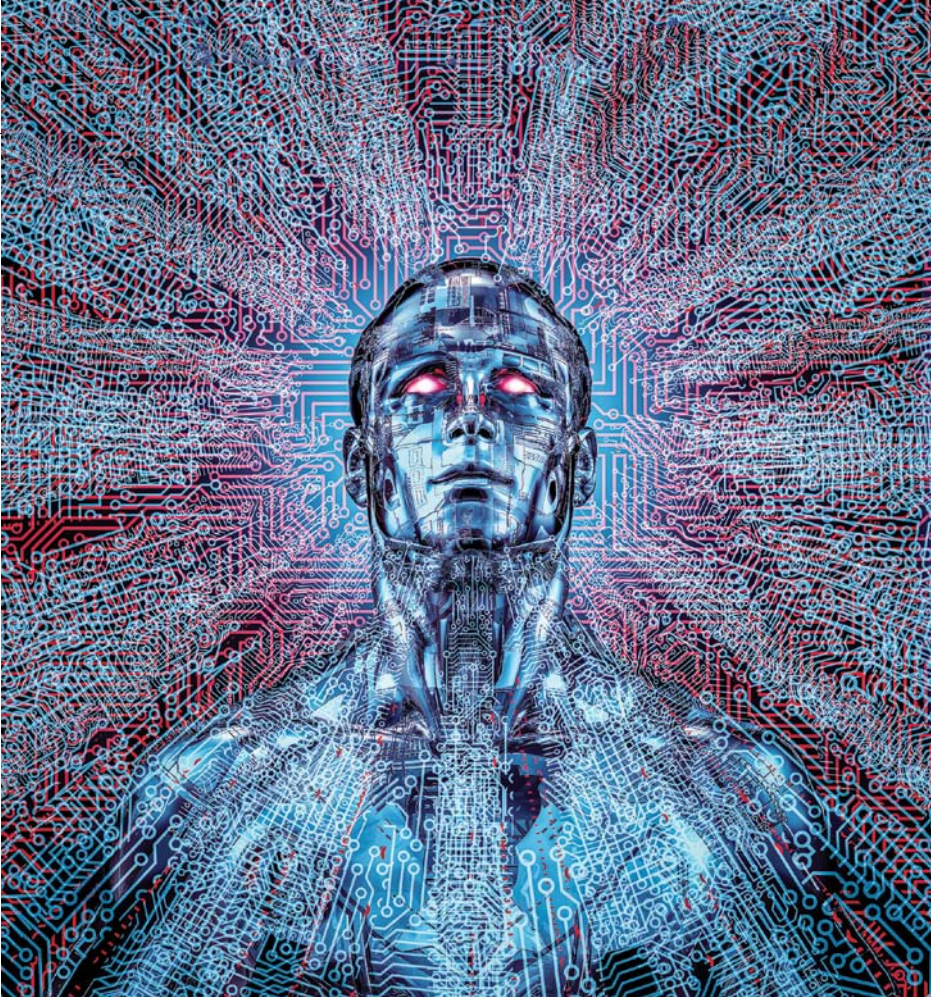


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

MAN'S FASCINATION AND FEAR OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS NOT NEW. IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE THE DEVELOPMENT AND RISE OF SCIENCE FICTION AS A GENRE, WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF AI, OR ROBOTS, OR ANY KIND OF MACHINES

sent: the unquenchable human need for knowledge, which, in turn, fuels the other unquenchable desire to create.

Mary Shelley wasn't alone in this. The English author Samuel Butler wrote an article titled 'Darwin among the Machines' (1863), which argued that machines were the next stage of evolution. Aghast at the technological advancements during the Victorian era, he believed that machines would render humans redundant.

In both *The Machine Is Learning* and *Machines like Me*, Butler's fear lies buried; they deal with the fear in their own different ways. In the case of Solanki, we are transported to a corporate setting, replete with sanitised conference rooms and a world divided up into cubicles. In this world—which to an outsider might

seem the picture-perfect example of orderliness—Solanki shows us that any discussion about AI and its use is incomplete without factoring in its intricate relationship with the very spirit of capitalism. In the world Saransh inhabits, the need to earn more and more is the central tenet. His insurance company wants the AI-driven application because it would reduce overhead costs, streamline work, make it more efficient and finally increase shareholder value. But Solanki's concern—who himself works in the insurance sector—is not AI per se, but the human. His novel tries to inquire about the culpability of humans who implement decisions which adversely affect the lives of others. In that way he seems to ask that age-old question that philosopher Hannah Arendt asked

when she sat as an audience witnessing the open trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann: if we were only following orders from those higher up, is it even our actions? In Solanki's novel, the question is, should we blame the machine, or those who are responsible for its birth and eventual deployment?

