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5 AUGUST 2019 / ₹50

THE GANDHIS VS THE CONGRESS

THE COMING COLD WAR

By Harish Khare

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OPEN MAIL

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Congratulations to the whole team—past and present—at *Open* for completing 10 years! The July 29th anniversary issue summed up a changing India aptly through its list of the 50 minds that have impacted us between 2009 and 2019. In a decade of upheavals, the magazine has continually given us perspectives that go beyond the obvious and the newsy. Once a crowded print market, the Indian media is now going through the same digital churn that its counterparts in Western countries are going. Yet this magazine has kept us hooked on to the physical product in a time of short attention spans and smartphone ubiquity. What the magazine said about people on its 'Soft Power' list is equally true of it: As readers, we are all fascinated by those publications which go that bit farther, those which push the envelope just a bit more. And in this, most of readers would agree with me, this magazine has rarely disappointed. I hope the magazine continues opening our minds to the world over the next decade and beyond. A changing India needs brave voices and incisive storytellers.

Monica Jabbar

GODS HELP THOSE...

India has never had a dearth of godmen and godwomen ('Gods and Godmen', July 29th, 2019). Some very much genuine, others fake to the core. Their tribe will flourish as long as superstition remains attractive. The genuine had an indelible impact on people but made no history. Even today, they are remembered with respect and reverence. They were highly spiritual, very simple, didn't have huge following or political connections or commercial ambitions and when they died, they died an ordinary person. On the other hand, there were those whose only goal was survival and success. The way to God is direct, not through godmen or godwomen.

MY Shariff

BETTER THAN MARX

Communism is an addictive and a toxic ideology ('Zero Marx', July 29th, 2019). For those looking to detoxify, I recommend *Basic Economics: A Citizen's Guide to the Economy* by Thomas Sowell. The book beautifully describes capitalism and communism, and how and why communism fails.

Amar J

RESORTING TO POLITICS

It is rather unfortunate to see elected representatives being transported to resorts for fixing deals to bring one or the other party to power ('The Last Resort of Politics', July 22nd, 2019). It is their moral duty to decline inducements or money to defect to other parties. I think tough anti-defection laws is the only solution to put an end to the menace of resort politics.

Anish Esteves

HER COUNTRY

When we talk about women empowerment, it is usually about those living in rural and semi-urban areas who need to be supported, given that they are the ones who face most kind of stigmas in society, and that is why it is heartening to see women self-help groups (SHGs) like the one in Chandu village in Haryana flourishing ('Remember Her', July 22nd, 2019). The state has always been in the news for women being discriminated against by their own family members. Which makes it all the more reassuring to read about women like Pooja Sharma setting up their SHG in the state. After the recent Budget announcement of financial aid to SHGs, I am sure more strong and independent women will be encouraged to take benefit of it to break free of the limits imposed by their communities and fulfill their dreams. Right from local panchayats to district magistrates, all authorities need to create a country conducive to their flourishing on their own terms.

Bal Govind

Editor: S Prasannarajan. Printed and published by Neeraja Chawla on behalf of the owner, Open Media Network Pvt Ltd. Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana).
Published at 4, DDA Commercial Complex, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110017.
Ph: (011) 48500500; Fax: (011) 48500599

To subscribe, WhatsApp 'openmag' to 9999800012 or log on to www.openthemagazine.com or call our Toll Free Number 1800 102 7510 or email at: customercare@openmedianetwork.in
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Volume 11 Issue 31
For the week 30 July-5 August 2019
Total No. of pages 68

By S PRASANNARAJAN

BEING BORIS

IF YOU READ only certain kinds of opinion writers in certain kinds of opinion pages, on both sides of the Atlantic, Boris Johnson is an ahistorical calamity—laugh with the "rascal" only to be damned. It's not a people's vote, the original referendum on Britain's continuance in the European Union, that has made him the new prime minister of the UK. This "man without conviction for a country without direction" has "lied, pandered and guffawed his dishevelled way to the highest office in the land." The new Conservative leader, "whose laziness is proverbial and opportunism legendary, is a man well practiced in deceit, a pander willing to tickle the prejudices of his audiences for easy gain. His personal life is incontinent, his public record inconsequential." "This is the Johnsonian way. The lies, the performative phrases, the layers of persona—they accrete, one on top of another, flecked here and there with Latin, until everyone has forgotten what the big deal was." These are random quotes from the lofty pages of journalism. As you read more of them, you realise: increasingly, the Boris-bashing commentators in their word play look like poor parodies of their subject, one of Britain's highest paid columnists. Since that vote three summers ago, Johnson, who along with Michael Gove (the would-be Brutus) formed the vanguard of the Leave campaign, has been ridiculed (by pundits from Left and Right) and admired (by the English who lived outside the London bubble) in unequal measure.

I remember that summer in London, when the city, a cosmopolitan oasis, was stunned by the worst kind of English eccentricity. London was history-proof, immune to the paranoia of the Little-England pastoralists, and steeped in its multicultural self-righteousness. Elsewhere, beyond the city that was appalled by the politics of the countryside and the rusty Brahminism of blue-blooded Tories, a new sense of Englishness prevailed over enforced supra-nationalism. Some, condescendingly, called it the return of nativism; some saw it as the imperial fantasy of the islander; and some shrugged it off as the politics of fear. On Liberation Day, there was no national celebration. In a divided Kingdom, the alarmists dismissed the preference of the majority as manipulated emotionalism. It was, in a sense, the death of politics itself—the politics of comfortable truisms. The resentment from below would topple the Establishment; Who-we-are would defeat Just-be-what-you-are. Johnson should have been the natural successor to David Cameron, who then resembled Gorbachev in the final days of the Soviet Union—a man who presided over the freedom rite, and paved the way for his own redundancy. In the end, Coronation Day became Funeral Day. But Boris Johnson didn't die. He has been resurrected as a caricature. He was what others wrote about him. He was not what he was: Eton, Oxford, editor, scholar, columnist, author, two-time London mayor, foreign secretary, and Britain's most popular politician. He was reduced to a series of one-liners. He was the idea on which his detractors—jealous journalists and ignored grandees—tested their capacity for hatred.

The so-called Anyone-but-Boris campaign was yet another instance of straitjacketing a social upheaval. When Brexit was followed by Donald Trump, it was the appearance that jolted the liberals and sober conservatives alike; the attitude of a people who elected the man got little attention. A Trump could not have played out his salvation theology without the backdrop of the ruins of both the traditional Left and the Right. It was the revenge of the abandoned. Between a preachy, platitudinous Left and a privileged, pompous Right lay the vast constituency of the resenting class, waiting for a redeemer, no matter if he was a vulgarian or a buffoon. The new narrative of liberal dissent, sprinkled with the acquired jargon of post-truth and fake news, refused to engage with the raw, elemental rage of the abandoned class. It doesn't, still. It's still lost in the ungainly aesthetics of power, whether in Washington or London. Aesthetics matters, as this column has argued earlier in these pages. A political royalty that disrespects popular sentiment matters more. The Boris moment marks a widening rift between reimagined Englishness and insensitive globalism.

Can Boris Johnson be the unifier? As I went back to his book-length appreciation of his hero, Winston Churchill, one passage by the fan boy stood out:

"Like the generations of leaves, so are the generations of men, says Homer. That seems about right to me: we are like leaves not only in our mortality, but in our similarity.

"I have always thought that an alien looking cursorily at this planet might conclude that we human beings are not strictly speaking individuals, but all really part of the same organism: like leaves connected by invisible twigs and branches."

These are not a buffoon's words. These are the words of a man who believes in the shared humanity of his world. Boris Johnson won't be an ephemeral prime minister but a worthy inheritor of Churchill's ideals if he can turn that philosophical lyricism into political pragmatism. ■

SAURABH SINGH

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

SENIOR TRINAMOOL Congress (TMC) MP Saugata Roy is never lost for words. A taciturn man in real life, his professorial talents and wealth of knowledge find full expression in Parliament. Easily the ablest parliamentarian on the TMC benches—he was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1977 and has since been a member either of the West Bengal Assembly or the Lok Sabha—he never lets go of an opportunity to pin down the Government. Given his mastery of the rule book, his points of order often leave the ruling party benches squirming with embarrassment. So, when the other day participating in the debate on the Budget, he mentioned Ambanis and Adanis to make the case that the Government was pro-business, the treasury benches erupted in protest. Meenakshi Lekhi, the New Delhi MP, was in the chair. She immediately expunged the impugned remark: "Ambanis and Adanis are essential for the Government." Help soon came from another veteran on the opposition benches. Biju Janta Dal's Bhartruhari Mahtab pointed out that this House in the earlier decades had regularly echoed with references to Birlas and Tatas from the Opposition members. If those were okay, references to Ambanis and Adanis surely could not be unparliamentary? Lekhi promised to reconsider the decision to expunge Roy's reference to Ambanis and Adanis. Which reminds me of the time not long ago when the late Samajwadi Party MP, Janeshwar Mishra, had put up a board on the lawns of his house located bang opposite Shastri Bhawan. It proclaimed loudly: 'Lohia *ke log*.' In his youth Mishra was a firebrand Lohiaite, constantly in the protest mode, railing against the pro-business

policies of the then dominant Congress. Since then, the socialist ardour has virtually evaporated even from the party that has '*samajwad*' in its name. Now, to my mind, it would be in the fitness of things if they all had boards proclaiming themselves to be of this or that industrialist's *log*, though if it came to the two *As*, one will be beaten hundred to one because they are still new in this slippery business. Incidentally, Governments in the '60s and '70s suffered no harm for being accused endlessly of being in the pockets of Tatas and Birlas. Nor can anyone, including Saugata Roy himself, expect the current regime to come to grief following the charge of its softness for Ambanis and Adanis. If Tatas and Birlas had become a popular metaphor for the entire capitalist class then, 'Ambanis and Adanis' in the public discourse is a metaphor for big money in the current age.

A TELEVISION CHANNEL launched with great fanfare just ahead of the Lok Sabha polls rehabilitated star anchors who had found themselves made redundant by their previous bosses who failed to renew their contracts. Now, the new channel too is in the throes of a huge financial crisis. The main promoter, or at least the one who fronts for the owners, has virtually washed his hands of the matter, with the staff running from pillar to post demanding pay arrears, and severance benefits, should any be forthcoming. And the well-known TV journalist who had earned a name for herself in her long stint with another channel, which too, incidentally, is in deep financial crisis, finds herself helpless. Despite her courageous stand in solidarity with the junior editorial and technical staff, she has failed to elicit support from any quarter. Aside from a perfunctory statement by a body of journalists, precious little has been done to persuade the owners of the new channel to at least honour the mandatory commitments on pay and severance packages. The Government, for its part, has strictly maintained a hands-off approach, refusing to entertain any request to intervene in the unseemly goings-in the new channel.

MODI'S MINISTERS feel obliged to stay in the work mode 24x7, unlike Vajpayee's. We have often heard ministers who were also part of the Vajpayee Government that it was fun to be a minister then, now it is all work. The late Prime Minister was laid-back, enjoying long post-lunch siestas and leaving it to trusted aides to do the needful. Modi, on the other hand, is a workaholic, and a tough taskmaster. However, in Modi 2.0, the Prime Minister has cracked the whip even on ordinary MPs, enjoining upon them to attend Parliament rather than play truant or gossip in the Central Hall. Poor fellows, they are not even ministers and are still expected to be on 'duty' all the time. Really, a tough schoolmasterish Prime Minister, isn't he? ■

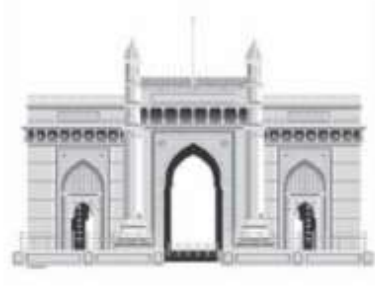
MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker

'THE LATEST FIRE in Mumbai...' is how I began this column, then stopped because by the time this issue of *Open* is printed and gets into your hands, there may well be another fire or two in this out-of-control city. So I will begin with: The fire which broke out the day before I wrote this column could have been far, far worse if it hadn't been for the efficiency and bravery of the fire brigade.

It happened during a working day in MTNL's 10-storey building in Bandra when there were over 200 people inside. Yet no one was killed or injured. As many as 175 firefighters, 14 fire engines, three turntable ladders and one robot firefighter handled the blaze and rescued people, bringing down many from the terrace using turntables. (Apparently the robot, bought with much fanfare and even more money, didn't do too well in its first outing: it found passages too narrow to turn in and couldn't climb up the stairs unaided. Perhaps it's an ancient robot.)

There will, of course, be a post-mortem to find out the whys and the wherefores. There always is in these cases. Pity no one has a pre-mortem because that would stop many incidents from becoming disasters. In this case, they would have found fire alarms were not functioning (but, hey, people can *shout*!), smoke had filled the staircase so people couldn't escape (that's why you need open windows in all stairs) and the building's compound had become a junkyard for discarded cables (giant, pythonesque ones), rubble and even abandoned cars. (Why does MTNL buy disposable cars with such abandon?) All this sounds like the old Indian saying, 'Good housekeeping is only for the house', but in this case, the brigade's fire engines, tankers and turntable ladders found very little room to manoeuvre, thus severely



hampering operations.

Another major impediment to fire-fighting was 'disaster tourism': I am sure there is no better sight than watching a building burn, but the hordes which turned up ended up blocking roads and pathways and generally getting in the way. I would think it's always better to watch these spectacles on TV: you have slow-motion replays, coverage from different angles and expert comments. But what can top the woman stranded on the building terrace who recorded her moment of rescue with a selfie, and even smiled and posed for her camera atop the ladder?

AFTER THE POST-MORTEM of the foot overbridge (FOB) which collapsed at the CST station and killed eight, the BMC lumbered unswiftly into action and did pre-mortems on 300 FOBs across the city. Twenty-nine were found to be 'extremely dangerous', requiring 'immediate demolition'. A mere four months later, the BMC has issued tenders to demolish 10 of these. There's nothing like quick action.

One is certain the wheels of super-swift motion are being oiled right now for more pre-mortems after the post-mortem of the Dongri building. This collapsed on July 16th and killed 13. After all, 499 more buildings are on the imminent-collapse list and in each of them people *live* and hopefully not die. Why don't they move out? If you ask that, you obviously don't live in Mumbai: accommodation here is difficult to find—*and* expensive. Areas like Dongri aren't for the well-off, so people in condemned buildings prop them up with bamboo and prayer.

The commonsensical question is: why don't the authorities do structural audits of cessed buildings *before* they get into the danger zone? After all, the cess tax goes into a repair fund and if you fix structural problems when they are small, cost of repairs will be small too, plus you avoid people having to move out. The trouble with common sense, of course, is it isn't common.

People cope with difficult circumstances with humour; in Mumbai we do so by inventing phrases. 'Disaster tourism' is one, 'holiday construction' another. When the BMC assistant municipal commissioner in charge of Dongri was quizzed on turning a blind eye to illegal additions to the now-collapsed building, he said the construction happened during holidays. Apparently, builders put up even 10 floors on a holiday. Speedy Gonzálezes, all of them.

THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY of the moon landing was commemorated widely in our newspapers. There was a wonderful photograph of the three astronauts, Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin and Michael Collins, riding in an open Cadillac with large crowds cheering on both sides of the road. It is said the crowd at their public reception was the biggest ever at Azad Maidan. The stage for them was a same-scale replica of the Eagle lunar module in which they had travelled. Another nice touch was provided by a Navin Chandra Kajaria who presented the astronauts and their wives with tickets for the Rs 3 lakh Diwali Jackpot Maharashtra state lottery. Did any of them strike it lucky? Perhaps not. The moon was jackpot enough. ■

Leader with a Capital L

HER GLASS-WALLED living room facing the 16th century Humayun's tomb was slowly getting filled with Congress leaders and workers. It was about a week to go for Lok Sabha elections in Delhi this May. In a small room, a few steps down, over breakfast, former Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit exuded confidence that her government's three terms "changing the face of Delhi" would stand her in good stead. It has, forever. But she and her party lost the battle in a Modi wave sweeping across states.

One wonders if she had sensed that day the writing on the wall for Congress. It neither manifested in her calm demeanour nor her wholehearted campaigning as the 81-year-old leader stepped out into the heat and dust to take on Bhojpuri singer-turned-BJP politician Manoj Tiwari and Aam Aadmi Party's Dilip Pandey in North-East Delhi. For Delhiites who saw the capital change over 15 years of her rule, Dikshit remains the most memorable chief minister. Her appeal went beyond politics in a city where several centuries live simultaneously. When Delhi's longest-serving chief minister and the country's longest-serving woman chief minister passed away last week it was no surprise that opponents, right from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, set aside politics to pay homage to her.

It was at a time that Delhi was facing an onion crisis, with prices of the vegetable rising, that Dikshit defeated the BJP to take over the capital's reins in 1998. Over the next five years, she focused on development, making it her governance mantra and the bedrock of her political journey. From being a city in distress, hankering after an effective public transport system, roads and clean air, Delhi opened up the throttle making way for Metro rail, CNG vehicles and flyovers criss-crossing the city, which is perpetually bursting at its seams.

Metro man E Sreedharan recalls how she left all technical decisions to him and never interfered in the work on the Delhi Metro. "I found her extremely elegant, never played politics and always supportive of the Delhi metro. I consider her an excellent administrator," says Sreedharan, who joined the Delhi Metro in November, 1997, less than a year before Dikshit became chief minister. In his 14-year tenure, she was chief minister for over 13 years.

When a compartment in the train was reserved for ladies, Dikshit was disappointed and asked why the Metro was not enforcing gender equality. "When I explained the reasons, she accepted the decision gracefully," says Sreedharan. Last month when the AAP government proposed making travel in public transport in Delhi free for women, Dikshit dismissed it as a move which should be seen politically. Sreedharan recalls another instance, soon after she took over as chief minister, when the alignment of line number one from Tees Hazari to Pulbangash was changed by him to reduce the number of structures to be acquired. Those affected were up against the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) and demanded that the original alignment be restored. Dikshit called a meeting in which Sreedharan explained the reasons. After listening to him, she said, "I will not question the technical decision taken by Mr Sreedharan as I feel he is the best person to decide on such matters. So the new alignment will stand. I understand your problems and will take necessary steps to resolve them." The protestors accepted it and dispersed.

"I had access to her any time of the day whenever I had a problem with the state government. She highly appreciated my emphasis on punctuality and cleanliness of trains and stations," says Sreedharan. It was during Vajpayee's regime that Delhi got its Metro. Dikshit made sure political differences did not come in the way of governance, her constant refrain being people choose leaders to deliver on promises.

Dikshit's concern for the environment, in a city where pollution levels have risen menacingly, reflected even in her last wish. She was cremated in a CNG crematorium, introduced in Delhi during her tenure

JUST LIKE SHE left the Metro to Sreedharan, she encouraged arts in the city but left its creative pursuits to the artists. Filmmaker Muzaffar Ali, who directed *Umrao Jaan*, says it was rare to find a person like her responding to ideas in a huge space like Delhi. When he came to Delhi from Lucknow in 2000, she met him and asked if there was anything she could do. He said Delhi was a city of Sufi saints. Dikshit was supportive of any effort to bring out the essence of Delhi, an amalgam of diverse cultures. That is how Jahan-e-Khusrau, a three-day

SHEILA DIKSHIT
(1938-2019)

Photograph by **ROHIT CHAWLA**

annual World Sufi Music Festival held at Humayun's tomb, took off. "Even after she was out of power, she came to attend it, as anyone else in the audience. She was always warm and humble with the artists. She saw the artist behind the art. She didn't curate, but she felt the art," he says. Last year, the theme of the festival 'Yamuna—Dariya Prem Ka' revolved around the river that cuts through the capital. Ali says the artist community was always associated with government and in Dikshit's absence, they would feel bereaved. "She knew that if she asked for anything from anyone even in another party, she would not get no for an answer. I wanted to see her in a role beyond politics," says Ali.

Dikshit did pursue writing, bringing out an autobiography *Citizen Delhi: My Times, My Life* in which reminiscing her campaigning in Uttar Pradesh's Kannauj parliamentary constituency in 1984, she says that on some days 'I certainly felt as if, like Alice in Wonderland, I had fallen down a rabbit hole. Being new to the scene, I found myself being borne away by the insistence of well-wishers around.' Her rivals in UP dubbed Dikshit, an English-speaking political greenhorn, an outsider. She won the election, entering Parliament for the first time, and became a minister in the Rajiv Gandhi Government.

It was in Delhi that she spent most of her life after she left Kapurthala in Punjab where she was born to an army officer. She studied at the Jesus and Mary Convent and Miranda House and married Vinod Dikshit, the son of Union Minister Uma Shankar Dikshit. At the helm in Delhi, she realised that the city had to be administered and responded to with a deep sense of understanding.

"We could honestly tell it to her face that she was wrong. She would hear us, however contrary it would be to her line of thinking. She would generally go ahead and do what she thought was right," recalls Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) director Shakti Sinha, who was principal secretary of finance and power during her tenure. Sinha was earlier private secretary to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and joint secretary in his PMO. Dikshit took that as an added advantage saying she would be able to utilise his experience of working in the PMO.

"Her concern for another human being dominated her politics. No matter what her own stress was, she would ensure a visitor is being properly looked after. Her own troubles would be forgotten if somebody else's problem had to be solved," says Congress leader Pawan Khera, who had joined her in 1998, when she was made president of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee.

