

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY BY SHASHI THAROOR • LONELIER IN THE END

MEGHA MAJUMDAR THE NEW LITERARY STAR • THE CLANS OF BOLLYWOOD

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# OPEN



6 JULY 2020 / ₹50

## NEHRU'S ERROR

Is India still paying for its first Prime Minister's  
China-submissive policy? **BY MJ AKBAR**

THE FUTURE IS MADE NOW **BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY**



Jawaharlal Nehru and  
Zhou Enlai in Beijing,  
October 5, 1954

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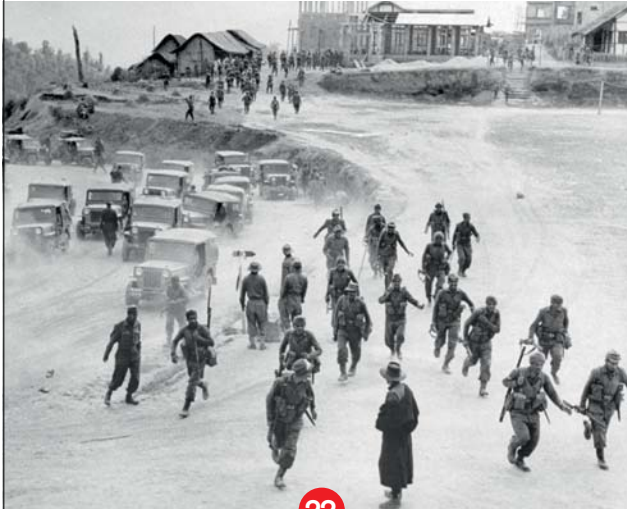
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# OPEN MAIL

editor@openmedianetwork.in



## LETTER OF THE WEEK

Like Pakistan in Kargil, China caught Indian forces by surprise in Ladakh and managed to cause heavy losses, including the lives of 20 soldiers ('Beijing's Belligerence', June 29th, 2020). We do not know how much loss India caused in retaliation, as we have chosen to remain conciliatory even as they keep up with their 'worse than 1962 humiliation' rhetoric. As a result, in the global arena, we have been left with no other option than playing victim. Where Indian forces were expecting 'at worst' Doklam-like fisticuffs, the Chinese killed with deadly improvised weapons even as they pretended to adhere to the letter of agreement. What weapons did Indian soldiers use in return? Why do we not want to reveal that? India seems to be replaying 1962. The worldview of Chinese President Xi Jinping must be understood clearly. For China, every nation is only a strategic partner, no one is a friend. India will stay vigilant on its borders with China day and night. However irrational it might sound, the popular sentiment against Chinese businesses is natural. Very soon, their funding in Indian companies might also be scrutinised. Instead of always reacting to China's claim on Indian territories, we will have to go on an offensive—maybe, even plan to enter Tibet.

Bholey Bhardwaj

## GOODBYE HERO

The tragic suicide of Sushant Singh Rajput has once again started the much-needed conversation about mental health in India ('Goodbye Too Soon' by Kaveree Bamzai, June 22nd, 2020). There is no denying the fact that our rat-race work schedules and instrumental relationships have left people today more vulnerable to mental health problems than ever before. The individual's dependence on social media today has only made the problem worse, let alone the need to maintain a perma-smile public profile. It is distressing that even though India has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, discussions

about mental health remain stigmatised. The allocation for mental health in the 2019-2020 Union Budget was merely 0.05 per cent of the healthcare spending. It is time to confront the traditional Indian society's myths about mental health.

Gaurav Pant

Sushant Singh Rajput had a tragic date with death when we were all having fun on a Sunday. The world he didn't know and the world he did were equally shocked. His family was aggrieved at what fate had handed them. The rest of us wondered 'Why?' As usual, social media was the source of a thousand and one theories. How did someone with such an



enviable career trajectory feel so distressed? Clearly, success doesn't complete life.

Ashok Goswami

Can the social media please stop making up stories about depression, anxiety and dementia till we get to know the facts of the suicide of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput? We should instead spend time creating mechanisms for help for and discovery of such individuals who feel they have no better option than to kill themselves. Let us take mental health counselling seriously, including for animals.

PV Madhu

Sushant Singh Rajput's fans idolised him. He was a role model for the youth who dream of making it big in an industry where background matters most. His public persona was devoid of the usual tantrums of celebrities and gave him the 'boy next door' image. His passing has shattered a million hearts all over the country. It is immensely sad when such a performer exits the scene abruptly before the applause has died down.

Yeshu Mishra

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By S PRASANNAARAJAN

## DREAM AND DICTATORSHIP

**D**ICTATORS DREAM. So do revolutionaries. In their dreams lies the synopsis of horrible histories. We can trace the origins of national mythologies and extraterritorial violations to those reveries. They built heavens on earth, challenged gods, and worked hard, with a sledgehammer in one hand and the book in the other, to keep questions and conscience at bay. Dreams born in the delirium of dictators are nationalist epics. They are sustained in the real world by lies and gulags—if it was Siberia yesterday, it's Xinjiang today.

The Chinese Dream, authored by Xi Jinping, is the new nightmare.

As a phrase, it's a rip-off. Another cheap Chinese imitation, it's the American Dream in Mandarin. In its ambition, it's MCGA instead of MAGA. Make China Greater Again. In Xi's words, said at the 12th National People's Congress in 2013, it is the only way forward: "To achieve the China Dream, we must foster the Chinese spirit, that is, the national spirit centred on reform and innovation. This spirit is the force that rallies the people and pools their strengths and that makes the country prosperous and powerful."

It may sound like motivational banality. In totalitarian traditions, the dry objectivity of words hides a sinister truth about the leader himself. It is enforced understatement in the service of expansionism, obedience and suppression. For Xi, it has a larger objective: the eternity of his reign. It is the return of the Great Helmsman, and the new one has perfected the craft of balancing total dominance at home with permanent conflict in the near abroad. It's Chairman Xi at work; it's the borders, not the headquarters, that are being bombarded.

Xi's Dream is the most audacious after Mao's. The original Helmsman, though a poet, did not call it a dream. The Chinese were then fed on Chairman Mao's "thoughts". Xi, whose Dream marks the third phase in China's evolution as a paranoid empire, builds on his predecessor's legacies to create a monument to his own indispensability. The China Dream updates Mao's revolution and Deng's modernisation, without compromising on the inviolability of the ideological apparatus.

It is a rich ancestry, bolder and bloodier, and always making the best use of practical aphorisms. The Chairman strived for the purity of the revolution through an abolition of hierarchies and the sanitisation of minds. The deaths, in millions, were inevitable statistical fallouts. From

the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution, it was the never-ending deployment of language to achieve the national idyll. For the founding revolutionary, socially engineered civil wars, couched in uplifting semantics, were necessary to purify the nation.

Deng was a survivor of the Cultural Revolution, and as the moderniser who took China out of Maoist taboos, he too understood the uses of aphorisms while selling a dream. It was glorious to be rich, he said, and didn't mind the colour of the cat as long as it did the job of catching mice. As he launched the modernisation, or Westernisation minus democracy (the corrosive "Fifth Modernisation"), Mao, still a powerful invocation, had to retreat to the souvenir shop. Marx with Big Mac was the apt metaphor.

By now, socialism with Chinese characteristics has become capitalism marinated in Chinese nationalism. If Mao supplied revolutionary memories, even with limited practical use, Confucius provided the philosophical foundation for lofty leadership and social hierarchy. Virulent nationalism needed adjectives culled from the revolutionary experience. The Thunder from the East, still, stopped the world from hearing the anxieties and paranoia of a country so scared of its own citizens. It was this paranoia that crushed the dreams that challenged the Dream on June 4th at Tiananmen Square in 1989, the year in which communism was rejected in Eastern Europe. Again, language was deployed for the final horror. The regime called the Tiananmen Square massacre an "incident".

Xi's Dream, in spite of its indebtedness to Americanism, does not allow dreams that yearn for democracy or freedom of thought. His Dream is the new Emperor's credo, and its defiance spreads across Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and to the Indian Himalayas. The Chinese Dream about the glorious nation is, as

we are fast realising, extraterritorial terrorism. In his introduction to his novel about Xi's Dream, the dissident Chinese novelist Ma Jian writes:

"China's tyrants have never limited themselves to controlling people's lives: they have always sought to enter people's brains and remould them from the inside. In fact, it was the Chinese Communists in the 1950s who coined the term 'brainwashing' (*xiniao*). The China Dream is another beautiful lie concocted by the state to remove dark memories from Chinese brains and replace them with happy thoughts."

And some happier thoughts from the Galwan Valley too? ■

**It's Chairman Xi at work; it's the borders, not the headquarters, that are being bombarded**



# INDRAPRASTHA

*Virendra Kapoor*

NOT MUCH HAS been heard of Maneka Gandhi lately, particularly after the BJP MP from Sultanpur, UP, failed to find a place in the Modi Government. But she would be happy to know that the good people of Delhi often recall her name either to praise or decry depending on their disposition towards dogs and monkeys. Yes, dogs and monkeys. In the gated communities of south Delhi, where they have virtually succeeded in regulating the entry of humans, a good percentage of the residents often curse the animal rights activist for the twin menace of monkeys and pariah dogs. When the simians come raiding, which is very often, and play havoc with overhead water tanks and mess up with satellite TV dishes, poor Maneka gets abused for the lax attitude of the municipal authorities towards these animals. I can hear her protest, arguing that the way to deal with monkeys is to leave them in their natural habitat far removed from the urban population, but the civic authorities are not up to scratch. They, and not her, ought to be blamed for the monkey menace. Period.

How about the pariah dogs? She is dead against them being caught by the same civic authorities and let loose in remote wilderness far, far away from Delhi. No, pariahs or pie dogs ought to co-exist with humans, she has argued forcefully in the past. But not everyone agrees. Particularly when the pariahs routinely chase vehicles, threateningly terrorising the riders. Domestic servants and drivers going home late after work are victimised daily by the growing number of pariahs in otherwise well-regulated colonies.

Expectedly, there is a lack of consensus among residents on handling the problem of the pariahs.



Some flaunting their love of dogs most insensitively feed them not inside the four walls of their homes, but on public streets. Others disapprove strongly. Predatory pariahs regularly terrorise old women and children. Hunting in packs, they run barking after even longtime residents, especially after dusk. But such is the hypocrisy of some of the dog-lovers that instead of feeding the strays in their own backyards, they arrange to have them fed elsewhere, believing that their own colonies must stay pariah-free.

Come to think of it, there seems to be a class divide here as well. The colonies of the super-rich, such as Golf Links, Jor Bagh, Shanti Niketan, West End, etcetera, do not seem to suffer from either the monkey or the pariah menace. A majority of the middle-class colonies must tear their hairs tackling it. Despite a pariah dog going rogue occasionally and biting the flesh off unwary residents, such is the apathy of self-styled dog lovers that they would not countenance either arranging a fixed shelter for these animals nor allow others to ensure that they do not become a nuisance to innocent residents. Their need to salve their conscience by feeding the 'poor dogs' must trump commonsense.

VICE PRESIDENT M Venkaiah Naidu has reason to feel flattered. It turns out a writer lifted whole sentences verbatim from an article that he had written for a business daily two years ago. A contributor to the web page of the main daily of the said group reproduced Naidu's article, claiming it to be his exclusive. Soon an alert reader complained about plagiarism, leading the newspaper to blacklist the contributor. Meanwhile, not unlike her husband who used the lockdown to renewing contacts with old friends and penning newspaper articles, Usha Naidu too found a diversion, listing down what she calls 'ten simple, friendly suggestions for a healthy life'. These prescribe the kind of food one should eat, avoiding fast foods, intoxicants of all kinds and keeping close to nature and maintaining a regular regimen of exercise. In these stressful times, Naidu's advice can be helpful while waiting for a return to normalcy.

THE CORONAVIRUS pandemic has disrupted the cosseted world of the upper crust in ways ordinary people can hardly imagine. Even though they have an army of gofers at their beck and call, they are afraid to summon anyone for fear of contracting the dreaded virus. Drivers living away in shanty colonies were furloughed for the same reason the domestic servants were told to stay away. But the worst cut was when they realised they can no longer play golf even though the Delhi Golf Club had reopened after the long lockdown. They feared that the caddies and other support staff in the club residing in unwholesome conditions in illegal colonies could well be the carriers of trouble. The pandemic is a great leveller, after all. ■

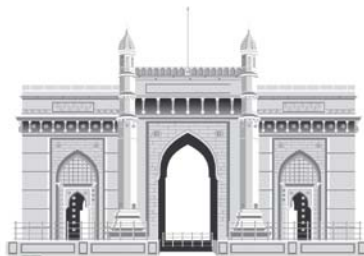
# MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker

I LIVE, AS MOST people in Mumbai do, in a residential tower with a gate, outsourced security and maintenance. When the lockdown was declared with four hours' notice, and simultaneously, all suburban trains and buses were cancelled, the staff on duty was stranded in the building. Three months later, they are all here with no replacements or shifts possible. A temporary kitchen was set up where they cooked their meals, while the ladies of the building arranged among themselves to provide breakfast and tea.

The vexed question troubling all buildings now is whether to allow part-time help back into apartments. Very few people have live-in staff, so husband and wife and all of their young have had to fend for themselves. Hopefully, this will translate into newfound respect for domestic workers. However, the vexation comes from a clear division between the 'Wants' and the 'Want Nots'—residents who insist that they have suffered long enough so want their maids back, while the 'Want Nots' say no, it's too risky to do so. The latter have enough evidence coming in every day of building societies which have relaxed rules and seen a huge number of Covid-19 positives, where earlier there were none. So what's to be done? Society managing committees are quite naturally fearful of opening their gates.

As usual, a politician has weighed in. State Co-operative Minister Balasaheb Patil, is not being co-operative. On the contrary, he has issued a threat to all housing societies: allow maids, drivers and delivery people to enter freely, or else... This makes sense on humanitarian grounds; after all, domestic staff need their salaries. But if more infections happen as a result, what will the government do? As it is, the Municipal Corporation cannot cope with existing cases, so diagnostic centres have been asked to reduce



testing to keep numbers in check!

There's no clear solution. Building managing committees say yes, then say no. It's not comfortable sitting on the horns of a dilemma.

THE ANTI-CHINA sentiment exploded on social media and shows no sign of abating. Will it just remain there, the latest target for people to blow off steam, or to be clever with cartoons and witticisms, or will it take concrete shape? One idiotic concrete shape was in the form of patriotic goons (that's the worst kind) vandalising shops that sold Chinese toys. If these young men had any sense, they would realise that they were only damaging the poor shopkeepers' livelihood, because the Chinese manufacturers had already pocketed their bucks!

More serious is the Central Government's directive to the Maharashtra government to not proceed with Chinese projects which had been signed with much fanfare here. The biggest is with Great Wall Motors to make electric cars with a phased investment of one billion dollars (Rs 7,600 crore), which would gradually generate 3,000 jobs. Another was for electro-mobility with a promised investment of Rs 1,000 crore generating 1,500 jobs. The third was a smaller project involving Rs 150 crore and 150 jobs. Question to consider: who is the loser? The Chinese can presumably invest the money elsewhere but Maharashtra will lose out in every which way.

In any case, the knee-jerk reaction against the Chinese, while understandable, needs a healthy dose of realism. India imported goods worth \$88 billion in 2018-2019, which is more than 17 per cent of our total exports. The US follows with \$36 billion, less than half the Chinese figures. Even more telling, three out of India's four power plants use Chinese equipment, and Chinese mobiles dominate the cheap phone markets to such an extent that three-fourths of phones sold in India come from China!

If you clear your head of rhetoric and sentiment, it's obvious that our huge dependence on Chinese imports and products is unhealthy and needs correction. At the same time, local substitution at the same prices is going to be a long haul.

MY LAST COLUMN mentioned the incredible creative output that occurred in England during the bubonic plague a few centuries ago, particularly from William Shakespeare who wrote three great tragedies (*King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*), while Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity and developed integral and differential calculus.

On June 16th, I made my own little discovery. This day is celebrated the world over by the Irish as Bloomsday, named after Leopold Bloom, the central character of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. That's the day when much of the action of the book takes place. While the story (or more accurately, the book's episodes) takes place in Dublin, Joyce actually wrote *Ulysses* in Trieste in Italy, where he had found a job teaching English to Italian sailors. He was safe there while the Spanish flu felled people by the thousands in other parts of Europe.

This is by no means mentioned to commend pandemics. Creativity be damned. We want to be up and about. ■

# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## Unfair and Less Lovely

IT IS CURIOUS to see how virtues change in unforeseen ways. What was once an aspiration turns into a social evil and actions once thought to be progressive, become just one more cog in the machinery that sustained the iniquity. What would be going through the mind of Shah Rukh Khan now as the anti-racism agitation in the US zooms in on fairness creams?

In the late-2000s, when Shah Rukh Khan first started endorsing fairness creams, the public were being fed a phenomenon called the metrosexual; courageous men who went beyond the rigidities of gender to do things thought to be the domain of women. Men could traditionally aspire to be handsome but not beautiful (the reason you never read about the tall, fair and handsome man). What could be a more appropriate symbol to upturn this and earn a lot of money in the process than to get a male star to endorse fairness creams. Or so some brand manager thought. Those who nitpicked against Khan then were a microscopic community of feminists who found no resonance. For the rest, Khan endorsing a fairness cream was him endorsing femininity itself. And now the murder of a black man in distant America has turned fairness creams into a symbol of racism.

That microscopic feminist objection to Shah Rukh's endorsement had even earlier turned mainstream on the back of social media as the years dragged on. He was now among a list of actors stereotyping beauty as anti-dark in return for money. These actors and actresses became, in Twitter imagination and allegation, endorsers of racism. And the final imprint of this was the manufacturing companies themselves conceding it about their product. This week, Unilever, which introduced Fair & Lovely in India in the mid-1970s, said it would drop the word 'Fair' from the name. In a press release, they called it the evolution of their

skin care portfolio 'to a more inclusive vision of beauty which includes the removal of the words 'fair/fairness', 'white/whitening' and 'light/lightening' from its products' packs and communication. As part of this decision, the Fair & Lovely brand name will be changed in the next few months.' The release quoted Sunny Jain, the company's President, Beauty & Personal Care, saying, 'We are fully committed to having a global portfolio of skin care brands that is inclusive and cares for all skin tones, celebrating greater diversity of beauty. We recognise that the use of the words 'fair', 'white' and 'light' suggest a singular ideal of beauty that we don't think is right, and we want to address this. As we're evolving the way that we communicate the skin benefits of our products that deliver radiant and even tone skin, it's also important to change the language we use.'

A few days before Unilever took this decision, Johnson & Johnson, one of its multinational competitors, had announced that it was getting out of these products. A *Reuters* report on this said: 'Johnson & Johnson will stop selling its Clean & Clear Fairness line of products, sold in India, a spokeswoman told Reuters. It was reported earlier this month that it would drop its Neutrogena Fine Fairness line, available in Asia and the Middle East. "Conversations over

the past few weeks highlighted that some product names or claims on our dark spot reducer products represent fairness or white as better than your own unique skin tone," Johnson & Johnson said. "This was never our intention—healthy skin is beautiful skin."

It is an open question whether any of this would have happened if the agitation against racism had not been in the US, which is the biggest market for these companies even if their skin-whitening creams are mainly targeted at Asia. Or if the agitation had not exploded in such magnitude and extremism, in

**The association of fair skin with beauty is ingrained in Indian society for thousands of years. People want what they want. A cultural bias in India will not be swept off by a movement against racism in the US. Also, political correctness often has a short shelf life while the dynamic of commerce remains long after that**





Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

which anything remotely perceived as anti-black would be construed as racist. Otherwise, the colourism allegation has been going on for a long time but it had never been a commercial threat to the entire company.

The Black Lives Matter movement changed that. It also demanded affirmation of support from the corporate sector, which the manufacturers of whitening products found led them to a tricky area. As when Unilever put up an Instagram post in support of the anti-racism protests and drew a barrage of comments over their skin whitening cream.

Similar predicaments arose for its endorsers. Like Priyanka Chopra, who too put up a similar Instagram post and got the same questions directed at her. It had already become unfashionable to endorse them with even people in their own fraternity, like Abhay Deol, calling them out.

The history of fairness cream endorsements in recent years is a history of apologetic interviews and getting in line with political correctness.