This ethical conundrum is somewhat intimate in McEwan. He is not concerned about issues such as capitalism and efficiency—although they do remain forever present in the background of his novel. What concerns him are issues of love, sexuality and what we really mean by 'human'. In his novel, the protagonist Charlie Friend is a conflicted personality. He is clearly in love with Miranda, but doesn't want to do anything about it. Then, the moment he brings in Adam, he becomes fascinated with the way his robot looks naked. The core of this novel is not so much Charlie, but Adam, who was built to 'follow orders' but as the novel progresses we begin to see how this artificial human slowly gets endowed with agency. At several points, he rebels, he asks questions, he reads literature and argues that 'when the marriage of men and women to machines is complete, this literature will be redundant because we'll understand each other too well'. For McEwan, AI is an opportunity to tease out questions about creativity and creation, monster and angel, morality and immorality and, ultimately, machines and humans. And neither of these clusters are seamlessly separated. A reader might be tempted to assume that McEwan too could fall for the age-old 'machines are bad, humans are good' idea. But nothing could be further from the truth. In McEwan's world such distinctions are seldom clean—and almost always messy.

Whether machines will end up finally replacing humans is still very much within the realm of speculation. But it is important to note that AI will continue to dominate cultural conversations. And now that it is out of the realm of conventional science fiction, these recent novels will pave the way forward for future fiction. ■

THE JAISHANKAR DOCTRINE

Rethinking India's engagement with its enemies and friends

By Siddharth Singh

IN SATYAJIT RAY'S *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (*The Chess Players*) two nawabs of Awadh are engrossed in a game of chess even as the British swallow their kingdom. It is an apt metaphor of an elite that is bereft of any strategic sense or tactical awareness of what is happening to its country. There are other, similar, metaphors that abound in India: the Panipat Syndrome, being a Prithviraj Chauhan and more.

It is a mistake to consider them as past events. The Indian view of the world and its reaction to external threats continue to display these features. One can add 1962 to that list and that story came perilously close to being repeated in 2020. It is too early to give it a firm conclusion.

How did India, a country known for the Mahabharata, an epic that is, above all, a war for territorial control; a country that was home to empires like those of Ashoka, Harsha and Akbar forget elementary strategic thinking? One clue can be found in the manner in which these epics and incidents of the past have been interpreted. The Mahabharata, for example, is now considered to be a fight for dharma and not the blood-soaked result of the quest for power and territory. It is the former interpretation that permeated India's thinking about the world aeons later. In one form or another, this kind of magical thinking continues to pervade New Delhi even today.

In *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, India's Minister for External Affairs S Jaishankar takes this sort of thinking to task. He notes, 'It is only when a national elite has a strong and validated sense of its bottom lines that it will take a firm stand when these are challenged. So, whether it is an issue of violation of sovereignty or infringement