By the end of her third term, Dikshit started facing allegations of involvement in irregularities in contracts for equipment for street lighting during the 2010 Commonweath Games. The charges were denied by Delhi Chief Secretary PK Tripathi. What saddened Dikshit, according to those who have closely known her, was that the CWG did not get its due credit. Her concern for the environment, in a city where pollution levels have risen menacingly, reflected even in her last wish. She was cremated in a CNG crematorium, introduced in Delhi during her tenure. She wanted a "full stop" to her political career after 15 years in power in Delhi, only to realise "there are full stops in other spheres of life. But there are no full stops in politics." ■

By AMITA SHAH

PORTRAIT • THE MOON

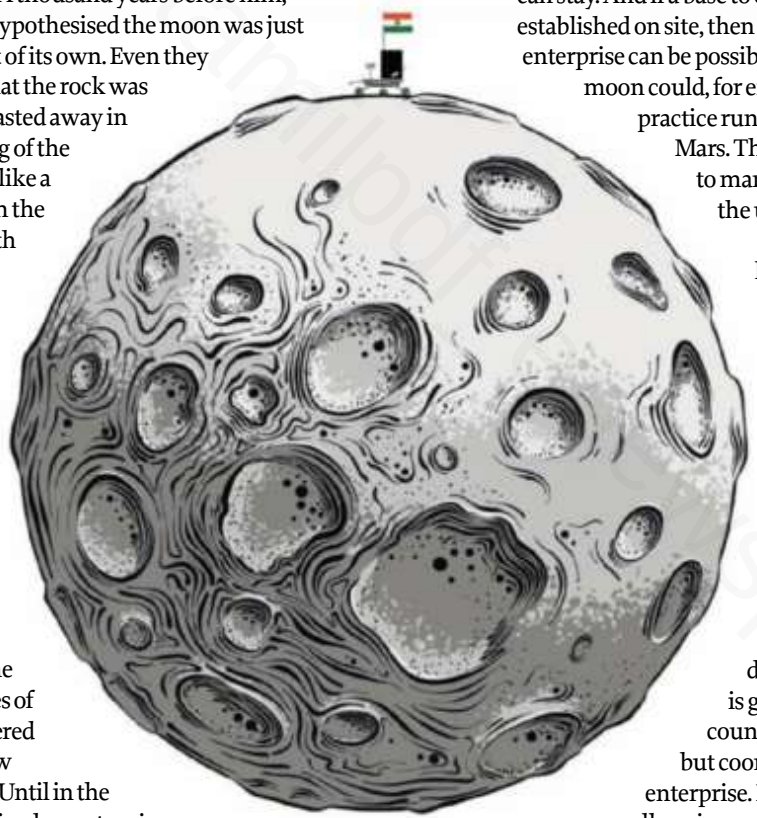
LUNAR RACE

Chandrayaan 2 and man's first moon landing

IT TOOK A few thousand years for the moon to get out of its reputation of being an astral body devoted to ratcheting up the insanity of men, to triggering werewolves, being an orb with a trapped rabbit and other supernatural myths. In an age before electricity, on certain days, it was the closest mankind would get to an LED bulb and—is it surprising?—that for a species inured to dark nights, the white light should be tied to the divine—the moon was also a God. And yet even in those days, some philosophers got pretty close to what it might be in reality. Aryabhata, the Indian astronomer and mathematician, had deduced as far back as 499 CE that moonlight was just reflected glory from the sun and its shadow led to eclipses. A thousand years before him, Greek philosophers had hypothesised the moon was just a round rock with no light of its own. Even they however couldn't guess that the rock was in fact earth, a big piece blasted away in the throes of the beginning of the planet, hooked by gravity like a bad marriage, appearing in the beginning like a mammoth ball on the sky within touching distance and then drifting away gradually until it revolved in uneasy truce.

Man's relationship with the moon changed when Galileo and his first telescope finally saw it for what it was: dead craters, plains and mountains, taking away in one moment all the enchantment and anxieties of ignorance, a process furthered across centuries by the slow enlightenment of science. Until in the 21st century the Soviet Union began to win the space race by putting the first earthling, a dog, and then a human out of earth. The US response was a wild ambitious scheme to put a man on the moon and 50 years ago they achieved it with the Apollo missions and Neil Armstrong's big leap.

The moon was then just a chess piece in a game of superpower vanities, a symbol of which ideological system delivered more. Capitalism prevailed and then by its own measure found the expense of the enterprise pointless and so called off human landings altogether.



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

The last man to step on the moon was in 1972. After that long spell, there are now a number of manned missions planned again. Interest in the moon in recent times have shot up and our own Chandrayaan 2 is the latest example of that. The reason is more than scientific curiosity. There is the colonial nature of human civilisation, of course, but it is an instinct that has to be fed by commerce. The moon holds vast resources of potentially exploitable minerals and more importantly, something that Chandrayaan's 1 went a long way in establishing in 2008, also holds water. This water, which isn't liquid but embedded, might have arrived through crashing comets and meteors or it could be through innate chemical processes, but there is one clear consequence: if it is there then it can be extracted, and if water can be extracted, then humans can stay. And if a base to operate from can be established on site, then all manner of human enterprise can be possible. Beside mining, the moon could, for example, be used as a practice run for operating bases in Mars. The moon is the first step to man's colonisation of the universe.

Chandrayaan 2 will land in the South Pole of the moon and that is where the sun shines forever and in the shadows of the craters, it is absent forever. In that dark zone lies the water that needs to be excavated to flag off humanity's ambition to be free of the earth. It is not easily or quickly done but the promise is greater now because countries are not competing but coordinating in the enterprise. In Chandrayaan 1, the small equipment—Moon Mineralogy Mapper—that discovered the water was NASA's. At some distant point in the future, the ugly nature of human competition might still raise its head to claim its resources but, as of now, the moon is a collective project in which India is among the handful of pioneers. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

ANGLE

A BLOCK ON THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

The Government shoots itself in the foot with the RTI amendment

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

POLITICIANS ARE USUALLY not fond of transparency because, at its core, the profession is about discreet negotiations—whether with constituents, donors, patrons and, for those down in the integrity scale, venal elements that increase their shot at power. It doesn't look good when the details of such transactions are revealed. And, should voters elect them, it is once again a series of give and take to further interests, which sometimes align with the country's and often don't.

In mature democracies, however, leaders in power realised that transparency is useful because absence of information is worse—they too come under its black hole, hostage to the handful of people supplying them information. But if the information pipeline feeding the public is healthy, they also get an accurate picture of what is going on. To look at information as a threat is like shooting oneself in the foot while trying to win a race and that is what the Government is doing by amending the Right to Information Act.

The objective is clearly controlling state and Central information commissioners, who force authorities to give information denied to RTI applicants. This is done in the amendment by taking over the reins of their appointment, tenure and salary. Placing pliant bureaucrats in positions is how politics takes control of the executive. And that is how it was envisaged in the Constitution except in areas like the judiciary and Election Commission where institutional independence is critical. Information commissioners were also envisaged in that category—as judges in the domain of information. In an article on the legal website *Livelaw*, two former Central Information Commissioners, M Sridhar Acharyulu and Yashovardhan Azad, explained how the amendment would affect the institution: 'The need of the hour is to strengthen the RTI regime by posting bold, upright and competent Commissioners who uphold the dignity and power of the Institution. Reducing their status, salary and tenure would be a retrograde step amounting to creation of an RTI ministry under the Government. The Bill therefore may kill the RTI Act itself.'

A reason the Indian bureaucracy dislikes the RTI is that fake activists use the information for blackmail. That is actually a good argument for the RTI. If there is nothing to hide, there would be no material for blackmail. And any information that a blackmailer can get is also available for the public. One of the defences the BJP has put out for the amendment is that already a lot of information has been proactively made available on Government websites showing good intention and also making RTI redundant. But the Government does not get to choose what it wants the public to know except in matters like military secrets. In everything else, encouraging access to information has only one consequence: better governance. India has a long history of institutions being destroyed for political convenience. It would be a pity if RTI became one more on that list. ■

IDEAS

HYPE

Something unusual occurred recently. Social media feeds began to gush with patriotic fervour as people—from Bollywood celebrities and politicians to godmen—showered the Assamese sprinter Hima Das with glowing tributes. Das won five gold medals in back-to-back sprint events in less than a month. Some of these tributes were also accompanied by a video, later found to be a recording of a much older race (the 400-m sprint at the IAAF World U20 Championships last year). Das must have been shocked at what had hit her. As those who follow track and field events have been warning, all this hype is misplaced. None of these races are considered 'world-standard'. Two of them were ranked 'F', the lowest, according to the International Association of Athletics Federations, and the other three were ranked the second lowest, 'E'. Das' timings are also nowhere near her best. But you can't expect people uninterested in sport but eager for any news of an Indian victory to understand that. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'The truth is always more heroic than the hype'

JESSICA LYNCH
FORMER US SOLDIER

By Bibek Debroy

Measures for Measurement

Judging development progress is easier said than done

BY NOW, MOST people have some idea about sustainable development goals (SDGs). SDGs were adopted in 2015 (they came into force in January 2016) and are to be attained by 2030. Earlier, for 2000 to 2015, there were millennium development goals (MDGs). If the world as a whole has progressed towards MDGs, that's largely because of China. If the world as a whole is to make substantial progress towards SDGs, that will happen largely because of India. Most people also know SDGs have a nested structure. There are goals, targets and indicators. Goals are general statements, while targets make them precise. Indicators are specific variables one can track. Let's take an example to illustrate what this means. SDG Goal 1 states, 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere.' Under Goal 1, we now have several targets: 1.1—'By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day'; 1.2—'By 2030, reduce at least half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions'; 1.3—'Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable'; 1.4—'By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance'; 1.5—'By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters'; 1.1a—'Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions'; 1.1b—'Create sound policy frameworks at the national regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions.'

This gives the general idea. The targets have made the goals more precise. But we still don't know how to measure them and track progress. The indicators do that. Moreover, this was only for the first goal of SDGs. There are 17 such goals. Each country has to develop its own set of indicators, reflecting national priorities and data availability. In September 2016, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation developed a set of possible indicators for India. This was discussed and refined and we now have a list of 306 indicators, spanning all 17 goals (actually 16 since the 17th belongs to a different category). This is known as the National Indicator Framework (NIF). The NIF isn't cast in stone. It can be tweaked. Indicators can be added or removed. However, the NIF is fundamentally how we will track India's progress towards SDGs. Improvement on what base? We need a baseline report and the base-year is 2015-2016. India's baseline report was recently released on June 29th. Measurement requires data availability at frequent intervals. While SDGs are desirable goals, tracking progress towards them is not that easy.

Since poverty is easily understood, let me stick to that first SDG goal to illustrate the kind of problem that occurs. I have already stated Target 1.1. Under Target 1.1, we have two indicators, 1.1.1 and 1.1.2. Indicator 1.1.1 is the 'proportion of population living below the national poverty line' and 1.1.2 is the 'poverty gap ratio'. The baseline report gives us 21.92 per cent for 1.1.1 and 5.05 per cent (rural) and 2.7 per cent (urban) for 1.1.2. These numbers are for 2011-2012. Why 2011-2012? Because that's when a National Sample Survey (NSS) was undertaken and when the then Planning Commission last computed such numbers. The NITI Aayog now has the responsibility of generating subsequent numbers for 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, every five years. However, we need an NSS round comparable to 2011-2012, a big if. And we also need a notion of the poverty line. In government programmes, Union and state, notions of deprivation are now based on the socio-

economic caste census (SECC) and there is no longer any notion of a poverty line. Who is going to develop this poverty line and how? Add to that indicators for Target 1.2. If you re-read Target 1.1, you will see that this is nothing but a multi-dimensional poverty index. There is no consensus about what such a multi-dimensional poverty index should look like. Constructing one for the purpose of writing an academic paper is easy. Constructing one for the purpose of tracking the impact of policy is easier said than done.

Let's move on to Target 1.3, which is far more tractable. The indicators for Target 1.3 are discussed below. Indicator 1.3.1 is 'percentage of households with any usual member covered by a health scheme or health insurance'. For 2015-2016, the baseline number is 28.7 per cent. Indicator 1.3.2 is 'number of beneficiaries under Integrated Child Development Scheme'. The 2015-2016 baseline number is 102.1 million. Indicator 1.3.3 is 'proportion of the population (out of total eligible population) receiving social protection benefits under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)'. We don't yet have a baseline number for this. (I have a problem with an indicator like this. Whether we explicitly admit it or not, every indicator has an implied value judgement. If the MGNREGA numbers decline, is that good or bad? I don't think the answer is clear.) Indicator 1.3.4 is 'number of Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed and provided bank credit linkage'. The baseline figure for 2015-2016 is 1.83 million. Indicator 1.3.5 is 'proportion of the population (out of total eligible population) receiving social protection benefits under Maternity Benefit'. This figure is also not ready yet. Indicator 1.3.6 is 'number of senior citizens provided institutional assistance through Old Age Homes/ Day Care Centers funded by the Government'. The baseline number for 2016-2017 is 22,050. Notice that in two instances the denominator is total eligible population, not total population. The indicators for Target 1.3 are much more tractable. Data are almost always annual, obtained through the Ministries of Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Development, Rural Development and Social Justice and Empowerment. Yes, data often come up from below, from states. And yes, there are time-lag issues. But otherwise, no serious monitoring issues.

SAURABH SINGH

That's not true of Target 1.4. Here are the indicators: 1.4.1—'percentage of population (rural) living in households with access to safe drinking water and sanitation (toilets)'; 1.4.2—'proportion of population (urban) living in households with access to safe drinking water and sanitation (toilets)'; 1.4.3—'proportion of population (urban/rural) living in households with access to electricity'; 1.4.4—'proportion of homeless population to total population'; 1.4.5—'proportion of population having bank accounts'; 1.4.6—'number of mobile telephones as percentage of total population'. A few of the baseline numbers haven't yet been compiled. For 1.4.4, the 2011 figure is 0.15 per cent. For 1.4.5 and 1.4.6, we have data for modified indicators. In 2015-2016, the number of accounts (including deposit and credit accounts) of scheduled commercial banks per 1,000 people was 1,425. In 2015-2016, the number of telephone subscriptions as a percentage of the total population was 83.4 per cent. Indicators 1.4.5 and 1.4.6 will always be reasonably easy and reasonably current. But think of 1.4.1-1.4.4. Such numbers usually come through the Census. We can get 1.4.1 through the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, 1.4.2 through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and 1.4.3 through the Ministry of Power. But there is no guarantee that these will be consistent with Census numbers. That apart, 1.4.4 will only be available through the Census, and such numbers are only available once every 10 years. Not quite good enough. I will skip Targets 1.5, 1.a and 1.b, because they won't add much to what I have already said.

If you think of the 17 SDG goals, several of them, understandably, are about social sectors, health and education, especially the former. Are our data good enough for either? Yes, there are surveys. How reliable are those surveys? Why don't different findings tally with one another? What is the process of vetting data? The National Statistical Commission (NSC) has often got involved in controversies over national income data. For national income and the Central Statistics Office-data, the NSC is indeed the vetting authority. But for other sources, it is the NSC's mandate to examine generation of data. Now that we have a newly constituted NSC, perhaps this is what the NSC will look at. Indeed, the 2001 Rangarajan report on India's statistical system highlighted blemishes in the data-generation system and that is why the NSC was set up. Without better social-sector data, monitoring progress towards SDGs will be close to impossible. ■

By Rachel Dwyer

The Sporting Spirit

Why sport heroes make ideal subjects for film biopic

THE CRICKET WORLD Cup, the Men's Final at Wimbledon, the British Grand Prix all took place on one day. While many were torn between at least two of these, I was not among them. Sports—or games, as they were known then—were compulsory at school but this was before games for women were taken seriously. Games were a blackspot on the timetable, more for the discomfort afterwards than during. First cold, then sweaty; that peculiarly British absence of proper shower facilities; then getting changed back into uniform. The horror of the clothing was a major complication too. The uniform was bad enough: brown gabardine skirt, white blouse, brown and yellow tie, brown cardigan, brown gabardine coat and a velour hat with a hat band and elastic under the chin and sensible shoes. I haven't worn brown for 40 years and have no intention of ever doing so again. But games involved even worse sartorial crimes.

Swimming was my favourite sport and I swam every day in a glorious lido in the summer holidays. Having my season ticket stamped every day was a badge of honour. School swimming was a hideous prospect. The brown swimsuit was just a piece of elasticated cloth with medals sewn on and looked like a surgical garment. Shared changing rooms had wet floors whose water always seeped into the uniform, socks often dropped in the puddles, making it unbearably miserable in winter.

For other games we wore a yellow shirt and a divided skirt, a garment that I hope is now extinct, being box-pleated shorts that were made to look like a skirt. Hockey was just about bearable but running around the pitch in winter was awful but better once we were allowed tracksuits. I played tennis most days in the summer at home and, at least at school, we were spared the white miniskirt and frilly knickers required by my club. Netball and rounders were just fun and it still amuses me to see their elevation as basketball and baseball.

Sports were strictly gender-divided like the rest of our worlds. My brother played rugby and a little cricket; many others played football. For weekend matches girls made sandwiches and cakes and when your boyfriend was on the rugby team, you took the oranges at half time to the vast amusement of the rest of the team.

My grandfather hunted, my uncle shot, and my father and all of them fished. The idea of killing animals was out of the question for me and after getting bitten and kicked, and then falling off a horse, I gave up riding. Animals and sports are my all-time low.

I was fated to marry a sport fanatic. Good at all sports, he tried hard not to beat me but it was still no fun playing together. My golf peaked when I got a birdie at Frinton Golf Club. Neither of us could ever work out how I did it and I reverted to my usual embarrassingly bad playing. My motto now is not to engage in any activity that requires a change of clothes.

After many injuries I was glad when Mr D retired from playing football. Once Saturday evenings ended at 10.30 to the theme tune of 'Match of the Day' and in summer to 'Test Match Special', but now they seem to have merged into other online activities.

There is no escape from sports for me. Hindi films are producing so many sport movies. Gone are Jeetendra and Leena Chandavarkar playing badminton in skin-tight non-sport gear, each shot making a popping noise to ruin a cracking song (*'Dhal gaya din'*), or villagers taking on Brits at cricket (*Lagaan* in 2001), the match lasting longer than a western film. The sport biopic has now become almost a sub-genre in itself, from hockey (*Chak De! India*

A scene from *Lagaan* (2001)

ALAMY

SPORT HEROES ARE POPULAR WITH THE NEW INDIAN MIDDLE CLASSES, AS STORIES OF SUCCESS, OF 'ORDINARY' PEOPLE WHO HAVE A TALENT THAT THEY NOURISH THROUGH HARD WORK AS THEY STRUGGLE TO PROVE THEMSELVES TO THEMSELVES, THEIR FAMILIES AND THE WORLD

in 2007, *Soorma* in 2018) to running (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* in 2013, *Paan Singh Tomar* in 2012) to wrestling (*Dangal* in 2016).

Sport heroes make ideal subjects for the structure of the film biopic. The 'first cycle' of film biopics which became hugely popular in mainstream Hindi cinema in the 2000s were historicals about national leaders, such as *Asoka* (2001), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008). The second cycle of biopics were semi-fictionalised biopics, depicting figures who are part of living memory; not rulers or leaders, nor those committed to public service, but figures whose success was achieved mostly in business or entertainment, and who have become the heroes and heroines of an emergent social group: India's new middle classes.

Sport heroes are popular with the new Indian middle classes, as stories of success, of 'ordinary' people who have a talent that they nourish through hard work as they struggle to prove themselves to themselves, their families and the world. They also enjoy the nationalist ethos which surrounds sport and which has become increasingly vocal in Hindi cinema as I discussed in my recent column ('The National Spirit', May 6th).

There was a wonderful sign at Lord's during the final: 'Indian cricket supporters for hire.' The 'Tebbit Test', which asked how loyal British people of South Asian origin are based on which cricket team they support, is irrelevant today. British Asians not only support England and India/Pakistan but also play for the England team. My three-year-old 'nephew', the son of a Pakistani-Indian couple who live in London, is a cricket-obsessive who has to be persuaded to take off his helmet and gloves at the table and to go to bed. He has a soft spot for Sri Lanka although he happily supports every team, having decorated the wall at home with the flags of all the countries playing. He thinks national anthems are 'cricket songs', singing along to them all with great gusto. He represents what I hope is the spirit of the World Cup in London and, if his talent develops at the rate it is now, perhaps we'll see him play in it one day—team yet to be decided.

I still don't watch the matches. I love gentle walks to complete my 10,000 steps a day. My daily rounds of the local park are delightful and I see the changing seasons and begin to recognise various dogs and their walkers. Runners go past speedboats to my stately galleon in full sail, looking forward to my well-earned reward of a cup of tea on return. Hardly sports but exercise fit for my age and traditional figure without having to wear silly clothes. ■

By RODERICK MATTHEWS

BORIS JOHNSON
THE ONE AND MANY

A portrait of the new UK prime minister

SO FINALLY IT'S official. After weeks of public debate, and a great deal of public dismay, 55-year-old Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson has won the contest for the leadership of the Conservative Party. Just under two-thirds of the party's members voted for him, and he now moves on to become Her Britannic Majesty's new prime minister.

No great surprise, because internal polling suggested very early on that he would be the clear winner in the two-horse race with Jeremy Hunt, the former foreign secretary.

Boris oozes confidence and charm, and has long been the darling of grassroots Tories. They didn't choose him for his principles though, because he has never claimed to have any. His popularity rests on his proven ability to connect with a live audience. He tells jokes and strives to entertain, which set him apart from all his main rivals—Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove, Sajid Javid—who might have impeccable conservative credentials, but are strangers to the art of projecting warmth. And his skill as a communicator is real. Those who know him say that he is actually much more comfortable in front of a crowd than one-to-one.

Boris litters his speeches with references to the classical world he studied at Oxford, and if he hesitates when looking for a word, he is quite likely to come out with a well-turned Latin phrase. Coupled with his crumpled appearance and eccentric speech patterns, this gives him an air of mysterious intelligence which the party faithful lap up.

He is indubitably good with words, *prima facie*. He spent a long career as a journalist, and served six years as editor of the right-of-centre *Spectator* magazine, though that stint also highlighted one of his recurrent vulnerabilities; his public pronouncements, both oral and written, are a goldmine of gaffes. While at the *Spectator*, he had to apologise to the entire population of the city of Liverpool for making unkind comments about them. Someone once observed that he was born with a silver foot in his mouth.

Nevertheless, his literary and journalistic output is phenomenal, with a steady flow of political columns, two books on Rome, one on the history of Islam (his grandfather was a Turkish Muslim immigrant), a collection of children's poetry, an unadmired novel and, most recently, a best-selling retrospective on his personal hero, Sir Winston Churchill. Books come easily and quickly, but Boris' true talent is for provocative journalism. He doesn't do boring, and no one really knows how that is going to play out in Downing Street. Or Clowning Street, as a hostile Scottish newspaper has just re-christened it.

To his supporters, Boris seems ebullient and self-assured, with impeccable Eurosceptic credentials. They see him as the man to galvanise his fractured party and to lead Britain out of its current, dismal political crisis. To his many detractors, however, he is the embodiment of elite entitlement, an over-privileged product of Eton and Oxford who has repeatedly failed to exhibit either moral fibre, work ethic or basic competence in the jobs the public has bestowed on him.

For instance, his record as foreign secretary from 2016 to 2018 is decidedly patchy. It is not a job in which it is easy to shine, but he managed to foul up on at least one important occasion, making a casual comment to a Parliamentary Committee that a British citizen accused of anti-government activity in Iran was in the country to train journalists. She was actually a charity worker on a family holiday, and Johnson's comments were used as evidence at her trial. The unfortunate Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is still serv-

GETTY IMAGES

BORIS JOHNSON OUTSIDE 10 DOWNING STREET, JULY 24

BORIS JOHNSON's literary and journalistic output is phenomenal, with a steady flow of political columns, two books on Rome, one on the history of Islam (his grandfather was a Turkish Muslim immigrant), a collection of children's poetry, an unadmired novel and, most recently, a best-selling retrospective on his personal hero, Sir Winston Churchill. Books come easily and quickly, but Boris' true talent is for provocative journalism. He doesn't do boring, and no one really knows how that is going to play out in Downing Street. Or Clowning Street, as a hostile Scottish newspaper has just re-christened it

ing a five-year prison sentence.