Five years ago, Chopra told journalist Barkha Dutt that she endorsed such creams for a year but then stopped because she felt bad about it. Shah Rukh himself in an interview to *The Guardian* sought to explain it away. To a question on this, the article said: 'What follows is a three-part justification: Khan says it is legal, that he would never endorse women doing it, that he would never use the product himself. Hang on, what? "I told them I'm not going to wash my face with it because I don't do it, I don't like it. They told me it's a cream for men to clear up oil and dust, and at the end

of the day you'll get the beautiful girl. I can tell you now, no cream is ever going to get you beautiful girls unless you are beautiful with women. Guys, if you think you're going to get women because of this cream, sorry. You're not. I know they might not extend the ads now and I won't do it, but I'm not selling fairness being better, I cannot sell beauty.'"

Even Sushant Singh Rajput, after his recent death, was being eulogised for having refused to endorse fairness creams.

Is this the end of fairness creams? Probably not. So long as there is demand, there will be supply. The association of fair skin with beauty is ingrained in Indian society for thousands of years. People want what they want. A cultural bias in India will not be swept off by a movement against racism in the US. Also, political correctness often has a short shelf life while the dynamic of commerce remains long after that.

Consumers might not express their desire for fairness openly if there is sufficient social pressure but it doesn't take too long for businesses and entrepreneurs to figure out the market. Unilever, for instance, has changed the word branding from 'fair' to 'radiant' skin. All it requires then is for consumers to read the code and think of radiance as fairness. Companies will tiptoe, but they will be catering to a market. Just as Bollywood itself, where, despite all its political correctness now, every single movie shoot's make-up team exists to make actors and actresses as fair as possible. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • NOVAK DJOKOVIC

# PLAYING HAVOC

The World's No 1 male tennis player wantonly got himself and others infected

**N**OVAK DJOKOVIC OCCUPIES an unusual space in our public imagination. In a world divided between loyalties towards either Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal, Djokovic is neither presented with our love or our hate. He is seldom missed and acknowledged only grudgingly.

And yet again and again, he has intruded into our mental landscape. We first grudgingly admitted him as a member, along with Andy Murray, Federer and Nadal, of the Big Four. And now he stands within kissing distance of both Nadal's and Federer's records.

Djokovic is now at the front and centre of everyone's mind. And not for something he would have wished for. He has been found positive for Covid-19, something entirely of his own doing. He has always had some odd views. He has said he believes in telepathy and telekinesis; he once hired a coach, Pepe Imaz, who taught him 'telepathy and levitation', and who specialised in giving long hugs. He also had something of an ideological opposition to surgery, preferring to treat an injured elbow with alternative therapy.

These were seen as the eccentricities of one of the world's top sportspersons. But during this pandemic, some of his ideas have appeared downright dangerous. In a Zoom conference with fellow Serbian athletes two months ago, he revealed that he is opposed to vaccinations. He said he wouldn't want to be forced to take a Covid-19 vaccine, whenever it becomes ready. His wife, Jelena, also shared a video of the conspiracy theory linking the outbreak to 5G technology. And then the Djokovic-organised and now disastrous Adria Tour took place. And his public image now stands unravelled.

The exhibition tennis tour involving him and a few top tennis players travelling to the three Balkan countries of Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro—where there were spectators, photo-ops, fist-bumps and hugs, and no social

distancing or face masks, and where the players even partied in a Belgrade nightclub—ended minutes before the final when one of the players, Grigor Dimitrov, was found to have tested positive.

So far, four players and two of their spouses, including Djokovic and his wife, and two coaches have tested positive. Another Serb athlete, the NBA star Nikola Jokić, who had spent time with Djokovic during the Belgrade leg of the tournament, has also tested positive. For all one knows, countless others, from those employed in hosting to fans, could have also been exposed to the infection.

By the time player Borna Ćorić's test results came in, instead of having himself tested in Croatia, Djokovic fled to Belgrade, potentially exposing many others to the virus.

Soon enough, the reports came in from Belgrade.

This surreal saga hasn't come to an end though. Amid the heaping criticism and calls for Djokovic to step down from the post of president of the ATP Player Council, there is now acrimony and denial. Djokovic's father Srdjan has pinned the blame on Dimitrov, the first of the players to test positive, claiming he probably arrived sick to the tournament. Djokovic's mother, Dijana, meanwhile has said, "It is horrible what is being written, but we are used to it." Meanwhile, Dimitrov's agent has responded saying the blame lay with the organisers. Many top tennis players and tournament organisers are also criticising Djokovic.

All this comes at a time when many sporting events are gradually restarting or planning to start. Every one of these, unlike Djokovic's tournament, come with new regulations. None of them have any spectators now. And they create what they call 'bio-secure' environments. In Germany's football league Bundesliga, for instance, players were barred from meeting visitors or neighbours for a month before the tournament started on May 16th. For the IPL, which many expect to be held some months later, some like Kolkata Knight Riders' CEO Venky Mysore have suggested the tournament can be held in a place like Mumbai which has four grounds (a fifth nearby in Pune) and where each team can be put up in a separate hotel.

Despite these precautions, even spectator-less events will not be entirely risk-free. They will still bring lots of potentially infectious people together—from players, coaching staff and officials to commentators, camera crews and groundsmen.

As the recklessness exhibited by Djokovic has shown, everyone will need to be cautious. ■

Photos GETTY IMAGES



By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

**ANGLE****FLIP SIDE OF A BOYCOTT**

**To live without Chinese goods is impossible and only hurts yourself**

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**W**HEN NATIONS GO to war, it is in the fitness of things to boycott each other's goods. It would be absurd to have trade over your borders when armies are killing each other at the same time. Trade is very often the cause of war itself. All of East India Company's wars in India, until they realised they had become the master of this country, were to enforce supply chains and markets. Napoleon embarked on his Russian campaign to force them to not trade with Britain. In war, what could be more appropriate than to have nothing to do with your enemy country's goods? Why shouldn't one cheer in unison when armchair patriots call for a ban on the buying of Chinese goods after the Ladakh skirmish that killed 20 Indian soldiers? Like Union Minister Ramdas Athawale seeking the shutting down of restaurants that sell Chinese food. A BJP leader suggested breaking the legs of those found using Chinese goods. The Confederation of All India Traders with 7 crore members made a list of 3,000 Chinese items to boycott. A Muslim body issued a fatwa against use of Chinese goods. One survey found 87 per cent Indians would be ready to boycott China goods for a year.

On the other hand, not a single one of these 87 per cent would be able to do it even if they wanted to. Take the mobile phone. Don't want to buy Xiaomi? Good. But every single phone of every brand anywhere has a little or a lot of China in it. Modern electronics,

from phones to televisions, needs rare earth elements and they almost entirely come from China. Any patriot who is firm about not having anything to do with China will have to switch to a mode of living of two decades ago, and scrounge for articles like tape recorders. Or he will have to tell himself—'I will have nothing of China except for rare earth elements'—and that sounds silly. Also, it makes him a hypocrite because he is not willing to sacrifice his standard of living for his principle. Either he didn't love his country at all or he is too weak to make the effort required. It is easy to stop eating Chinese food—as Athawale recommends—but will he live without a phone? As the world stands today, China is in everything you touch. Want to ban TikTok? Fine. But do you use PayTM? Is your child learning from Byju's? Did you just book an Ola? All of them have Chinese shareholding. But they are all, at the same time, Indian companies. Again, the patriot will have to put up a disclaimer.

And to know what does happen when Chinese goods are boycotted, you have to appreciate why Chinese goods are used in the first place. They are cheap. Stop using them, and you drive up prices of these goods. As an English-speaking, middle-class, urban, armchair-nationalist warrior, you could take the hit, but do spare a thought for the poor. It is why the Government does not enforce a boycott. The only thing it achieves is hurting yourself. Also, we are not at war with China yet. ■

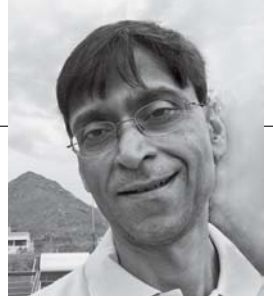
**IDEAS****NEPOTISM**

There has always been a discussion about the unfair advantages family members of Bollywood personalities get when they decide to enter the industry over those who are termed 'outsiders'. The word 'nepotism' first entered the public lexicon a few years ago when Kangana Ranaut began to get into spats. Nepotism exists in every aspect of society, and many who now rail against Bollywood's nepotists are themselves, in some way or another, beneficiaries of nepotism in their own social and professional milieus. In showbiz, where everything is loud and the success of every actor or director contingent upon a brand image being created, nepotism becomes most visible. In the wake of Sushant Singh Rajput's death, something of a backlash against Bollywood's 'insiders' is now visible. Several actors and directors are being trolled, many have switched off public comments on their posts and others deleted their accounts. They probably hope to ride out this sentiment. But at this moment, it doesn't look likely. ■

**WORD'S WORTH**

**'There is no nepotism in the Hindi film industry'**

**RISHI KAPOOR**  
ACTOR



By Makarand R Paranjape

# A Time to Reveal

There is much to gain by declassifying the report on the 1962 war

**A**RE INDIA AND China about to go to war? A simple answer, despite the loss of at least 20 of our soldiers including a colonel, would be 'not likely'. However, the prospects of a definitive and lasting solution to the outstanding border dispute do not seem imminent either, despite some encouraging signs.

Apart from statements by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, there have been foreign-minister level talks between External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and his counterpart, Wang Yi. As I write this, our Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane is at the border in Ladakh. He is not only boosting the morale of the jawans guarding our icy frontiers in an especially inhospitable part of the world, but actually checking the situation on the ground.

While everyone knows how powerful, both economically and militarily, China is, India can take some comfort from studies such as Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center which suggest that India has an advantage in a hilly and high-altitude fight. Our soldiers, moreover, are more battle-hardened and fighting-fit. China, on the other hand, would like to win, as per the Sun Tzu doctrine, without firing a single shot. Both nations are not only nuclear-armed, but mature enough to avoid a precipitous conflict.

But given the ongoing skirmish, it is not surprising that the demand for the tabling of the Brooks-Bhagat report has resurfaced yet again. This report, commissioned by an Indian defence establishment shocked by the 1962 debacle against the Chinese, was submitted by Lieutenant General Henderson Brooks and Brigadier Premindra Singh Bhagat in 1963. It remains top-secret, not having been declassified to date.

In the past, there have been repeated calls for it to be made public. However, both Congress and non-Congress led Governments at the Centre have resisted such requests. Now, BJP MP Tapir Gao, representing the Arunachal East constituency in the Lok Sabha, has once again asked for the report to be tabled. He believes that it will help us learn valuable lessons from our previous defeat.

How true is this assumption? Well, for starters, any

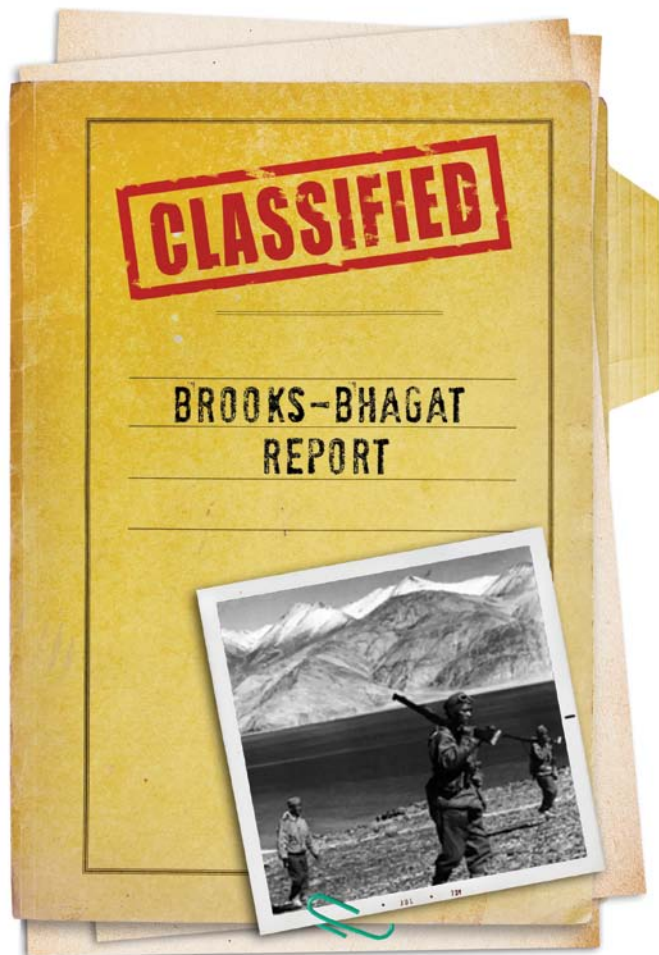
confident democracy should not hesitate to make public a document over half-a-century old. The argument that it would demoralise us or show our leaders in a bad light no longer holds. The situation today is different and most of the key actors of 1962 are dead. A critical appraisal of our faults and flaws should not be averse to a self-assured republic.

Moreover, a large part of the document has already been leaked by Australian journalist-writer Neville Maxwell in 2014. It is not clear how Maxwell got hold of a report of which the only two known copies were in an army vault in South Block. He was the correspondent of the London *Times* during the 1962 war. Eight years later he released his book, *India's China War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). Maxwell argued that the 'fierce border war... sharply reduced the role and status of India in world affairs' (page 11).

In order to compensate for our disadvantage in Aksai Chin, where we had already lost so much territory, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, along with Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon and Lieutenant General Brij Mohan Kaul, implemented the so-called 'Forward Policy'. According to Maxwell, 'Assuming that as possession is nine-tenths of the law India had only to go and stand on as many parts of Aksai Chin as possible to turn the tables on China' (page 175). Of course, this was a tactical error and proved disastrous, given how unprepared we were.

Maxwell uploaded a portion of the Brooks-Bhagat report on the internet, where it is still available ([bit.ly/2Z2MqR8](http://bit.ly/2Z2MqR8)). If so, why not officially release the whole report? Maxwell, in an article in *Economic and Political Weekly* in April 2001 said that 'the report includes no surprises, and its publication would be of little significance but for the fact that so many in India still cling to the soothing fantasy of a 1962 Chinese 'aggression''. What he means is that the Indian Government succeeded in convincing the public that we were taken by surprise by a Chinese invasion and had no option but to retaliate even though it meant certain defeat.

The purpose of the Brooks-Bhagat report, thus, was to inquire into the causes of India's debacle without allowing the needle of criticism to point too close to Nehru or Army Chief General Pran Nath Thapar. It was meant also to paper over the



## THE SITUATION TODAY IS DIFFERENT AND MOST OF THE KEY ACTORS OF 1962 ARE DEAD. A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF OUR FAULTS AND FLAWS SHOULD NOT BE AVERSE TO A SELF-ASSURED REPUBLIC

deep cracks in the army between those who belonged to the old school of professional soldiers and others who had political patronage, like Kaul and his coterie called 'Kaul's boys'. Kaul, disgraced by the defeat, had to resign. Chief of Army Staff General Pran Nath Thapar also resigned on November 22nd, 1962, the day following China's declaration of ceasefire. General Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri, who succeeded him, ordered the enquiry.

Apart from Kaul, another key culprit, according to the report, was Intelligence Bureau Chief NB Mullick. Also a

Nehru confidant, Mullick repeatedly misled Nehru and Menon into believing that the Chinese would not dare to attack India. The border police was under his command. When he handed over the front to the army, it was already too late to rectify the situation.

What Brooks and Bhagat did, despite attempts by Army HQ to muzzle and obstruct them, was to name names.

Their roll of dishonour included, besides Menon, Kaul and Mullick, Foreign Secretary MJ Desai and Brigadier DK Palit. The latter, as Director of Military Operations, openly maintained in August 1962 that the Chinese did not have the capacity to fight back. As Maxwell put it, Palit also 'blindfolded the enquiry... personally faced down both Brooks and Bhagat, rode out their formal complaints about his obstructionism, and prevented them from prying into the 'high level policies and decisions' which he maintained were none of their business'.

The report repeatedly indicts Kaul, the Chief of General Staff and Commander 4 Corps, and his contradictory and incompetent handling of the war effort. Brooks-Bhagat's criticism of Kaul is scathing and unambiguous: 'The Chief of General Staff, sitting in Delhi, ordering an action against a position 1,000 yards north-east of Dhola Post is astounding. The country was not known, the enemy situation vague, and for all that there may have been a ravine in between, but yet the order was given. This order could go down in the annals of History as being as incredible as the order for 'the Charge of the Light Brigade'.'

Luckily, 2020 is not 1962 redux, nor is Modi anything like Nehru. In fact, they are as unlike as chalk and cheese—without prejudice to who's who, which depends on which side you're on. Yet, it is imperative to avoid contradictory signalling and confusion on how India is handling the crisis. We just saw how the Prime Minister's assertion at the all-party meeting on June 19th that 'Not an inch of our land has been lost, neither has anyone occupied our posts' resulted in much needless controversy, followed by clarifications and retractions.

One revealing complaint in the report, not surprisingly, is about the mishandling of the press and information. Tabling the Brooks-Bhagat report, soon, even if not immediately, will help us eschew even more serious tactical errors. Schisms within the Army on the one hand, and between the armed forces and the civilian power centres on the other hand, can be avoided or amended before they prove disastrous. The report will highlight the urgency of making sure such errors are not repeated.

But, in any case, we are a democracy, not a closed society like China. The people have a right to know. ■

## In Agreement

Both Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and his opponent Lalu Prasad want Bihar's elections to be held on time. Nitish thinks a delay would mean imposition of President's Rule, which may not be good for him. And any delay could be disastrous, too, since the real effect of the pandemic could be felt by then. On the other side, Lalu thinks the public mood is very negative against the Nitish government and an early election could get him back in power. What the Election Commission decides will depend on the Covid-19 situation.



## Chinese Whispers

In Uttar Pradesh, several houses have had new electricity meters installed recently. One day, the chief minister's office (CMO) got a call from someone who said that the meter installed at his place was made in China and the government ought to boycott them. An inquiry was immediately started. The CMO found that the tender bidding had been in the name of an Indonesian company, but actually it was a front for a Chinese one. The government immediately cancelled the deal and is returning and replacing all the meters. Yogi Adityanath clearly senses the public mood about China.

## VENUE MISMATCH

With the Supreme Court active in conducting hearings over video, an interesting exchange took place between Chief Justice of India (CJI) SA Bobde and senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi. During a hearing, the CJI noticed a lot of statues in Rohatgi's background and asked whether he was in a museum. The advocate replied that it was his farmhouse. He had moved there in order to swim daily in its pool. The next day, before another hearing, Rohatgi told his juniors that the CJI won't be able to say anything because he had changed the angle of the camera. But this time, Bobde asked Rohatgi if he was in an art gallery since there were a number of famous paintings in the background.

## KOVIND DIARIES

President Ramnath Kovind is said to have kept himself busy during the lockdown by writing about his political journey. He has not yet decided whether it will be an autobiography and, as of now, it is in the nature of personal diaries.

## Seat Change

The BJP and Janata Dal (United) will unitedly contest the Bihar election but there is a tug of war over seats. The JD(U) is the senior partner and also has the chief minister's post but the BJP wants more seats this time—at least a 50:50 arrangement. In 2010, the JD(U) got 143 seats and won 116. The BJP, meanwhile, won 91 out of the 100 it contested. Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party also wants more seats. The BJP feels the anti-incumbency factor works against Nitish Kumar and it can do better. Nitish, however, is worried that the BJP will claim the chief minister's post after the election.

## A Point about Age

The BJP continues to maintain that all party members must retire from active politics once they turn 75 but then the principle is not maintained when it comes to certain Government appointments. The Attorney General of India KK Venugopal has now crossed 89 and when his tenure ended recently, there was pressure on the Prime Minister to change him. Especially on the Rafale defence deal case in Supreme Court, there was a rift between Venugopal and defence ministry. But the law ministry gave an opinion in favour of keeping him on.

## Return Gambit?

Recently, the Congress Working Committee was discussing the performance of the Modi Government when, suddenly, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot raised the issue of Rahul Gandhi and requested him to come back as party president. The question people are asking is whether he did this at the behest of Sonia Gandhi. If so, can Rahul return at the helm before the Bihar election?

## Tasty Choice

A special flight organised by the Government to bring back those stranded in Dubai to Kolkata ran into a peculiar problem that the external affairs ministry did not anticipate. The passengers were told they would be served vegetable cutlets but, even though a popular item among Bengalis, they declined and asked for a prawn dish. It took the foreign secretary to intervene and change the menu.