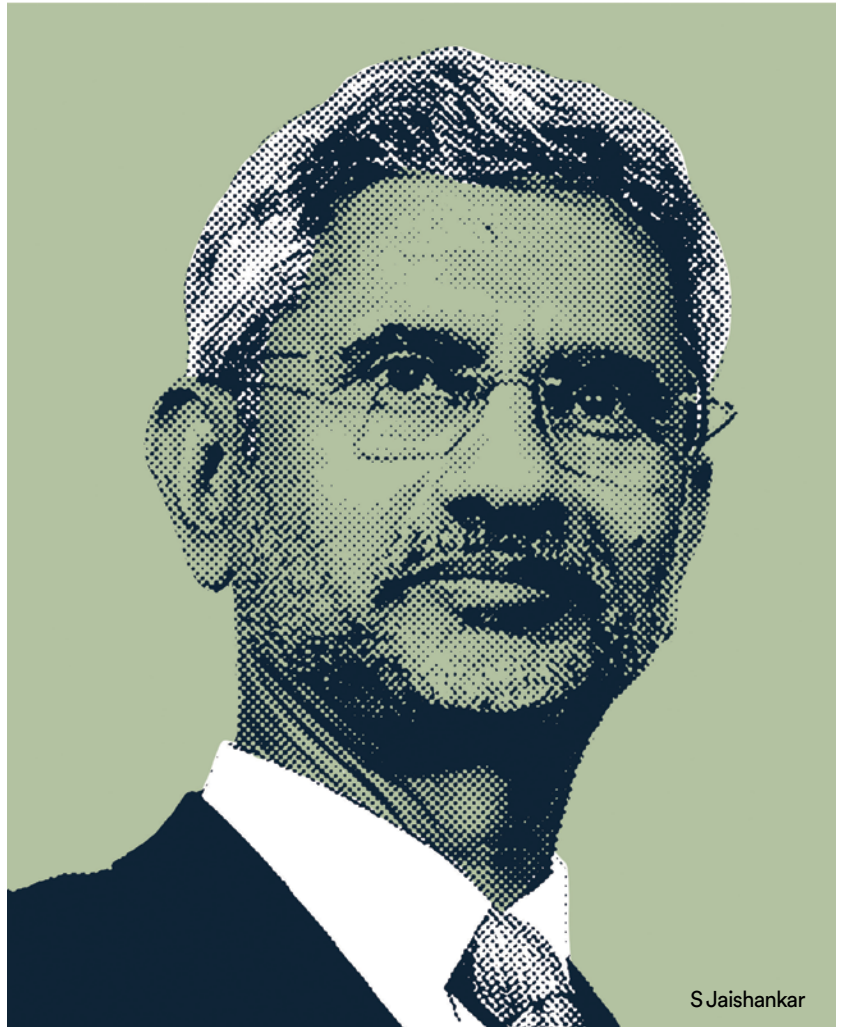


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

of borders, an ability to respond categorically can come from this inherent self-belief. Asserting national interests and securing strategic goals through various means is the dharma of a state, as indeed it was of an individual warrior.'

This is a refreshing and proper interpretation of dharma in contrast to the drivel that has been dished out

by a number of influential 'strategic thinkers' since India gained Independence. There have, of course, been notable exceptions but these individuals have often remained on the side lines. Some of this baleful influence has been visible in dealings with Pakistan and China where peace has been sought come what may even when the costs

have far outweighed benefits. Ideologically, a multipolar world has remained the dream that India seeks even if the country had little influence in the world. Even when this possibility seemed real, India overstated its benefits in terms of its room for manoeuvre. The 'Bandung Spirit' underestimated the costs of collective action and the Non-Aligned Movement was never anything more than a talking shop.

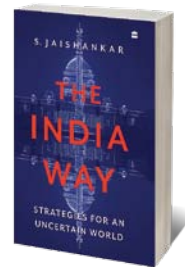
The worst part of it was India's absence of realism in dealing with China, a state of affairs that continued until very recently. In his 2019 Ramnath Goenka Lecture (re-worked as 'The Dogmas of Delhi' in his book), Jaishankar took a shot at the lack of realism in India's foreign policymaking. At that time, he was criticised on the nature of the world order that was clearly bipolar while India continued to hanker for multipolarity and reliance on 'hedging strategies'. That lecture was delivered just a month after the Mamallapuram meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping. This was arguably the time when the 'Wuhan Spirit' dominated Indian thinking. The Quadrilateral Dialogue was not allowed to go beyond a point so as to 'reassure' China.

Since then much has changed. China's surprise attack on Indian soldiers out on a verification mission in Galwan Valley on June 15th-16th finally shook India out of its torpor. The 'hesitations of history', to use a felicitous phrase of Prime Minister Modi, have been swept aside. The 'Quad' is steaming ahead and foreign ministers of the four countries now meet and discuss China regularly. India has also commenced on fortifying itself militarily, a process that has speeded up further since 2014. Border infrastructure, especially in eastern Ladakh, is also being created at a frenetic pace. But a lingering doubt remains: isn't this a continuing sign of the Panipat Syndrome?

Perhaps this is an unfair characterisation. No government—even one that is led by realist leaders such as Modi and Jaishankar—can escape the shadow of the past. Jaishankar knows this only too

well. He notes, 'India's foreign policy carries three major burdens from its past.' These are: One, the 1947 Partition, 'which reduced the nation both demographically and politically. An unintended consequence was to give China more strategic space in Asia'; two, 'delayed economic reforms that were undertaken a decade and a half after those of China. And far more ambivalently'; and three, the delay in exercising the nuclear option.

These weigh heavily on how India deals with China. By now it is painfully obvious that no treaty, agreement or understanding with China is worth the paper it is signed on. The most important of the three burdens listed by Jaishankar are economic reforms. Even



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today, economic growth is not a priority. Its link with aggregate national power is not appreciated by policymakers even as it remains hostage to redistributive politics at home in one way or another. Investment growth has been crippled almost for a decade and the necessary reforms to spur it have either not been carried out or have come haltingly. One can just imagine if India had grown at a rate of 7 per cent plus every year for, say, 15 years. Our ability to handle China would have been of a very different order in terms of marshalling the necessary resources. If there is some hesitation today, it is in no small measure due to the gigantic economic disparity between the two countries. It is an uncomfortable thought but unfettered political competition at home—something which even powerful political parties cannot defy—has external costs in the case of India. This is not about political freedom let alone democracy but the ruinous expenditures that must be maintained to keep things calm domestically.