That fiasco aside, Boris earned a reputation among diplomats for showing no enthusiasm for the details of his brief. One of his immediate Foreign Office underlings, Sir Alan Duncan, described himself as Boris' 'pooper scooper', perpetually doomed to clearing up his master's messes.

Johnson's tenure of one of the great offices of state eventually came to an end not because of incompetence but because he chose to resign over Theresa May's Brexit policy, declaring that her 'Chequers Plan' would reduce Britain to 'a vassal state' of the EU.

Understandably, his supporters tend not to dwell on his time at the Foreign Office. Instead they tend to emphasise how he served two successful terms as mayor of London, from 2008 to 2016, which certainly remains his most significant achievement. He pulled off the extraordinary feat of beating a genuine working class socialist, Ken Livingstone, not once, but twice in his own backyard. This gave him two ineradicable tags—brilliant campaigner and serial winner. Here was a posh boy who could win elections in a Labour city. Surely, they say, he is the man to see off the current Labour leadership, who are even redder than 'Red Ken'.

But Boris' years as mayor are not without their controversies. He put together an effective team and the city seemed to thrive, but he has since talked up many achievements that were not his to boast of. For instance, he claims credit for the triumphant London Olympics of 2012, but the games were a cross-party project, secured under the leadership of Ken Livingstone in 2005. Similarly, 'Boris' bikes', the ubiquitous red two-wheelers that can be hired all over London, were also the idea of his predecessor.

This brings us to the main drawback with Boris, which is his loose allegiance to the truth. Last weekend the national press was dominated by pictures of Boris on a podium, energetically waving a kipper, while denouncing unelected bureaucrats in Brussels for introducing new regulations which require the manufacturer of said kipper to send his product through the post on an ice pillow. Cue outrage among the assembled Tory members, who can't get enough of this sort of Euro-bashing, which Boris has been serving up since he was Brussels correspondent for a major newspaper twenty years ago.

He was eventually sacked from that posting for making up stories about kooky EU rules, and the kipper-waving routine, too, was less than accurate. The regulations he was railing against were in fact imposed by the British authorities, not Eurocrats, and the manufacturer is located in the Isle of Man, which isn't in the EU. He pulled off a similar trick on the first night of the leadership hustings when he claimed that as London's mayor he won a great victory over the unelected bureaucrats of Brussels by securing traditional, open platforms on the back of the new London buses he had commissioned. Again, a problem. There are no such platforms; the new double-decker 'Routemaster' buses have a door at the rear, which any London bus user would know. But Boris was in Birmingham that night, and his audience shared his alleged triumph with him.

Currently it is fashionable to compare Johnson to Donald Trump—the US president himself has somewhat clumsily dubbed him "Britain Trump"—and there is a degree of truth in the parallel. Both are theatrical, often chaotic, elastic with the truth, and driven by enormous self-confidence.

But there are two major differences.

First, there is only one Donald Trump: crude, confrontational and divisive, whereas there are at least two Boris Johnsons. Boris 1 is a socially liberal, immigration-friendly one-nation Tory who can reach out to Labour voters in the south. Boris 2 is a nationalistic, hard-hitting Europhobe, who writes chauvinist jibes at religious, sexual and ethnic minorities, and appeals principally to the Tory party membership.

Secondly, both of these Borises are desperate to be liked, in a way that Donald Trump isn't. Close colleagues and admirers of Margaret Thatcher regularly observe that her greatest political strength was her ability to do what she thought was right, whether it made her popular or not. In this sense, Thatcher is Trump's twin, not Boris.

THE EMOLLIENT, empathic Boris 1 can be charming as well as amusing in a way that the passionate, patriotic Boris 2 rarely is. And here we can detect the canny strategist within him. His short-term need to capture the votes of the Tory grassroots has driven him to his current hard position on Brexit, making him the first mainstream politician to positively embrace the 'no deal' option. He has nailed his colours defiantly to the mast, and has declared that Britain will leave the European Union on 31st of October 2019 under all circumstances, with or without a deal, "do or die". This kind of no-nonsense leadership assured his victory in the two-man run-off before the seats were set out in the first hall.

But is his passionate "belief in Britain" really enough? Will boldness be enough to make his premiership a success? The signs are that he believes it is.

The strongest card in the Brexiteers' hand has always been to ignore, downplay or flatly deny that there are any problems with the Brexit process at all, and he has quadrupled down on this strategy. Last Monday he disposed of the thorniest of Brexit snags, the Irish 'backstop', with a flick of the wrist. In his weekly *Daily Telegraph* column, he asked: If the Americans could put a man on the moon fifty years ago, why can't we solve the Irish border problem?

Vintage Boris. Superficially plausible, but hiding serious flaws that emerge with more leisurely reflection. We might object, *inter alia*, that the British in 2019 are not the Americans in 1969; Ireland is not the moon, and the difficulties now are about people and perceptions more than technology.

Yet he surely knows that making points in the print media is not enough. His main problem will be with the EU negotiators, who are notoriously hard-nosed.

All through the recent leadership contest, commentators have been asking what he can actually do between now and the end of October—about one hundred days—that Theresa

REUTERS

BORIS JOHNSON WITH QUEEN ELIZABETH II, LONDON, JULY 24

May could not do in three years. Can he revive proposals already rejected from others, as if they are magically now acceptable from him?

Boris has not been specific about his strategy, but perhaps that is all part of it, to keep the Europeans guessing. Some suggest that Johnson will simply shout louder than May, either physically or metaphorically, in an attempt to be believed about the possibility of leaving without a deal. This new intensity is supposed to shock the hitherto stubborn EU into remorseful cooperation, and somehow the circle of the Irish question can be squared.

Because the Irish border is such a central issue, perhaps it is worth unpicking it a little. The basic problem is that, following any kind of Brexit, the north of Ireland will be out of the EU, and the south will be in it. Tariffs and standards will be different on either side of that border. But any attempt to harden the border, meaning to give it more legal significance, or to re-install any kind of physical infrastructure surrounding it, runs counter to the Belfast Agreement of 1998, commonly called the Good Friday Agreement.

The version of Brexit contained in Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement takes full account of all the sensitivities involved, and creates a temporary customs union between the United Kingdom and the EU, to ensure that the political consequences of separating Northern Ireland from the mainland UK, however temporarily, are avoided, while trade is still facilitated. The downside is that, although temporary, this transition phase—the backstop—is not time-limited, and the British government cannot unilaterally withdraw from it without EU consent.

The EU see the Withdrawal Agreement as a deal between institutions, not persons, and they have never said anything other than that the deal is closed. That Agreement was highly offensive to the hardest Brexiteers within the Conservative Party, and it failed to pass through Parliament, despite Prime Minister May's repeated efforts to persuade opponents (and some colleagues) of its merits. Boris was unable to stomach it and resigned from the cabinet. Yet, despite this principled stand, he later voted for this same charter of vassalage on its third and last appearance on the floor of the Commons last February.

Critics frequently couple this apparent inconsistency with a long-standing story that, in 2016, before announcing his support for Leave in the referendum, Boris drafted two articles, one pro-Leave and one pro-Remain, and only published the former after due reflection. The received wisdom about this is that he wished to triangulate a position, not so much on the issue of Leave or Remain, but on the next Tory leadership contest. He expected Remain to win, but he saw the referendum campaign as a way to woo the Tory members, with a view to mopping up their support when David Cameron finally stepped down.

These manoeuvrings have lent a certain air of duplicity to Johnson's actions regarding Europe. Some purists are prepared to label him as less than a true Brexiteer, and Nigel Farage, the high priest of Leave, has publicly stated that he does not trust Boris to deliver. The wider public are not sanguine either. A recent poll shows that only 26 per cent of the public expect him to lead Britain out of the EU on 31st October, as promised.

Whatever his personal convictions, Prime Minister Johnson now has to find a way through some very tricky political terrain. His government has a working majority of two. This includes the support of the ten-member Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), but the 'confidence and supply' agreement with them is currently up for review. Meanwhile, one Conservative MP has just been charged with a criminal offence and has lost the party whip, and there is a by-election in August, which the sitting Tory is unlikely to win, having been forced to seek re-election over an expenses fraud. There are also strong rumours that perhaps eight Conservative MPs will defect to the Liberal Democrats if Boris continues his hard line.

All this calls into question Johnson's ability to command a majority in the House of Commons. So how should he proceed? Take on the recalcitrant MPs and persuade or cow them into supporting something like Theresa May's deal with the backstop removed? But the EU wouldn't accept any such 'tweaked' proposal. Alternatively, it has been suggested that he could prorogue Parliament—stand it down temporarily—which is the sort of thing that cost King Charles I his head. It would be legal,

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as part of the prerogative powers of the Crown, but it wouldn't be popular to use such a device as leader of a minority government on a controversial matter of such national importance.

And he might not even get the opportunity. Last week the Commons, by a majority of over forty, passed an amendment to a bill relating to Northern Ireland, adding a clause requiring that Parliament sit in September.

Boris is therefore in the unusual, and highly unfortunate, position of finding himself boxed in by both his friends and his enemies. His friends have managed to extract very strict, unambiguous promises about delivering Brexit by Halloween. His enemies have removed almost any way he can do this with the support of Parliament.

Most Conservatives want Boris to succeed, and even some of his Tory opponents will give him a little time. But the clock is ticking and he has put his neck on a very public block.

The obvious way to deal with a Parliament that won't oblige is to change it by calling a snap election. There is scarcely time to do this before the October deadline, though it might be possible, if the writs were sent out in the next week or so. But many Tories consider such a gambit as suicidal. For a government to throw itself on the mercy of the electorate to try to get the power to deliver Brexit, while claiming that its inability to do so is someone else's fault, would invite inescapable derision and contumely on itself.

Despite the prevarication, the ambiguity and the polysyllabic classicisms, the TORIES adore him, and applaud him to the rafters. Despite the infidelities and bed-hopping, the party of family values forgives him endlessly

Nigel Farage has a political party, or at least a very large pressure group calling itself a party, which threatens to make mincemeat of any Tory who is not an ultra. Farage's Brexit Party swept the Euro elections in May, and nearly won a parliamentary by-election shortly afterwards. Wiser heads consider that Boris will try to get the best deal he can before October, and will delay calling an election till the middle of next year.

But there is no guarantee that he will last that long. He may well become the shortest-serving prime minister of all time, if the adverse circumstances surrounding him conspire even slightly. He is sure to face a motion of no-confidence from the leader of the Labour Party, the increasingly isolated and ineffective Jeremy Corbyn, if not immediately, then in September. At that point, Boris can only hope that more Labour MPs defy the whip than Tories. And if he loses, an acting prime minister might well be tempted to apply to the EU for yet another extension to Article 50, and the whole rigmarole will begin again, with more talk of cliff edges, crashing out, treachery and the threat of civil disorder.

But Boris is a politician rather than an ideologue, so perhaps we will see a tilt towards pragmatism. He needed one set of people to get him into No 10, and they were duly recruited. Shortly he will need another, much larger set of people, to keep him there. Cue a pivot to a softer line, more compatible with all his rhetoric about uniting the nation. And cue accusations from Brexit purists about betrayal.

Which brings us to the issue of trust. Boris remains unwilling to be pinned down by anyone other than himself, and he comes into office with a pile of unanswered questions behind him. He has a long track record of avoiding interviews and dodging questions. Most recently, he refused to comment publicly when a row with his girlfriend behind closed doors became a national news story. What was it about? Who threw what at whom? Why was his girlfriend shouting "Leave me alone"? Answer came there none, for he has always held the line against intrusion into his private life. Twice divorced, and many times paired up, we don't even know how many children he has. Perhaps he doesn't either.

Yet despite the prevarication, the ambiguity and the polysyllabic classicisms, the Tories adore him, and applaud him to the rafters. Despite the infidelities and bed-hopping, the party of family values forgives him endlessly.

Boris Johnson is the most charismatic politician of his generation, but possibly the most unreliable too. He likes to model himself on Churchill, but he seems as likely to serve up a Gallipoli as a D-Day. He is, in the estimation of some, the very embodiment of a 'cake and eat it' attitude, though recently he has slimmed down by a noticeable amount. Yet he remains a political heavyweight, a fountain of energy and optimism who cuts a very different figure from his lacklustre predecessor.

But which Boris will turn up to kiss the Queen's hand? The moderate, reassuring ex-Mayor of London—the uniter? Or the insouciant cynic, the arrogant provocateur—the divider? Will it be healing balm and jokes, or more defiance and Churchillian quantities of 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'? Will he be collegiate, and restore the cabinet government which vanished under Theresa May? Or will he unleash his inner Trump and try to run the whole show himself, while communing with his base via public media? Will he knuckle down and deliver? Nobody knows.

As it stands, the looming election is scheduled to be Corbyn versus Johnson. To many this is Scylla versus Charybdis. Or perhaps just mild-mannered Laurel versus bumptious Hardy. In the Ukraine, they have elected a professional comedian as their leader, but we in Britain prefer to stick with amateurs.

Oh Britannia—*semper in excreta.*■

Roderick Matthews is an author and essayist based in London. His books include Jinnah vs Gandhi *and* Mountbatten and the Partition of British India

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RAHUL'S *War* ON THE CONGRESS

Now that **Rahul Gandhi** has walked away, the Congress' karmic decrepitude has cast its dysfunctional spell on its leaders. These stuffed men of straw do not know even how to go about gathering their wits. Even after two months, they dare not pick up the gauntlet thrown down by the Family to find for themselves a new mascot.

By HARISH KHARE

It has been more than two months since Rahul Gandhi announced to the whole wide world, at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee, that he was walking away from his 18-month-old job as the president of the Indian National Congress. No one was sure what he meant. Then, on July 6th, he put out a public statement, asserting that the party must find itself a new president. Not only that, Rahul Gandhi was categorical that the search for a new president must take place outside the Gandhi Family. Easier said than done. Delhi without the Qutab Minar! Agra without the Taj Mahal!

In his July 6th statement, the Congress president-"resignate" had disclosed that "Immediately after resigning, I suggested to my colleagues in the Congress Working Committee that the way forward would be to entrust a group of people with the task of beginning the search for a new president. I have empowered them to do so and committed my full support to this process and a smooth transition."

The "process" has not taken off and there is no transition yet. Rahul Gandhi has gone away to foreign lands and no one can claim to know when he would be back. And, in his absence, the "process" remains stalled.

After initial signs of an imminent meltdown, Congress leaders across the country seem to have recovered their breath; factional equations stand, more or less, frozen, without anyone attempting to start a serious street fight. Except in Goa, no large-scale desertions have taken place. The JD(S)-Congress coalition in Karnataka had to collapse, with or without Rahul Gandhi at the helm of affairs in the Congress. A chilling realisation is taking place: Rahul Gandhi is not being particularly missed.

Yet the Congress leaders are reluctant to cross the Rubicon.

ANY ATTEMPT TO make sense of why the Congress finds itself in such a state of utter lack of imagination and initiative has to necessarily begin with an understanding of the nature of Sonia Gandhi's presidential innings. The very fact that she remained the president–and, a very controlling and a very commanding boss at that—for 19 long years has inevitably shaped the Congress and its political reflexes and impulses, not just its organisational culture but also its self-image.

Most serious students of political history are in general agreement that the personality of the person at the top does end up defining an organisation's élan and its collective behaviour. And, historians often trace a leader's failures and accomplishments to the strengths and weaknesses of his/her personality—their anxieties, the nature of childhood experience, the content and circumstances of adolescent socialisation, the inner moral struggles in adult life, the spiritual scars acquired in public life, etcetera.

Ironically, so little is known about Sonia Gandhi's psychological profile; yet this very personality has left its imprint on the Congress' organisational abilities and capacities.

Much before Sonia Gandhi got ensconced in the Congress presidential *gaddi* on March 14th, 1998, it was commonly suggested by her myth-makers that she had had an excellent political education. On the face of it, it was an easy assumption to make and concede. After all, she was the daughter-in-law of one of the most successful political leaders in independent India; what could be a better classroom than Indira Gandhi's dining table; and, she had a ringside view of how in and out of power Indira Gandhi got the better of her political detractors and adversaries. A unique learning experience.

It also needs to be remembered that Sonia Gandhi became Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law because she had fallen in love with the handsome and charming Rajiv Gandhi. He was a professional pilot. He was demonstratively 'not in politics' and was uncontaminated by the demands of 'dirty politics'. 'Politics' was what Sanjay did. Not Rajiv.

Photograph by **ROHIT CHAWLA**

AS LONG AS SONIA GANDHI WAS ABLE TO WORK HER PRESUMED MAGIC WITH THE VOTERS, CONGRESS LEADERS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY WERE CONTENT TO FALL IN LINE; NO ONE BOTHERED TO EVEN REGISTER THAT ALL AVENUES OF 'INNER DEMOCRACY' HAD BEEN CHOKED OFF

Then, fate intervened—and intervened twice. Sanjay Gandhi died in a plane accident and Indira Gandhi was killed by her own security guards.

We have been told that Sonia Gandhi was fiercely opposed to her husband taking up the prime ministerial job. But it was a national call. Only Rajiv Gandhi could succeed the assassinated Indira Gandhi. Thereafter began Sonia Gandhi's second round of political education; this time, she got to have a much more intimate knowledge of the trials and tribulations a prime minister need necessarily endure.

More relevantly, Sonia Gandhi must have observed how, despite a massive mandate, her husband could not get the better of the Congress party establishment. Rajiv Gandhi's days as 'a rebel and a reformer' did not last long; he was spectacularly rebuffed when he tried to challenge 'the ruling orthodoxies'. Sonia Gandhi was a witness to how, after his short-lived rebellion, Rajiv was constrained to make his peace with those very 'power brokers' he had denounced so grandiloquently at the Bombay Centenary Session. This must have been an absorbing lesson in the Congress realpolitik and the Congress leaders' taste for intrigue and double talk.

In her turn, Sonia Gandhi was absolutely clear from day one as the Congress president: she would not take on the Congress, she would not try to reform this oldest political formation in the world. For their part, the Congress leaders and cadres understood that Sonia Gandhi alone could help them gain power and they were perfectly happy to offer obedience and loyalty in return for patronage and perks of office.

This was a mutually satisfying arrangement: the Congress leaders did not have to make any kind of commitment about issues of ideology. 'Pragmatism' became the working principle and 'electoral victories' the only yardstick of 'political success'. As long as Sonia Gandhi was able to work her presumed magic with

Photograph by **ASHISH SHARMA**

PRIYANKA GANDHI IS A GENERAL SECRETARY IN CHARGE OF UTTAR PRADESH, BUT CANNOT RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO PLAY THE 'HIGH COMMAND'

the voters, Congress leaders throughout the country were content to fall in line; no one bothered to even register that all avenues of 'inner democracy' had been choked off. Nor was anyone in a position to question the role 'the family' had come to acquire. There was an awe-inspiring mantra: party leaders had no say when it came to the Family and its involvement in the party. No one was prepared to challenge Sonia Gandhi when it became apparent, sometime around 2009, that her supreme priority was to ensure her son's elevation, first as the Congress president and then, if possible, as the Prime Minister of India.

FOR MOST CONGRESS leaders, the idea of a Rahul presidency had a comfortable, tautological ring to it; the prospect of a Rahul premiership was even more intoxicating. The more cunning among them began pushing and promoting *their* sons and daughters, as they correctly sized up Sonia Gandhi's own dreams for Rahul.

It was recently disclosed that after the 2014 drubbing, Janardan Dwivedi, a long-serving general secretary in the All India Congress Committee, had, on September 15, 2014, sent in his resignation, in the hope that it would provide Sonia Gandhi with a good enough reason to completely overhaul the Congress hierarchy, especially revitalise the crucial slate of general secretaries and secretaries. But Sonia Gandhi was now risk-averse; she was not going to develop an appetite for taking on the entrenched establishment politicos. Her priority was not rejuvenation of the Congress; it was elevation of Rahul Gandhi as the organisational boss.

While it was easy to impose Rahul Gandhi on the Congress, the voters in India were not to be so easily taken in. Somehow Rahul Gandhi's quest for power could garner neither the requisite political acceptability nor the minimum moral respectability. Twice, in 2014 and 2019, the *Idea of Rahul* stood comprehensively rebuffed.

By May 23rd, 2019, the Congress leaders resembled very much TS Eliot's *Hollow Men*:

Shape without form, shade without colour
Paralysed force, gesture without motion

Now that Rahul Gandhi has walked away, the Congress' karmic decrepitude has cast its dysfunctional spell on its leaders. These stuffed men of straw do not know even how to go about gathering their wits. Even after two months, they dare not pick up the gauntlet thrown down by the Family to find for themselves a new mascot.

SO, WHY HAS there not been a regime change in the Congress?

For one thing, no one can be sure as to how sincere the Family is in insisting that it would not provide a 'president'. Many veterans know that Rahul Gandhi is a complicated man—impet-

SOMEHOW RAHUL GANDHI'S QUEST FOR POWER COULD GARNER NEITHER THE REQUISITE POLITICAL ACCEPTABILITY NOR THE MINIMUM MORAL RESPECTABILITY. TWICE, IN 2014 AND 2019, THE IDEA OF RAHUL STOOD COMPREHENSIVELY REBUFFED

uous, erratic, imperious, with an oversized sense of entitlement; they know he has walked away from the president's job in a huff because he is peeved that the senior leaders were not in sync with his sophomoric "*chowkidar chor hai*" virulence during the 2019 Lok Sabha campaign; and now, these veterans suspect that Rahul Gandhi has unleashed a war against the Congress, the very political party that is the only *raison d'être* for his place in India's public life.

These life-long durbaris discern that the Family—Rahul, Priyanka and Sonia—is on the same page in this display of tantrums. Many of those who know the family intimately suggest that it will not allow the Congress to settle down to a different tune and to a different bandmaster.

There is a sober view that Rahul Gandhi and the Family have an obligation to help the party make the transition; yet, even the most 'loyal' seniors remain befuddled about the Family's intention. Many are wondering whether some kind of a 'strategic cunning' is at work, letting things drift, smoking out potential challengers.

"Power structure will not change," believes a very senior loyalist. Another one argues that there may be a *de jure* change but *de facto* power will remain with the Family. No substantive leader—not that there are that many—would knowingly confine herself/himself to the front office while the Gandhis managed the store from the backroom.

The Family must have also noted that there has not been any massive outcry for the Gandhis to stay put. On the other hand, there is considerable resentment among many senior Congress leaders who want the Family to just go away.