## Present Tense

Home Minister Amit Shah went to the HLNJP Hospital recently. On arriving, the doctors there started to tell him the rich history of the institution, established by Viceroy Lord Irwin. But Shah was reportedly impatient. He asked them to forget history and return to the present to let him know what was happening in the Covid-19 crisis.

## Losing Control

Manipur is seeing a seesaw battle of politics. It is a BJP-ruled state now but was earlier with the Congress. The National People's Party (NPP), with which the Congress was in alliance, split and the BJP used it to get to power. However, several NPP MLAs again broke off and are ready to support the Congress. Amit Shah has authorised Assam Deputy Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to handle the Manipur crisis. There will be a floor test in the Assembly but Shah thinks the situation is in his party's favour.



By SHASHI THAROOR

# IN PRAISE OF THE INDIAN VOTER

*The redeeming surprises of a volatile democracy*

**D**EMOCRACY, WINSTON CHURCHILL famously wrote, is the worst system of government in the world, except for all the others. One of its defining characteristics is its unpredictability, since democracy reflects the wishes of large numbers of people expressed in the quiet intimacy of the polling booth. The wonders of democracy have repeatedly startled the world as the voters of India have confounded all the pundits and pollsters to place the country in the hands of different governments led by different parties or coalitions. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, would have been proud of this. His greatest satisfaction would have come from the knowledge that the democracy he tried so hard to instil in India had taken such deep roots, despite so many naysayers claiming that democracy would never work in a developing country.

As a result, India has managed the process of political change and economic transformation necessary to develop our country and to forestall political and economic disaster. Much as it is tempting to do so, this cannot, in all good conscience, be accredited to some innate beneficence that one acquires along with the right to an Indian passport. Rather, I credit Indian democracy and civic nationalism, rooted in the constitutional rule of law and free elections.

Every Indian General Election is immediately the world's largest exercise in democratic franchise—with some 900 million registered voters in 2019, that is hardly surprising. And look what happens in these elections: governments are routinely voted out of office, and voters hold politicians accountable for their development promises. And they do so within India's extraordinary framework of diversity: for instance, as I have often pointed out with pride, in May 2004, India witnessed a General Election victory by a woman leader of Roman Catholic background and Italian heritage (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime Minister by a Muslim (President APJ Abdul Kalam)—in a country 80 per cent Hindu.

India's democracy has flourished while pursuing some of the most intractable challenges of development the world has known. Of course, fiercely contentious politics remains a significant impediment to India's development, since reforms are pursued with hesitancy as governments keep looking constantly over their electoral shoulders. But this also ensures the acceptance of reforms when they are eventually made.

India has also been proud of being able to demonstrate, in a world riven by ethnic conflict and notions of clashing civilisations, that democracy is not only compatible with diversity, but preserves and protects it. No other country in the world, after all, embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices, and the range of levels of economic development that India does. Yet Indian democracy, rooted in the constitutional rule of law and free elections, has managed the processes of political change and economic transformation necessary to develop our country. This is an experience that some who are currently in power appear to forget, or devalue.

As I have repeatedly argued in my writings, India is united not by a common ethnicity, language or religion, but by the experience of a common history within a shared geographical space, reified in a liberal constitution and the repeated exercise of democratic self-governance in a pluralist polity. India's founders wrote a constitution for this dream; we in India have given passports to their





Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

## **THE INDIAN VOTER HAS LONG SINCE RESOLVED THE ‘BREAD VERSUS FREEDOM’ DEBATE SO BELOVED OF INTELLECTUALS: THE QUESTION OF WHETHER DEMOCRACY CAN LITERALLY ‘DELIVER THE GOODS’ IN A COUNTRY OF POVERTY AND SCARCITY, OR WHETHER ITS INBUILT INEFFICIENCIES ONLY IMPEDE RAPID GROWTH**

ideals. So the idea of India is of one land embracing many. It is the idea that a nation may endure differences of caste, creed, colour, culture, conviction, cuisine, costume and custom, and still rally around a democratic consensus. That consensus is about the simple principle that in a democracy you do not really need to agree all the time—except on the ground rules of how you will disagree. The reason India has survived all the stresses and strains that have beset it for seven decades, and that led so many to predict its imminent disintegration, is that it maintained consensus on how to manage without consensus. That consensus now seems to be in question, as the Indian that was comfortable with the idea of multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India, is now being forced to yield to a narrower India privileging Hindi-speaking Hindus.

The Indian voter has long since resolved the ‘bread versus freedom’ debate so beloved of intellectuals: the question of whether democracy can literally ‘deliver the goods’ in a country of poverty and scarcity, or whether its inbuilt inefficiencies only impede rapid growth. Some still ask—as they were prone to when three Governments fell between 1996 and 1998—if the instability of political contention (and of makeshift coalitions) is a luxury a developing country cannot afford, and whether, as today’s young concentrate on making

their bread, they should consider political freedom a dispensable distraction. Some argue back that not only is democracy not incompatible with economic growth and progress, it is the only guarantee that growth and progress will be stable and self-sustaining. But they do so with diminishing conviction, in the face of the relentless assault of Modi-tva.

This is where lies the great battle for Indian nationhood, and for the survival and success of India’s civic nationalism. I used to aver that no one identity can ever triumph in India: both the country’s chronic pluralism and the logic of the electoral marketplace had made this impossible. In leading a coalition Government, and then in losing office, the first iteration of the Hindutva-inclined Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government learnt that any party with aspirations to rule India must reach out to other groups, other interests, other minorities. After all, there are too many diversities in our land for any one version of reality to be imposed on all of us. The second iteration—the Modi Government—has twice been elected with an absolute majority, for reasons I have explained elsewhere, and does not need the support of others. Might it, then, emboldened by its current levels of support, remake India’s nationalism altogether? I have looked at this question from different angles and tried to provide a satisfactory response, but the battle is still being fought and it is impossible

to predict exactly how the future might unfold.

Democracy is a process and not just an event; it is the product of the exchange of hopes and promises, commitments and compromises which underpin the sacred compact between governments and the governed. Democracy is also about how to lose, and that is something Indians have repeatedly learnt, as multiple changes of governments have confirmed. But democracy flourishes within a specific defined framework of nationhood, and that is where India is beset by the uncertain fear that the framework itself is being rattled.

Yet civic nationalism is vital for India's future. While there is no easy way to cope with the country's extraordinary diversity, democracy is the only technique that can work to ensure all sections of our variegated society the possibility of their place in the sun. Elections and civic institutions are the instrument for ensuring this. What is encouraging for the future of democracy is that India is unusual in its reach; in India, electoral democracy is not an elite preoccupation, but matters most strongly to ordinary people. Whereas in the US a majority of the poor do not vote—in Harlem in 10 presidential elections before 2008 (when a credible black candidate, Barack Obama, ran), the turnout was below 23 per cent—in India the poor exercise their franchise in great numbers. It is not the privileged or even the middle-class who spend four hours queueing in the hot sun to cast their vote, but the poor, because they know their votes make a difference

**T**HE EXPERIMENT BEGUN seven decades ago by India's founders has worked. Though there have been major threats to the nation from separatist movements, caste conflicts and regional rivalries, electoral democracy has helped defuse them. When violent movements arise, they are often defused through accommodation in the democratic process, so that in state after state, secessionism is defeated by absorption into civic nationalism. Separatism in places as far afield as Tamil Nadu in the south and Mizoram in the Northeast has been defused in one of the great unsung achievements of Indian democracy: Yesterday's secessionists have, in many cases, become today's chief ministers. (And thanks to the vagaries of democratic politics, tomorrow's opposition leaders.)

It's still true that in many parts of India, when you cast your vote, you vote your caste. But that too has brought about profound alterations in the country, as the lower castes have taken advantage of the ballot to seize electoral power. The explosive potential of caste division has been channelled through the ballot box. Most strikingly, the power of electoral numbers has given high office to the lowest of India's low. Who could have imagined, for 3,000 years, that a Dalit woman would rule as Chief Minister of India's most populous state? Yet Mayawati has done that three times in Uttar Pradesh, on the basis of her electoral appeal. And even the ascent of a self-declared 'chaiwala' (tea-seller) to the position of Prime Minister is a testament to the triumph of Indian democracy.

On the 50th summer of India's Independence, KR Narayanan, a Malayali Dalit—a man who was born in a thatched hut with no toilet and no running water, whose university refused to award him his degree at the same ceremony as his upper-caste classmates—was elected President of India. He led an India whose injustices and inequalities he had keenly felt as a member of an underprivileged community; yet an India that offered—through its brave if flawed experiment in constitutional democracy, secularism, affirmative governmental action and change through the ballot-box—the prospect of overcoming these injustices. Five years later, he was succeeded by a Tamil Muslim, a fisherman's son who sold newspapers in the street as a boy and who happened to be the father of India's missile program. Today, the highest office in the land is again occupied by a member of the Dalit community, Ram Nath Kovind, who rose to the top from humble beginnings in Uttar Pradesh. If the presidency symbolises the Indian state, it is still a symbol of India's diversity and its egalitarian democracy.

The question of whether democracy and development can go together has also been answered convincingly by India. Some experts have argued that democracy does not lend itself to rapid development—that the compromises that are an essential element of democratic governance, and the need for decision-makers in a democratic society to take the wants of their constituents into account, were distractions that less developed states could ill afford if they were to make the hard decisions necessary to improve their futures.

In its first few decades after Independence from Britain in 1947, India was seen as the global posterchild for the virtues of democracy, in contrast to its giant neighbour, China, which turned into a communist dictatorship in 1949. Till the 1970s, it was widely argued that while both countries suffered the horrors of poverty, under-development and disease, India's was the superior model because its people were free to choose their own rulers. As China surged ahead economically from 1978 onwards, however, the debate changed: it was now argued that China's was clearly the superior economic performance, while India's chaotic democracy held its people back from the efficient pursuit of prosperity.

This was apparent across the board, notably in infrastructure development. If China wanted to build a new six-lane expressway, it could bulldoze its way past any number of villages in its path; in India, if you wanted to widen a two-lane road, you could be tied up in court for a dozen years over compensation entitlements. But the flip side of India's weakness is its strength: India has mechanisms to deal with dissent, whereas China's suppression of politics could prove unsustainable in the long run, when a more educated populace began to assert its rights.

The old debate has now taken a new twist with the publication by Daniel A Bell, an American professor at Beijing's Tsinghua University, of the book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, which argues that the authoritarianism intrinsic to China's success is actually a viable model of governance which might in fact be superior to India's



(L-R) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President APJ Abdul Kalam and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi, October 2005

GETTY IMAGES

## IN MAY 2004, INDIA WITNESSED A GENERAL ELECTION VICTORY BY A WOMAN LEADER OF ROMAN CATHOLIC BACKGROUND AND ITALIAN HERITAGE MAKING WAY FOR A SIKH TO BE SWORN IN AS PRIME MINISTER BY A MUSLIM—IN A COUNTRY 80 PER CENT HINDU

democracy. But the question has not gone away, and the dysfunctional politics of democratic India in recent years has made it seem even more relevant. When, for a quarter of a century, India was ruled by governments in Delhi made up of over 20 political parties, political decision-making was determined by the lowest common denominator: the weakest link in the governmental chain determined its strength. Is that an efficient way of ensuring the well-being of the Indian people? Arguably not. But is the over-centralised, top-down, unitary autocracy being engineered by the Modi Government any better?

I am not persuaded that Bell's affirmative answer (for the Chinese version of totalising nationalism) is

(and the West's) democracy. Bell cites the remarkable economic success of an assortment of non-democracies in recent years. Certainly, countries like Singapore and China have prospered in recent decades through benign authoritarianism, built on what Bell calls 'political meritocracy'. While Amartya Sen famously demonstrated that famines don't occur in democracies with a free press because their governments would be unable to ignore the suffering, Bell argues that China has also avoided famine and done better than democratic India on malnutrition. In other words, you don't have to be democratic to serve your people effectively. That is an argument that could well appeal to some in the current Indian political leadership.

Bell focuses on the methods for choosing political leaders in both systems of government and suggests that the authoritarian selection processes, based strictly on merit, guarantees better leadership than the random enshrining of ignorance and prejudice in democratic voting. China's economic success can be attributed, he says, to the way it selects, evaluates and promotes officials. Despite some weaknesses (notably complacency and corruption), it ensures orderly governance and development, which democracy doesn't necessarily do. The 'politically relevant question,' he says, 'is whether democratic elections lead to good consequences.'

It's a question India debated once before, exactly 40 years ago, when then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency in 1975, suspended India's civil liberties, locked up the opposition leadership and censored the press. She argued explicitly then that democracy in India had detracted from development. The issue became known as the 'bread versus freedom' debate: the question of whether democracy can literally deliver the goods in a country of poverty and scarcity, or whether its inbuilt inefficiencies only impede the prospects of rapid growth.

That debate was resolved in India by the elections of 1977, which defenestrated the Emergency regime and restored

the right one. While rapid industrialisation and development has pulled millions of Chinese out of poverty, it has often come at great cost in human suffering. China may have grown at breakneck speed—but it has broken necks in the process.

**W**HATEVER ONE MIGHT say about India's sclerotic bureaucracy versus China's efficient one, India's tangles of red tape versus China's unfurled red carpet for foreign investors, India's contentious and fractious political parties versus China's smoothly functioning, top-down communist hierarchy, there's no doubt that India had become an outstanding example of the management of diversity through pluralist democracy. Every Indian had been allowed to feel he or she has as much of a stake in the country, and as much of a chance to run it, as anyone else.

The legitimacy of democracy in India comes from the faith of the vast numbers of underprivileged rather than the minuscule elite. It is the poor who turn out in large numbers to vote, because the poor know that their votes matter. They also believe that exerting their franchise is the most effective means of demonstrating what they really demand from the government.

Frustration with Indian governments manifests itself in voting against the rulers rather than in revolts or insurrections. The Chinese system wasn't designed to cope with fundamental challenges to it except through repression. But every autocratic state in history has come to a point where repression was no longer enough. If that point is reached in China, all bets are off. The dragon could stumble where the elephant can always trundle on.

One of the problems of the Chinese system is that it is too bureaucratic. It only permits gradual and graduated ascent up the ladder, making it impossible for a young and relatively inexperienced but exciting leader like Barack Obama to emerge.

A queue at a polling station on the outskirts of Varanasi, May 2019



**DEMOCRACY IS A PROCESS AND NOT JUST AN EVENT; IT IS THE PRODUCT OF THE EXCHANGE OF HOPES AND PROMISES, COMMITMENTS AND COMPROMISES WHICH UNDERPIN THE SACRED COMPACT BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND THE GOVERNED**

It would fail to pick gifted leaders who were failures in their youth, like FD Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln or for that matter MK Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru. Rebels and non-conformists who have flourished in Indian politics would never have got to first base in the Chinese system.

The Chinese model denies its citizens a say in the kinds of policies the nation should pursue and eliminates any possibility of mediating among competing value systems, ideologies and political and economic choices. Politics is about more than efficient management—it is also about representing different segments of society and accommodating their views and interests. This only liberal democracy within a framework of civic nationalism can do

Bell cites the successes of authoritarian systems but does not acknowledge that these successes do not require authoritarianism. The methods employed by China and the other East Asian ‘tigers’ to promote economic growth and development, which include economic competition, use of international markets, spread of education and land reforms, have in fact been consistent with democratic principles. As a result, many formerly authoritarian states in East Asia have become democracies at no cost to their development success stories. And no people who have gained democratic rights have clamoured for a return to the blessings of dictatorship, a clinching refutation of the Bell view.

Indian democracy is a strength, not a weakness. The Chinese system requires consensus and cooperation from top to bottom. It will flounder, and founder, if that consensus

ever breaks down. This is why the Chinese model works in a predictable environment, but the Indian model may be better to cope with the perils of an uncertain world. And just as we are aware—and proud—of modern India’s strong democratic traditions, we are also aware of our responsibility to develop—to seek to bring all our people into the 21st century with comfortably full bellies and comfortably fulfilling occupations. Democracy and human rights are fundamental to who we are; but human rights begin with breakfast.

So modern India has struggled to come to terms with what has sometimes been seen as the competing demands of freedom and development, just as it has struggled with the need to fully respect diversity and at the same time strengthen and pay homage to our sense of identity. Democracy, as precept and practice, will never wear the mantle of perfection. I have written in my books of the many problems that India faces, the poor quality of much of its political leadership, the rampant corruption, the criminalisation of politics. And yet—corruption is being tackled by an activist judiciary and by energetic investigative agencies that have not hesitated to indict the most powerful Indian politicians. (If only the rate of convictions matched the rate of indictments, it would be even better... ) The rule of law remains a vital Indian strength.

The liberal institutions of our civic nationalism give every member of our polity an opportunity to pursue their constitutional rights. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance Government (2004-2014) ensured the rearming of India’s rights regime (with the Right to Information Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Education Act and other liberal entitlements such as to food security and welfare), along with near-double-digit economic growth, a dramatic drop in the number of Indians living below the poverty line and even a nuclear deal with the US. It is that entire edifice of acquired rights for Indians that is under threat from today’s hyper-nationalist assault, in addition to the Nehruvian idea of India and the civic nationalism that informed these rights-based policies.

The challenge in Indian nationalism has always been that of finding ways of acknowledging and accommodating difference. To my mind, this entails one thing: to reaffirm, and to fight for, India’s endangered civic nationalism, in the face of the determined effort to replace it with an ethno-religious nationalism as India’s ruling credo. This must involve a reassertion of our democracy and a defiant deepening of the habits of democratic practice in our political culture, which is in currently the process of wrenching the Indian people away from democracy in the name of identitarian majoritarianism.

The India of tomorrow will only flourish if it resists the undermining of these strengths by a rampant Hindu nationalism, strengthens its civic institutions and shores up its liberal democracy. That is the challenge that awaits India in the 21st century. ■

*Shashi Tharoor is a Member of Parliament and the author, most recently, of The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism*



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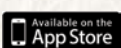
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# IS INDIA STILL PAY CHINA-SUBMISSIVE

The commonsense question is this: How can claims south of the line it created of its own



# ING FOR NEHRU'S POLICY?

China have any more  
volition in 1962?

By MJ AKBAR





# The evolution of Jawaharlal Nehru's

China-submissive policy on Tibet began long before India's Independence. Its origins lie in his deep friendship with Marshal Chiang Kai-shek, leader of Kuomintang China between 1928 and 1949, and concepts of an India-China relationship enunciated by Chiang's ideological and political mentor Sun Yat-sen, father of the historic 1911 revolution that overthrew the 'barbarian' Manchu Qing dynasty and ended 2,000 years of imperial rule.

This projected friendship, however, came at a price. For Chiang, as much as his rival and successor Mao Zedong, the complete integration of Tibet with China was a non-negotiable article of faith. Both believed that their border with India traced a descending arc from Aksai Chin in the west to south of the Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh, or 'South Tibet' in Chinese parlance. Chiang Kai-shek never

hid or disguised this conviction. It was up to India and Nehru to accept a future on these terms.

Reunification was at the top of the 'Three Principles of the People' which Sun Yat-sen established as the basis for the revival of a shattered China: *Minzu* (nationalism), *Minquan* (democratic rights) and *Minsheng* (welfare state). Chinese nationalism was placed in contradistinction to 'ethnic nationalism' and meant the merger of five broad groups into a single national consciousness based on common blood, language, customs and livelihood. Mongol, Tibetan, Manchu and Uyghur Muslims had to set aside their 'deviations' and merge along with the larger Han identity into this 'revived' consciousness. The strength of China, according to this thesis, lay in unity. Tibetan independence was dismissed as a British imperial construct, with the Communists later condemning 'splitting slave-owners' like the Dalai Lama as stooges of

Western imperialism. Chiang, and later Mao, believed that Nehru, as a radical foe of colonialism, would view geography through a Chinese eyeglass.

Sun Yat-sen could not immediately implement what he preached. The road to power is rarely smooth for a revolution. Sun Yat-sen abdicated as provisional president in 1912, believing that he had done his duty by overthrowing the dynasty. His ideas were quickly shredded by leftover elements of the ancient regime, one of whom, Yuan Shikai, even briefly called himself emperor.

On August 25th, 1912, Sun Yat-sen launched his party, the Kuomintang, which went on to win the first elections, albeit with only 2 per cent of the population voting in a limited franchise. His candidate for prime minister, Song Jiaoren, was assassinated on Yuan's orders, his banned party shifted its base to the south, and he went into exile in Japan. China disintegrated





Zhou Enlai and  
Jawaharlal Nehru  
at Palam Air Force  
Station in New Delhi,  
June 28, 1954

GETTY IMAGES

In September 1951, Zhou Enlai provided an opportunity for closure with a statement that there was no territorial dispute with India. But Nehru decided that it would be better to let sleeping boundaries lie

further as warlords retained their control over large parts.