These are constraints that anyone who is crafting India's foreign policy has to reckon with. They are not even whispered by those wishing for *aman ki aasha* or woolly proponents of the Panchsheel idea in academia and the Foreign Service. But things are changing. Since 2014, India has not hesitated to use force against Pakistan and is clear about the menace posed by that country. Hopefully, the events in Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso will lead to a similar, and lasting, realisation about China. It is too much to expect a chaotic country such as India to have any grand strategy, let alone a coherent one. What can be expected is that its leaders realise the necessity of imbibing realism in their outlook. But it is also important for India's leaders to gain a measure of self-confidence in dealing with the world, be it an aggressive China or friends who warn that India will be less agreeable a partner in case it turns 'illiberal'. Perhaps, gaining a better sense of purpose may be an alternative to grand strategy, for a while. *The India Way* may spur some happy debates to that end, hopefully. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

Act Two

Since retiring from acting in the '80s after her marriage to **Rishi Kapoor**, **Neetu Singh** made a few exceptions and faced the camera—but only to work with her husband or son. In *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), she made a fleeting appearance as the missus of the character played by Rishi Kapoor. The following year, she took a full-fledged lead in *Do Dooni Chaar*, again opposite her husband. In **Yash Chopra**'s swansong *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (2012), she guest-starred yet again opposite Rishi Kapoor, and then in *Besharam* (2013), she joined her husband to play a pair of crooked cops trying to make a fast buck at the expense of the protagonist, a down-on-his-luck Lothario, played by son **Ranbir Kapoor**.

The actress has frequently said that having started her career as a child artist and spent the bulk of her childhood and youth on film sets, she was most happy to bid goodbye to the movies when she did. She was never tempted to return to acting fulltime, and the few appearances she did make post-retirement were on the request of her family. But now it appears that Neetu has said yes to starring in *Good Newwz* director **Raj Mehta**'s next, a 'dramedy' in which she will play **Anil Kapoor**'s wife and **Varun Dhawan**'s mother.

Industry sources say Anil and Neetu will play a long-suffering couple who decide to end their marriage and are looking for the right moment to break it to their overseas-settled son. But their son is himself having trouble breaking the news to his parents that his wife and he have decided to divorce. The role of Varun's wife will be played by **Kiara Advani**, and much like the last time around, Raj is expected to treat a serious subject with some levity.

Neetu is believed to have said yes to the project on the encouragement of her children **Riddhima** and **Ranbir**, who, in the months since the passing of their father, have been keen that she find distractions to keep herself busy and happy.

A New Chemistry

It was right here in this column more than two months ago that we first broke the news

that Varun Dhawan would be starring in *Stree* and *Bala* director **Amar Kaushik**'s next film—a 'monster satire' set in a forest in Madhya Pradesh. Filming is expected to begin in a few months when shooting restrictions are relaxed across the country and when it is safe to travel with a full unit.

Last week though Varun faced the camera for Amar—not for a feature but for an ad film. The actor took a Covid-19 test (helpfully documented on his Instagram) before strapping on a mask and heading out to shoot for the first time in nearly six months. Previously, and while still in lockdown, Varun hosted a talent contest for an e-commerce platform but he did that from the convenience of his own home. The ad film, however, was a studio shoot—but with safety precautions. Sources say it was also an opportunity for both Varun and Amar to get to know each other better and to understand each other's working style before they head into the forests to film their feature, which, according to some reports, has been tentatively titled *Bhediya*.

Hot Right Now

Vir Das doesn't want his genius to be limited to home shores. The actor and comedian has repeatedly said he is keen to explore both standup and acting opportunities in the West, and towards that end, he took a role in the (largely forgettable) ABC drama series *Whiskey Cavalier* last year. But earlier this week, it was announced that he has been signed by top Hollywood artist management agency UTA for representation outside India.

Vir, who was named by *Variety* magazine as one of the 10 Comics to Watch in 2017, is the only Indian funny man (or woman) to have three comedy specials on Netflix.

Getting a spot on UTA's roster could be a big step towards a global career, given the agency has some experience representing major international comics such as Awkwafina, Chelsea Handler, Chris Tucker and Hannah Gadsby. ■



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