The Family has been given a taste of ineffectiveness, as Priyanka Gandhi discovered the other day when she tried to intercede on behalf of Navjot Singh Sidhu. She is a general secretary in charge of Uttar Pradesh, but cannot resist the temptation to play the 'high command'. She is reported to have sent her secretary, Kanishk Singh, to Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh with a message to find an honourable way of accommodating the very difficult Sidhu. The Captain simply refused to grant an audience to Priyanka Gandhi's emissary. Amarinder Singh no longer felt the need to humour a cabinet colleague who refused to acknowledge the chief minister's authority.

Of course, Sidhu continued to overestimate the efficacy of the high command, even after the May 2019 defeat, and continued to act pricey. Sidhu did not take charge of his new ministerial department; but the chief minister was not in a mood to put up with a colleague who thought he had some kind of immunity because he enjoyed the high command's protection and patronage. Many equations and many calculations stand revised. Navjot Sidhu saw the writing on the wall and walked out of the cabinet into political irrelevance.

A kind of rearguard action has already been mounted. The Family is trying to make itself felt. Priyanka Gandhi travelled to Sonbhadra in Uttar Pradesh, grabbed the headlines when an inept Yogi government 'arrested' her—and the Congress MPs dutifully protested at the Gandhi statue in Parliament House. Rahul Gandhi continues to make crucial appointments, and Sonia Gandhi remains the head of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

Here is the Congress conundrum: the Gandhis will not—and cannot be expected to—fade away into political oblivion. That much Rahul Gandhi has forewarned. In his letter of resignation, he has announced that "I will, of course, continue to fight for the ideals of the Congress Party with all my strength." Given their famous surname, the Gandhis could easily grab headlines, and occasionally land themselves in controversies, which, in turn, would force the 'new Congress' to come to their defence.

Even if there is a genuine regime change, the Gandhis will continue to queer the pitch. It is no secret that there is a series of legal cases involving the Gandhis, and each court appearance can become an occasion to remind everyone about the centrality of the Gandhis to the organisation.

A new narrative has been instigated that the BJP/RSS would be only too eager to see the back of the Gandhis, as they remain the only obstacle in the saffron crowd's all-India domination. This, of course, does not take into account the comprehensive rout that the Congress has suffered on the Gandhis' watch in 2014 and 2019. These Family partisans prefer to attribute a Machiavellian cleverness to the Amit Shah-Modi duo, without realising that the Gandhis' presence at the top of the Congress party suits the Nagpur commissars.

A cold war between the Congress and the Gandhis is round the corner. "He [Rahul] will burn the house down rather than have someone else occupy it," says an astute friend of the Family. Even if the Congress manages to find a 'replacement' for Rahul Gandhi, ingrained habits of compliance and submission would assert themselves; it will be easy for the Family to see to it that no new leadership arrangement sustains itself. A year of disarray and dispiriting electoral defeats in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand would see a clamour for the return of the Gandhis. ■

Harish Khare is a senior journalist and commentator based in Delhi

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HOW THE CONGRESS LOST THE *War* OF IDEAS

RAHUL GANDHI DID NOT HAVE A COUNTER-ARGUMENT IN THE FACE OF FORCE MODI

By PR RAMESH

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

What do you say about the entitled leadership of the country's oldest political party except that they seem to have a tendency to perennially shoot themselves in the foot? In May, when he finally decided to quit as party president, Rahul Gandhi seemed overwhelmed by defeat, disillusionment and bewilderment. The ground has been shifting on the socio-political front, calibrating public sentiment closer to the Right, plunging the party into a grave crisis after its decimation at the hustings. The news from the states was no better on Gandhi's watch. Its boat had sailed in Goa, with MLAs abandoning

the ship for the BJP. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress sank without a trace in the state polls and, in Telangana, the party suffered a political meltdown. The desertions from the rocky JD(S)-Congress coalition and the ensuing drama in Karnataka ended this week finally with the HD Kumaraswamy government losing the trust vote, even as Gandhi vacationed on foreign shores. The Congress was headless.

Gandhi's quitting ended the worst-kept secret in the Congress: there was a severe leadership crisis in India's grand old party even as the 2019 electoral landslide for the BJP threw it into complete disarray. With the meltdown of the Nehru-Gandhi family super glue that kept the Congress together for decades as a multi-interest platform, no single leader was capable of stepping into the vacuum created by Gandhi's exit. Urgently patch-worked, over and over since the 1990s, to stall imminent crumbling, the Congress now faces the threat of being made redundant. The party had, after all, splintered in PV Narasimha Rao's time, led by regional leaders such as Sharad Pawar, ND Tiwari and Arjun Singh, as well as GK Moopanar in the south. In January 1998, Mamata Banerjee formed the All-India Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. Many of them had risen to powerful positions on account of their perceived proximity to the Nehru-Gandhi family.

The recent developments have also exposed the second worst secret: Rahul Gandhi was a moody and reluctant party president at best, needing constant hand-holding by his mother Sonia Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi herself appears to have been afflicted with a compelling vision of her son as a future prime minister, following in the footsteps of his father, grandmother and great-grandfather. Also, she has remained the driving force behind his survival this long as president, fuelled by the desperation of a party leadership that is aware that without the family, the Congress would fall apart.

Increasingly, Rahul Gandhi is being seen as out-of-depth, with even people who are charitable acknowledging that he is inconsistent. Gandhi has himself admitted in private to a stubborn streak that would not allow him to change his decision once his mind was made up, as on the recent occasion. He is a reluctant politician and his frequent trips abroad, besides the way he winked in Parliament even as he professed love for the Prime Minister, had further diminished him.

Rahul Gandhi, at 49, has been singularly clueless about the radical changes on the ground that have impacted the Congress' political fortunes. In a nation dominated by youth below 35, a new generation is not enamoured of the idea of dynastic leadership. To them, Rahul Gandhi smacks of someone who has benefitted from his pedigree with nothing to boast of as his personal achievement. Two of the party's worst-ever performances have been on his watch, in 2014 and 2019. The party has lost power in state after state. After his resignation, things have taken a turn for the worse even in the few key states where it has been in power, including Karnataka, Punjab and Rajasthan. In Madhya Pradesh, where it won by a slim majority, a daily threat hangs over Kamal Nath's government.

That disconnect between the family leadership model, purveyed by the Nehru-Gandhis and their loyalists, and the New India has only served to highlight how much voters today despise, and refuse to subscribe to, such entitlement. That leaves the Congress in a dilemma that it will find extremely difficult to extricate itself from: the leader seen as the only one who can keep the party together has been unable to perform that role with any degree of efficiency, but the leadership refuses to think beyond the family when it comes to the political rejuvenation of the party. Paralysed by this dilemma, there is now a very real risk of the party sinking deeper into the morass of uncertainty.

Rahul Gandhi's tweets on his resignation, made after his announcement at the Congress Working Committee meeting, served to emphasise his political immaturity. It partly pinned the blame for the Congress' devastating show in the 2019 General Election on his own colleagues, claiming that they had not given him total support in the ideological battle against the BJP and its leader Narendra Modi. In his battle against the BJP, he maintained, he had often stood alone but was proud to battle on nonetheless. The Congress had consequently lost badly and, as party chief, he took the blame and had resigned. But now, he maintained, so should others. Sources in the Congress say that he virtually extracted resignations from Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora as they refused to follow suit.

This was defeatist to the core—a victim card being played overtly and a victimisation syndrome being showcased that was pinned on a thinly veiled reference to his campaign on the Rafale fighter deal and his imagined charge of the Prime Minister's involvement in it. Fuelled by the slogan '*Chowkidar Chor Hai*' the campaign received the cold shoulder from leaders within his own party. It was a campaign that directly pitted Gandhi against Modi in the popularity stakes and sought to take the latter down by a direct assault on his personal integrity, which still notched up the highest ratings.

Aside from Gandhi himself and his data analytics team, most

RAHUL GANDHI IS BEING SEEN AS OUT-OF-DEPTH, WITH EVEN PEOPLE WHO ARE CHARITABLE ACKNOWLEDGING THAT HE IS INCONSISTENT. GANDHI HAS HIMSELF ADMITTED IN PRIVATE TO A STUBBORN STREAK

(Second from left) Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and others at AICC headquarters, May 25, New Delhi

Photograph by **ASHISH SHARMA**

RAHUL GANDHI HAS BEEN SINGULARLY CLUELESS ABOUT THE RADICAL CHANGES ON THE GROUND THAT HAVE IMPACTED THE CONGRESS' POLITICAL FORTUNES. IN A NATION DOMINATED BY YOUTH BELOW 35, A NEW GENERATION IS NOT ENAMOURED OF THE IDEA OF DYNASTIC LEADERSHIP

party leaders were of the view that there were very few takers for the campaign on the ground. They were aware that Gandhi was being misled by some among his chosen team into believing that the Congress stood more than a fighting chance at forming the next Government at the Centre, ousting Modi. And that Rahul Gandhi would be either prime minister or, at the very least, king-maker. During the campaign, Gandhi is known to have got upset with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister and senior party leader Kamal Nath because the latter did not join the '*Chowkidar Chor Hai*' chorus. It is such stubbornness which refuses to acknowledge the reality on the ground–instead of getting curious as to why this veteran of so many electoral battles, and one with a lot at stake in this one, was lukewarm to the Rafale campaign—that highlighted Gandhi's inexperience.

Till date, not a single Congress leader has come on record—most prefer to say it privately—on the possibility that Rahul Gandhi's aggressive campaign against Modi, targeting him for imagined breach of propriety, had boomeranged on the party. Talk to any Congress leader of consequence and he/she will tell you that it did not go down well with the voters. Gandhi himself reacted with anger at the Election Commission and even at his own colleagues, choosing not to acknowledge that voters rejected his campaign and that he had come up short in a presidential contest where he pitted himself against the more popular and trusted Modi.

Many compared Rahul Gandhi's resignation to a captain deserting his ship in stormy waters. In the weeks of confusion that followed his refusal to reconsider his decision, Gandhi's acolytes floated the 'demolish the headquarters' theory, by which they maintained that the party organisation had been the big liability on the Congress' path to electoral success. Echoing Gandhi's own sense of hurt and desertion, they hold that it was the party 'organisation' (euphemism for a host of other party leaders) that was a burden on him and that blocked Gandhi's attempt to leverage his popularity. Espousing this view, Sachin Rao, strategic adviser to Gandhi in the Youth Congress and the NSUI, and an integral part of his handpicked team, was heard telling people that "the party will rise, once again, like a Phoenix from the ashes".

UNDER SONIA GANDHI, the party outsourced all of its intellectual content to the Left. Rahul Gandhi's acolytes—who have argued that the party organisation has become unwieldy—are now keen that the party carry out a drastic restructuring through a purge. This, amid repeated questions about the exact ideology the Congress espouses and its inability to spell it out. It is their case that though the organisation would suffer from the widespread slash and burn in the short run, it would finally emerge much stronger, empowered by a new crop of leaders with ideological clarity and clear objectives. An organisation cast in Rahul Gandhi's image that would be in sync with his instincts and worldview. This is a course of action that Gandhi reportedly backs, one that would give him a free hand to keep his favourites in the revamped organisation.

The irony couldn't be sharper: here was an argument that the president of the biggest opposition party would have done

THE CONGRESS' 2019 DEFEAT WAS INFLUENCED BY THE TWIN FACTORS OF RAHUL GANDHI'S LEADERSHIP AND THE HINDUISATION OF THE POLITY. THE CONGRESS WAS UNABLE TO RESPOND TO EITHER ISSUE AND WHAT FOLLOWED WAS A SHARP DECLINE

much better at the hustings as a free agent rather than by leading his flock into battle. This, despite the fact that it was clear–especially after the Balakot air strikes–that Narendra Modi looked invincible.

Meanwhile, a section of the party's senior leadership has been making a desperate effort to keep the Congress pulling together against the imminent danger of its falling apart. While veteran Karan Singh suggested four working presidents from different regions to avoid infighting and chastised the top leaders for wasting a month pleading with Gandhi to take back his resignation, others favoured a CWC decision favourable to the Nehru-Gandhi family on a leader with his or her feet firmly on the ground.

The quest for new leadership is fraught with contradiction. A strong section of the party, which believes in the indispensability of dynastic rule, would not like to take a risk and would prefer that someone like Mallikarjun Kharge kept the seat warm for Gandhi until he could be 'persuaded' to return to office, after a decent cooling-off period.

THERE IS ANOTHER school that feels somebody young should be given a chance. Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot and the like were automatically ruled out since they suffered from a major handicap: they were entitled and intrinsic to Lutyens' Delhi, making them risky replacements for Rahul Gandhi. There was, crucially, also the danger of their overshadowing the reluctant prince. Someone like Mukul Wasnik, who rose from the Youth Congress ranks, has been favoured by others as an alternative to Kharge or Sushil Shinde. He is considered safe and is the leadership's man with no base of his own. So he can't be much of a problem. On the other hand, this relatively young leader from the Dalit community could prove problematic in the larger caste calculations.

Collisions are expected among those putting forth these various calculations once the Monsoon Session of Parliament ends, exposing the farcical arrangement of leading the party through an amorphous office called president of the AICC as a completely unworkable proposition.

There is, however, a larger issue beyond the leadership crisis that should be a worry for the Congress. It is whether the party is at all likely to course-correct the manner in which it conducts its politics. If it persists in its politics so far, the party can only hope to fixate on the rearview mirror, savouring the glories of the past, while the ground shifts significantly towards a Hindu polity. The Congress leadership's response to that transformation has been leaden-footed to say the least. Erratic 'soft Hindutva' on the one hand ('janeudhari Brahmin', temple visits by Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, for instance) and heavy reliance on minority votes on the other, representing knee-jerk, old-school secular politics, whereby the leadership conceded to the demands of conservative or hardline Muslim clerics.

The problem that confronts Rahul Gandhi is that the majority community is no longer willing to accept the old-fashioned secularism. The demands of the Muslim community, unlike in the decades immediately after Independence, have now acquired an 'in your face' dimension that upsets the majority community. And a significant section of the Hindus sees a parallel between Islam's global intransigence and its local manifestations.

What is also complicating matters for the Congress is the fact that Hindus have pruned the space for parties to engage in appeasement gestures. In fact, the Congress' 2019 defeat was influenced by the twin factors of Rahul Gandhi's leadership and the Hinduisation of the polity. The Congress was unable to respond to either issue and what followed was a sharp decline.

That the party has not learnt any lesson was evident last week in the Lok Sabha when its leader in the House, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, had to struggle to get his party MPs not to rush to yoke themselves to AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi's wagon on forcing a division on the anti-terror National Investigation Agency Bill. The current crisis in the Congress mirrors the developments in the Democratic Party in the US, where the Left-Liberal ideology of the 'Squad' represented by the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar is pushing the party to take positions against homeland security and in favour of cancellation of all student debt. Just as this could make President Donald Trump's second run easy, Rahul Gandhi's Congress is helping the BJP gain more heft with its support for the so-called '*Tukde Tukde* Gang', with its call for thinning down the Army's presence in Kashmir and with its opposition to anti-terror legislation.

The Congress has Himalayan battles ahead of it, if it wants to survive and remain relevant in a rapidly changing polity. By all indications, the party is in no position to challenge the BJP in the coming round of state elections. Rahul Gandhi will once again be in focus, for both voters and pundits. To little or no avail. ■

THE INEVITABLE END

The real story in Karnataka is not the fall of the Congress-JD(S) government but the impending demise of the Congress itself in the state

By V SHOBA

ON JULY 23RD EVENING, after 14 months as Karnataka Chief Minister, HD Kumaraswamy's luck ran out. His own prayers, his brother HD Revanna's magic lemons, even a lucky room at the Taj West End—all failed to arrest the ineluctable fall of the Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) government, which had run athwart of the aspirations of 19 of its Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Twenty legislators, including Congress Ballari (Rural) MLA B Nagendra, reportedly unwell, were absent on the day of the long-anticipated trust vote, whittling down the numbers of the coalition, which had come to power after the Assembly elections in May 2018 with a strength of 118 in a house of 224. Leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with its 105 MLAs intact and more slated to join its ranks, flashed victory signs after bringing down a government that was birthed only to keep the party out of power in the state. For the BJP, which coasted to a second term in power at the Centre, 2019 has been an *annus mirabilis*. Close on the heels of the party's sweep of 25 of the 28 parliamentary constituencies in Karnataka, BS Yediyurappa, the 76-year-old state party president and a man of antic conceits, may finally be able to put the ignominy of his 55-hour stint as chief minister on the back of a fractured verdict in the Assembly polls last year behind him.

While former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, who was also

KARNATAKA CHIEF MINISTER HD KUMARSWAMY (CENTRE) DURING THE CONFIDENCE MOTION IN THE ASSEMBLY, BENGALURU, JULY 23

the Chairman of the Coalition Coordination Committee, has accused the BJP of indulging in "wholesale" skulduggery, the party maintains that the hollowing out of the Congress-JD(S) combine is the result of internal upheavals. "The rebels felt they were being dictated to. The government was not letting them function as individual legislators and ministers. Most of them, if not all, including Vijayanagara MLA Anand Singh, will shortly support us in our bid to form the government. There will be no need to go for fresh elections," said B Sriramulu, the BJP's Tribal leader from Ballari, and the Molakalmuru MLA, speaking to *Open* on July 24th. "Some of them may be given ministerial berths but what is wrong with that? Didn't the coalition government undertake Cabinet expansions to accommodate some of the disgruntled MLAs? Even after that, they remained unhappy because coalition leaders failed to address genuine grievances," Sriramulu said.

BS YEDIYURAPPA AND BJP MLAs AFTER THE TRUST VOTE IN THE ASSEMBLY, BENGALURU, JULY 23

THE CONGRESS AND the JD(S), which had spared no effort over the past month to win back the renegades, stressed they wouldn't welcome them back "even if the sky fell". "I am very hurt by the actions of rebel MLAs, who were my friends," said DK Shivakumar, the Congress' redoubtable arbiter and chief minister-in-waiting, ahead of the no-confidence motion on July 23rd. The minister for irrigation in the Kumaraswamy government quoted Voltaire: "Lord, protect me from my friends; I can take care of my enemies." Amid the high-tension debate and the dramatic sleepovers in the House over the past few days, Shivakumar—with his hard-edged practicality, irrepressible wit ("The way KR Puram rebel MLA Byrathi Basavaraj ran to the Speaker's office would put even Ben Johnson to shame") and displays of after-hours camaraderie with opposition leaders ("There is nothing wrong with making you deputy chief minister, but the BJP won't do that, they will choose someone else," he joked to a smirking Sriramulu)—emerged as the face of resilience in the Congress in its hour of despondency. In debating the trust motion, even as the BJP's silence betrayed its gross hunger for power, Congress and JD(S) leaders, including Siddaramaiah, Priyank Kharge, Krishna Byre Gowda and KM Shivalinge Gowda, demonstrated an understanding of constitutional law and the grace to face their own fallibility.

The odds, of course, were heaped against the embattled government. Governor Vajubhai Vala, allegedly a BJP sympathiser, wanted a trust vote without delay. The Supreme Court had ruled that rebel MLAs could defy their party whips without being disqualified, thereby paving the way for the fall of the government. More worryingly, it has set a precedent for judicial interference in a crucial legislative matter. "We all go home knowing we tried the best we could. For all the charges of disunity in the coalition, all of us were more than willing to compromise for the sake of stability," says JD(S) leader and higher education minister in the outgoing Cabinet GT Deve Gowda, who tried, in vain, to convince rebel JD(S) MLAs to return. Deve Gowda, who had vanquished his bête noire Siddaramaiah in Chamundeshwari by over 36,000 votes in the 2018 Assembly elections, said earlier this month if the coalition coordinators thought that installing the latter as chief minister would quell rebellion, he was all for it. Among the first wave of rebels who left the coalition early in July were supporters of Siddaramaiah, leading to speculation that it was the former chief minister who had instigated them—a theory that has since lost currency.

"There are two kinds of leaders who have quit: veterans who felt incapacitated as part of a shaky and ineffective coalition and MLAs whose popularity has been declining and who cannot win another election on their own," says a senior BJP leader who did not wish to be named. "Once they join us, it is Narendra Modi who is the candidate. The results of the Lok Sabha elections have made it clear to everyone that people want a strong leader." Many of the

BS YEDIYURAPPA, THE 76-YEAR-OLD STATE BJP PRESIDENT, MAY FINALLY BE ABLE TO PUT THE IGNOMINY OF HIS 55-HOUR STINT AS CHIEF MINISTER LAST YEAR BEHIND HIM

rebel MLAs, including Pratap Gowda Patil, a former Yediyurappa loyalist who won from Maski on a Congress ticket by 213 votes, and actor-politician BC Patil from Hirekerur, had scraped by with slender margins in the 2018 Assembly elections.

Holed up in a hotel in Mumbai, rebel legislators repeatedly invoked their disenchantment with the government to justify their desertion. The word 'interference' was often used in connection with the state Congress and JD(S) top brass. Indeed, it has emerged as the trigger for the resignation of senior leaders like R Ramalinga Reddy, the BTM Layout MLA, who cited differences with Deputy Chief Minister and in-charge of Bengaluru G Parameshwara. Though Reddy eventually returned to support the government in the trust vote, the damage had been done. His dissent emboldened other MLAs—Basavaraju, Munirathna, ST Somashekhar and MTB Nagaraj—from the Congress stronghold of Bengaluru to break away. They had all complained of 'internal problems' emanating from the high-handedness of the top leaders of the coalition, especially Parameshwara and Public Works Minister and brother of Chief Minister HD Kumaraswamy, HD Revanna. While wads of cash may or may not have eased their journey across the aisle, there can be little doubt that the rebels—13 from the Congress, three from the JD(S), two Independents and the lone Bahujan Samaj Party MLA—felt compelled to withdraw support. AH Vishwanath, a four-time MLA and Kuruba leader who was made JD(S) state president a year ago and resigned after the Lok Sabha polls assuming responsibility for the party's poor show, abandoned ship reportedly because he felt sidelined in a rapidly shrinking party. His exit, along with that of Narayana Gowda, the Krishnarajpet MLA who said he was forced to resign because of constant interference from former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's family, leaves a gaping hole in the JD(S) bastion of Mysore-Mandya. Up north in Bombay-Karnataka, Ramesh Jarkiholi, the Gokak MLA and a powerful sugar baron who was dropped from the Kumaraswamy Cabinet in December, had been working to engineer a defection in the Congress for months. Shivakumar's interference in local politics in Belgaum was reportedly the last straw.

"This is a wake-up call for parties pitted against the BJP," says psephologist Sandeep Shastri. "The BJP has, of course, fished in troubled waters, but the disarray in the Congress national leadership after the Lok Sabha elections and the fact that the Karnataka alliance was filled with untenable contradictions paved the way for the BJP's eventual victory in the state."