In 1915, Sun Yat-sen married—a second marriage—his secretary Soong Ching-ling, who was three decades younger. She was the daughter of Charlie Soong, who had gone to America to train as a minister in the Methodist church but returned to make a fortune in banking and printing. Charlie Soong's three daughters, Ai-ling, Ching-ling and Mei-ling, were three of the most remarkable sisters in any political history. The eldest married HH Kung, the richest man in the country; the second wed the icon of modern China; and the third became the wife and, arguably, dazzlingly attractive architect of Chiang Kai-shek's fortunes.

Sun Yat-sen returned to China in 1917. He was only 51, and full of renewed ardour. Far more important, however, was that he returned with a new strategy. Reunification was still his core objective, but he realised that he needed more

than words. The threat and use of coercive military action was essential to tame those who would not listen.

That remains the central strategy of the Chinese state while its reunification process continues into the 21st century. As Mao Zedong later put it, negotiations may, or indeed may not, constitute nine fingers of the Chinese hand, but the tenth finger was military force. The Communists added a new dimension by turning the army into a wing of the party rather than the country.

In 1921, Sun Yat-sen assumed power as head of a military government in Guangzhou with the title of Grand Marshal, and prepared for military operations against warlords of the north. By this time, Mahatma Gandhi had changed the nature and direction of India's freedom struggle, turning a still largely elitist Congress into the primary vehicle of a mass movement. Sun Yat-sen recognised this as the 'awakening of

India'. The British Empire, he declaimed, was a third-rate state without India. "India and China," he asserted in 1923, "are the backbone of the oppressed peoples of Asia." Together, they could support a post-colonial structure across the continent. This became a tenet of Kuomintang foreign policy. The need for cooperation was heightened when the British sent Indian troops to support the northern warlords in 1925.

Once again this plea for cooperation came with the Tibet rider. In 1924, Sun Yat-sen delineated his map of a Sino-Indian future which hid nothing and remains an evocative exposition of the Chinese definition of India's limits and China's 'civilisational' space. His speech at Kobe University on November 28th, 1924, helps explain the Beijing view of Nepal and South Asia even a hundred years later.

The danger signals were blinking in high voltage, and everyone looked the other way.

## THE NEPAL SYNDROME

"There are two small countries situated to the north of India, namely Bhutan and Nepal," said the Chinese leader. Tibet was not considered a third country to India's north since it was part of China. "These countries [Nepal and Bhutan] are small in size," he continued, "but are inhabited by a brave, strong, and warlike people...Nepal was, in fact, a great Power in Asia" which never paid tribute to Britain.

But this did not mean that Nepal was independent. Here follows a sentence which should open a few eyes: "Nepal considered China as her suzerain state and up to 1911 Nepal sent annual tribute to China via Tibet...China has degenerated during the last several hundred years, yet Nepal still respects her as a superior State...Nepal has been influenced by Chinese civilisation, which, in her eyes, is the true civilisation, while that of Britain is nothing but the rule of might."

Later, the father of modern China, and an icon revered in both Beijing and Taipei, repeats this claim that Nepal was a tributary state of China, and that status continued: "So Nepal even now willingly respects China as a superior State."

While the future is fraught with possibilities, there might be more than one explanation for Mandarin being taught in Nepalese schools at Beijing's expense.

In the 1920s, however, Britain could be reviled but not ignored. As long as the Raj existed, Tibet would remain independent, a buffer between empire and China. It made sense to befriend a rising Congress star with a predilection for foreign

policy and a worldview that placed imperialism and colonialism as implacable enemies of subjugated people.

## AN ENCOUNTER IN BRUSSELS

The first international conference which Jawaharlal Nehru attended took place in 1927 at Brussels. The theme was perfectly suited to his left-leaning heart. The International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism had, with good reason, Britain at the top of its agenda while it kept a beady eye on the 'rising imperialism of the United States' in Latin America (the phrase is from Nehru's official report to the Congress party). The three nations designated to lead the world out of oppression were China, Mexico and India. China was doing its bit already with partial funding of this conference.

Nehru was in his element at Brussels. As member of the



Indian soldiers dragging artillery during the 1962 war with China

presiding committee, he helped set the day's agenda. He was among the inaugural speakers, and was appointed to the executive committee of the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence. One of his colleagues on the committee was Soong Ching-ling, now widow of Sun Yat-sen, who had suddenly died of ill health in March 1925.

Nehru described the Chinese delegation, which included Liao Huanxing and Xion Guanguan, as "very young and full of enthusiasm". He signed a joint declaration with the Chinese on the importance of cooperation and said in his speech at the conference: "The noble example of the Chinese nationalists filled us with hope, and we earnestly want as soon as we can to be able to emulate them and follow in their footsteps." The bonhomie of Brussels warmed into an important friendship with Chiang Kai-shek's China over the next two decades.

The idea that germinated in Nehru's mind was the prospect of India and China becoming the backbone of a pan-Asian alliance. This would develop and expand into an Afro-Asian and then worldwide alliance of the "Third World" which became a central plank of his foreign policy, leading to the birth of the non-aligned movement in 1961.

After his mentor's death, Chiang Kai-shek took over his party and army, and split the alliance with the Communists fostered by Sun Yat-sen, setting off the friction that would lead to civil war. By 1928, his forces had entered Beijing. He chose Nanking as his capital but the consolidation of China was again interrupted, this time by the Japanese invasion of 1937.

All through the 1930s, Nehru promoted multi-faceted relations with China, which he described as 'India's sister in ancient history' in a letter to his daughter Indira Gandhi. For him, the partnership was politically astute and a civilisational

erally made India a belligerent in the war without consulting Indians. (Mao, interestingly, approved of Gandhi's decision to keep the Congress out of World War II, while Chiang wanted full Indian cooperation. Mao only joined the Allies after Germany declared war on the Soviet Union.)

In Chongqing, Nehru's personal equation with Marshal and Madame Chiang took on a much warmer hue. He proposed a seven-point programme for India-China friendship that included exchange mechanisms for cooperation in cottage industry, culture, politics and universities. Chinese delegates were invited to All India Congress Committee (AICC) sessions. Chiang wanted to send a delegation to India consisting of Soong Ching-ling, Wang Jingwei and Ku Meng-yu. That is when the British stepped in. They refused to give visas. But they could not stop statements and letters. Both Chiang and Mao protested when Nehru was interred in 1941; and both

Ching-ling and Mei-ling wrote to Nehru when he was imprisoned after the Quit India movement in 1942.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was reluctant to host Chiang Kai-shek when the Chinese leader, appointed commander-in-chief of the Allied forces for South-east Asia after Pearl Harbour, wanted to visit India in early 1942. His mission was intended to be helpful. He wanted to break the deadlock between the Raj and Gandhi, using his friend Nehru as a plausible intermediary. This would enable India to play a full hand in the war, then at a critical phase as Japan's seemingly invincible machine, having wept through East Asia, put India in its sights.


Churchill could not stop Chiang, but the mission failed. As the British archly noted in their official record,

Nehru clung to his friends like nettle during the Chiang visit. China's first couple also met his sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who would play an influential role after 1947 as India's envoy to Washington and the United Nations. She and Soong Meiling became good friends.

The complex interplay between friendship, utopian ideas and the demands of national interest would reach centrestage of this political drama in less than five years.

## THE RAJ AND TIBET

**Lieutenant Colonel Sir Vincent Arthur Henry McMahon** demarcated the eastern border between British India and Tibet, confirmed by both countries at the Simla Convention in 1914. Tibet was represented by Lonchen Satra. China



Nehru complained after the 1962 defeat that he had been stabbed in the back by China. This was incorrect. He had been stabbed from the front because his vision had become befogged by unreal objectives and transcendent rhetoric

imperative. When the Japanese invaded on July 7th, 1937, Nehru led the Indian campaign to support China. As president of the Congress, he announced a China Day on September 26th, 1937, called for a boycott of Japanese goods and appealed for donations to the Chinese war effort. In 1938, the heroic medical team led by Dwarkanath Kotnis left for the Chinese front, earning plaudits from both Kuomintang Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists. This culminated in an invitation to visit China in 1939.

In August, Nehru left by an Air France plane, *Ville de Calcutta*, for Hanoi, and later sailed up the Yangtze to reach the wartime capital, Chongqing. Chiang Kai-shek welcomed him as "an intimate friend". From his base, Mao sent a telegram inviting the Indian leader to Yan'an. Much to his regret, Nehru could not go as he had to cut short his visit after Britain unilat-

repudiated the draft agreement of April 27th and its representative, Ivan Chen, refused to sign the final document on July 3rd, 1914. McMahon's own career became controversial when in 1917 he was forced to resign as High Commissioner in Cairo after the Russians stepped out of World War I and revealed details of the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France, carving up Arab lands between their empires after the war, instead of giving Arabs what they had been promised in return for their support.

But there was no ambiguity in British minds, till the last days of the Raj, about the independent status of Tibet, despite the fact that Chiang Kai-shek was a critical ally in World War II. One story from the sixth volume of the *Transfer of Power* papers is sufficient to illustrate this.

On March 3rd, 1946, the penultimate Viceroy, Lord Wavell, reported in his cable to London that an official mission from Lhasa had called on him, laden with gifts and formal letters for both him and King George. Wavell noted that Chiang Kai-shek's ambassador in Delhi (the name is not mentioned in the British records but we can surmise that it was Lo Chialuw) had attempted to force himself into the delegation and gate-crash the lunch, arguing that Tibet was part of China. He was snubbed with a 'stiff' letter pointing out that he had not been invited. The only unusual part of the lunch was that it had to be rushed since the Tibetans did not want to miss the start of the Delhi races.

This was the policy that Nehru sought to subvert, and then reverse, even before he became Prime Minister of independent India, in late 1946 and early 1947.

The world, ravaged by a devastating war on the one side and dislocated by the surge of anti-colonial sentiment on the other, was in a fluid phase. In India, the trauma had begun. The Muslim League was on a rampage after the Great Calcutta Killings of August 16th, 1946, described in its pamphlets as the beginning of a 'jihad' for Pakistan. A gruesome reaction followed in Bihar and Noakhali in Bengal.

In the first week of September, Nehru was sworn in as head of an Interim Government as part of the process towards freedom. Strangely, at the top of Nehru's mind was not an immediate conference on national unity, but one on Asian amity. Within days of taking a transitional office, Nehru announced that an Asian Relations Conference would be convened in March 1947. It was obvious to him that China's presence would be vital to its success. The organising committee, exercising a latitude which included Georgia in the west and both Jewish and Arab delegations, invited Tibet as well.

A livid Chiang Kai-shek threatened to stop the Chinese delegation from attending. The first moment for clarity on Tibet had come. After all, the organising committee was Nehru's creation. It was following the prevalent international consensus on Tibetan independence. Lhasa had an independent government. But Nehru demonstrated, in his first test, that for him relations with China were more important than the freedom of Tibet. He buckled.

Hesitant word through KPS Menon that Tibet's status would not be raised at the meet. Chiang Kai-shek relented, and the four participants from Lhasa were given instructions to keep quiet.

This was not enough for the Chinese. Chiang undermined Nehru's desire to make India the permanent host of pan-Asian gatherings. Another leader might have taken diplomatic umbrage, at least temporarily. But Nehru continued to stretch the elasticity of concessions to China during the next 10 years over Tibet in public, and over the United Nations Security Council seat in private, with a generosity that can only be described as mind-boggling.

Both Chiang and Mao believed that their border with India traced a descending arc from Aksai Chin in the west to south of the Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh, or 'South Tibet' in Chinese parlance. Chiang Kai-shek never hid or disguised this conviction. It was up to India and Nehru to accept a future on these terms

## THE COST OF BROTHERHOOD

India became the first non-socialist country to recognise the Communist government in Beijing after Mao Zedong seized power in late 1949 and Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. In May 1950, Nehru sent an ambassador to Beijing who, till the end of his tenure in September 1952, seemed more comfortable justifying Communist China's actions to Delhi than conveying India's concerns to Beijing. KM Panikkar was an Oxbridge historian drafted into the foreign service; his left-leaning formulations were consistent with the anti-colonial sentiments of progressive opinion in that age. The problem

was that when this clashed with India's national interests, the compromise was often at the cost of the latter.

Mao did not waste much time on Tibet. Between October 6th and 7th, 1950, his troops routed the militarily weak Tibetan resistance at Chamdo. A trade delegation from Lhasa was in Delhi at that time; it had no clue. The official word from Beijing over the next fortnight was "no comment" but the *People's Daily* reported that Tibetan women had begun to sing "Mao is the rising sun of Tibet", always an ominous sign. China only confirmed on October 24th that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been ordered to free three million

the frontiers of China.'

This said it all. The PLA would defend the frontiers of China and the frontiers would now run along the Himalayas.

The one senior colleague to warn Nehru of dire consequences was Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who wrote a letter on November 7th, 1950 predicting that the Chinese would soon disown all border agreements with Tibet. Nehru dismissed these concerns in his reply of November 18th, 1950, saying: 'If we lose our sense of perspective and world strategy and give way to unreasoning fears, then any policy is likely to fail.'

There was nothing unreasonable about Patel's fears.

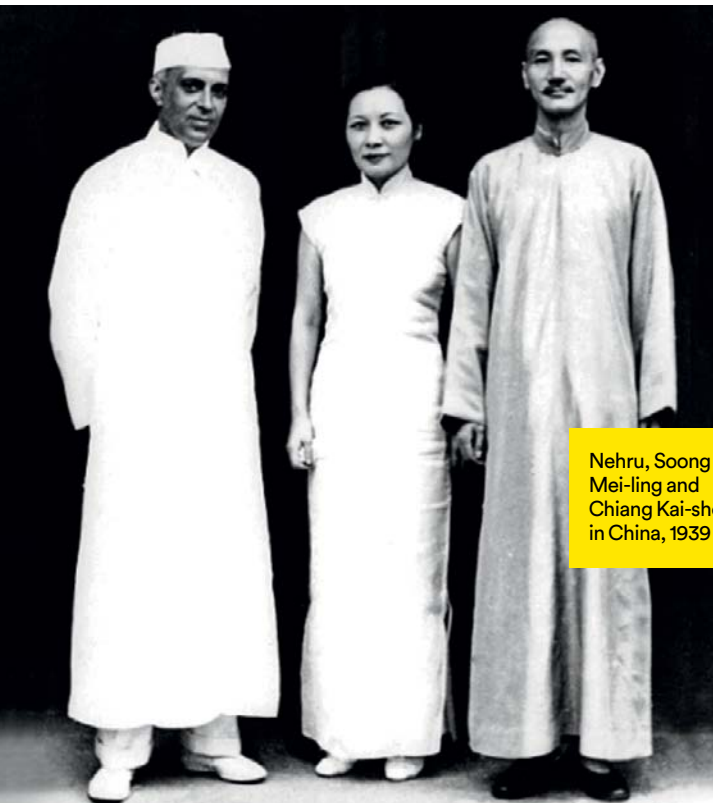
On November 20th, Nehru told India's Parliament that the "McMahon Line is our boundary and that is our boundary—map or no map". But there was now a crucial difference on the ground. That line was now a border with China, not Tibet. Since China did not recognise the independence of Tibet, it was under no obligation to accept what Lhasa had signed.

While the PLA consolidated its hold on Tibet, Beijing applied the soft touch on Delhi as it first brought Lhasa into line. Mao attended the Republic Day celebrations at the Indian embassy in 1951. On May 23rd, 1951, the Tibetans accepted the 17-point 'Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' and the annexation was legalised. Tibetan delegates were initially puzzled by the first point, which asked them to 'unite and drive out imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet', for the only aggressive forces they had seen came from the east. They wanted to know who the imperialists were. But victors do not have to answer questions.

Perhaps the Indian mission was not reporting back to Delhi that the Chinese media was describing Nehru as a 'bourgeois imperialist' and 'running dog' of British imperialism. This too has become a familiar practice. Beijing uses a section of its obedient media to send aggressive signals while officials make official noises.

In September 1951, Zhou Enlai provided an opportunity for closure with a statement that there was no territorial dispute with India. The experienced bureaucrat, Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, first Secretary General in External Affairs but now governor of a state, asked his old ministry to seize the chance as China was likely to activate disputes later, when it might not be to India's liking or interest. But Nehru, after consulting Panikkar, decided that raising the issue then would force China into renegotiations that might become hostile. It would be better to let sleeping boundaries lie. Nehru had clearly made a mistake.

This error, made in the public domain, was nothing compared to a colossal misjudgement made in the secrecy of private confabulations.



Nehru, Soong Mei-ling and Chiang Kai-shek in China, 1939

Tibetans from "imperialist oppression".

Delhi protested on October 27th, more evidence that the official policy of India was still firmly on the side of Tibetan independence. The protest added that this would make it difficult for India to support China's membership of the United Nations—yet another policy that Nehru would quickly suborn in pursuit of his romantic visions of Indo-Chinese brotherhood. The Communist regime sent a firm reply: 'Tibet is an integral part of China, and the problem of Tibet is entirely a domestic problem of China. The Chinese People's Liberation Army must enter Tibet, liberate the Tibetan people and defend

## THE SECURITY COUNCIL BLUNDER

**In August 1950, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, then in America, sent a secret letter to her brother Jawaharlal that the US wanted India to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. She says in this document, now lodged at the Nehru Memorial library: 'One matter that is being cooked up in the State Department should be known to you. This is the unseating of [Communist] China as a Permanent Member in the Security Council and of India being put in her place.'**

John Foster Dulles, then Secretary of State, anxious to move in this direction, was persuading influential columnists to build public opinion along these lines. Nehru quickly sabotaged this effort, and Pandit passed on word that the American effort to make India a permanent member would not be received with much warmth in India. Nehru wrote to her: 'In your letter you mention that the State Department is trying to unseat China as a Permanent Member of the Security Council and to put India in her place. So far as we are concerned, we are not going to countenance it. That would be bad from every point of view. It would be a clear affront to China and it would mean some kind of a break between us and China. I suppose that the State Department would not like that [India rejecting the offer], but we have no intention of following that course. We shall go on pressing for China's admission in the UN and Security Council.'

Nehru accepted that India was entitled to this seat, but 'not at the cost of China'. He would not countenance taking India into the Security Council because of China's claim. He had to keep his rejection secret, because there would have been a public outcry against such a suicidal decision. It is perfectly reasonable to surmise that Nehru's Cabinet might not have agreed with him.

In 1955, Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin made a similar suggestion. Sarvepalli Gopal, official biographer of Nehru, writes that the Indian Prime Minister insisted that priority be given to China. He added that he had previously rejected such an American offer, obviously making a virtue of his actions.

This was an astonishing sacrifice of Indian national interest in the quest of some quixotic international dream, whether we see it in the context of 1950 or 2020. Nehru had taken the Kashmir dispute to the United Nations. Instead of acquiring a veto for India, he handed it to a country which has become Pakistan's lifeline ally. Nor is it that China ever felt the need to reciprocate. Seven decades later, China remains the principal obstacle to India's membership of the Security Council.

The high point of this China-submissive diplomacy was the Panchsheel (Five Virtues) Agreement of April 29th, 1954, more accurately called the 'Agreement on Trade and Inter-course between the Tibet region of China and India', signed by Indian Ambassador N Raghavan and Deputy Foreign

# T H E R O

## India-China border dispute

**DECEMBER 1949** India grants diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China

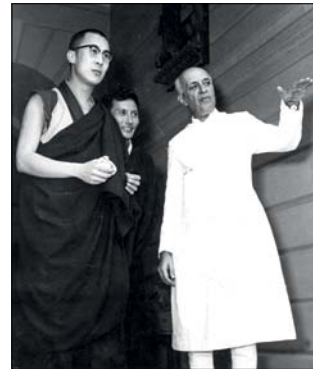
**OCTOBER 1950** China invades Tibet

**MAY 1954** India and China sign the Panchsheel agreement

**APRIL 1959** The Dalai Lama escapes from Tibet and crosses into India. Beijing protests New Delhi's decision to grant him asylum

**SEPTEMBER 1959** The PRC officially refuses to accept the McMahon Line as the boundary

**APRIL 1960** Meeting between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai in Delhi fails to produce any result on the border dispute



**OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 1962** India-China war. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) attacks across the LAC and overruns Indian outposts. The war ends in India's defeat when China declares a unilateral ceasefire on November 21st and withdraws behind the LAC. China retains Aksai Chin. India accepts Zhou Enlai's ceasefire proposal in December 1962

**MARCH 1963** Boundary agreement between China and Pakistan. More than 5,000 sq km of territory in Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir (PoK) handed to China

# A D T O G A L W A N

over the decades

**NOVEMBER 1965** The PLA intrudes into Sikkim and NEFA, a few months after Beijing accuses Indian soldiers of crossing into China from Sikkim

**SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1967** The Nathu La and Cho La clashes along the Sikkim border are the closest India and China come to war after 1962. This time, it ends to India's advantage as its troops destroy several PLA outposts and the Chinese suffer many casualties



**APRIL 1975** Beijing criticises Sikkim's merger with India

**OCTOBER 1975** Four Indian soldiers are killed in a PLA ambush at Tulung La in Arunachal. This will be the last time Indian and Chinese troops exchange fire on the border for at least the next 45 years

**DECEMBER 1986** Beijing criticises Arunachal Pradesh's change of status to full statehood

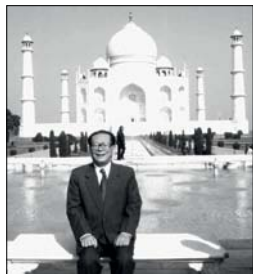
**DECEMBER 1988** Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visits China. It is decided that a joint working group on the boundary question would be set up

**DECEMBER 1991** Premier Li Peng visits India, the first by a Chinese premier in more than three decades. Li agrees to resolve the boundary dispute

**SEPTEMBER 1993** Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao visits China and signs the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement



**NOVEMBER 1996** Chinese President Jiang Zemin visits India. An agreement on confidence-building measures along the LAC is signed



**MAY-AUGUST 1998** Beijing condemns the Pokharan II nuclear tests and Defence Minister George Fernandes' comment that China is India's biggest threat. But talks begin on reopening the Kailash-Mansarovar route. A year later, China remains neutral over the Kargil War

**FEBRUARY 2000** Despite the Karmapa row, India helps China's entry into the World Trade Organization

**JANUARY-MARCH 2002** Following Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's visit to India in January, Delhi and Beijing agree to delineate the LAC quickly and resolve the border dispute

**JUNE 2003** Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visits China



**JULY 2006** Nathu La Pass reopens after almost 44 years

**2007-2011** Denial of Chinese visa to Arunachal chief minister as China says it does recognise Indian sovereignty over the state. This is the beginning of the visa denial and stapled visa regime

**APRIL 2013** The PLA intrudes into the Depsang area in Ladakh, almost 20 km across the LAC



**SEPTEMBER 2014** Chinese President Xi Jinping visits India. Through the duration of the visit, the Indian army and the PLA confront each other in Ladakh after Chinese incursions across the LAC

**MAY-JUNE 2017** India refuses to join the Belt and Road Initiative summit in Beijing. But it is admitted to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a full member



**JUNE-AUGUST 2017**

Standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in Bhutan's Doklam plateau over China's construction of a road in the strategic tri-border area. India wins a tactical victory when both sides withdraw, but China returns to Doklam soon after



By SUDEEP PAUL

Minister of China, Zhang Hanfu. In retrospect, they seem variations of a single virtue: non-aggression. This meant in hard reality that India could not interfere in Tibet, while China, at any time of its choosing, could challenge the boundaries by claiming that Indian territory was part of Tibet. It is pertinent to note that even before the ink had dried on the Panchsheel deal, Beijing published maps showing Aksai Chin as a part of China even though borders had not been delineated, let alone demarcated.

While on the streets of India, the ancient sister civilisations turned into a brotherhood (“Hindi-Chini *bhai bhai*”), China used the next eight years to shift the narrative, strengthen its capabilities and prepare for a war that would solve its problems, destroy Nehru’s credibility, and dent India’s reputation. According to Jonathan Ward, author of *China’s Vision of Victory* (2019), Mao said he wanted war because India had to be “taught a lesson” and described the war itself as “rational, beneficial” and “courteous”. 1962 was certainly the oddest instance of courtesy since Cain settled his problems with his brother Abel in the Biblical era of Adam and Eve. (Ward was quoting from Chinese official records and diplomatic archives.)

Nehru, and his Defence Minister after 1957, VK Krishna Menon, never adequately explained why they believed China would never go to war, and why they left the Himalayas defenceless. Nehru was always eager to take the most positive interpretation of China’s intentions. YD Gundevia, an admirer who became Nehru’s foreign secretary, recalls in his memoirs that in August 1948 he brought a message from Burmese Prime Minister Thakin Nu that a defence pact between India and Burma would help both in any future confrontation with China. Nehru got so angry, Gundevia recalls, that he began to shout. “He must be crazy,” said Nehru. “Does he want to provoke China? What is China going to do with Burma? It’s nonsense. It is real nonsense. I will explain to him [Thakin] when he comes.” There was no defence pact, of course.

A throwaway remark reveals that by the mid-1950s Nehru was certainly aware of the Chinese build-up. This comment was made in 1954 during the parliamentary debate on rice supplies through India to Chinese troops in Tibet, without the knowledge of the Dalai Lama, as yet another favour to China.

In one more remarkable instance of appeasement, India agreed to supply rice for Chinese troops in Tibet after a request from Beijing during a severe shortage. Ever determined to add to the political balance of goodwill, Nehru complied. According to one account, a foreign prince holidaying in Kalimpong first revealed that goods were going by mule track to the PLA

from India, but mistakenly believed that they were military supplies. Nehru admitted that 1,000 tonnes of rice had been sent, although others have put the figure at 10,000 tonnes. Be that as it may, Nehru certainly misled Parliament when he claimed that the rice was supplied because of famine in Tibet. There was no famine, and in any case, the staple diet of Tibetans was tsampa or roast barley. Nehru insisted that the “humanitarian” supplies would continue. What made him angry was the report that India was sending military material. As he said, the Chinese “had far more supplies than we possessed”.

If this was true of 1954 and 1955, why was no effort made to redress the imbalance? Instead, under Defence Minister Krishna Menon’s watch, defence production was downgrad-

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Mao Zedong and Nehru in Beijing, October 26, 1954

ed, which amounts to virtual criminal negligence. At the time of freedom, India had the best defence production facilities in Asia, with Japan having been defeated and disarmed. But when in 1957 Nehru initiated a ‘forward policy’ on establishing border posts, this was not complemented by sufficient equipment or even adequate clothing needed for mountain warfare. By December 1959, influential Americans like Senator John F Kennedy were predicting that India’s competition, not cooperation, with China for Asian pre-eminence would become a decisive struggle during the 1960s.

The Chinese were far better prepared for this struggle. On January 23rd, 1959, Zhou Enlai had stepped up the ante by pointing out that no agreement had ever been concluded



between the “Chinese central government” (as distinct presumably from a Chinese ‘regional’ government in Lhasa) and Delhi. This was precisely what Bajpai had warned about in 1951. Zhou added, in a coup de grace, that he had not raised the border dispute before (including in 1954 when India formally surrendered on Tibet) because “the time was not ripe”.

By 1959, the acrid smell of bitterness filled the air and by April 1961, BN Mullick, the director of the Intelligence Bureau, was warning that the Chinese were planning to advance. But Menon remained compulsively complacent. Nehru initiated a debate on foreign policy in Rajya Sabha on August 22nd, 1961 saying that India was not thinking of a long war in the Himalayas, and that diplomats would persuade the Chinese that

haver Tyagi, entered the world book of anecdote when he stood up in Parliament in response to Prime Minister Nehru’s effort to minimise the loss of vast tracts in Aksai Chin by saying it was so barren that not a single blade of grass grew on its rocky expanse. Tyagi took off his Gandhi cap, bowed his pate and pointed out that not a single blade of grass grew on his bald head either, but was that any reason to hand it over to someone else?

India’s defeat in 1962 was comprehensive. The war began with a massive Chinese invasion across chosen fronts on October 20th, and ended only when China announced a ceasefire on November 20th. Within another 10 days, China withdrew to a self-defined ‘Line of Actual Control’. India, unable

to prevent the advance, had no say in the retreat. China retained 2,500 square miles in the west.

The commonsense question is this: How can China have any more claims south of the line it created of its own volition in 1962?

If it did not occupy the Galwan Valley then, to give only one example of many, what rationale, or indeed the famous Maoist ‘courtesy’, enables it to claim anything more south of the LAC? India was in no position to impose anything in 1962. China was, and did. Common sense indicates that, at least as far as China is concerned, the matter should be considered over. The only nation with any possible grievance after 1962 is India. The Line of Actual Control is in effect a line that China drew.


Is the truth about the China border policy elsewhere? Is its strategy to nibble away, to eat what it can from a neighbour’s plate each time it considers the ‘time to be right’, to repeat Zhou Enlai’s phrase? History is witness to a different proposition. Times change.

China’s assessment about the ripe moment was right in 1962.

China’s assessment about the ripe moment in 2020 is wrong. ■



*MJ Akbar is an MP and the author of, among other titles, Nehru: The Making of India*



The Security Council blunder was an astonishing sacrifice of Indian national interest in the quest of some quixotic international dream. **Nehru had taken the Kashmir dispute to the UN. Instead of acquiring a veto for India, he handed it to a country which has become Pakistan’s lifeline ally**

their claims were wrong.

The long road of strategic concessions and defence indifference had to end in the capitulation of 1962. Nehru complained after the defeat that he had been stabbed in the back by China. This was incorrect. He had been stabbed from the front because his vision had become befogged by unreal objectives and transcendent rhetoric.

## A COMMONSENSE QUESTION ON AKSAI CHIN

In 1962, after the humiliation on the battlefield, a relatively unknown Congress Member of Parliament, Ma-



# CHINA THROUGH A CHALLENGE

To blunt Xi Jinping's expansionism and to halt further Chinese encroachments, India must bare its own teeth and implement a containment strategy, including by joining hands with like-minded powers

By **BRAHMA CHELLANEY**

Indian soldiers at the foothills of a mountain range near Leh in Ladakh, June 25

# W S D O W N E T O I N D I A

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**ighting two battles simultaneously—one against Chinese aggression in Ladakh and another against the China-originating coronavirus—India finds itself at a critical juncture in its post-Independence history. How India emerges from the dual crises will not only decide Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s political future but, more importantly, have an important bearing on the country’s future trajectory and international standing.**

The bare fact is that China’s stealth aggression in the second half of April caught India napping, with the armed forces discovering the intrusions in early May. In a swift operation that must have been planned months ahead, China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) forcibly changed the status quo by encroaching into disputed and undisputed border areas of Ladakh. This came at a time when a distracted India was wrestling with the coronavirus outbreak by enforcing the world’s strictest lockdown.

Since the 1980s, China has been eating away—bite by bite—at India’s Himalayan borderlands, even as successive Indian prime ministers have pursued a policy of appeasement toward Beijing. India is now reaping the bitter fruit of such appeasement.

In comparison with China’s intrusions in the past years, its latest aggression is unprecedented. The well-coordinated encroachments were strategically geared to creating new facts on the ground by grabbing vantage locations, with the intent to secure militarily commanding positions and render Indian defences vulnerable. This was underscored by the PLA’s occupation of the key strategic heights around Lake Pangong, in the area stretching from Fingers 4 to 8, and by its encampments atop Galwan Valley’s ridges that overlook India’s newly built Darbuk-Shyok-DBO highway. That highway is a key supply route to India’s most forward military base located near the Karakoram Pass.

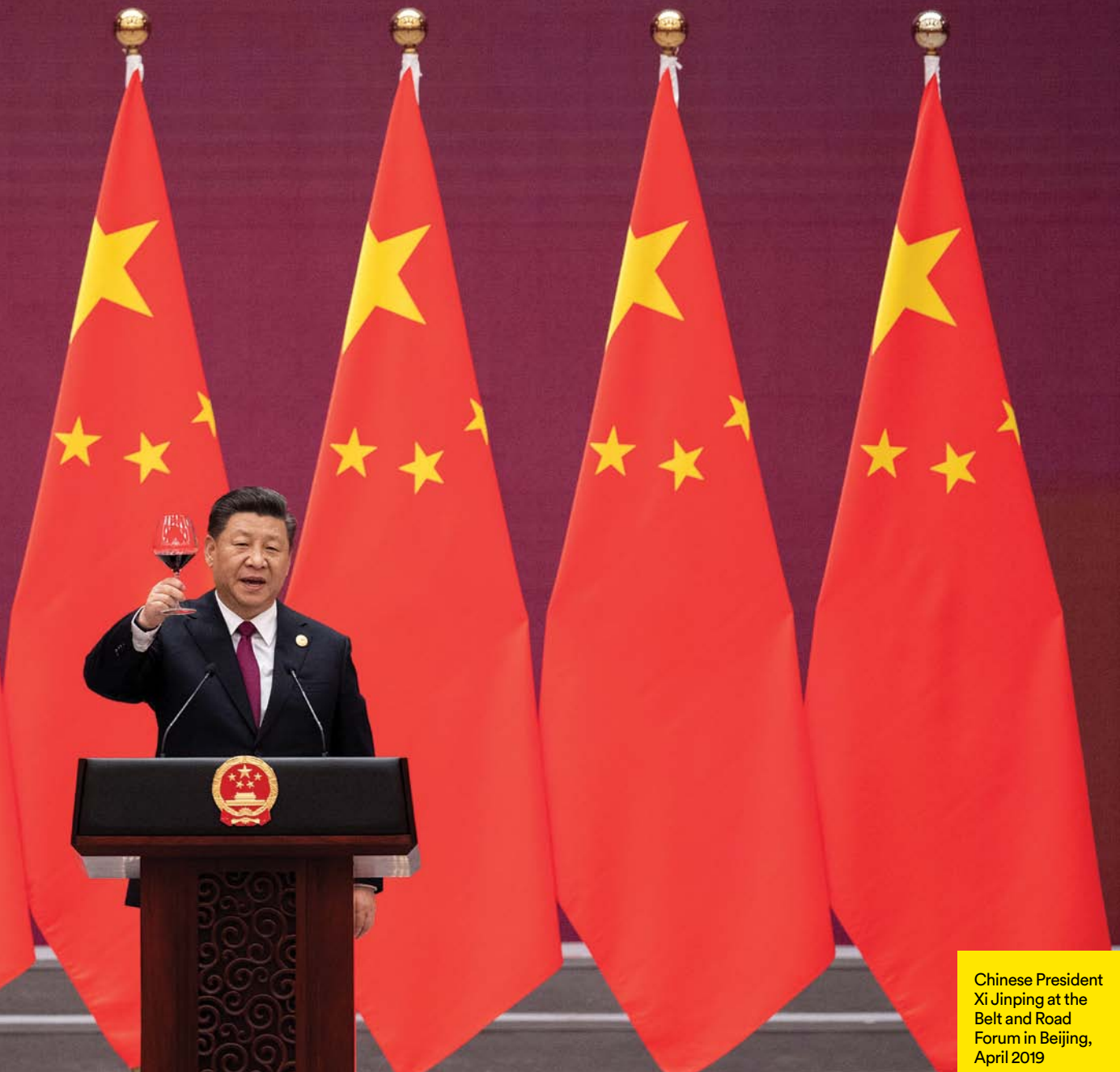


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Although China provoked bloody clashes at the Sikkim-Tibet border in 1967 and triggered border skirmishes in 1986-1987 by crossing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Samdorong Chu, this year has marked the first time that it has opened military pressure points against India in peacetime all along the Himalayan frontier. To mount pressure on India, China not only has amassed forces along the Himalayan frontier but also provoked a series of clashes with Indian troops, even along Sikkim’s 206-km border with Tibet.

### **CHINA SEES CONFLICT AS INEVITABLE**

**Although China has risen from a backward, poor state to a global economic powerhouse, the key elements in its statecraft and strategic doctrine have not changed. Since the Mao Zedong era, China has adhered to the ancient military strategist Sun Tzu’s advice: The ability to subdue the enemy**



Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, April 2019

without any battle is the ultimate reflection of the most supreme strategy.' This has meant exploiting the opponent's weaknesses and camouflaging offense as defence. 'All warfare,' Sun Tzu also famously said, 'is based on deception.'

Communist China has repeatedly used force since 1950. This happened even under Deng Xiaoping, who sought to "teach a lesson" to Vietnam in 1979, in the style of Mao's 1962 war on India. Whenever China has used force, it has been in the form of military pre-emption, executed through deception, concealment and surprise. Its latest aggression against India had all these elements.

The Chinese system sees conflict as inherent in China's efforts to resolutely achieve its rightful place in the world and to assert its territorial claims and broader strategic interests. Beijing is thus ever willing to create or manage conflict. From employing its trade muscle to inflict commercial pain on countries that challenge it to exploiting its monopoly on the

global production of a vital resource like rare-earth minerals, China has staked out a muscular, conflict-making role. As a *Global Times* editorial on June 22nd said in relation to India, 'The border dispute has made it clear that China is not afraid of conflicts when it comes to territorial issues.'

Against this background, a China-India agreement to de-escalate tensions will offer Beijing an opportunity to escalate its game of deception, with the aim of buying time and consolidating its hold on the newly encroached areas. China usually takes one step at a time in its relentless push to expand its land and sea frontiers. In the coming years, it could seek to replicate its Pangong territorial grab in other strategic Ladakh areas, such as Depsang, Demchok and Chumar.

In fact, India's perennially reactive mode has long allowed the PLA to keep the initiative in the Himalayas. The PLA began honing its 'salami tactics' in the Himalayas in the 1950s, when it sliced off the Switzerland-size Aksai Chin plateau from

Ladakh. Later, China inflicted a humiliating defeat on India in the 1962 war, securing peace, as a state mouthpiece crowed in 2012, on its own terms.

Today, China pursues a ‘cabbage’ approach to borders, cutting off access to an adversary’s previously controlled territory and gradually surrounding it with multiple security layers. China has been gradually subverting the status quo in the South and East China Seas, its border with India and even the flows of international rivers—all without firing a single shot.

Operating in the threshold between peace and war, China has pursued increasingly persistent efforts to intrude into India’s desolate borderlands. Yet India has silently faced China’s bulletless war for territory without a concrete counterstrategy to impose costs for such revisionism. As China’s coercive power grows, it is likely to increasingly employ its capabilities not to wage fullscale military conflict with another country but to

The Himalayan frontier is vast, inhospitable and difficult to patrol, giving an advantage to a determined aggressor. Kiren Rijiju, India’s then Minister of State for Home Affairs, told Parliament in 2014 that, on average, China was launching at least one stealth border transgression into Indian territory every day. According to Rijiju, PLA troops were intruding into vacant border spaces with the objective of occupying them.

China’s high-altitude territorial incursions gained momentum after then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2003 surrendered India’s Tibet card by formally recognising Tibet as part of China. Beijing exploited Vajpayee’s yearning for a successful China visit by extracting concessions that presented India as seemingly willing to accept a Sinocentric Asia. For the first time, India used the legal term ‘recognise’—in a joint document signed by the heads of the two countries—to accept what China calls the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as ‘part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China’.

Vajpayee’s gratuitous concession on Tibet—a large historical buffer between the Indian and Chinese civilisations that the Chinese communists annexed in 1950-1951—acted as a spur to China’s creeping aggression. It was in the period after India’s Tibet cave-in that the Chinese coined the term ‘South Tibet’ for the Austria-size Arunachal Pradesh. The cave-in also set in motion stepped-up Chinese incursions and other border transgressions, with such scofflaw actions steadily increasing from 2005 to 2020, as India’s own figures underscore.

In the Himalayas, like in the South China Sea, China has in some instances employed civilian resources as the tip of its intrusion strategy. While China’s naval forces in the South China Sea have followed Chinese fish-

ermen to carve out space for occupying reefs, in the Himalayan region, the PLA has used specially recruited Han Chinese herders and grazers to encroach on some Indian frontier areas.

China’s stealth wars have already become a leading cause of geopolitical instability in Asia. India is a principal target of such stealth wars. China has been posing new challenges to India, ratcheting up strategic pressure on multiple flanks, including by reviving old territorial claims and constantly expanding its claim lines in the Himalayas. Given that the two countries share the world’s longest disputed land border, India is particularly vulnerable to direct military pressure from China. Indeed, the largest territory that China seeks, Arunachal Pradesh, is almost three times as large as Taiwan.