In a heart-on-his-sleeve farewell speech ahead of the trust vote, the outgoing chief minister peddled the tired trope of the wronged, self-effacing politician and launched a screed against political poaching and the threat to democracy that it posed. He closed, however, with a practical warning to the BJP: if the party, which now enjoyed a frail majority, rushed to stake claim to form a government, a hostage situation may soon repeat itself. Stability may well be the unobtainium of Karnataka politics, but the BJP sees pure potential in uprooting the Congress from the state. "Many years ago, a weed began to sprout all over the lawns of Bangalore. It was so rampant and vile that people were paid per kilogramme for uprooting it. That weed was called Congress grass," says a senior BJP leader. "It is time to employ the same strategy in politics." ■

THE BATTLE FOR TURF

Pro-Pakistan terror groups in Kashmir are at war with pan-Islamic jihadi groups. Security agencies don't know which way it will go

By RAHUL PANDITA

ON THE NIGHT of July 9th, the global terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda released a video of its chief Ayman al-Zawahiri. In the message, titled 'Don't forget Kashmir', Zawahiri called for terrorist groups in Kashmir to "single-mindedly focus on inflicting unrelenting blows on the Indian Army and Government so that the Indian economy bleeds and that India suffers sustained losses in manpower and equipment." Terming the "fight in Kashmir" as part of the worldwide Muslim community's "Jihad against a vast array of forces", he called upon "scholars" to clearly state that the "jihad" in Kashmir (and other parts of the world) is an individual obligation on all Muslims. He also called Pakistan's army and government "toadies of America", and cautioned terrorists not to fall into their trap.

Around the same time, the chief of Ansar Ghazwatul Hind, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Kashmir, Hameed Lelhari, issued a statement as well. He urged cooperation among terrorist organisations working in the state and called for the formation of a *shura* (council) to take collective decisions regarding military actions against the Indian state. The Ansar was raised by Zawahiri's close associate, Asim Umar, who has earlier been with other jihadi organisations, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban. Zawahiri had himself announced the launch of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent in 2014.

Lelhari was appointed Ansar's chief after the death of its earlier head, Zakir Musa, in May this year. Musa was close to Hizbul commander Burhan Wani. Musa succeeded him after his death in 2016, but soon distanced himself from the organisation's pro-Pakistan stance. In an audio recording released in 2017, he urged that fighting in Kashmir should only serve the cause of Islam and would not be for a nation. "Sharia *ya shahaadat* (Islamic rule or martyrdom)," he had said. When he died in an encounter with the police, his men believed that the tipoff to security forces may have come from the Hizbul itself.

Even as security agencies are trying to ascertain how Zawahiri's message could affect insurgency in Kashmir, they are keeping a close eye on the fight that has now begun between pro-Islamic State (IS) groups and pro-Pakistan groups like Hizbul and Lashkar.

The pro-Pakistan groups in Kashmir have a support system in the Valley currently that the likes of Ansar and the newly formed Islamic State of the Hind Province (ISHP) lack. According to intelligence agencies, Pakistan has also recently provided big funds to Jaish. But these organisations are under the Pakistan Army's thumb and are now beginning to feel that the pro-IS groups may overthrow them as the main fighting force in Kashmir.

According to a senior police officer in Kashmir, Lelhari's call for a militant council is seen by the Hizbul as an attempt to eclipse the United Jihad Council, an umbrella group of terrorist organisations, led by the Hizbul chief, Syed Salahuddin.

Days before Lelhari's statement, Adil Ahmed Dass, a terrorist associated with the ISHP was found dead on June 27th in an orchard in South Kashmir. It turned out that he was killed by Lashkar and Hizbul terrorists after he deserted Lashkar with his weapon and joined the ISHP. His brother Musaib said that they had heard of his death on June 26th itself, but it was only the next morning that the army took him to the spot. Musaib said they also found an injured Lashkar terrorist, Arif Hussain, nearby. "I spat at him and asked him why they had killed my brother," he said. Arif, according to Musaib, told him that it was a Hizbul militant Zubair Wani who had killed Adil Dass.

Two days later, an ISHP spokesperson Khateeb released a video statement, blaming Hizbul and Lashkar. He said that their cadre had laid a trap for Dass on the pretext of swearing allegiance to IS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and he was shot by them as he knelt

BURHAN WANI (CENTRE) WITH HIS GANG

ZAKIR MUSA, FORMER CHIEF OF ANSAR GHAZWATUL HIND

in prayer. Khateeb accused these two organisations of killing innocent Kashmiris and said that they were not interested in Kashmir's liberation but grabbing its land for Pakistan.

In the 1990s also, during the peak of militancy in Kashmir, infighting between Hizbul and another major terrorist group, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), had resulted in the killing of many cadres of the latter. In his video statement, ISHP's Khateeb also blamed Hizbul for the killing of dreaded terrorist Qayoom Najar (he was killed by security forces in 2017) for his pan-Islamist utterings. He called the Hizbul's current commander, Riyaz Naikoo, Riyaz "Nalaayak" (worthless).

In another statement released by the ISHP, the organisation said, "Our hands will feel no weakness while slaying these enemies of Islam." It accused Lashkar and Hizbul of unleashing a reign of terror in the Valley in the last three decades and warned that their end was close.

After Adil Dass' killing, Hizbul chief Syed Salahuddin also broke his silence; in a video statement, he appealed for mutual trust and unity among all militant ranks. He asked that Dass' killing be investigated jointly and punishment meted out to those found to be involved. Salahuddin said that there should be no scope for differences in the ranks of separatists. "Our great struggle [for secession] has already suffered irreparable damage [in the past] because of these differences and *inteshar* [conflict]," he said, warning that once again there were similar "indications of damage beyond measure".

It is not clear whether these statements will lead to any truce. Currently, the separatist movement in Kashmir is going through a tough time, owing to a crackdown by New Delhi. The Minister of State for Home Affairs, G Kishan Reddy, recently told Parliament that till June 13th, 113 terrorists had already been killed in the Valley. Since 2016, 733 terrorists have been killed. Recently, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) attached the house of Asiya Andrabi, the pro-Pakistan Kashmiri separatist leader. The attachment order, the first from the NIA in Kashmir, was issued under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

"Right now, our biggest headache is Jaish, especially after the Pulwama suicide attack," says a senior police officer. But he admitted there was concern about what the ISHP could be up to. In South Kashmir, after a huge consignment of explosives went missing from a stone quarry, it set alarm bells ringing. The explosives were later recovered from nearby fields.

According to police sources, they are now keeping a watch on whether more desertions will happen from Hizbul and Lashkar. "We are also keeping an eye on a few young Kashmiris who are abroad," another senior police officer revealed. In one case, a Kashmiri man, Adil Ahmed, an MBA from Queensland, Australia, has been in the custody of the US-allied forces in Syria for his involvement with the IS. His father, who works as a contractor in Kashmir, has now appealed to the Centre to bring back his son. In 2016, the NIA deported from the UAE a Kashmiri, Sheikh Azhar ul-Islam (24), and two others on charges of links with the IS.

"After Pulwama, and after Sri Lanka, we cannot take any chances in Kashmir," says a police officer. ■

PRO-PAKISTAN GROUPS IN KASHMIR HAVE A SUPPORT SYSTEM IN THE VALLEY CURRENTLY THAT THE THE NEWLY FORMED PRO-ISLAMIC STATE ONES LACK

DEVIL'S OWN

The Kerala government wants to stop the state's obsession with the occult with a law against superstition. Can black magic be contained?

By SHAHINA KK

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

ON FEBRUARY 25TH THIS year, 32-year-old Jamshath, a resident of Kotakkal in Kerala's Mallappuram district, was almost smothered to death by her husband. "The next day of our housewarming he beat me so badly I was taken to hospital with severe injuries. He informed my mother that he had pronounced talaq and I was no more his wife," she says. An exorcist he had been frequenting told him that she was responsible for the 'ill omens' in his life. Getting rid of her was the solution given to correct his life. Her marriage had been good enough in the beginning. Then her husband came under the influence of the godman and would take Jamshath along on his visits. The godman wanted women devotees to hug and kiss him. They were asked to sit on the floor near his chair and rub his feet. Jamshath refused to do it. When he tried to touch her, she walked out. It was this that made the godman command her husband to do away with her by either a divorce or finishing her off.

After her escape, she walked out of her home with their 10-year-old son. She now lives with her parents and works in a commercial establishment. "He had wanted me to cooperate with that exorcist who was a pervert," says Jamshath, who is now fighting a legal battle to establish her matrimonial rights. However, there was no action against the godman despite her police complaint. "The police told me it was not possible to book him," she says. The godman, meanwhile, goes on with his business uninterrupted across the state.

Jamshath's account is one of the innumerable stories from the underbelly of black magic and exorcism prevalent in Kerala. Despite the state's literacy, its history of rationalist movements and communist ideology, it doesn't have a law banning black magic like Maharashtra and Karnataka. Rationalist organisations like Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham and Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) have prepared and sent draft bills to the previous Congress government years back without any success. It is only now that the present state government has decided to heed the long-pending demand to ban black magic and exorcism by law. But the draft bill prepared by the Kerala State Law Reforms Commission seems to be toothless. "In the current form, it appears to be one that protects superstitions instead of banning them," says AP Muralidharan, president of KSSP. For example, there are exception clauses for religious rituals. "Any superstition and witchcraft can be attributed to religion and holy scriptures. They can avail the benefit of the exemption," says U Kalanathan, one of the founders of Kerala Yukthivadi Samgham.

And while the bill might be ineffective in what it wants to do, resistance to it by conservative religious communities is going to be a headache for the government. For instance, the bill brings a ban on discriminating against menstruating women. A clause stipulates 'involving in evil practices against women by forcing isolation, prohibiting re-entry into the village or facilitating segregation of menstruating postpartum women' as a punishable offence. This might again find a similar resistance as the ban against women of menstruating age in Sabarimala that Kerala witnessed recently.

The bill punishes a range of activities usually termed witchcraft or black magic. Instilling the fear that one's body is possessed by supernatural powers, assaulting a person under the pretext of expelling ghosts, killing of an animal or bird, prohibiting and preventing a person from taking medical treatment for any illness are some of the punishable acts specified. All such activities are widely practised across all religions at present.

Apart from sexual assault, Jamshath also had to deal with her husband's unwillingness to vaccinate their son because the godman was against it. "I gave all periodical vaccinations to my son without the knowledge of my husband and his family," she says. The practice of relying on magic for physical and mental diseases is endemic to all religions in Kerala. *Kreupasanam* is a perfect example. It is registered as a newspaper but its primary goal is not dissemination of information but performing miracles on devotees who buy and distribute the copies.

The Kreupasanam Marian Shrine located at Kalavoor in Alappuzha district looks like any another church but the difference begins once you enter. A devotee has to go to a counter adjacent to the gate and buy a bundle of the newspaper, which has about 25 copies. Further inside, there are separate counters for covenant prayers. This is an agreement to visit and offer prayers there for a fixed tenure. People come with a diverse range of requirements—from curing diseases, getting wealth, jobs, houses and even electric connections.

Father Joseph Valiyaveetil, founder-director of *Kreupasanam*, says 300 to 500 people visit the shrine daily to offer prayers. With each one of them buying at least one bundle, that adds to around 1,000 copies of the newspaper being sold in the church itself daily. The newspaper is published in five languages—English, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam. More than half of the newspaper is filled with the narrations of miracles experienced by devotees. Consider these examples:

- 'My dad had a severe stroke. Doctors warned us that he would not live more than a day. We made a covenant prayer. He got up

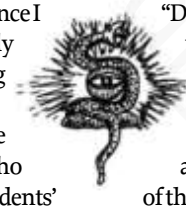
IN THE BILL'S PRESENT **FORM, ANY EXORCIST ACTIVITY CAN BE EXEMPTED UNDER** THE COVER OF RELIGION

the next day and started talking'.

● 'My sister was in coma from stage 4 cancer. We made a covenant prayer and I even witnessed Mother Mary near me while praying. She was completely cured after this.'

Many women we met at *Kreupasanam* had in common liquor or tobacco addiction of men in their family. One woman sought our help to fill the printed registration format for a covenant prayer. She wanted her husband to love and care for her. "I have two children. I got married ten years ago. He has stopped talking to me long back. I am not loved at all," she said. Another couple had come from Thrissur to complete the covenant prayer they offered after losing their house in last year's flood. A new house was built through a government project. The couple says the authorities provided compensation on time and reconstructed the house. But instead of good governance, the wife thought it was because of "the blessings of *Kreupasanam* and Mother Mary and nothing else."

And yet when Father Joseph Valiyaveetil fell ill with viral fever, he got admitted to a private hospital. When asked why *Kreupasanam* could not cure his disease, he said, "I am a priest and I absorb the sins of people coming here seeking cure from diseases. They all become well but there is no one to absorb my sins. Hence I have to go to hospital and take medicines." KSSP recently filed a complaint against *Kreupasanam* for promoting superstitions but it led to no action.



KS Zubair, a medical doctor who got his MBBS degree from Kozhikode Government Medical College and who claims to have been an office-bearer for the left-wing Students' Federation of India, now runs a centre to cure people possessed by djinns, which he claims is the cause of many diseases. He is opposed to the anti-black magic bill. If asked to stop his practice, he plans to invoke his fundamental right to religion. "There are legal means to fight against the proposed bill," he says.

That someone should be correlating djinns with diseases is not accepted by many devout Muslims also. "It has nothing to do with Islam," says Jameela Alpatta, the vice-president of Muslim Girls and Women's Movement (MGM), affiliated to the Mujahid faction in Kerala. She agrees that there is a reference about djinns in the Quran but doesn't believe they have the capacity to possess human beings. She supports the bill. "Treatment practices like Dr Zubair's should be banned. It is nothing but exploitation of superstitions," she says.

The bill does contain provisions to curb it. Clause 10 says: 'Prohibiting and preventing a person from taking medical treatment for any illness and instead giving him treatment like mantra-tantra or chanting prayers or such other things would be treated as a punishable offence.' But the bill also has provisions to defeat itself. In its present form, any exorcist activity can be exempted under the cover of religion because the bill does not provide any definitions to exception terms like 'Religion' and 'Spiritual'. "There are limitations, I agree," says K Sasidharan Nair, the vice-chairman of the State Law Reforms Commission. "We don't claim that this bill would put an end to all such practices. We cannot go against the fundamental rights of religious freedom guaranteed in the Constitution."

Dr Manoj Komath, a rationalist activist and senior scientist at Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences & Technology, thinks the bill will not be of much use. He points to what he terms the conspicuous example of 'Chathan Seva', especially in the village of Peringottukara, in which *kuttichathans* or poltergeists are worshipped in temples. For a fee or an expensive pooja, it solves the problems of devotees. "Normally, almost all the established black magic and sorcery activities are claimed (or cleverly made) to be connected to some religious practice by the proponents themselves. This Chathan Seva is being claimed to be a legitimate Hindu religious activity. However, none of the Hindu scriptures endorse it," says Komath. He argues that Section 15 of the bill permits all these activities.

Predominantly worshipped by backward-caste Hindus, chicken and liquor are the major offerings in the *chathan* temples. "Devotees used to offer arrack in the past. When it was banned, we allowed Indian Made Foreign Liquor. Either the devotees paid for it and we bought from the Beverages Corporation outlets or they themselves bring it," says Sujith Lal, a trustee and priest of Kanadi Chathan Madom, one such temple. He argues that no code of law can close down the temple because of their fundamental right to practice religion.

The bill clearly says that *vastu* and astrology would not come under its purview and that 'the advice in regard to vasthusastra, or advice by astrologers, unless such advice results in cheating, defrauding or exploiting any person' is exempted. The 'saint' who made Jamshath's life hell, the doctor who does djinn therapy, the newspaper that performs miracles, the Chathan Seva in temples can all claim for the exemption provisions in the bill.

The State Crime Records Bureau doesn't have separate data of crimes related to exorcism but the rationalists give some indication. "Twenty-four people have been killed in 17 crimes since the last three years," says U Kalanathan who meticulously collected media reports of crimes related to black magic since 2014. Every time there is a gruesome crime, there is the call for curbing black magic by law. In May this year, exorcism by a family in financial straits drove a mother and daughter to suicide in Neyyattinkara in Kerala. In August 2018, an exorcist and three members of his family were buried alive. The murders were done by his assistant who had been a loyal follower for years. However, no one practising black magic seems to be worried about the bill, confident that whatever they are doing would pass the test of being a religious faith, a confidence corroborated by the loopholes in the bill. ■

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TIME WILL TELL

As India's fascination for luxury watches grows, aficionados expand their tastes to include independent watchmakers, all the way from Glashütte to Jaipur

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

THEY MEET AS often as they can, swilling single malts and admiring their latest acquisitions, the movements of a complex series of gears and springs, the variation of the tiny hand measuring the passage of seconds, the pattern of the self-winding pendulum or the manually wound mainspring, or just contemplating the next object of their attention. They are grown men, with businesses, wives and children, but when it comes to their pricey baubles, they can be rendered quite childlike.

"It's what keeps us sane," says Aman Kathuria, whose day job is running his family's stainless-steel manufacturing business but whose lifetime passion is watches, shared by 45 other members of a collectors' club called J9. The purchase of a watch has marked every special occasion in Kathuria's life, beginning with the Art Deco-influenced Tissot Classic Prince, a homage to its 1917 version, when he graduated from Delhi's Sri Venkateswara College to his latest purchase—a quirky piece, with a green dial and a bronze case, an Oris 40mm Big Crown Pointer Date designed to celebrate the 80th anniversary of a special piece created in 1938 so that glove-wearing Second World War airmen could easily adjust it.

Kathuria is the kind of man Pranav Saboo can relate to. Saboo is CEO, Ethos Watch Boutiques, India's largest chain of luxury watch boutiques with 45 stores across India, and ethoswatches.com, the country's largest website for watches, which sells watches in the range of Rs 10,000 to Rs 2 crore. The Chandigarh-based Saboo has every plan to make both even more exclusive when he launches the first boutique in the country to sell watches from global independent watchmakers to discerning Indians. The prices will be higher but he hopes it will be worth it for those looking for distinctive work, as the world's watch-making axis shifts from Geneva in Switzerland to Glashütte in Germany, home of the handmade Nomos and A Lange & Söhne. Both brands embody the transformations in global politics. As Gary Shteyngart wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2017, in 'Confessions of a Watch Geek', Nomos specialises in manual-winding and automatic mechanical watches and was founded in January 1990 by Roland Schwertner, two months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A Lange & Söhne was founded in 1845 by Ferdinand Adolph Lange, the godfather of German watchmaking. After the Second World War, the Soviets nationalised the company based in the former East Germany. Walter Lange, the great-grandson of Ferdinand, fled to the West. In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Lange was sixty-six years old, he returned to Glashütte and started making watches again.

It is these brands, worshipped in stores such as Contrapante in New York, that Saboo wants to bring to India. These brands, which still venerate craftsmanship, are quite content making just 500 to 3,000 watches a year. It's their stories he finds fascinating, often traversing wars and revolutions. Brands, such as H Moser, was founded by independent watchmaker Heinrich Moser in St Petersburg, Russia in 1828, makers of pocket watches favoured by Vladimir Lenin. Saboo plans an atelier for 10 such brands under the Ethos umbrella at Chanakyapuri in Delhi by August. "They are unique in that they are a work of art and a work of wearability," says Saboo.

Luxury watches work on the principle of exclusivity, given that they are a perfect blend of art and engineering, but they have an additional quality that reflects the values of the buyer. In this rarefied world, there is, however, a gold standard—the Rolex, whose resale value is usually double its cost. Founded in London in 1905 by Hans Wilsdorf as a company specialising in the distribution of timepieces, he started to dream of wristwatches equipped with mechanical movements manufactured by a Swiss watch-making company in Bienne. When a London secretary named Mercedes Gleitze swam across the English Channel in 1927, Wilsdorf made sure she had a Rolex Oyster on her wrist. Rolex has kept its association with adventure by accompanying explorers from mountaintops to the depths of oceans. Ever since, the story of the watch has been of extraordinary achievement.

As Kathuria says, they don't choose their brand ambassadors unthinkingly. "Who wouldn't want to emulate a Roger Federer or a Jack Nicklaus?" And our very own Vijay Amritraj? Indeed, in these social media-savvy times, the more-than-hundred-year-old brand has the coolest hashtag possible: #EveryRolexTellsAStory. What's more, the classic Swiss watch has always restricted its manufacture, ensuring demand is always higher than supply. Saboo currently finds himself torn between his two loves, his perpetual obsession, the Rolex Daytona, of which a mere 30 pieces are manufactured every year, and which has a waiting list of 1,000, much like the Birkin handbag for women, and the Parmigiani Kalpagraphe Chronomètre. "It's a technical marvel with its integrated chronograph but it is also beautiful with its rose-gold case. I wear it with an alligator leather strap," he says about the latter.

But are luxury watches an exclusively male preserve? Do men collect watches the way women collect handbags, with the inbuilt advantage that their acquisitions are timeless? For Anita Khatri, whose Mumbai-based company represents Ulysse Nardin, which has been in the business of

AT A COST OF OVER Rs 2.5 LAKH A WATCH, GAURAV MEHTA HAS BEEN GIVING OPTIONS, SUCH AS ENGRAVING LORD HANUMAN INSIDE THE WATCH

watch-making since 1846 and became part of the Kering luxury conglomerate only in 2014, and Audemars Piguet, founded in 1875 and unusually still a family business, that is not so. For Khatri, watches are as much pieces of art as they are of jewellery and status symbols, all rolled into one.

They are also a deeply personal form of expression, she points out, and refers to her recent obsession: an Audemars Piguet Millenary rose-gold watch with diamonds. "It's different as it has an elliptical shape, off-centre disc. More than that, it has a mechanical winding, which creates a special relationship with the wearer," she adds. In the new rich India, women have been building their own watch collection to match their social appearances with equal fervour. Bejewelled watches for weddings, gold strap for everyday use, a coloured dial to go with whites and other assorted exigencies.

But Indians love their gods more than their watches perhaps, and not everyone

PRANAV SABOO CURRENTLY FINDS HIMSELF TORN BETWEEN HIS TWO LOVES, THE ROLEX DAYTONA, OF WHICH A MERE 30 PIECES ARE MADE EVERY YEAR, AND THE PARMIGIANI KALPAGRAPHE CHRONOMÈTRE

is ready to customise luxury timepieces for them. Enter Gaurav Mehta, a former risk-insurance expert who saw an opportunity in this market and set up the Jaipur Watch Company in 2013 by blending his passion for collecting coins with his love for horology. The watchmaker offers bespoke watches to his high-value clients and the opportunity to celebrate special moments in a more meaningful way. At a cost of over Rs 2.5 lakh a watch, he has been giving clients options, such as engraving Lord Hanuman inside the watch dial or inscribing 'Ya Ali' in the Kufic script on another. Each task requires considerable research. The Kufic script, for instance, is the oldest calligraphic form of the various Arabic scripts and was developed in 7th century Kufa, Iraq. "It is believed the original Quran was written in it. I had help from a friend in Rampur for this. There is no way I could get it wrong," says Mehta.