Thanks to such PLA tactics, India has over the years lost considerable land in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. In Ladakh, for example, PLA’s nibbling at Indian territories has re-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping in Wuhan, April 2018

sulted in its capture of Chumar's Tia Pangnak and Chabji Valley and an ancient trading centre, Doom Cheley. China has been able to advance its territorial aggrandisement along the Himalayan frontier (and in the South China Sea) without the need for missiles or bullets.

Yet, without realising it, successive Indian prime ministers have aided or condoned China's terrestrial aggression. In fact, their naïve statements have encouraged greater Chinese incursions. Take Modi, who prioritised resetting ties with China after becoming Prime Minister in 2014 without any prior national experience.

In 2017, Modi said that, although China and India are at odds over their borders, it was remarkable that “in the last 40 years, not a single bullet has been fired because of [it]”. The Chinese foreign ministry responded by praising Modi's “positive remarks”. Modi's predecessor, Manmohan Singh, for his part, used to claim that, in their 5,000-year history, India and China fought only one war, in 1962. What this rose-tinted history failed to acknowledge was that China and India became neighbours only after China completed its capture of Tibet in 1951.

India's accommodating rhetoric has helped China's designs to such an extent that the phrase Modi coined, “inch toward miles”, as the motto of India-China cooperation actually reflects the PLA strategy of incremental encroachments. While India-China cooperation has yet to inch toward miles, the PLA has been busy translating Modi's slogan into practice.

## SLIPPERY SLOPE OF APPEASEMENT

**When China caught India's undermanned and ill-equipped army napping by launching a surprise, a multi-pronged military attack across the Himalayas on October 20th, 1962, the humiliation that ensued marked a tectonic moment in India's post-Independence history. Taking an enemy by surprise confers a significant tactical advantage in war, and the Chinese invasion inflicted an immense psychological and political shock on India that greatly magnified the initial military advances that China achieved.**

Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai publicly said that the war was intended “to teach India a lesson”. China's blitzkrieg created gloom and a defeatist mindset in India and forced its army to retreat to defensive positions. India even shied away from employing its air power for fear of unknown consequences, although the Chinese military lacked effective air cover for its advancing forces. India's then Prime Minister Jawahar-

Since the 1980s, China has been eating away—bite by bite—at India's Himalayan borderlands, even as successive Indian prime ministers have pursued a policy of appeasement toward Beijing. India is now reaping the bitter fruit of such appeasement

lal Nehru publicly bemoaned that China had “returned evil for good”. It was Nehru's persistent appeasement toward China that set in motion the events leading to the 1962 Chinese invasion.

India's defeat led to profound developments. It hastened the death of Nehru and set in motion fundamental changes in the country's policy and approach, including the launch of military modernisation. Yet, by the late 1980s, appeasement returned as the leitmotif of India's China policy. Today, nearly 58 years after 1962, Indian appeasement toward China has again resulted

in developments inimical to India's security. War clouds have suddenly appeared. India has largely forgotten the lessons of 1962, including the costs of reposing faith in China's words.

Appeasement is a slippery, treacherous slope. Once a nation embarks on appeasement, it slips into a self-perpetuating trap. Every prime minister after Indira Gandhi has kowtowed to China. Indian appeasement resumed with Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 Beijing visit and deepened with Vajpayee's 2003 surrender of India's Tibet card. Modi, for his part, has taken appeasement to a new level.

The paradox is that, in the post-Indira Gandhi period, every time India has stood up to China, it has been followed by New Delhi's kowtow to Beijing. The Sumdorong Chu confrontation was followed by Rajiv Gandhi paying obeisance to Beijing. In 2017, Indian forces resolutely halted PLA's effort to build a road to the Indian border through the uninhabited Doklam plateau that India's ally, Bhutan, regards as its own territory. This action was followed by Modi's kowtow to China.

It was Modi, as Chinese President Xi Jinping later revealed, that proposed an annual “informal” bilateral summit—a proposal that led to the so-called Wuhan process. Xi gladly accepted Modi's proposal of early 2018 because high-level meetings aid China's ‘engagement with containment’ strategy toward India.

Worse still, Modi initiated this process despite China's seizure of Doklam. After the 73-day troop standoff at the southwestern edge of Doklam ended with an agreement to disengage, China launched frenzied construction of military fortifications and seized control of almost the entire plateau, other than the corner where the faceoff had occurred. By the time Modi decided to travel to Wuhan, the Doklam plateau, which previously had no permanent military structures or permanent force deployments, was teeming with Chinese barracks, helipads, ammunition dumps and other facilities,

as satellite images underscored.

The myth of Doklam victory that Modi sold Indians to bolster his image proved costly for India, as China's 2020 aggression has highlighted. Despite being Bhutan's de facto security guarantor, India failed to defend that tiny nation's territorial sovereignty. China's Doklam capture has shattered Bhutanese faith in India's security assurances, making Thimphu more eager to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Meanwhile, with his leverage weakened, Modi's effort at rapprochement with Beijing quickly slid into overt appeasement. In early 2018, his Government halted any official contact with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. This compounded Vajpayee's Tibet cave-in. Officials were directed to stay away even from the March 2018 events marking the 60th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight to India.

The following month, the Wuhan summit produced little more than Indian Government-sponsored media hype. In fact, no sooner had the summit ended than significant differences emerged on how India and China interpret even the key understandings reached at Wuhan. For example, India said the two leaders 'issued strategic guidance' to their respective militaries to avoid further border friction. But China's statement made no mention of that. India, which has chafed against the increasingly lopsided trade with China, said agreement was reached at Wuhan to strengthen trade and investment in a 'balanced and sustainable manner'. But that crucial phrase was missing from Beijing's version.

Such differences were no surprise. Like all previous India-China summits since 1988, the Wuhan summit was long on political theatre, such as shows of amity, but short on concrete results to fundamentally change the bilateral dynamics. As if to pander to India's proverbial weakness—confounding symbolism with substance—Xi focused more on diplomatic stagecraft, including receiving Modi with a very long red carpet, taking the Indian leader on a lakeside walk and a boat ride and engaging in long handshakes while voicing hope the summit would "open a new chapter in bilateral ties".

Wuhan was followed in October 2019 by an equally unremarkable Modi-Xi summit in Mamallapuram, near Chennai. Yet Modi hailed both summits as harbingers of a new strategic

convergence with China. If anything, his "Wuhan spirit" and "Chennai connect" lullabies—like Nehru's *Hindi-Chini bhai bhai* lullaby—lulled India into a dangerous complacency.

Against this background, is it any surprise that military tensions between India and China are rising again amid an intense geopolitical rivalry? There is still no clearly defined Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas separating the rival armies. Such a situation has persisted despite regular Chinese-Indian talks since 1981. In fact, these talks constitute the longest and most futile negotiating process between any two countries in modern world history.

China has taken India round and round the mulberry bush for 39 years in the negotiations on resolving the larger boundary question. The negotiations began as 'senior-level talks' in 1981 before being relabelled as 'joint working group' talks in 1988 and then as 'talks between special representa-

tives' in 2003. With new each label, India has sought to wipe the slate clean in order to start afresh, underscoring its unwillingness to learn from its unpalatable past experiences. For example, India today cites 22 rounds of talks thus far between the special representatives, but without mentioning the earlier border negotiations, as if they didn't happen.

More significantly, China has made it clear that it has little interest in resolving the boundary question. An unsettled border aids China's 'salam slicing' strategy and also helps it to exert direct military pressure on India whenever it wants. During a 2010 visit to New Delhi, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated bluntly that sorting out the border disputes "will take a fairly long period of time". In fact, after

Vajpayee's 2003 Tibet cave-in, China stopped talking about clarification of the LAC. Since 2008, thanks to Beijing, references to clarifying the LAC find no mention in official bilateral documents. Yet successive Indian Governments have played into China's hands by carrying on with useless negotiations.

The same is the story with India's investment of considerable political capital in establishing a border-management framework with China over the past 27 years. Five border-management agreements were signed between 1993 and 2013. Each was signed with great fanfare at a summit, and each was hailed in India (but not in China) as a major or historic 'breakthrough'. This shows how successive Indian prime min-

War is not decided by military and economic capabilities alone. If capabilities alone determined the outcome of wars, then the stronger side would always win. But history is replete with examples of the weaker side triumphing over the more powerful opponent





Prime Minister  
Atal Bihari Vajpayee  
in Beijing, June 2003

isters have got a free pass from the country's pliant media and feckless analysts, thus exacerbating India's China challenge.

The last accord, the 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), was a textbook example of appeasing an aggressor and whetting the belligerent's appetite for swallowing territory. Beijing wanted a new accord to wipe the slate clean over its breaches of the border-peace agreements signed earlier. With the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yearning to showcase the 'success' of the summit, India acceded to the habitual violator's call for new border rules. And Singh, with the help of the pleneload of journalists he usually took on any overseas visit, marketed his China trip as a major success.

The BDCA's provisions were vaguely worded, allowing China—a master at reinterpreting texts—to cast the burden of compliance mainly on India. In fact, whereas China has flouted the letter and spirit of every bilateral accord, India has been strictly adhering to the various agreements' provisions to such an extent that it has even gone beyond their literal meaning, resulting in the preventable deaths of 20 Indian soldiers at the hands of the PLA on June 15th.

The 1996 accord's provision not to use firearms within two km of the LAC (Article VI) relates to peacetime border-policing situations, including cases where rival border patrols run into each other. It does not relate to aggression by one side against the other. What India has faced since April in eastern Ladakh is China's pre-emptive military strike. Had Article VI been correctly read earlier as applicable only to border policing, India would not have lost 20 soldiers. The 20 were brutally murdered by PLA troops armed with improvised weapons, before Indian soldiers avenged the killings by inflicting heavy PLA casualties.

Today, thanks to China's brazen aggression, the vaunted border-management framework lies in tatters. The aggression has highlighted the worthlessness of the Indian investment in such agreements. Yet, after telling his Chinese counterpart that China's aggression broke "all our agreements", Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, in the same telephonic conversation, oddly reposed faith in those very 'bilateral agreements and protocols' for de-escalation! This raises a fundamental question: Will India ever learn?

Since 1988, the more India has sought to appease China,

the greater has been the perceptible hardening of China's stance toward it. This hardening is reflected in developments beyond the bilateral domain, including Chinese strategic projects in other countries that neighbour India and the PLA's troop presence in the Pakistan-held Kashmir. With its troops present near the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir's frontier with Ladakh, China is seeking to ramp up pressure on both Indian flanks in Ladakh.

More fundamentally, the strategic rivalry between the world's largest autocracy and its biggest democracy has also sharpened, despite their fast-rising trade. Trade is the only area in which bilateral relations have

thrived, with China managing to more than double its trade surplus with India on Modi's watch to over \$60 billion per year. China's booming trade surplus, however, has failed to moderate or restrain its behaviour.

## MODI'S ALTERNATE REALITY

**Since the time Modi served as Gujarat's Chief Minister,** he has tended to view China not as it is but as he would like it to be. After he became Prime Minister, he went out of his way to befriend China. He postponed a Japan visit by several weeks so that his first meeting with an important world leader was with Xi. By delisting China as a 'country of concern', Modi further opened up the Indian economy to Beijing but ended up facilitating greater Chinese dumping.

Even by his penchant for springing surprises, Modi's recent televised speech at the end of the June 19th all-party meeting was a stunner. As if underline a surreal alternate reality, Modi declared: "Nobody has intruded into our territory, nor is any intruder present, and nor is any post of ours under someone else's occupation." His speech became an instant propaganda coup for China, with its state media saying his words signalled to Beijing that Modi doesn't want 'further conflict with China' because, as the *Global Times* warned, 'India will be more humiliated than [in 1962]'.

Modi effectively scored a self-goal damaging India's diplomatic and strategic interests. If India is unwilling to call China out on its aggression and intrusions, how does it expect any other major power to come to its support by criticising China's aggression? More importantly, by obscuring the truth on China's encroachments, India is playing right into Beijing's hands. China, the master of propaganda, will use Modi's own words to tell the world that there was no aggression from its side, while continuing to consolidate its new territorial gains in Ladakh.

The supposed 'clarification' issued by Modi's office on his speech raised more questions than it answered, worsening the confusion. Without denying Modi's key words, it said: 'What is Indian territory is clear from the map of India.' The official Indian map extends to areas where PLA forces are currently arrayed against India. The Chinese cannot be faulted if they

interpret Modi's words as signalling that India, in reality, no longer considers the China-occupied areas, including Aksai Chin, as its own.

Modi's speech, in fact, illustrated how India relives history. Nehru kept obscuring China's encroachments in the 1950s until he was caught in a trap that led to the 1962 humiliation. Now, despite the availability of satellite imagery in the digital era, Modi has likewise sought to cloak Chinese intrusions. Instead of drawing lessons from the Nehru era, including from how China stealthily occupied Aksai Chin, Modi delivered a speech that implicitly absolved China of its intrusions. His words can only embolden the aggressor.

Modi has cast himself as India's 'chowdika' (gatekeeper) safeguarding the country's frontiers from encroachers and terrorists. The fact that India was caught off-guard by the Chinese aggression is embarrassing for him. Modi wants to protect his image as a strong leader. This, unfortunately, has led him to downplay China's aggression from the time the Indian Army discovered it. Until the PLA's savage killing of 20 Indian soldiers lifted the lid on the Chinese aggression, Indian authorities sought to minimise the significance of China's actions and to hide details. How can saving face at home become a bigger priority for the country's leader than safeguarding long-term national interests?

Had Modi rallied the nation behind him as soon as the Chinese encroachments were discovered and had he ordered the armed forces to take counteraction, the PLA would not have gained time to consolidate its hold on the newly encroached areas. In the Lake Pangong region, for example, the PLA has transformed the landscape by building dozens of observation posts, bunkers and other concrete fortifications since the first clashes flared between rival troops there on May 5th-6th.

India has lost valuable time by doing nothing. It has been hoping against hope that China would see reason and withdraw.

Unfortunately, the Indian Government even obscured the nature and significance of the clashes that occurred in the first 10 days of May, including near the Naku-la Pass, on the Sikkim-Tibet frontier. It also hid the extent of Indian casualties. In fact, the clashes were sought to be passed off as minor until revelations emerged weeks later that both sides had briefly captured each other's soldiers and that some troops had been seriously wounded that they required airlifting to hospitals, including in New Delhi.

Worse still, the Indian Army Chief, General Manoj Nara-

vane, personally downplayed China's aggression. He issued a bizarre statement on May 14th that gratuitously blamed "aggressive behaviour by both sides" for the clashes, which he euphemistically called "incidents". An Army chief blaming his own troops for "aggressive behaviour" while they confront an invading foe is unheard of.

General Naravane's statement—apparently issued at the Government's behest—actually went to great lengths to cover up China's aggression, including the ensuing clashes that erupted at several border points. The statement blamed the Ladakh and Sikkim border "incidents" on "differing perceptions" of the LAC's alignment. In effect, he offered China a justification for its encroachments.

To be sure, the "differing perceptions" argument has long been proffered by successive Indian Governments to obscure loss of territory or to rationalise Chinese incursions. This argument has given China, with its ever-shifting claim lines in the Himalayas, a carte blanche to keep encroaching on more and more Indian areas by quoting India's own admission that the LAC is indistinct and hazy.

General Naravane not only expounded the "differing perceptions" theory while the country was faced with its most serious China-frontier crisis in decades, but also his statement claimed that the Ladakh and Sikkim border "incidents" were "neither co-related nor do they have any connection with other global or local activities". Why should the Indian Army Chief take it upon himself to explain Chinese actions so as to paint those in better light? The fact is that the Ladakh and Sikkim border developments were indeed co-related and were part of Xi's larger aggressive quest for Chinese dominance.

On June 13th, a month after his first statement, General Naravane made another statement that "the entire situation along our borders with China is under control", even as the intruding PLA troops were consolidating their hold on the areas they had infiltrated. Just two days later, the façade of 'all is well' on the Himalayan borders collapsed, after the PLA's ambush-killings triggered bloody clashes. The killing of 20 Indian soldiers, with scores more hospitalised, shocked the nation and brought the Government's handling of the situation under public scrutiny.

## INDIA'S OPTIONS

China's stealth intrusions into eastern Ladakh have been followed with frenzied construction activity to consolidate its



Xu Qiling, commander of People's Liberation Army in charge of China's western theatre

## India must remember that when it has stood up to China, as in 1967, the bully has backed off, thus ensuring peace along the Himalayan frontier

hold on the newly encroached areas and fortify its defences. Amid a Chinese military buildup along the Himalayas, Xi appointed a favourite general in early June to lead PLA forces arrayed against India. Xu Qiling, a rising PLA star and ground force commander of the Eastern Theatre Command, swapped positions with He Weidong, the ground force commander of the Western Theatre Command. Xu has the experience to lead joint ground and air operations. As if to signal that it could be readying to wage war on India, China evacuated its citizens from India in special flights from late May.

Many analysts in India and abroad have cited the Sino-Indian power asymmetry to argue that India cannot take on China. After all, China's economic and military power is much greater than India's. Some analysts have argued that Modi's "no intrusion" statement reflected this reality.

War is not decided by military and economic capabilities alone. If capabilities alone determined the outcome of wars, then the stronger side would always win. But history is replete with examples of the weaker side triumphing over the more powerful opponent.

What is critical to any war's outcome is leadership, political will, resoluteness, strategy and tactics. History is shaped by farsighted and visionary leaders, who can change the destiny of a nation. Great leaders in history turned small island nations into global powers, while shortsighted leaders unravelled empires.

Defence generally has the advantage over offence, because it is easier to protect and hold than to advance, destroy and seize. Defensive operations in the mountains or on high-altitude plateaus, as in Ladakh, are aimed at resisting and foiling an enemy strike in order to prepare the ground for a counterattack.

India has one of the world's largest and most-experienced mountain warfare armies. The fearlessness and bravery of its soldiers was highlighted recently by the swift costs they imposed on PLA troops in the Galwan Valley after an Indian patrol was ambushed. They demonstrated the true mark of valour when, in the face of death, they inflicted heavy Chinese casualties in hand-to-hand combat, including killing the PLA unit's commanding officer. Intercepts of Chinese communications by US intelligence have confirmed that China lost more than twice as many soldiers as India.

The deaths represent China's first combat troops killed in action, other than in UN peacekeeping operations, since the end of its war with Vietnam in 1979. The combat fatalities are a humiliation for China, which explains why it has hidden information on its casualties. Some on Chinese social media

have criticized Xi's regime by contrasting India's honouring of its martyrs, including holding large public funerals, with China's refusal to even recognise its fallen.

The Indian Army today is capable of repulsing a PLA attack and inflicting heavy losses. But there is a bigger question: Does India have the political will to impose costs on China? Despite Modi's strongman image, India remains essentially a soft state, as his own China speech highlighted.

Shrewdly timing a pre-emptive strike that takes the opponent completely by surprise has been central to communist China's repeated use of force. By contrast, India—with its defensive mindset and risk-averseness under successive prime ministers—cannot even think of undertaking a pre-emptive assault. This gives China a major tactical advantage over India. As the *Global Times* said on June 21st, China knows that India will not fire the first shot.

It will be China's initiative to start a war against India and to end it—just like in 1962. And to achieve its objectives, China will do anything, from breaking binding agreements to employing a range of elaborate deceptions.

India needs to make a fresh start by abandoning its accommodating approach toward China that has made it look like a meek enabler. After spending so many years on the defensive, India must discard the platitudes and retake the narrative. To blunt Xi's expansionism and to halt further Chinese encroachments, India must bare its own teeth and implement a containment strategy, including by joining hands with like-minded powers.

India must remember that when it has stood up to China, as in 1967, the bully has backed off, thus ensuring peace along the Himalayan frontier. But when India has sought to placate or appease China, the emboldened bully has stepped up its incursions and territorial aggrandisement.