He's produced special watches for all kinds of memorable moments: from a corporate couple's 25th wedding anniversary to a CEO celebrating a big deal. His favourites? A classic silver body embedded with a pre-Independence-era King George VI coin from 1944, marking the year of Amitabh Bachchan's birth with his signature encrusted on the flip side of the watch, which he presented to the actor. And a made-to-measure timepiece for Gaj Singh of Jodhpur, which had the maharaja's coat of arms and the official polo emblem.

Those are the emotions associated with the timepieces. Indeed, as the legendary Patek Philippe ad says: You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely take care of it for the next generation. As Geneva's oldest family-owned watch company, founded in 1839, that tagline is emblematic of the brand in practice as well. The narrative around these timepieces is what tempts those with money to spend, and with India continuing to grow at around 7 per cent annually, discretionary spending in the top 25 per cent will continue to rise disproportionately. It is this market that the luxury watchmakers' innovative narratives are aimed at.

Take Breitling's Cinema Squad, for instance—Brad Pitt, Charlize Theron and Adam Driver tempting you to buy a timepiece that has a history that began in 1884. Or, take the 171-year-old Omega's strategy of taking women seriously. When the watchmaker launched the latest models of the Constellation Manhattan women's watch collection, they did so in Shanghai, China last year with their models and brand ambassadors—actresses Nicole Kidman and Liu Shishi, and models Cindy Crawford and Alessandra Ambrosio.

Shunali Khullar Shroff, Mumbai-based writer of *Love in the Time of Affluenza*, believes watch collection in India is happening in a Gatsby-esque way so as to buy an entry into a certain club or class of privilege. "Aspiration is a natural human trait. We all want to own that one nice watch, but to own a drawer in your closet that you call a watch drawer because collecting timepieces is your brand new hobby, then is about fulfilling some other greater need within you," she says. People have their own ideas about how they want to enjoy their newly acquired wealth and perhaps they try everything their money can buy, including social status, she adds. "We should grant them that. The Vanderbilts and Rockefellers are known to have been exactly this acquisitive when they first came into wealth a century ago after all," she adds.

History and myth, fashion and function, art and engineering, sentiment and synchronicity, these luxury watches have it all. From Buzz Aldrin's Omega Apollo 11 Speedster (which has been missing since 1970 when it disappeared while in transit to the Smithsonian) to the Rolexes gifted to Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay before their ascent of Mount Everest, there are few instants in time that have not been captured and savoured by the finest timekeepers to the world.

"The invention of the mechanical clock in medieval Europe...was one of the great inventions in the history of mankind.... One can think of few objects that have played so critical a role in shaping the character of life and work as clocks and watches." So wrote economist and watch historian David S Landes in *Revolution in Time*. He tells the story of clocks and watches from Su Sung's astronomical clock made in China in 1086 to the quartz-watch revolution of the 1970s. He wrote it in 1983. Otherwise, he would have, no doubt, included the return of the mechanical watches and the rise of the smart watch. And he would have marvelled at the irony that mechanical watches are far less accurate than battery-powered quartz watches, but often far more expensive, because their bearings are more intricate.

And that indeed is the hallmark of great artistry. We, like our watches, are made more beautiful by our imperfections. ■

SALON

MALLIKARJUN KATAKOL

THEATRE OF LIFE

CRAFTING THE COVENANT

SG Vasudev's retrospective reveals the joyous communion of man, woman and nature 58

DIVIDED WE FALL

What's it like being a Muslim in today's India? Salman Khurshid takes a personal journey with a political message

By Mani Shankar Aiyar

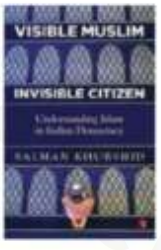
WHEN, SEVEN DECADES after Independence, the eminent grandson of former President Zakir Hussain, feels the need to explain "What am I as a Muslim?" we have to ask ourselves where as a nation have we gone wrong.

The founding fathers of our Republic 'anchored democracy in India on religious toleration and secularism, and ensured that India belonged to all Indians irrespective of their religious beliefs' [*Jawaharlal Nehru* by Rudrangshu Mukherjee]. Indeed so ingrained was religious pluralism in the Indian mind that immediately after realising his goal of 'two nations', Mohammed Ali Jinnah, in his inaugural address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, had this to say about the two communities he had earlier claimed were two incompatible nations:

"...every one of you, no matter to what community he belongs...is first, second and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges, and obligations ...I cannot emphasise this too much...in course of time all these angularities of majority and minority communities...will vanish...you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State...you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense...but in the political sense, as citizens of the State."

It was a speech that could have been made by Nehru or Dr Ambedkar. But within a week of this noble pronouncement, Pakistan began voiding itself of its minorities. A few months later, there were few left to 'go to their temples' or to their gurdwaras. Why did this happen? Despite Jinnah? Or because of him? Both, I think, is the answer. This once-upon-a-time 'Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity' had unleashed forces he neither comprehended nor controlled. The rest, as they say, is history.

India's principal freedom fighters, on the other hand, refused to vindicate Jinnah by devising a 'Hindu India' in juxtaposition to a 'Muslim Pakistan'. For so many decades did mainstream India pride itself on being a secular Republic and adhere to that fundamental principle that even when Jayaprakash Narayan cobbled together the Janata Government after decisively defeating Indira Gandhi, the Government broke down within two years (1977-79) on the key nation-building question of 'double membership', that is, whether India's first-ever non-Congress Government could continue to contain those whose primary allegiance was to the RSS and its poisonous advocacy of 'Hindutva'.



It was not Indira who brought down Morarji. It was secularism—as understood and subscribed to by all Indians barring the small minority committed to Savarkar and Golwalkar, who decided that the Janata Government would have to go unless it stopped co-habiting with the RSS.

Alas, that unshakeable national consensus and commitment to secularism as the cornerstone of our nationhood has been weakening since the 1980s. The BJP's decisive victories in two successive general elections, the second time with an increased majority, and its capture, by fair means and foul, of a huge majority of state governments, has rendered 'secularism' a bad word in the lexicon of much of the political class (although two-thirds of our electorate are yet to declare themselves for the alternative Idea of India embodied in the word 'Hindutva').

Prime Minister Modi and his cohort are, with increasing success, engaged in fulfilling the 'two nation' theory of Jinnah and the Muslim League which held (and holds) that our sub-continent and its historical and civilisational heritage show that far from being the composite state that our freedom fighters and founding fathers envisaged, we do in fact constitute two separate nations in which the minority is subordinated to the majority and survives at the sweet will of, and on the conditions imposed by, the majoritarian state, in keeping with Golwalkar's injunction that Muslims "can have no place in the national life unless they abandon their differences, adopt the religion, culture and language of the nation and completely merge themselves in the National Race".

After all, the expression 'two nations' was first coined by neither Allama Iqbal nor Rahmat Ali nor Mohammed Ali Jinnah but by none other than Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who then went on to state infamously in Nagpur on August 15th, 1943 that he entirely agreed with Jinnah that India comprised two nations and not one. So, Modi's drive to Hindutva is fulfilling not only Jinnah's dream but also those of his mentors—Savarkar and Golwalkar.

It is this that explains Salman Khurshid's pressing need to answer his own question: "What am I as a Muslim?" He sees his book, *Visible Muslim, Invisible Citizen: Understanding Islam in Indian Democracy* (Rupa; 320 pages; Rs495) as a companion volume to Shashi Tharoor's *Why I am a Hindu.* Neither title would have found any traction in the first six decades of our Independence. So, what has changed in the country to render Tharoor's work a best-seller and Khurshid's will also doubtless follow? Well, principally because the Hindutva movement launched in 1990 by Advani's Rath Yatra has gathered so much momentum that Modi's Opposition flinches from even using the word 'secularism' and desperately searches for synonyms like 'pluralism' to mean the same thing. The irony is that this amounts to 'appeasement' of the Hindutvists. Instead of boldly confronting them on the secular ground, secularists are now trying to show that non-BJP/RSS Hindus are more Hindu than BJP/RSS Hindus. That is to concede half the battle before it even begins. For Indian secularism has never been anti any religion—*sarva dharm sambhaav*. It has always been a matter of respecting the right of others to hold beliefs that you yourself may not hold and having a special care for the minority communities to ensure their protection because while all forms of communalism are to be combated, given the imbalance of numbers in our country, "majority communalism is worse than minority communalism", as Nehru unabashedly affirmed at the start of our life as an independent nation.

KHURSHID'S MAGISTERIAL SURVEY OF THE CONDITION OF HIS COMMUNITY REVEALS WITH TELLING EFFECT THE TRAVAILS THAT CONFRONT INDIA'S MINORITY MUSLIM COMMUNITY

SAURABH SINGH

Khurshid's magisterial survey of the condition of his community seven decades after our Constitution guaranteed equality of status to all communities reveals with telling effect the vicissitudes and travails that confront India's minority Muslim community, aggravated by India's current descent into a majoritarian state. These are the problems of citizenship, refracted through the prism of issues related to *identity*, *dignity* and *security* that continue to plague the community.

Equal citizenship is founded on the imperative of 'unity in diversity', on recognising that the alternative of 'unity through uniformity' will lead only to the disintegration of India. While Hindutva grants the right to be different to most ethnicities, it demands to know why Muslims should look differently, talk differently, dress differently, eat differently, greet each other differently, and subscribe to a different code of personal law instead of conforming to what they claim as the 'national' ethos, the 'national' norm. Thus, instead of a 'cooperative democracy that preserves self-esteem and identity essentials for all citizens', Khurshid convincingly demonstrates that both the public and political space for Muslims is 'shrinking' as is the 'intel-

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WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

lectual and attitudinal space' available to the community. Among the most useful archival material he has retrieved is the lively debate in the columns of *The Indian Express* (March, 2018) that followed upon Ramachandra Guha's curious argument that Muslims would be well advised to do away with the burkha and the skull cap as outward symbols of the religion to which they belong.

To push this agenda, salience is being deliberately and viciously teased out between Muslims and Pakistan. Repeatedly, the community is being put to more and more absurd 'loyalty tests', when 70 years ago they passed the biggest loyalty test of all by closing their ears to the siren call of 'Islam in danger' and refusing to go to Pakistan. 'Why,' asks Khurshid, should today's Indian Muslim 'have to answer for Partition and be asked to go to Pakistan?' For those who do not know or choose to ignore the contribution of the community to our Freedom Movement, Khurshid painstakingly lists them out; to those who choose to ask what the Indian Muslim has done to build the modern nationhood of independent India, Khurshid provides a compendium of distinguished Indian Muslims and their contribution to different walks of life. Perhaps the greatest of these contributions has been to promote through poetry, music, literature and the arts—all copiously quoted—the Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* that has made India the envy of other nations coping with diversity, a composite culture that is now, most regrettably, being challenged and repudiated.

This repudiation of a shared heritage opens the road to an assault on the dignity of our fellow Muslim citizens. Perverted stereotypes are trotted out of the Muslim as a hidebound reactionary, as an oppressor of women, as a potential or actual terrorist. Khurshid patiently puts all this in perspective, citing chapter and verse from not just the holy texts of Islam but from all the great literary sources and key Muslim leaders, past and present, that testify to the high respect in which they have traditionally exalted beliefs other than their own. He draws pointed attention to the Islamic rendition of secularism in classical Arabic: '*lakum dinakum waliya din*': 'To you your religion, to me mine,' adding, 'Meaningful co-existence is part of the idea of India as much as of Islam.'

He gives detailed jurisprudential analyses of key issues relating to Muslim practices—triple talaq, the uniform civil code, Shah Bano and Shayara Bano—in interpreting matters of faith in the light of the judicial injunction to keep in mind 'constitutional morality'. Drawing attention to progressive attempts within the Muslim community to undertake social reform and keep at bay illiterate mullahs and their unwarranted fatwas, he deplores, however, the BJP's attempts to 'use gender injustice to inflict injustice on the Muslim'. Pointing out that 'the identity of individuals and groups have elements of faith as well as social norms,' he underlines that 'when identity is attacked in its entirety, there is no occasion to pick and choose between different aspects.'

KHURSHID DRAWS POINTED ATTENTION TO THE ISLAMIC RENDITION OF SECULARISM IN CLASSICAL ARABIC: '*LAKUM DINAKUM WALIYA DIN*': 'TO YOU YOUR RELIGION, TO ME MINE'

As for the security of the community, their concern began with Advani's 'chariot of fire'—his Rath Yatra of 1990 that left burnt homes and dead bodies in its wake. The demons that the Rath Yatra unleashed led to the horror of the demolition of the Babri Masjid (in the august presence of the entire leadership of the sangh parivar bar Vajpayee). The riots that followed, particularly in Mumbai, broke what residual faith the community had comforted itself with in regard to the machinery of the State providing personal security to innocent Indian Muslims. After 2014, 'a pervasive sense of fear has become the hallmark of the BJP government...most intense among Muslims'. This haunting sense of insecurity has been intensified step by step through 'love jihad', 'ghar wapasi' and, above all, the 'gau rakshak' movement that has effectively legitimised vicious attacks by Hindutva vigilantes on innocent, unarmed Muslims (and dalits) virtually unrestrained by their leadership. Ten gruesome incidents of lynching, ranging from Mohammad Akhlaque to Akbar Khan of Alwar, are summarised in the book.

Repeated unconvincingly explained 'encounters', targeting young Muslims in the name of fighting 'terrorism', including the bizarre Batla House encounter of September 2008, are another source of physical insecurity. Instead of reassuring the community that they are not being targeted, a culture of encouraging people 'to lend interpretations that suit their own prejudices' is promoted by the saffron establishment. Khurshid chillingly provides (from an answer given to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha) the cold brutal statistics of the wide spread of communal violence, deaths and injuries in the period 2014-17. It is testimony to the consequences of demonising the 'Other' which is the fundamental *raison d'etre* of a majoritarian state.

What is the answer to this dreadful state of affairs? Of course, 'this is not and must not be a battle for Muslims alone, but also a battle within Hindu society' for 'ultimately, the battle against bigotry and communalism will be fought by the majority of Hindus whose commitment to the idea of India ensures that we remain a secular country'. It is also for the Muslims themselves to rid their community of regressive social practices and work towards the educational, social and economic emancipation of their co-religionists. ■

Mani Shankar Aiyar is a former Union Minister

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Facing up to the Forbidden

The novelist Nemat Sadat tells **Bhavya Dore** about the travails of coming out as a gay man in Afghanistan

A DAY AFTER BARACK Obama won the presidential nomination for the Democratic party, Nemat Sadat cracked open his laptop and sat down to write a novel. In a few weeks he wrote 45,000 words. It was August 2008, roughly a year before he came out to his family, about six years after he came out to himself. Watching a black man rise to power was catalytic. "Somehow I got inspired by him," says Afghanistan-born, Washington-based Sadat, 40, while on a visit to India. "He was the first biracial person to win the nomination for a major political party in the US. I thought if he can do that, then I can certainly write a novel."

That novel, *The Carpet Weaver* (Viking; 304 pages; Rs599), was launched in Delhi recently, 11 years and hundreds of rejections since it was begun in 2008. Sadat's debut novel starts in 1977, centres on a teenaged Kanishka Nurzada and his family in a lively, less constricted Kabul. It plots Kanishka's adolescence, his attraction to his friend Maihan and their beleaguered teenage romance against the backdrop of intensifying socio-political tumult in Afghanistan. Eventually, the family is forced to leave the country, even as Kanishka nurtures hopes for a reunion some distant day in some distant land with his first boyhood love.

"The novel is not just about one thing but about multiple things. It's a coming-of-age story or a *bildungsroman*, and a *kunstlerroman* as it is the coming of age of an artist, the carpet weaver," says Sadat. "It's also about a clash of cultures because the character has multiple identities, and about those clashing identities, which is similar to my life with my clashing identities."

The lubricating power of the novel is Kanishka's quest for both familial acceptance and romantic love. Set in a conservative society where homophobia isn't just socially sanctioned, but practically state policy, since it invites the death penalty, the frisson of the forbidden animates the relationship. 'The one thing I know is that Allah never forgives sodomy,' says Zaki jaan, Kanishka's godfather in the novel's opening line. 'Kuni', as gay men are disparagingly referred to, 'deserve hell' another character says in an anonymous note to Kanishka.

The seeds of the novel emerged from Sadat's own thwarted romances. "I haven't shared this before publicly or privately, and that is, the history of unrequited love in my own life. Being rejected time and again by everybody I wanted to pursue a relationship with," says Sadat.

> **I felt like a fish out of water in the LGBT community which is predominantly dictated by gay White men from affluent households"**
>
> **NEMAT SADAT**

There are easy parallels between Sadat's life and Kanishka's: the Afghan roots, taking refuge in the US, Kanishka's sister Benafsha who was "100 per cent inspired" by his own, identity crises. And for both, there were few templates of romantic love to aspire to. 'All the romances in the canon of Afghan literature...involved heterosexual couples,' Kanishka thinks to himself.

For Sadat, as a gay person of colour in the US, there was little by way of reference points in American popular culture. "I felt like a fish out of water in the LGBT community which is predominantly dictated by gay White men from affluent households," he says. "That was a different world. For me the literature they were putting out didn't resemble me." Except oddly enough, one work: *Brokeback Mountain*, a tragic romance between two White cowboys. "Them living a double life; being married and pursuing romance—it was the kind of double life I was living," he says. "I wasn't lucky to have this romance but I was pretending to pursue women in order for people to stop questioning my identity."

Sadat, a journalist and activist, grew up in California (he left Afghanistan as an infant) and did not know personally the Kabul he captures, whether the art of carpet weaving or the sweaty hammams. The portrait was drawn up from conversations with relatives and family who lived through that period.

The novel's title refers to Kanishka, the son of a carpet salesman who despite his father's exhortations to the contrary nurses an artistic passion for carpet

SAURABH SINGH

weaving. As the novel proceeds, carpets eventually become magical vehicles of the family's escape; one among other ironic twists that populate the narrative. Threaded through is the sub-plot of his father's Maoist links, an increasing liability as China distances itself from the local communist networks. The family is forced to flee to Pakistan following an attempted coup and later once the Soviet invasion plunges Kabul into further political turmoil.

For most of the world, the best-known work of Afghan English literature has been Khaled Hosseini's *Kite Runner*, which also focused on a young boy in 1970s Afghanistan. Sadat is full of warm praise for Hosseini, whose own literary stardom offered hope for writers like himself, but he was conscious of avoiding the image of Afghanistan as a war-wracked country of barbaric people.

"I have a problem with writers who focus on the clichés and tropes," says Sadat, who counts James Baldwin, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga among the writers he admires. "Afghan literature in the US shows women as subservient and victims of abuse. Men are fundamentalists. There is hatred towards infidels. Of course, that's true, but if all the books are like that, then that's a problem. I do show some of that too. But I show the good, bad and ugly. I show the nuanced side of Afghanistan."

There are the baroque descriptions of foods and festivals, police violence and social stigmas. But also scenes of alcohol induced encounters, sexual advances made by women, and the playful marital dynamic between Kanishka's parents. "I feel that in order to tell a bigger truth you need to challenge assumptions and propaganda," he says. "If I do this cliché maybe it will connect with an editor, but do I want to sell out? Or do I want to regret doing that later on?"

Editors were sceptical about the work, he claims. One hoped it could have been more in the vein of *Call Me By Your Name*, the André Aciman novel featuring a summer romance between two young men in Italy.

It took several years and 450 rejections from literary agents before this novel found its way to the Indian agent Kanishka Gupta on Sadat's 451st attempt. "I thought I had broken a record," he says. But he found someone else had 471.

Neither the literary road nor the personal journey was ever simple. Sadat spent a year in Kabul in 2012, first as a development consultant, later as an assistant professor at the American University, where he galvanised a nascent queer rights movement. That propelled him into the cross-hairs of the administration and forced him to leave the country, where homosexuality still remains a capital offence. Shortly after, in August 2013, he came out publicly in a post on Facebook, an act of snapping open the closet door that unleashed a firestorm both in Afghanistan and the diaspora community in America. He received death threats, and his father even asked him to tell the media it had all been a joke. "Coming out for most people is the end of internal turmoil and then they are done," he says. "For me, I ended an internal war only to start an interpersonal and societal level war."

But things have since settled, and living publicly as a gay man has been worthwhile, he says. Now he is working on his memoir, and a second novel, whilst continuing to support his causes as an activist. His activism also informed this novel, both in its content and its intent. "Throughout history you see how novels have acted as an agent for social change," he says. "If I want to be accepted, if I want to help people like me, I thought I can write this incredible novel... Maybe this book can do what *Brokeback* did in terms of changing attitudes of mainstream heterosexuals." ■

Subversive Truth

A Bengali novelist reimagines dissent

By Rohit Chakraborty

THIS COULD HAVE BECOME RAMAYAN CHAMAR'S TALE: TWO ANTI-NOVELS
Subimal Misra, translated from Bengali by V Ramaswamy

Harper Perennial
296 Pages | Rs 399

VICTORIAN NOVELISTS HAVE always taken the idea of the novel quite literally: a form that invites reappraisal and transformation. Charles Dickens was constantly changing his mind as he was writing and simultaneously publishing sections from *Oliver Twist* in *Bentley's Miscellany*. In 'When Colour is a Warning Sign', the second 'anti-novel' collected in Subimal Misra's *This Could Have Been Ramayan Chamar's Tale*, Nirmal Gupta, publisher of *Eikhon*, a Calcuttan little magazine, expresses his own ambiguity towards Misra's work: 'it is quite difficult to suddenly come to any conclusions regarding you [...] In your writing there are no such things as sequential events, it appears outwardly to be only floating images [...] the question of outright rejection does not arise because some aspect or another haunts me.'

V Ramaswamy, who has produced a stupendous translation of Misra's 'anti-novels', places the 'anti-establishment' author at the tail end of the Hungryalist Movement and ventures farther in history to cite Misra's forebears: Jagadish Gupta, Manik Bandopadhyay, Kamal Kumar Gupta, and Amiya Bhushan Majumdar, who were 'parallel' to writers canonised in Bengali literature, like Tagore. By terming Misra as antithetical to something, as opposed to being 'parallel' to it, both Ramaswamy and Misra suggest a confrontation and a conflict. Janam Mukherjee's foreword to the collected anti-novels asserts: '[Misra's] writings [continue] to push at the boundaries of the middle-class bourgeois mores, structured towards a pernicious and predatory socio-political order.'