In 1967, while still recovering from the major wars of 1962 and 1965, India gave China a bloody nose in the military clashes along the Sikkim-Tibet border. Those clashes were triggered by a Chinese attack much less grave than the Chinese aggression India now confronts. In 2020, can India pretend to be weaker than it was in 1967, despite building a nuclear arsenal and despite its longstanding status as one of the world's largest importers of weapons? ■



*Brahma Chellaney is a geostrategist and the author of nine books, including the award-winning *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis**



# The New Work

## With physical distancing and hyper hygiene

By **MOINAK MITRA**

**R**aksha Hegde has no time for a breather. The 20-something facility manager from international property consultant Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) is either working the phone lines or on chat with clients across India as their offices reopen after the coronavirus-induced lockdown. The Bengaluru-based Hegde is a picture of calm as she goes about her day trying to soothe frayed nerves and remove the fear psychosis of those joining back work. “We train mostly on the communication aspects and help employees [of client firms] onboard and provide any assistance they need in their workplace over phone or chat since no physical meeting is allowed yet,” says Hegde, who, among others from her organisation, is now a wellness ambassador. “Like front-office executives, such people help employees settle down in the workplace maintaining social distancing and communicating wellness initiatives at work. Their job is to make sure an employee is safe within the office and also bring the confidence back,” says Hegde’s boss Ajit Kumar, Executive Director, JLL India, who manages corporate solutions, a combination of project management and facilities management for client companies.

While Hegde deals with mitigating the fear that the virus has instilled in the minds of hundreds of workers, India’s unrelenting Covid-19 curve ensures that many are still reluctant to turn up at work. At a BPO in Gurugram, the management was ebullient by May end when it got permission to restart operations with 500-odd people. Though the company went out of its way by providing free transport to ferry people, which it had stopped earlier owing to a slump, just 230 of them turned up. Within a week, a bulk of them gave up. After all, the new rules of engagement in the workplace seemed a tad too severe for a young workforce that makes up a

BPO—no sitting across each other, less talking, no going to the cafeteria at will, no more smoke breaks. “These are youngsters and they feel they have come to a place worse than home. As it is, many of them were getting frustrated at home during the lockdown and the only option was to give them some leeway which the company couldn’t since government officials were randomly checking the workplace,” explains Rajesh Sharma, Managing Director (IFM and Asset Services), Cushman & Wakefield. Today, the BPO is still operating, though with nearly half the strength it got permission for—many who refused to turn up in the first few weeks, decided to rejoin with the passage of time.

If the youth have reasons to shun the post-lockdown workplace, so do others who simply cannot come to terms with a kosher environment straddling fewer touchpoints, constant sanitisation and zero camaraderie. “This is the end of both office romance and politics,” quips an executive one week into her ‘disinfected’ workstation. Whichever way one looks at it, the lockdown has spawned a work-from-home (WFH) reality, as more and more organisations are looking at, for the want of a better word, ‘homeshoring’ a chunk of their workforce. “Though work from home as a concept is here to stay, many companies are pegging it at [a constant] 25-30 percent [of the total manpower]. Automatically, such reduction in workforce will kick in social distancing [in offices],” says MV Harish, MD, Project and Development Services, JLL India.

A hybrid model seems to be at work too. “I don’t think it’s going to be about work from home only but a mix will emerge wherein you can work from home for a part of the day and come to office for the remaining part,” claims Nitin Jain, MD, Alvarez & Marsal India. This is typically so for the services industry, such as IT, where working from home does not hamper productivity and offices can more easily adapt to such circumstances.

At the other extreme, some companies, mostly multinationals,

# king Class

## giene, offices reopen to wary workers



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

are averse to reopening at this juncture. Among others, Sharma of Cushman & Wakefield was on call with the India heads of a host of his MNC clients some days ago as they felt “the need to extend the work-from-home policy for another three months.” At that very juncture, Sharma wanted to know if they were confident that the virus would evaporate and things would settle down in three months. “They had no answer,” says Sharma, adding that fear grows with the passage of time and it will be even more difficult to make their employees come to office later. For one, the MNCs are guided by mandates coming in from their international headquarters and so they do not really seem to be in any hurry to reopen. And if productivity is not impacted, there is no harm if people continue working from home.

Homegrown companies and those in essential services, though, seem keen to get on track with their workforce. A source claims that companies such as TCS, Kotak Mahindra and Dalmia Group have reopened with 10-15 per cent manpower, which they are eager to ramp up as and when fresh government guidelines get issued. For starters, TCS seems to be in no hurry since it plans to move 75 per cent of its workforce to work from home permanently by 2025. In the case of its competition Tech Mahindra, though, a gradual ramp up is noticeable although, in the long run, they too expect 25-30 per cent of their associates working from home. To welcome back its people, the company has undergone a complete redesign of the floor plan with an eye to physical distancing. “We have introduced staggered lunch breaks to prevent overcrowding in cafeterias, using facial

recognition system for attendance and launched a ‘book-my-seat’ app to automatically allocate workstations,” says Harshvendra Soin, Chief People Officer, Tech Mahindra.

In the manufacturing space, car major Maruti Suzuki is learnt to allow its people to come in batches. “If ‘x’ number of people come on a particular week, ‘y’ will come the next week. They are also working on much reduced productivity targets and are simultaneously assessing the market for demand since only then will they manufacture cars at some capacity,” the source elaborates.

In manufacturing, people are core to the production process. With four production units and 11 offices, auto component maker Schaeffler India would know it better than others as it has 2,800 employees on its rolls. Talking to *Open*, Santanu Ghoshal, Vice President of Human Resources at Schaeffler India, says: “Our manufacturing plants resumed operations from the first week of May, maintaining social distancing and safety protocol. We ramped up to near normalcy in our multi-location plants. We are currently working with skeletal staff as a majority of our people continue to work from home.” Here too, subdued demand is being met by the reduced number of people at work.

Yet, employees remain diffident in the face of the raging pandemic. Recently, health-tech community product FYI conducted a survey to assess the anxiety level of employees and observed that they expected their employers to take responsibility of workplace wellness as and when offices reopen. Of the 560 employees surveyed across Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, 93 per cent were apprehensive to return to their workplace with



**“ALL TOUCHPOINTS HAVE NOW BECOME EITHER FOOT-OPERATED OR SENSOR-BASED. SUCH THINGS BRING CONFIDENCE TO EMPLOYEES”**

**Ajit Kumar**  
executive director,  
JLL India

the overriding fear that their health will be compromised.

That has not stopped employers from getting their house in order. Six feet office, thermal scans, circular routing, door steppers, touch-free elevators and contactless keys are some of the terms doing the rounds. The new office space now wears a completely different look and MV Harish of JLL feels that nooks such as break-out areas, collaboration zones and lounges, which used to impart “life” to workplaces, may be brought to use differently by adding more seats. And following social distancing norms, the average size of workstations is bound to go up from 75-90 square feet to 100-120 square feet per person, he adds.

Ajit Kumar of JLL gets regular queries on WhatsApp groups of his clients on the safety quotient of their workplaces. All he does is post a photo and writeup of the work done to ensure health and hygiene. “For instance, when you go to a restroom, you are worried about touching the tap and sanitiser, which could be contaminated. To avoid that, we have created a foot-operated tap. All touchpoints have now become either foot-operated or sensor-based. Such things bring confidence to employees.”

The office cafeteria, too, has undergone surgery with pre-defined timelines where one can order food online and come in at an allotted time as per social distancing norms, say 10 minutes before the food is ready. “If the cafeteria can seat 400 people, in the current scenario, there is only room for 200,” says Kumar, adding that online ordering streamlines time slots to remain in the cafeteria maintaining controlled footfalls. Simply put, your café time at work just got rationed. “We are also recommending pre-packed food rather than a buffet, and for quite some time, the array of food will never be the same [across office cafeterias],” says Kumar.

Even office meeting rooms are being downsized. If it is a very small meeting room, maybe, only one person is allowed in. Rooms that can seat 15 people have now become eight-seaters.

Kumar says that a move is afoot to make even elevators go touchless. “We are working out a way by which you can use your mobile phone to operate the lift making use of QR codes,” he says. That said, the new workplace is ready to welcome back its people with myriad protocols, signages, decontamination stations and even a repurposed wellness room. Well, every office had one where you could go and pop in a paracetamol if you felt unwell or had a headache. “The protocol has changed and if you feel unwell, you’ll be isolated, asked to go home and furnish a proper medical report before returning to work.”

For JLL, being an international entity with a global footprint has been a blessing. Its Wuhan office in China reopened a fortnight back and shared some valuable insights. One such learning was to do with disposable face masks, which are deemed bio-medical waste, and hence, hazardous. It is dangerous for such masks to be dumped in the bin. So the Wuhan office gave the feedback

that instead of giving people disposable masks, they should be encouraged to wear re-usable masks which they can later wash. And JLL India improvised by adding a third bio-medical waste bin along with dry and liquid trashcans.

Even in creating the “recovery readiness guide” for its clients, Cushman & Wakefield leveraged insights and best practices from its recent experience moving 10,000 companies and nearly a million workers back into 800 million square feet of buildings it manages in China through a joint venture with Vanke Service. “This is a living guide, put together by pulling in global expertise and while it is currently dominated by lessons from China, we know as we move forward, we will keep evolving and updating the same,” says Anshul Jain, MD—South East Asia and India, Cushman & Wakefield.

Since the spread of the coronavirus appears to be occurring through airborne transmission of aerosols, safe indoor air quality is top of mind for any returnee. It implies applying World Health Organization-approved filters in the overall air conditioning of the workplace that have the ability to weed out dust particles and contaminants, such as bacteria and viruses.

At oil and gas major Shell’s Bengaluru and Hazira facilities, people are gradually coming back to work. “As the lockdown began to ease, we set up a team to prepare our employees to return in a phased manner,” says Sundeep Bedi, General Manager, Shell Business Operations, highlighting the war on Covid-19 the company is waging to make every employee feel secure—from arrival to departure. The company ferries its people on company buses which are sanitised after each ride. Upon reaching the workplace, the staff can proceed after a mandatory temperature check but wearing a mask in the building is now mandatory at all times. With designated shifts for employees, only a handful of them are in office at any one time. But what is telling is that, on the first day of return, employees are greeted with a ‘welcome kit’ that contains four

masks, a hand sanitiser and a unique personal plastic ‘contactless’ key with which one can easily operate lift buttons or door handles without touching surfaces. Then there are alcohol-based wipes to clean laptops. Even water dispensers and sanitisers can now be operated by foot. Add to this the demarcation signs inside the office to maintain social distance plus visual cues and posters with clear instructions and reminders of the new norms.

Today, much of India Inc is opening its door again in similar fashion. While employees remain cautious, companies are upping the safety quotient. When a top consultancy reopened a month ago, the strategy was simple—first, the top 50 leaders rejoined the firm in the US headquarters. Within a week, 150 more in the next tier turned up. Now, 500 more down the ladder are slated to return. Maybe, it is a better way of handling the returnees—where leaders set an example for others to regain their confidence and rejoin work. ■



**“MOST OF MY  
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THREE MONTHS”**

**Rajesh Sharma**  
managing director  
(IFM and Asset Services),  
Cushman & Wakefield



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# A Bad Day in the Neighbourhood

The lockdown might be over but the residential welfare association refuses to cede its powers

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**



It was sometime in the middle of the lockdown when Dr Rohan Salunke first noticed the barricade that had come up on the lane outside his house. Those living in the buildings and *chawls* of the area in Mumbai's Malad suburb did not want anyone entering or leaving. A group of men, Salunke learnt, would sit at the barricade to enforce the blockade throughout the day.

Dr Salunke, who travels almost every day to the Mahatma Phule Charitable Trust hospital in Navi Mumbai where he works as a radiation oncologist, was aware of the difficulties healthcare professionals like him were facing in their neighbourhoods. So he worked around the problem. He would leave around seven in the morning, long before any of those men showed up at the barricade, and returned late in the night to avoid them. "I'd just get out of my car, push the barricade aside and move on," he says.

But one day, he was late by around an hour.

"A group of 12 men threatened me. It became very ugly. And

An illustration of a security fence with a brick wall on the left and a chain-link fence on the right. A yellow sign with black text is attached to the brick wall. The sign reads "OUTSIDERS NOT WELCOME".

OUTSIDERS  
NOT WELCOME



eventually they allowed me to leave, but I was told I would not be allowed to return,” he says.

Dr Salunke eventually had to turn to the police, who then goaded the men to remove the barricade.

“It was really weird,” Dr Salunke says. “Because for quite some time, there was like a parallel justice system in this area. Whatever the rules, if they didn’t want something, it didn’t happen.”

Dr Salunke’s was one of the few cases where an entire neighbourhood of buildings on a single lane came up with a rule of its own. In most cases, the guilty party has been a single cooperative housing society (CHS) or residential welfare association (RWA). Those working in essential services have been threatened and assaulted, and often made to move out. In Delhi, one doctor had

to shift to an OYO room. In Mumbai, over 80 nurses from Bhatia Hospital, which was sealed after an outbreak occurred there, had to be accommodated within the hospital or in hotel rooms nearby after their housing societies, around eight of those, did not allow them to even return to pick up their belongings.

It isn’t just those working in essential services. When people cocooned themselves in various lockdown phases, they found every small aspect of their lives now being monitored and controlled by their RWAs. Chairmen and secretaries—a vast majority of them senior retired men who fill their days playing carrom in the housing society games room and managing the mundane duties needed for the upkeep of housing colonies—are now thrilled about the new emergency powers vested in them.

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## **RWA CHAIRMEN AND SECRETARIES—MOSTLY RETIRED MEN WHO FILL THEIR DAYS PLAYING CARROM AND MANAGING THE MUNDANE DUTIES NEEDED FOR THE UPKEEP OF HOUSING COLONIES—ARE THRILLED ABOUT THE NEW EMERGENCY POWERS VESTED IN THEM**

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Once the lockdown came into force, within the gates of housing colonies, mini-dictatorships ensued. In the guise of the larger interest of the housing colony, individual rights were trampled upon. Many RWAs found the rules enforced by the government during the lockdown too soft and made up their own. New circulars arrived over the RWA WhatsApp group, those found guilty of breach shamed the next day. Residents had to declare their travel history, some RWAs, in the early part of the lockdown, were even found circulating official lists of Indians who had recently returned from countries that had been badly hit by Covid-19. Newspapers were forbidden; parcels had to be collected from gates; outsiders, even those employed to care for the sick or elderly, weren’t allowed in; residents, whatever

the emergency, weren’t allowed to step out.

But now when governments have ordered for relaxations and many individuals are returning to work, people are finding that their RWAs are still not playing ball. The lockdown maybe over but the RWA refuses to cede its emergency powers.

Sanitation points and thermal screening are de rigueur. The Aarogya Setu app is becoming a must in many places. In some places, guests are being asked to provide medical certificates saying they are Covid-19-free. In others, where guests are allowed for a few hours, watchmen are being asked to scan car boots to ensure none of these have large bags indicating they are moving in for a long time. Maids and technicians find themselves not being allowed in, or with heavy restrictions, or sometimes climbing several floors

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



since lifts are being barred for them.

At Paradise Heights, a large colony of six tall buildings in Mumbai's Borivali area that houses, according to one member, around 3,500 people, no one is still allowed to enter the colony. No maids are permitted; in fact any visitor who plans to visit a resident must carry a doctor's certificate that declares he has none of Covid-19's symptoms. This society had been particularly tough even during the lockdown. For much of the lockdown, the gates of each of the six buildings were locked, and a watchman was posted outside each building to make sure nobody ventured out. Later, this was eased, but only a single member from a house could step out during a window period of about two hours every day.

**THE GREATEST CONTENTION IS OVER WHETHER MAIDS SHOULD BE ALLOWED INSIDE. "RWA GUYS DON'T SUFFER. BECAUSE IT'S THEIR WIVES OR DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW DOING ALL THE HOUSEHOLD CHORES," SAYS PRIYA FROM MUMBAI**



A guard checks an app that filters out maids from containment zones in Pune, June 13

"There used to be lots of arguments and discussions. Many thought the [housing] society was being too strict. But these rules were for our own good," says Vaibhav Powale, a resident in the colony.

Despite these precautions, one individual tested positive during the lockdown. How did the housing society respond to this news? "We got the BMC [Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation] to seal not just the floor [where the case was detected] but the entire building," Powale says.

The greatest contention is over whether maids should be allowed. Priya (last name withheld upon request), a corporate communications professional who lives with her husband, child and mother-in-law in a gated community in Mumbai's Powai area, points out that most RWAs tend to have only male members. "These guys don't suffer. Because it's their wives or daughters-in-law doing all the household chores," she says. "Our [RWA] WhatsApp group is filled with all kinds of crude sexist jokes about how women are not able to take care of their homes without *bais*. I have been told to adjust a bit for the good of all. I'm sure if any of these uncles were in my situation, juggling a job along with household chores, they would have had no hesitation in bringing the maids back."

Many of these disagreements have led to verbal and sometimes physical confrontations, often with the police having to restore calm. Ramesh Prabhu, the founder and Chairman of Maharashtra Societies Welfare Association (MahaSeWa), an umbrella group of CHS' in Maharashtra, jokes that every police station in cities like Delhi and Mumbai now knows of all the politics and fissures of housing colonies within their jurisdictions. Unsurprisingly, a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the Bombay High Court two weeks ago asking for the state to issue uniform guidelines for all CHSes.

**T**he PIL by advocate Yusuf Iqbal Yusuf, which wasn't admitted in court, pointed out that managing committees which govern housing societies have no experience in healthcare and have framed guidelines on the basis of improper and incomplete information. Their restrictions have been arbitrary and unreasonable, he says, sometimes going to the extent of insisting that all visitors must now prove that they have tested negative for Covid-19.

About a week ago, Prabhu organised a webinar for around 650 members of various CHS' managing committees in Mumbai and other cities in Maharashtra. "Almost the entire duration was spent on questions about whether maids were to be allowed in or not," he says.

According to Prabhu, the state government has not been clear on this point. "In Maharashtra, the Begin Again document [which frames the guidelines of this current phase of relaxations], allows for self-employed individuals like plumbers and electricians, but makes no mention for domestic helps," he says. It is presumed, he says, that they are allowed too; some municipal corporations like those in Pune and Kalyan-Dombivli

(close to Mumbai) have brought out circulars that clarify this.

But in Mumbai, this unprecedented situation has met a familiar Indian malaise: the bureaucracy.

“We have approached the government so many times to clarify the situation in Mumbai. But when we go to the state government, they ask us to go to the BMC, the BMC asks us to go to the collector’s office, and the collector tells us to go to the state government. So we are all caught in this loop,” Prabhu says.

According to Prabhu, a lot of the onus on rows breaking out in housing colonies across the country rests with governments. In a lot of these cases, he says, the state government hasn’t specified the exact role the managing committee of these colonies should perform. In some cases, he points out, the government has had unreasonable expectations, like the Maharashtra government announcing last month (later retracting) that committee members of CHS in Covid-19-affected wards in Mumbai will have to maintain a daily log of body temperature and oxygen levels of all residents or face action for non-compliance.

MahaSeWa is supposed to represent the interests of cooperative housing societies in Mumbai. But for the last few months, Prabhu says, all his time is now spent helping out residents who are being given a hard time by their RWAs. “I just got a call from a tenant who is finally being allowed into his flat, but he has been told he can’t bring his possessions out of fear that deliverymen could carry the infection. How does this poor fellow live now, where does he cook or what does he wear?” says Prabhu. “And the most common problem is that maids are not being allowed. It’s unfair now when everything is being opened to keep insisting that maids can’t come.”

Prabhu’s own housing society does not permit maids. Residents also have to pay for a type of personal protective equipment kit every time they allow a repairman to fix something in their apartments. “Right now nobody in our society wants maids. But if anybody demands it, I’m going to support it.”

In Pune, the thorny issue of allowing maids into homes has led one housing colony to create a mobile app that can filter out those who live in a containment zone. Brijen Shah, a member of the Sujay Garden Housing Society, a large colony of bungalows and buildings where an estimated 2,000 people live, explains that each maid has been issued an identity card with a QR code. There are



**“WHEN WE GO TO THE STATE GOVERNMENT, THEY ASK US TO GO TO THE BMC, THE BMC ASKS US TO GO TO THE COLLECTOR’S OFFICE, AND THE COLLECTOR TELLS US TO GO TO THE STATE GOVERNMENT”**

**Ramesh Prabhu**  
chairman, MahaSeWa



**“NOW THAT EVERYTHING IS BEING OPENED UP, WE THOUGHT WHY NOT COME OUT WITH AN APP THAT CAN ELIMINATE THOSE MAIDS WHO ARE THE RISKIEST CARRIERS?”**

**Brijen Shah**  
member, Sujay Garden  
Housing Society, Pune

about 400 maids who work in this colony. The mobile app in the watchmen’s phones glow red every time a maid living in a containment zone has her ID card scanned.

“There was a big argument over allowing maids in. And now that everything is being opened up, we thought why not come out with an app that can eliminate those maids who are the riskiest carriers [of infection]?” Shah says.