In the eponymous first anti-novel, the narrative of Ramayan Chamar, a Bihari Dalit working at a tea plantation in North Bengal, forced into a 'system akin to slavery', and murdered early, is one filigreed with images surfeit in babudom and a 'delusion of radical leftism'.

In the seams of Misra's own narrative jumps, the deep gulfs of Bengali livelihoods — 'pimp and gentleman, professor and idiot, babu and dalit' — are laid bare. The word, 'scissors', appear throughout the text not only to signify the layered divisions within and beyond it, but to symbolise separatist ambitions of the disenfranchised that interrupt the narrative: 'We, the poor people, offspring of the disfavoured queen's womb—the country's become independent while we're left to forage cow-dung'.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

Although Misra sets a manifesto for the Anti-Novel in a preamble subtitled 'Subimal versus Subimal', in which he decries 'literature [that] begins to speak in a single mould and tune', his ideology is perhaps more ably embodied in the second anti-novel where he expresses a desire for 'many-more-things' in a story. The reader, who desires to 'become one with the times' seeks to find truth in these many-more-things that only the novelistic form can convey. A novelist's duty is to be a trustworthy exhibitor whose text is 'simultaneously story, history, proclamation and personal diary'. Misra's text is quite superficially just that: an amalgamation of newspaper clippings, soliloquies, and vignettes arranged in a postmodernist mosaic.

'When any stationary or moving thing is presented directly,' Misra claims, 'its actual visage cannot be captured.' Misra's anti-novels are as much a reinvention of the novel, that has been congealed and commodified into a methodised, stationary, inert 'cultural object', as a critique of the *bhadrolok*, the bourgeoisie, whose totalitarian impulses have alienated and antagonised the rest in Bengal. Much like Nirmal Gupta, I too have found it difficult to extract something absolute from reading Misra, constantly changing my mind about how I feel about his prose. But, I have come to this realisation: as an anti-establishment writer, more fertile in Bengali little magazines than the mainstream (as this very translation)—a nod perhaps to his Hungryalist forbears—Misra's anti-novels might be novels after all: changing our minds about each of the many-more-things through a reappraisal of form and substance. ■

THE BOOK OF LOVE STORIES
Ekarat

Speaking Tiger
173 Pages | Rs 250

Passion Plays

Love is a dish best served cold

By Palash Krishna Mehrotra

THE PRESENCE OF death looms large in this voice-driven collection of thorny love stories, written under the pseudonym, Ekarat. Ekarat, the author bio tells us, 'is an alter ego with a million stories to tell.' It appears that a Banksy-like author has debuted in the world of Indian short fiction.

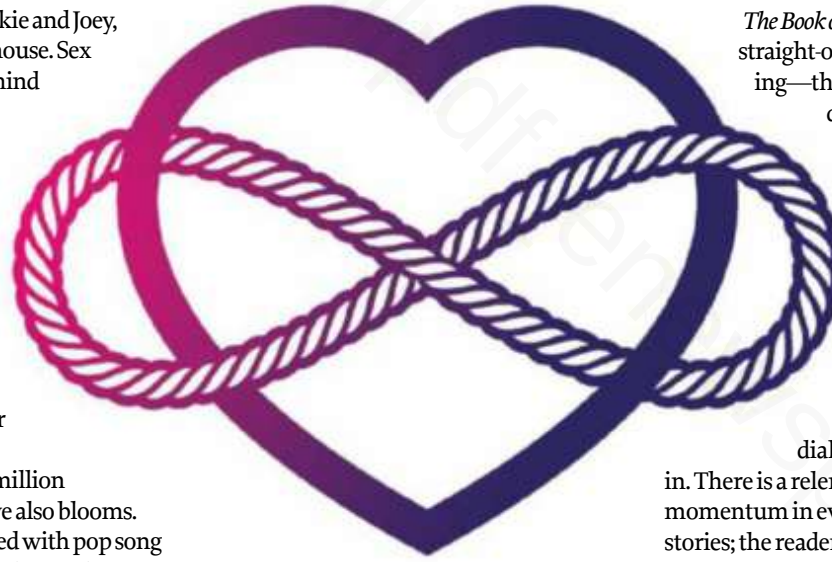
The narrator of the first story reveals more about Ekarat: 'I am a humble editor of a travel magazine and a struggling writer after dusk. I live in a neat bachelor pad in south Delhi, with a terrace built for evening dos, and I have the most awesome housemaid in the world. Two dogs, Blackie and Joey, guard the gate of my house. Sex is plentiful.' Keep in mind though, that this is a book of fiction.

In these gripping tales, love turns cold, love turns sour, love kills, and yet Ekarat, or rather his characters, continue to believe in the redemptive power of an emotion, which provides fodder for a million pop songs. Indeed, love also blooms. The stories come tinged with pop song corniness, and in a good way. The story titles are like names of songs: 'Perizaad's Lover', 'Love Has Come to Town, 'Baby Did a Bad Bad Thing.'

Not a trace of cynicism and yet darkness lurks at every corner; the pursuit of love is an essential part of self-knowledge and self-discovery; the road forward lies not in sitting in paralytic judgement over others but in the acts of forgiving and accepting, or simply moving on.

Ekarat takes as his starting point a truth that is contested in contemporary times, that human beings are flawed and messy creatures, especially in love: 'By accepting her past, what great favours had I done her. And who the hell was I to *accept* her? I had merely been a bystander in her narrative. She had built and broken her life, and built it again.'

In the stories here, the terminally-ill owner of an FM radio station tries to find a lover from his past; a famous editor falls in love with a junior colleague; two seven-year-olds bicker over a marriage proposal; two 12-year-olds, trying out a kiss for the first time, get their braces entangled; an army cantonment romance falls prey to the Hindu-Muslim divide; an Indian student in Brussels strikes up an unlikely virtual friendship with an Indian girl in America: 'Then I find out that she's not just pro-American but right-wing, which I have a very hard time connecting with.'



In a story inspired by Robert Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*, adulterous Perizaad doesn't protest when her lover 'tied her hair around her neck and gently pulled' with murderous intent. She gently encourages him instead: '"Please... do it," she completed her death sentence.'

The stories have a strong sense of place. Delhi is as much of a protagonist, from Amar Colony digs, a flat in Munirka DDA, a Saket coffee shop, an unknown Gurgaon bar, to a Chattarpur farmhouse, a Jorbagh bungalow and the India Habitat Centre.

The Book of Love is a triumph of straight-on infectious storytelling—the writing is low on description, shorn of metaphor and literary pretension. It signals the arrival of a bold new voice, an outsider artist banging on the closed doors of Indian writing in English.

The quick fire dialogue draws the reader in. There is a relentless raging momentum in even the shortest of stories; the reader is carried along in its sweeping arc. Ekarat's narrative fluency though at times suffers from a breathlessness that could have benefited from editorial temperance. Resorting to cliché, then calling out oneself for doing so, does not absolve the author of the crime of using the cliché in the first place: 'It might seem like a cliché that Europe would be a vacation and Africa a punishment...' and later, 'he'd lost weight, had a shaggy beard and smelled like a sewer. He was a walking, fumbling cliché of a wreckage.' ■

Opium for the Masses

The relationship between economic growth and religious belief

THE THIRTY YEARS' War (1618-1648) was probably one of the most destructive episodes in history. Millions perished and the destruction witnessed during that time was unprecedented. The long-run results were salubrious. The Peace of Westphalia led to the birth of the modern system of nation states. More importantly, it led to the ushering in of extensive religious freedom in Europe. Secularism—the separation of the state and the church—was a decisive outcome.

The German sociologist Max Weber interpreted these events as the root of Capitalism. In Weber's analysis, Protestantism birthed Capitalism through thrift and frugality. For long the staple of hand-waving arguments about economic development, progress and the decline of religion, these ideas are now part and parcel of economic studies that parse cause and effect, layer by layer. Rachel McCleary and Robert Barro's **The Wealth of Religions: The Political Economy of Believing and Belonging** (Princeton University Press; 216 pages; Rs 1,615) is a summation of the major results in the area in recent years.

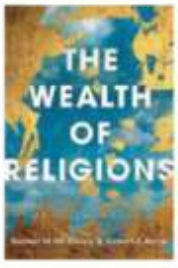
What McCleary and Barro look at carefully is the two-way relationship between economic growth and religious belief. Does economic growth lead to a progressive reduction in religiosity? And what effect does religious belief have on economic growth?

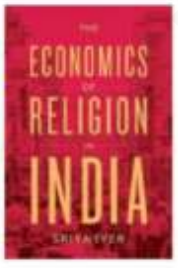
The scholars note, 'Weber thought that Protestantism was important in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution...because it provided moral discipline and a psychological compulsion to work hard.' In less than a century, this 'moral discipline' had transformed into the modern notion of rational choice for allocating time for work and leisure. They note, 'Our central finding is that the effect of religiosity on economic growth involves a positive response to believing relative to belonging (attending). We conjecture that religious beliefs stimulate growth because they help to sustain aspects of individual behaviour—honesty, thrift, work ethic—that enhance productivity.'

It is interesting to note that nearly 115 years after *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* growth theorists dwell on the theme of thrift and hard work, never mind that the theory of economic growth is premised on rational behaviour and has virtually no room for religious ideas. Are rational mechanisms too arid for the complex choices made by human beings under a variety of constraints, ones that defy even the most arcane production functions?

Given this two-sided relationship between religion and economic growth, it is interesting to conjecture about modern Indian history from this perspective. Data shows that most Indians are believers in some faith or the other. A 2015 Pew Research report showed that 86 per cent of those surveyed said religion was very important to them personally. Figures like this one are subject to fluctuations but the trend is clear: Indians remain a deeply religious people.

This bit of data throws a spanner in the Weberian secularisation thesis that McCleary and Barro used to describe the demand for religious services. Thus India seems to be an outlier with respect to secularisation. There is plenty of data to sketch a history based on such a conjecture. Data gathered by political scientists Steven Wilkinson and Ashutosh Varshney, when supplemented with other sources, shows two trends. One, from 1950 until 1983 roughly, the number of riots per year remained below 50. The number peaked at around 100 per year in 1990 and then subsided to their historical average in the 1990s. The 2002 Gujarat riots broke this trend dramatically and thereafter the trend subsided. Two, the intensity of riots was the highest in 1968-69, late 1970s and 1992—the year Babri Masjid was demolished. 2002 was considerably lower and nowhere near the historic triple peaks (1968-69, late 1970s and 1992).

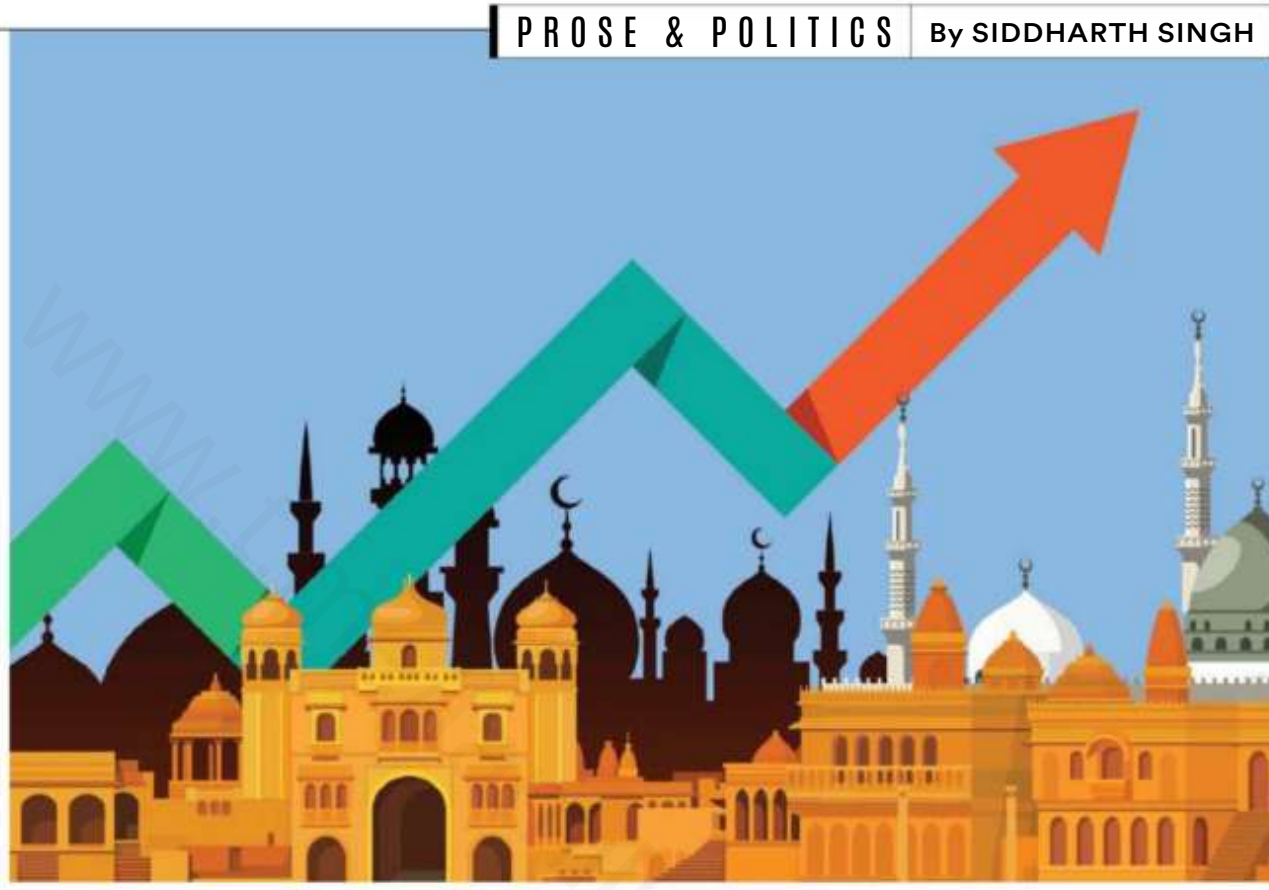




If anything, the empirical puzzle is why does India defy the European pattern of economic development and secularisation? Why is intense religiosity a product of those years when the country witnessed an economic boom?

These trends, especially the number of riots per year, point towards the fact that inter-religious violence, strongly held religious beliefs, correlate to an extent with the period when economic growth took off after successive reforms in the 1980s and 1990s.

These and other aspects of religion in India have been explored by Sriya Iyer, a Cambridge University economist, in her book **The Economics of Religion in India** (Harvard University



SAURABH SINGH

Press; 304 pages; Rs 3,999). Iyer notes, 'In general, riots are positively correlated with the percentage of Muslim population and urban inequality, and negatively correlated with economic growth.' In fact, Iyer carried out an econometric exercise where she tried to look at the effect of riots, among a number of other variables, on economic growth. The result showed a very small effect that riots have on growth: an extra riot leads to a 0.027 per cent decline in economic growth.

This is but to be expected. Religious riots are just a subset of the larger issue of how economic growth affects religious attitudes. The Indian case defies the Weberian claim (not to speak of the Freudian and Marxian ones) that economic development should lead to a decline in religious belief. India, if anything, shows a reverse trend: It was during a period of relative economic stagnation—the time of the so-called 'Hindu rate of growth' when the country averaged 3.5 per cent growth from 1950 to 1980—that Indians were less favourably inclined towards religion. Contemporary historians of Leftist and liberal persuasion are quick to latch on to the idea that this state of affairs was due to the presence of a 'strong secular state' that did not allow religion to 'get out of hand'. It may be too speculative but it is worth noting that many such secular-minded economists also look with alarm at the spurt of high growth seen in India in recent decades, though that concern is couched in terms of the dangers posed by rising inequality.

The truth, however, may be considerably more complicated. Even if one accepts the claim that India was a strongly secular state in 1950s, it is not hard to see how that situation unravelled. The key determinant here is secularisation—or progressive withdrawal of religion from day-to-day affairs—and not secularism, which was nothing more than a top-down emphasis on keeping religious conflict at bay. The process of economic development, one that is sufficiently deep, never really occurred across India during the so-called secular years. It was an enclave-type economic development, restricted to certain sectors and specific geographic locales. The vast Indian countryside remained more or less immune to this mechanism.

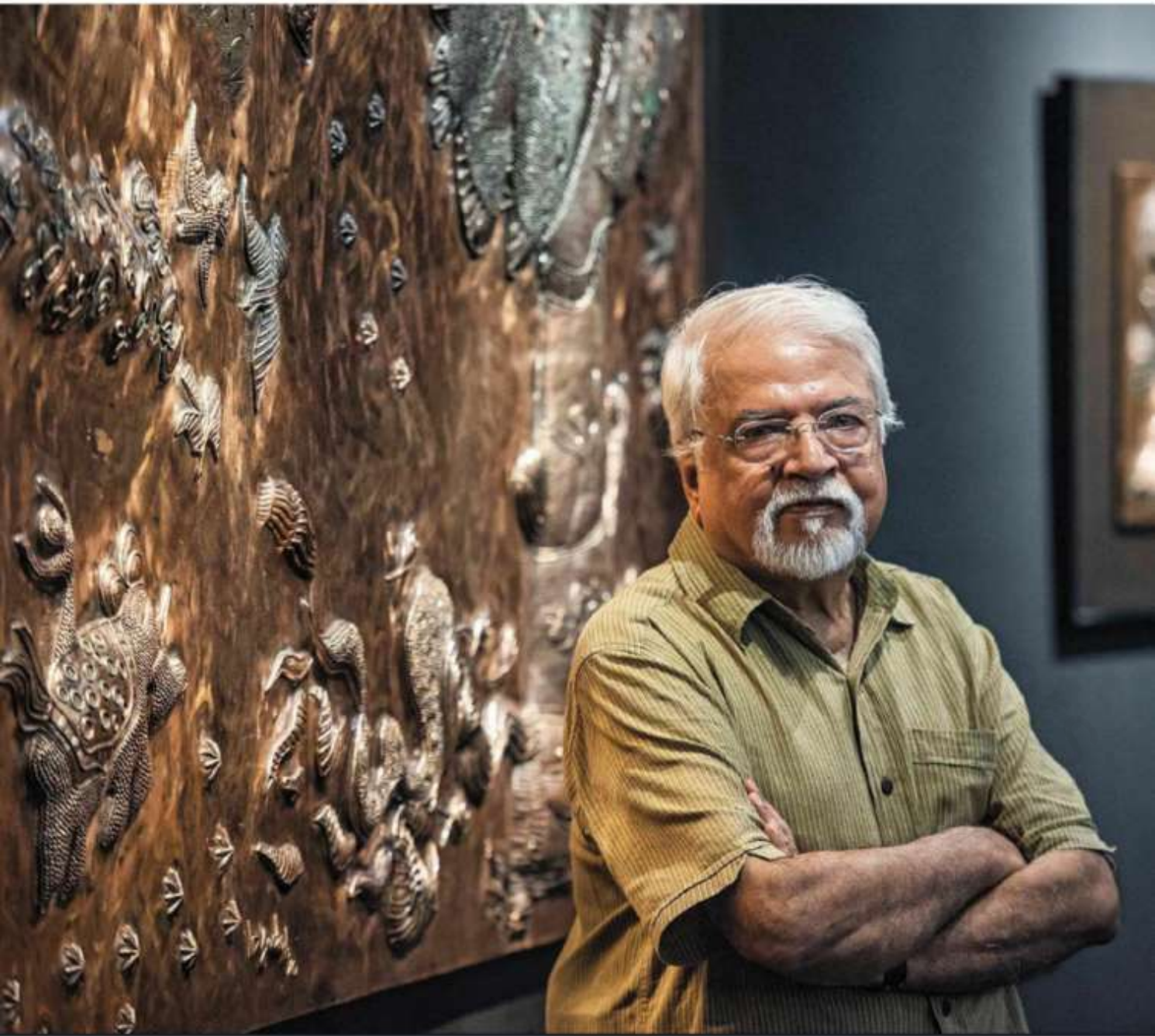
If anything, the empirical puzzle is why does India defy the European pattern of economic development and secularisation? Why is intense religiosity a product of those years when the country witnessed an economic boom? At one level there may be more than mere economic cause-and-effect at work, necessitating careful work by specialists in comparative religious studies. At another level, the usual economic problems, lags in cause and effect, missing variables, measurement issues and the like may be at work. It is worth noting that economic studies of religion on India are sparse to the point of being non-existent. Finally, it may be the case that at the empirical level, the relationship may not be stable. For example, during 2007-2013, when the United Progressive Alliance Government executed a 'socialist turn' in economic policymaking, religiosity slowly began ratcheting up. This was a complex interplay between economic and political factors. It will be interesting to speculate about the situation now when a similar economic pivot is on. The difference is that the India of today is suffused extensively with religious belief. ■

ART

CRAFTING THE COVENANT

SG Vasudev's retrospective reveals the joyous communion of man, woman and nature

By Shikha Kumar



IN 1964, A YOUNG student from the Government College of Art, Madras, had a show at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai. He didn't sell anything. Today, the artist SG Vasudev, is showing over 300 works at the National Gallery of Modern Art in the city. It's a retrospective quite unlike most others—spread across five floors of the gallery, and chronicling over five decades of his life as a leading contemporary modernist in India.

"Looking at some of the works from the '60s, I can hardly believe that they're my paintings. It's taking me back to those times and my thoughts... I wonder what was on my mind when I was doing these works," says Vasudev, when I meet him hours before the show opens to the public. Titled *Inner Resonance—A Return to Sama*, the retrospective comes to Mumbai after two iterations, in Bengaluru in September last year, and Chennai earlier this year. It has been curated by art critic and editor Sadanand Menon, who has followed the artist's work since the '60s.

Walking the circular space of the gallery, you encounter works across mediums—stunning oils on canvas, and pencil on paper. Some of the themes are also rendered on large tapestries, and copper reliefs, with entire floors dedicated to these mediums. This blurring of lines between art and craft is what Vasudev is masterful at—an ability he credits to his early days spent in Chennai.

"In college, our principal (KCS Paniker), encouraged us to work in different sections. So even though I studied painting, I learned batik and ceramics. That's how my respect for craft began," he says, adding, "Is Mahabalipuram built by artists or craftsmen? There really is a very thin line." In fact, this fusing of arts and crafts is what also fomented the formation of Cholamandal Artists Village in Chennai in 1966.

> "EVEN THOUGH I STUDIED PAINTING, I LEARNED BATIK AND CERAMICS. THAT'S HOW MY RESPECT FOR CRAFT BEGAN. IS MAHABALIPURAM BUILT BY ARTISTS OR CRAFTSMEN? IT IS A THIN LINE" **SG Vasudev**

This artists' commune, located in the then-rural hinterlands of the city, went on to establish itself as an iconic space for creative expression at a time when radical movements were on the rise, and universities across the country were in a state of turmoil. Cholamandal sowed the seeds for what we know as the Madras Art Movement today. Vasudev, who co-founded the commune, lived and worked there for over two decades.

"When we were about to finish college, Paniker asked us what we were going to do next. Many of us said we'll take up jobs. He was against this, and said he had seen many brilliant students vanish from the arts scene. He recommended that we experiment with crafts and try and make a living," recalls Vasudev, adding that he and other artists created batik works and a year later, sold most of them at an exhibition.

Vasudev's art through the decades has seen him explore various themes, all are on display at the retrospective such as—*Maithuna (Act of Love)*, *Vriksha, Tree of Life & Death* and *Rhapsody*. Vriksha, in fact, has been a steady leitmotif in his works. We see its evolution from the '60s with elements of nature like birds and animals, to *Earthscapes* in the '90s, when the paintings become heavy with the weight of environmental degradation.

In 1967, at an exhibition he was having at Dharwad, Vasudev met renowned Kannada poet DR Bendre. A literary critic, who had covered Bendre's work extensively, explained his poetry to Vasudev. "One poem in particular, called *Kalpa Vriksha Vrindavana* in Kannada, really stayed with me. I used it to do a series of paintings. In Cholamadal too, the artist lived amidst nature. "It was next to the sea and there were lots of old tamarind trees in the compound. That influence became very strong in my work," he says.

Vasudev says that he had never heard of the Tree of Life, until a friend saw the tree element in his works at a Delhi exhibition, and pointed out what it was. He went on to read about its significance in different religions and it became a dominant theme through the years. In 1988, the artist lost his wife and fellow artist Arnawaz to cancer, and

moved to Bengaluru from Cholamandal. While Vasudev had grown up in Bengaluru—he lived there until he went to art school—moving back came with its own set of challenges. "In Chennai, 99 per cent of the artists came from the same school, and had similar philosophies and politics. In Bangalore, they were from all over—Baroda, Santiniketan, Delhi—and they came with different experiences."

The late Girish Karnad had made a documentary on Arnawaz's life after her death. He noted that in her paintings, even through the period she had cancer, she didn't dwell on death or compulsion. "Whereas this could be seen in my work... of course, at the time I didn't know I was painting that. I call some of the paintings from that period *Tree of Life & Death*."

Karnad was a close friend, and opened up a world of associations for Vasudev. He first met him while in college—Karnad had come to Chennai from Oxford and would continue to visit Cholamandal over the years. Through him, Vasudev was introduced to prolific Kannada writers like AK Ramanujan, UR Anathamurthy and K Shivaram Karanth.

"I miss him a lot," says Vasudev of Karnad, "When *Tughlaq* was made in English by Alyque Padamsee, I watched it with him in Bombay. He was like family. If he was alive and in good health, he would've come for this show." Karnad inaugurated the Bengaluru retrospective last year.

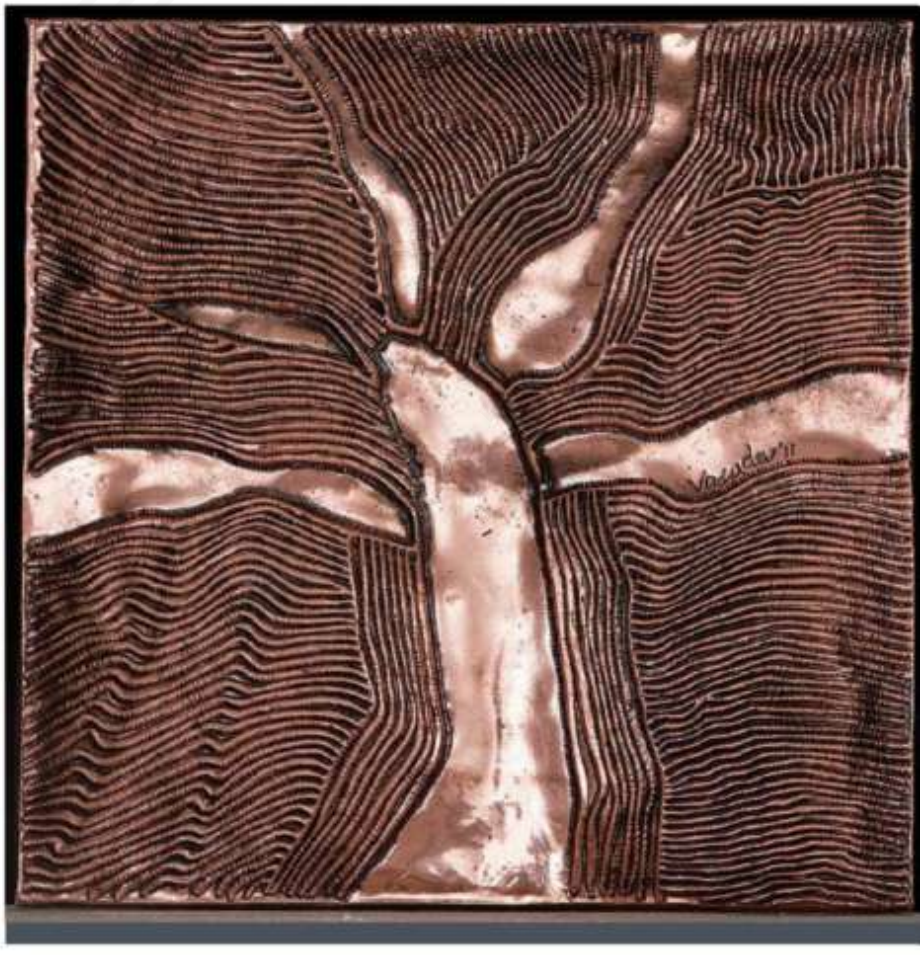
This was also a time the artist dabbled in fields outside of art—he was the art director for *Samskara*, the film adaption of Ananthaurthy's novel, designed masks for Karnad's theatre production *Hayavadana* and sets for BV Karanth in Chennai. He also did drawings based on Ramanujan's poetry, and later did the cover designs for his books. "This retrospective is not just about my paintings, but also the confluence of my interests in theatre, music, dance, literature and poetry. I strongly believe that one should have a connection with other arts, and not compartmentalise, or confine themselves to just painting and sculptures."

Unlike artists who work in solitude, Vasudev thrives on collaboration. His intricate work on silk tapestries is the result of a 23-year-long association with master weaver K Subbarayulu, who he met through MF Husain at the latter's studio in Bengaluru. "Artists and craftsmen have to respect each other to have a successful collaboration. People often ask me if I have an ego problem as an artist. I don't. Only when you think, 'He can't create without me, or I can't without him,' does ego come in."

Vasudev's glinting copper relief work, on the topmost floor of the gallery, makes for a stunning departure from his portfolio of drawings and oil on canvas. In a work from the *Maithuna* series (1989), we see the joyous communion of man, woman and nature. The elements of nature come alive in a series of Tree of Life works from the '70s. The artist learned to work with sheet metal from Kuppuswamy, who made Tanjore plates, used in the doors of temples. "Working on copper is a very laborious process and it was important that I train somebody," he says, explaining how lacquer, copper sheets and different tools come together to make the embossed works.

A few years after he moved back to Bengaluru, Vasudev married journalist Ammu Joseph. Through her, he met other journalists, filmmakers and theatre professionals in the activism space, and this started to reflect in his work—earth scenes became shorn of their greenery. "I started thinking

RHAPSODY



Photos **MALLIKARJUN KATAKOL**

(LEFT) *EARTHSCAPE*; *VILLAGE SCENE*

more deeply about environment issues after meeting Ammu. That's when *Earthscapes* came about. There are some exciting works from the series that I could not display here. Each one depicts people burning trees, and themselves getting destroyed in the process."

His *Theatre of Life* series is a compelling metaphor for masked emotions. In a red-and-black silk tapestry work, we see a man with many faces. In another oil on canvas, the man reaches outside a frame to touch masks on a tree. These works were the result of observing the lives of people in a village. "Every day, by two in the afternoon I would see them sitting in front of a TV. I did a painting with a number of heads watching an idiot box. But then I realised I shouldn't blame them. We were like that too. Even news readers are all wearing masks... they're all similar in their presentations," he says.

Music has greatly influenced his art—his interests span from Carnatic music, and Hindustani musicians like Bhimsen Joshi and Mallikarjun Mansur to jazz and contemporary artistes. *Rhapsody* is the coming together of many of his past themes. He titled it while thinking about the music he was listening to while painting. "In Carnatic music, there's something called Ragam Tanam Pallavi. It's a process that also applies to my painting—you start with the white pigment (Ragam), once that dries you work with the colours (Tanam), and finally there's removal of the colours to show more of the white texture (Pallavi), and a story emerges," he says.

The Madras Art Movement remained on the fringes of mainstream Indian art—according to Vasudev, the focus was on cities like Baroda, Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata. "They never looked towards the South... nobody would bother about what you were doing in Chennai or Bangalore. Madras Art Movement was equivalent to the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay, but it hardly got any recognition." In addition, there were no art historians in Chennai at the time to document what was happening. A select few like Josef James and Geeta Doctor took an interest and chronicled the movement.

> "THIS RETROSPECTIVE IS NOT JUST ABOUT MY PAINTINGS, BUT ALSO THE CONFLUENCE OF MY INTERESTS IN THEATRE, MUSIC, DANCE AND POETRY" **SG Vasudev**

"Things are different today, though, with the media everywhere. You can be in Mysore, like NS Harsha and make it internationally. In Cholamandal, 45 artists have donated art works to create a museum, where people can learn more about the movement." Vasudev's efforts to make art more accessible—"people don't go to museums and galleries"—have led to initiatives like Art Park, held on the first Sunday of every month in Bengaluru. It's an informal space where people, young and old, can interact with artists, view or buy their works. Ananya Drishya is a similar monthly 'Meet the artist' event. He has also created a scholarship trust in Arnawaz's name to give financial assistance to young artists.

The 78-year-old, whose foray into art began with diagrams in zoology and botany, is brimming with new ideas after this retrospective. He keeps his drawing sheet with him wherever he goes. "It's not about money or success. It's the sheer work that I enjoy doing. If I stop that, then depression hits. My classmates in college, who had picked engineering and medicine, joked about my decision to go to art school. After 50 years, they now meet me and say, 'Vasu, you made the right decision.'" ■

SG Vasudev's retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai runs till August 11, 2019

The Cruelty of Images

Could the assault of self-same images of suffering make us immune to their potency?

By Somak Ghoshal

EARLIER THIS month, when 26-year-old Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter Valeria were laid to rest in a private ceremony in El Salvador, their deaths were mourned across the world. In the last week of June, their bodies had washed up on the banks of the Rio Grande, the river that separates Mexico from the US. The child's head was tucked under her father's T-shirt and her right arm was locked in an embrace around his neck for fear of being separated from him during their perilous crossing. They drowned trying to cross into the US in search of a better life.

Mexican photo-journalist Julia Le Duc captured their final moment in an unforgettable frame that gained wide currency on the internet in the days that followed. Suddenly, people and nations, who did and did not have any obvious stakes in the immigration crisis, were moved by the enormity of the moment they had witnessed. But even as the photograph gained momentum, commentators drew attention to the ethics of circulating such graphic images. And the name that came up frequently in these discussions was that of the American writer and cultural critic, Susan Sontag's.

One of the best-known theorists of photography, who was as concerned with the moral questions the medium threw up as its aesthetic challenges, Sontag became a household name thanks to the Met Gala earlier this year, which was inspired by the ideas in her classic essay *Notes on 'Camp'* (1964). In her writings on photography, she asked urgent and difficult questions, many of which remain pertinent to this day:

By making public the spectacle of such tragedies, do these photographs deprive the victims of the last vestiges of dignity? Or do such images serve a larger social and humanitarian purpose by arousing the viewers' collective concern? Most crucially, how are we, the onlookers, expected to process the message behind such horrific visuals, exposed as we are to a barrage of such imagery on social media every day?

While these questions have trailed the evolution of photography since its inception some two hundred years ago, definitive answers are yet to emerge. As recently as 2015, the photograph of the body of the three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, who was drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to cross into Europe, became a flashpoint of a global debate over the propriety of disseminating such images. However, long before the internet and social media turned the world into a global village, photographs have acted as powerful instruments of propaganda.

In 1858, Italian-born British photographer Felice Beato travelled to India to document the grisly aftermath of the revolt of 1857. Although several of his photographs were staged (Beato dug up the skulls of dead mutineers and arranged them strategically to heighten the effect of his compositions), he did manage to capture some chilling scenes of the hanging of the accused. These visuals were not only meant to act as deterrent against future rebellions, but also to boost the morale of the colonial government to tighten its administrative grip over the Empire.

The camera's potential would soon be harnessed in subversive ways as well. In 1876-78, British civil servant Willoughby Wallace Hooper chronicled the devastating famine that raged through the then Madras Province. When his photographs of shockingly emaciated and malnourished Indians, either dead or on the verge of death, made their way back into England, there was a public outcry over the success of the colonial government's ostensibly 'civilising mission' in the tropics. Hooper was also severely criticised for staying aloof on duty, instead of intervening and offering assistance to his desperate subjects.

In 1919, it was the turn of an Indian, called Narayan Vinayak Virkar, to use the camera's power to the advantage of his people. That year, after General Reginald Dyer and his men killed hundreds of innocent citizens by opening fire on them at Jallianwallah Bagh in Amritsar, Virkar decided to document the aftermath of the atrocity by photographing its survivors at the accursed site. He urged people who had lost friends and family to pose next to the now-famous wall, riddled with bullet holes, pointing at the spots they had lost their loved ones.

As art historians Nathaniel Gaskell and Diva Gujral have pointed out in a recent study, *Photography in India: A Visual History from the 1850s to the Present*, the medium, from its beginning, would thus act 'as cure and as poison', depending on the perspective of the viewer. Indeed, the practice of photo-journalism, which began to emerge around the Great War and matured on the heels of its successor, would draw extensively on photography's gift to act as a double-edged sword.

Born in 1933, Sontag grew up in the shadow of World War

AP

JULIA LE DUC CAPTURED THE FINAL MOMENT OF FATHER AND CHILD IN FRAME THAT GAINED WIDE CURRENCY ON THE INTERNET. SUDDENLY, PEOPLE AND NATIONS, WHO DID NOT HAVE ANY OBVIOUS STAKES IN THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS, WERE MOVED BY THE ENORMITY OF THE MOMENT THEY HAD WITNESSED

II, the Pearl Harbour attack, followed by the atomic bomb explosion on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the 1960s, as a supporter of the left, she deplored US brutalities in the Vietnam War, especially the use of napalm that caused mass casualties of civilians. She travelled to Sarajevo during the Bosnian war to witness the first genocide in Europe since World War II. So it's no surprise that her engagement with visual archives, especially with press photographs, runs through the gamut of her work.

Strikingly handsome, Sontag was also widely photographed during her lifetime—and even in her last days by her partner and photographer, Annie Leibovitz. She anticipated the camera's all-pervasive gaze as well as its ubiquity in public life, long before it became an essential feature of smart phones.

For Sontag, the camera was not only a tool for social and political change, but also an essential condition of modernity. 'It would not be wrong to speak of people having a compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing,' she believed. More than forty years ago when she wrote these words, humanity did not have cameras installed in handheld devices or a wide choice of social media platforms to share snapshots of their days, travels or meals on.

Deeply influenced by European avant-garde cinema, Sontag wielded the camera herself for several years, especially through the 1960s and '70s, when she made several experimental movies, none of which made a mark, either critically or commercially. In 1977, she published *On Photography*, the now-iconic collection of her essays on the subject, which continues to be studied as a foundation of photographic thought. In the last years of her life, she would finish *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), a companion volume, focusing exclusively on the depiction of suffering and mutilation in war photography.

Writing at a distance of nearly three decades, Sontag departed from some of her earlier formulations on photography, though her discomfort with images of tragedy remained unabated. Given her investment in conflict zones around the world, her dilemma is understandable.

For Sontag, war photography wasn't an archive of inert images that fed the news media. It was rather a 'quintessential modern experience', a service rendered by 'specialised tourists' known as photo-journalists. 'Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it,' she wrote. 'The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.'

Could the assault of self-same images of suffering, day after day, make us immune to their potency? 'Shock can become familiar,' Sontag conceded. 'Shock can wear off.' Yet, she added a proviso: 'representations of the Crucifixion do not become banal to believers, if they really are believers.' By that logic, the photograph of Alan Kurdi, or of Valeria and her father, cannot cease to affect true believers of human rights and dignity. ■

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Noel de Souza

'I got a few knocks and bruises but it was all worth it'

Tom Holland

FOR THE FIFTH time Spiderman is out to save the universe and the box office. Twenty-three-year-old Tom Holland plays Spiderman with great panache. How long can filmmakers ride the success of the franchise and how do they keep it fresh?

Why should the audience revisit Spiderman? What makes this one different from others?
I'm really eager to see if the audience will be prepared for what's in store for them, because the filmmakers have taken a big risk, it was hard to make, and my character has really been developed. The journey that Spiderman goes on emotionally and physically is really dramatic, he has matured. Also I had to perform some of the stunts, there is a sequence in which I don't wear a mask and I had to pole vault up a 30-foot bridge, I was running across poles and flipping off buildings, it was crazy and I got a few knocks and bruises but it was all worth it. It looks great.

Spiderman is of high school or college age. So I would like to ask you, what kind of student were you?
I was a good student in school. I had bad attendance because I was working all the time. I didn't fit in very well in school because I started working professionally when I was 11, so I grew up very quickly, and was surrounded by adults, and then when I went back to school I was like, 'Well, you are all a bunch of idiots.' I grew up real quickly, so I never really fitted in at school. But I did enjoy studying design technology, all of my mom's side of the family are carpenters, so I always enjoyed that. As a matter of fact, I went through a stage in my career where I must have gone to some 50 or 60 auditions and didn't get a single job, and then my mom sent me to Cardiff in Wales and I did this carpentry course, so I'm a qualified carpenter, because in England you need qualifications to work on a site. I loved doing that. But it's funny the course was for ex-soldiers and ex-prisoners. And they were all tough people who were turning their lives around and they were swapping stories and stuff like that, and every time I complained about something, they would say, "Okay, okay actor man". I also loved playing sports; I liked the camaraderie of that.

Now that you are a known name, do you think people treat you differently?
I haven't really noticed a difference, I've done very well in my career of only being in the spotlight when I need to be, I very rarely go to a premier of a film that I am not in. I very rarely go to high-profile parties.

Yes, but when you are in public. What is it like?
There are occasions when people get excited, they are fans of the movies and they love to meet us and that stuff, which is really sweet and really fun. But in my everyday life I have not noticed a difference.

Do you see yourself wanting to direct some day?
My brother and I are aspiring directors, and that is what I would ultimately like to do in this industry. I love acting and I enjoy it. I find the spotlight a little scary and a little daunting. I think being behind the camera will suit me the best in the long run. My brother Harry and I have written a short film, it's 12 pages long. It will be a ten-minute short. We wrote it in the pub, it's kind of like a dark comedy and I am very lucky to be able to send the script to people like Ron Howard and Kevin Feige and they give me notes. I will fund the film myself because I don't want to have to answer to a studio. If it's not very good we can just put it away and I don't have to get into trouble for it. Maybe in five years' time, I'll do a feature film. ■

RAJEEV MASAND

Family at Work

By the time you read this they might be heading back home to Mumbai, but for over a week the Bhatts have been breaking bread in Ooty. **Mahesh Bhatt**, **Soni Razdan**, **Alia Bhatt** and **Pooja Bhatt** were photographed together, but don't be mistaken—they weren't on a family holiday. Mahesh was shooting a schedule of *Sadak 2*, which stars both Pooja and Alia in key roles. Soni was accompanying Alia for the schedule, and elder sister **Shaheen** dropped in for a few days to hang with the family.

While Pooja will be paired opposite **Sanjay Dutt**, her co-star from the original 1991 *Sadak*, younger sister Alia will star with her *Kalank* colleague **Aditya Roy Kapur**. This belated sequel sees Mahesh return to the director's chair 20 years after he gave it up—he has said the prospect of working with Alia was a big clincher. His daughter, however, has revealed she's terrified to be directed by her father. "He's very exacting. But also, he knows me so well he'll see through any shortcuts that I might take or any moments that I fake," she said.

You may be aware Alia starred in a 'home production' at the age of six, when she was roped in to play the younger version of **Preity Zinta**'s character in *Sangharsh* (1999), which Mahesh wrote. There's been some talk that uncle Mukesh Bhatt is keen to remake *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin* (1991) with Alia and *Ranbir Kapoor* in the roles that **Aamir Khan** and Pooja played, but with Alia's choc-a-bloc schedule it seems unlikely the project will fructify anytime soon.

Farah's Bet

Farah Khan isn't confirming it yet because the paperwork is still in the process but it's no secret in Bollywood that **Hrithik Roshan** has confirmed he will star in her *Satte Pe Satta* remake that **Rohit Shetty** will produce. The choreographer-director recently threw a party to celebrate the success of Hrithik's most recent film *Super 30* that was attended by a mini galaxy of film folk, including a clutch of young actors and actresses, presumably because they know there's a slew of roles she'll soon be casting in the film.

Hrithik was originally supposed to star as **Shah Rukh Khan**'s younger brother in Farah's *Main Hoon Na* (2004), but passed when his debut film *Kaho Na... Pyaar Hai* (2000) made him an overnight sensation. Reportedly, his father **Rakesh Roshan** told him he should focus on solo-starrers instead of doing another multi-hero project after *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham...* (2001). Farah and SRK totally understood where Roshan Sr's logic was coming from, and amicably allowed him to exit the film, eventually casting his then brother-in-law **Zayed Khan** for the part.

She Who Cannot, Marries

Rumour has it that this actress (who has seldom made news for her performances, her choice of films or the characters she plays) may be looking to settle down. The tabloids have been insisting for some time that her (former actor) parents are keen that she find the right guy and move on to 'the next phase' of her life.

While she still lands the occasional 'big film' it's clear to anyone who cares to notice that she hasn't been able to dazzle either fans or critics. For the bulk of her career she's chosen to piggyback on the shoulders of A-list male superstars in films that have offered her little to do. You can count on her to shimmy and shake to remix tracks, but let's just say that for the most part her acting has all the depth of a potted plant.

According to the grapevine, she's currently seeing a young actor who's just starting out in the business. He's only one film old, younger than her and not at all ready for marriage. She knows him through her superstar co-star who gave him a break in the movies. The awkward thing is she was dating another young man in the same superstar's family circle until recently. ■

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