Every morning, Shah procures a list of containment zones in Pune and distributes it to residents over WhatsApp. “It’s the prerogative of the residents to inform their maids not to come. But even if they don’t, with the app, nobody can now enter,” he says.

Not all of the steps being taken by housing colonies however are being criticised. Several RWAs have converted the now-unused club houses and gymnasiums within their colonies into isolation wards with oxygen cylinders in case any member gets infected and fails to find a hospital bed.

Rashid (name changed upon request), the treasurer of a large housing colony in central Mumbai, has procured two oxygen cylinders. Plans are now afoot to convert the colony’s gym into an isolation ward. He hopes that over time, steps like these help paper over the differences that have crept up across the building.

Throughout the lockdown, several arguments broke out over the harshness of the building’s rules, often with even policemen getting involved. At one point, a well-known doctor who owned an apartment in this building returned to it. Her mother had died from a non-Covid-19 ailment and she wanted to grieve alone. “But everybody was scared that she might be infected. So a big argument broke out. One resident even made phone calls to the BMC saying she had Covid-19. The lady stayed one night in the flat and never returned. I heard even the hospital [where she worked] heard of this rumour and asked her not to come to work,” he says.

“All this feels so terrible. This was such a nice loving [housing] society. We all loved each other so much. But now nobody gets along with anyone,” Rashid goes on. “The virus will go away one day. But I don’t know what will happen to the society.” ■

*Also read ‘Portrait of a Housing Society from a Covid-19-Triggered WhatsApp Group’ at [Openthemagazine.com](http://Openthemagazine.com)*





# LONELIER IN THE END

A Covid-19 victim's rites of passage  
at a Delhi crematorium

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Text and Photographs by  
**PARUL SHARMA**

**T**en days ago, I posted on social media a few photographs of the cremation of a Covid-19 victim at the Nigambodh Ghat electric crematorium in northern Delhi. The comments my post evoked were surprising and unsettling. Quite a few comments from close friends were the refrain: 'Wow! Be careful Parul.' One response asked, with genuine banality, 'What possessed you to photograph a random death of someone you don't know?'

Another person asked me, with evident hostility,

'Do you expect us to believe that you actually went to the crematorium to take this photograph?'

Death can be a tragic sight, and the rites of death in India are invariably strident theatrics or solemn bemusement. In public, we project our grief like an advertisement striving for recognition. But a coronavirus victim's death is nothing like the above. It is a requiem for the forsaken. The putrid air in the large hall where the electric cremation furnaces are housed is sinister and the portent, not of an afterlife, but of a threat.

To view bodies wrapped in slithery white and blue plastic arriving in a van, almost like an Amazon



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**THE INCREDIBLE BRAVERY OF CREMATORIUM WORKERS WALKING WITH GLAZED EYES AND THE FROZEN RIGOUR OF THE ODD MOURNERS DEFINE THE NEW DEFAULT RITUAL OF A COVID-RELATED DEATH**

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**BODIES WRAPPED IN SLITHERY PLASTIC ARRIVE IN A VAN, LIKE AN AMAZON DELIVERY, THEN LOADED CLINICALLY ON A HANDCART, UPTURNED ON AN ESCALATOR, BEFORE A PUSH INTO THE CONFLAGRATION**

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delivery, then being loaded clinically on a handcart, wheeled and upturned on a moving escalator like baggage at an airport check-in, before a push and a shove into a blazing conflagration, can churn your stomach and paralyse your mind. Not only is it a lonely death. It is an unforgivable death. The senselessness of having your breath suddenly become still because of a ridiculous witch virus out of a dark fairy tale called Corona.

The incredible bravery of crematorium workers walking with red, glazed eyes and the frozen rigour of

the odd mourners who dared to come to Nigambodh define the new default ritual of a Covid death. I am not clear about what took me on a lockdown afternoon to photograph the last journey of a person who died of Covid-19, someone I did not know. I do not know whether my showing of this reality is a travesty or sacrilege or homage. More than any other place or event or person that I have photographed till date, these shots of human tragedy in the new age of distancing confront me every day with endless doubts and questions to which I do not have answers. ■



*Parul Sharma, a New Delhi-based fine art photographer, took over 3,000 photographs of Delhi under lockdown for a black-and-white photo documentary book to be published by Roli Books in August*



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# The Bright Spark

Megha Majumdar's debut novel, about a terrorist attack, deals with the big questions of contemporary India with a light hand

By Nandini Nair

SALON



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Megha Majumdar

**M**EGHA MAJUMDAR'S debut novel *A Burning* (Hamish Hamilton; 304 pages; Rs 599) has received the kind of attention that most debut authors wouldn't even dare to dream of. Majumdar was born and raised in Kolkata and now works as an editor at *Catapult*, in New York City. She would have first come to the attention of select Indian readers when she was in conversation with Margaret Atwood for Jaipur Literature Festival 2020's Brave New World series of online discussions. Atwood not only held her book up to a worldwide audience on April 22nd, she also recommended it to all her readers. From thereon, the rustle around *A Burning* has turned into a gale of approval. In the cover blurb, Amitav Ghosh deems it the 'best debut novel I have come across in a long time... the arrival of a new voice of immense talent and promise'. She has received raves not only from the likes of Parul Sehgal of *The New York Times* but also James Wood of *The New Yorker*. The attention that Majumdar is receiving is comparable to the fanfare that hailed Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997.

While the pandemic has kicked the literary world in its shins, this novel has brought the attention right back to the fundamentals—the debut author with a story to tell.

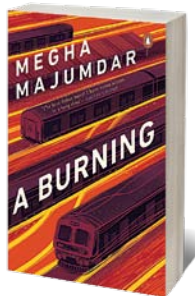
*A Burning* is a contemporary Indian novel that excels on certain fronts. It tells of a radicalising India with the lightest of touches. To Majumdar's credit she never comes across as an author with an agenda. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy's second novel that came out in 2017, for example, too often sounded like a placard and less like a page. Majumdar writes with a hand that is steadied by deep understanding. She is too skilled to fall into hyperbole. Her disquiet with what she sees unfolding in India never reaches the level of rhetoric. Here the

story comes first, and the ideology, a distant second. It is a novel about a scapegoat, in the true Biblical sense, where a goat must be sacrificed to carry the sins of the community. By telling the story from the point of view of the scapegoat it reveals the many travesties of justice and ruthlessness of society. As Jivan, the protagonist, says, 'This country needs someone to punish... And I am that.'

The novel tells the story of the young Muslim woman Jivan who is accused of helping to blow up a train, killing 112 people. The cops come to her door because of a Facebook post by her that reads, 'If the police didn't help ordinary people like you and me, if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean that the government is also a terrorist?' The other two lead characters in the story are PT Sir, who taught Jivan physical exercise, and Lovely, whom

such as this, Majumdar shows how the majority community and the system slowly pivots against the minority religion. The absence of evidence does not determine guilt or innocence, instead how friends and neighbours perceive the 'wrong religion' can define how one is treated by both state and community. It can determine whether one will live, or go to prison, or die.

A common thread ties together Jivan, Lovely and PT Sir. They are all a 'reminder that dreams and dreamers do exist in this city'. They all want better from their lives. Jivan believes that education and a job will hack her a path out for poverty. For Lovely, it is a career in films. And for PT Sir, an entry into politics. Majumdar etches out the aspirations of her characters, in a way that makes them easily recognisable. As Jivan says, 'With my clean school uniform, a bag full of photo-



**MEGHA MAJUMDAR WRITES WITH A HAND THAT IS STEADIED BY DEEP UNDERSTANDING. SHE IS TOO SKILLED TO FALL INTO HYPERBOLE. HER DISQUIET WITH WHAT SHE SEES UNFOLDING IN INDIA NEVER REACHES THE LEVEL OF RHETORIC**

Jivan taught English. Their testimonies will play a role in deciding Jivan's fate in court, after her arrest.

PT Sir is recruited by a local politician Bimala Pal to provide evidence against a man who is supposed to have robbed a hardware store. PT Sir has never seen the man, but he has been told that this man steals for a living. 'There has never been evidence, though his neighbours and friends all know the truth. It is true that he also belongs to the wrong religion, the minority religion that encourages the eating of beef, but that is a peripheral matter, according to Bimala Pal's assistant. The main issue is, a robber has to be stopped. What decent man would object to participating in the execution of justice?' Through astute observations

copied books strapped to my shoulders, even a new pencil in my pocket, I did not feel like that goat anymore.' PT Sir will ascend the ladder of money and, thus, respectability. He will be able to pay for kitchen appliances in a sheaf of cash, after all, 'monthly instalments are for the common man'.

Jivan's desire is to be middle-class. It is a phrase that between Jivan and Lovely is used five times in the novel. Lovely asks, 'Can you blame me for wanting, so much, to be—not even rich, just middle class?' When Jivan makes a friend Priya and attends her birthday party at her home, Jivan sees the pieces of the world that she seeks to grasp. When she leaves, Priya's mother gives her a tiffin box full of food for her family. 'Was Priya a mil-

lionaire? No, she was only middle class,' realises Jivan. To be middle-class means to have choices, it means being able to provide for others, it means having more control over one's life.

While in jail, Jivan tells her story to Purnendu, a reporter, who she believes will tell her side of the story in a newspaper and to the world. When Purnendu tells her that he will write her story, and his editor will make it better, she says, "My story would be better if..." I count on my hands. 'If we had not been evicted, do you see? If my father had not broken his back, if my mother had not been attacked for trying to run a small business. If I could have afforded to finish school.' Majumdar capably shows how it is this accretion of misfortune that keeps the poor in poverty.

**A BURNING HAS BEEN** pitched as a 'thriller' by its publishers. James Wood writes, 'The elements of a thriller are transmuted into prismatic portraiture.' But a thriller it is not. There is no moment of white-knuckle suspense, there is no urgent turning of the page to find out what next. The elements of a thriller that it does have are an underdog fighting a heartless system and high stakes, since it is a matter of life and death. The reader does not know how the fate of the three protagonists will unspool, but that is the nature of biography and life and is not particular to a thriller. To be a thriller, there needs to be some ambiguity as to the identity and motivations of the victim and perpetrator. This novel does not have that. From early on, the reader knows that the author's sympathies lie with Jivan. She is set up as the woman who has been wronged by the system and the novel will reveal the many injustices that she and her parents have been pummelled by. Lovely, the hijra who aspires to be a film actor, is similarly buffeted by society. PT Sir is the only character whose proclivities and inclinations remain mysterious to the reader. Will he do the right thing? Will he do the wrong thing? Which path

will he take?

The debut thriller of this year, for me, will have to be *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* by Deepa Anappara. One cannot help but compare *Djinn Patrol* with *A Burning* as both are debut novels by Indian women authors, released this year, internationally, to much acclaim. Crucially, both cast an unflinching eye on India's deeply unequal urban societies. *Djinn Patrol* reads like a thriller because the reader does not know where the missing children are disappearing to, who is taking them and if they'll ever return. By using a child narrator as a detective, Anappara adds layers of texture and complexity to the narrative. The novel is pacey while also being emotionally wrenching. In comparison, *A Burning* lacks the speed and the heart.

If *Djinn Patrol* works better as

me get kicked off this film!' The cadence of the sentences does not bring Lovely closer to the reader. Majumdar's ear, eye and pen are sharply attuned to class demarcations and divides. Given her sensitivity at noting these differences, Lovely's voice feels abrasive.

As Jivan says, 'Lovely believed she would have a better life someday, and so did I. The path began with *abcd*. Cat, bat, rat. English is the language of the modern world. Can you move up in life without it? We kept going. And I was moving up. So what if I lived in only a half-brick house? From an eater of cabbage, I was becoming an eater of chicken. I had a smartphone with a big screen, bought on an instalment plan, with a screen which jumped and credit which I filled when I could. But now I was connected to a world bigger than

## A BURNING HAS BEEN PITCHED, BY ITS PUBLISHERS, AS A 'THRILLER'. BUT A THRILLER IT IS NOT. THERE IS NO WHITE-KNUCKLE SUSPENSE. THERE IS NO URGENT TURNING OF THE PAGE TO FIND OUT WHAT NEXT

a thriller than *A Burning*, it is also superior when it comes to voice. Told in the voice of a boy living in a *basti* whose friends start to vanish, his voice is always childlike, without being mawkish. In *A Burning*, Jivan and Lovely speak in the first person. While Jivan, a Class 10 graduate who works at a Pantaloon store in a mall, speaks in unbroken English, Lovely, a transgender, speaks in a disjointed English that only distances her from the reader. She is a compelling character, but her voice (which is essentially grammatically incorrect present continuous sentences) adds a layer of artifice to her. Sample this paragraph spoken by Lovely: 'For all my life, everybody is believing that I am having a direct line to god, but I am knowing the truth. Whenever I am calling god, her line is busy. So today I am bowing my head deep. Please do not let

this neighbourhood.' The knowledge of English distinguishes Jivan from her parents. With English, she can get a job in a mall, complete with a name badge. Her mother and father can only find jobs in the streets, whether it is as a rickshaw driver or a streetfood seller.

*A Burning* is a novel that I will remember for Jivan, a young Muslim woman who dreams big and does big things, but is broken by a malevolent system. This is not a novel that I will remember for invention or play with language. In the late '90s, Roy's accolades arose not only for transporting the reader to 'exotic' Kerala, but also for how she stretched language and imagery to brilliant lengths. *A Burning* tells a story—and tells it well—but it never lofts above the here and now. That is, perhaps, its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. ■

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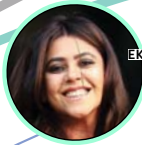
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CINEMA

# THE CIRCLES

Inside Bollywood's camps, clans and cliques

By Kaveree Bamzai



AMITABH BACHCHAN



FARHAN AKHTAR



ZOYA AKHTAR



ANUSHKA SHARMA



ADITYA CHOPRA



AISHWARYA RAI BACHCHAN



ABHISHEK BACHCHAN



**H**E SHOULD HAVE been the last person Karan Johar wanted to work with. As a senior at Breach Candy's Green Lawns School, he had bullied Johar for being a nerd. But when they met backstage at an awards function, Johar invited Nikkhil Advani to collaborate on his directorial debut, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). Advani had just worked as an assistant to Sudhir Mishra on *Is Raat Ki Subah Nahin* (1996), and Johar had completed work on *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) in many capacities—actor, assistant director, Kajol's hair brusher. Advani would go on to work with Johar on his directorial debut *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* as well as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001). The third in the Shah Rukh trilogy, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003), was his big break. Written by Johar, it was directed by Advani. Advani recalls this and asks: "Was I an insider or was I an outsider?"

Indeed, he was an outsider who briefly was an insider before going right back to being an outsider again. "Karan and I were young, he thought I had said something, I thought he had said something. Before we knew, some years passed and we stopped working together." But both continued doing well, even after parting ways. Johar went on to make his production house a powerful force in the industry and directed many more films. Advani took a little longer to establish himself, directing a series of movies before starting his own production house, Emmay Entertainment. His first movie as a producer-director was the highly regarded *D-Day* (2011) and since then he has established his credentials as a maker of smart, sharp, newsy movies such as *Airlift* (2016) and *Batla House* (2019). He currently has nine productions in various stages across movies and web series. His one mantra: pay it forward. "My first responsibility is to my writers and assistant directors. I want to make sure they get a chance to direct films, just as I did."

The outsider has become an insider again, with his own ecosystem. But he still hasn't forgotten the days of struggle when he, Anurag Kashyap and Manoj Bajpayee would hang out at Sudhir Mishra's home, because they knew they'd get fed, "with one *sabzi*, *dal* and *roti*". Advani's career captures the essence of the Mumbai film industry, which has come under intense scrutiny now with the death by suicide of actor Sushant Singh Rajput. A rising star who had come from Patna via Delhi College of Engineering to make it in Mumbai, the popular narrative is trying to paint him as the eternal outsider who could never break the glass wall that separates the haves from the have-nots. A clutch of actors and directors, from Kangana Ranaut to Abhinav Kashyap, have targeted the 'camps' and 'cliques' for being impermeable and impenetrable, giving access only to those from the same gene pool.

Despite being given the status of an industry in 1998 by then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, the late Sushma Swaraj, Bollywood norms and conventions are different from other film cities of comparable size—not just Hollywood, but also Hyderabad or Chennai. Mark Lorenzen, who has done detailed research in this field, says social networks—personal ties between people that allow them to share informa-

tion, trust each other and collaborate—are a means used in all film cities to assemble teams for film projects. But for historical reasons, social networks, and in particular family ties, are much more used in Bollywood than in comparative film cities (where agents, lawyers, film schools and other institutions play greater roles in connecting people).

Nikhil Dwivedi came to Mumbai to become an actor after giving up a well-paid job at American Express Bank and is now a successful producer (he made *Veere Di Wedding* in 2018 and *Dabangg 3* in 2019). He says, "For newcomers these big names are legends. For those within the industry these uncles and aunts came to your birthday parties. This is not to deny the struggle of star children, but just that it is of a different nature."

Bollywood was family-based right from the start, notes Lorenzen, a professor at Copenhagen Business School, more so than the other film cities in India. After the Second World War, the larger film studios in Bombay went bankrupt almost at the same time as there was an influx of filmmakers to the city from the north—resulting in a surge of small, flexible family-based film production companies such as RK Films (by Prithviraj Kapoor's son Raj), BR Films (brothers BR Chopra and Yash Chopra, who then formed his own production house YashRaj Films) and Navketan (founded by Dev Anand).

These successfully targeted the emerging home market



**“WE WANTED TO MAKE THE KIND OF FILMS WE WANTED TO SEE”**

**Kamesh Ssharma**  
producer, *Clean Slate*

(coining the masala filmmaking formula in the process) and due to their success, they came to dominate the film industry in Mumbai for half a century. Even if Hindi films look different today and also target export audiences, the family-based industry structure of Bollywood is still influential—the industry has fewer large studios/conglomerates compared to Hollywood, which is now run by five major studios: Walt Disney, Paramount Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Universal Pictures and Warner Bros, which have complex relationships with independent producers and distributors.

For producers and directors in Mumbai, social networks/family ties are a useful means for assembling a project team. Filmmakers who are members of the Bollywood film families and dynasties (very broadly defined, and not just the Chopras, Kapoors and Bachchans) are on average more prolific and successful than other filmmakers. But in his research, Lorenzen found that if you are not a top-tier family, collaborating with your own family on a film does not pay off at the box office—quite the opposite, they found a small negative effect.

Some may find it difficult or impossible to break into project



**“THERE IS SO MUCH PRESSURE ON THE ACTORS TO LOOK THEIR BEST ALL THE TIME WHETHER IT IS EXITING THE GYM OR THE AIRPORT. BASED ON THAT AND THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS, THE MANAGER DECIDES THE BRANDS THEY SPORT”**

**Hansal Mehta** film director

teams and networks. It is a classic Catch-22 situation: Those who are already in a network keep getting more network ties, those who are outside the network struggle to break in. And if a social network is (partly) based on family ties, it gets even more exclusive and difficult to break into. The more exclusive and closed, the more the network will resemble closed ‘clubs’ or ‘cliques’.

In a film industry based on social networks, outsiders need to perform better than average network members to find work. In the case of Bollywood, actors who are outsiders—because they are not from the right family, neighbourhood or club—need to perform better than network members to be offered new roles and will likely find it more difficult to find new jobs after a flop film than the network members. As a result, outsiders are much more likely to exit the industry than network members, and only very few will become big enough stars to rise ‘above the network’. For each Shah Rukh there will be hundreds and hundreds of outsiders who did not make it.

But there is mobility over time. Anurag Kashyap may have been a struggler who began in the industry as a writer for Ram Gopal Varma—at one time, he was seen as the saviour for all newbies with a queue outside what he described as his ‘factory’—but over two decades he has become an independent school of filmmaking, having given a break directly or indirectly to an array of stars from Vicky Kaushal to Nawazuddin Siddiqui. It’s the same with filmmakers such as Anubhav Sinha, Vishal Bharadwaj, Hansal Mehta and Anand L Rai. There is an informal camaraderie between all of them that extends from reading scripts for each other to watching first cuts.

Also, even when it comes to film families there is a hierarchy. All Kapoors are not equal: for instance, When Anil Kapoor began as an actor, he was seen as an outsider, even though his father Surinder Kapoor had graduated from being Geeta Bali’s secretary to a minor film producer. Ditto for Ajay Devgn, who began as fight master Veeru Devgun’s son, or Vicky Kaushal now, who is action director Sham Kaushal’s son. But over time, with the right alliances and pure persistence, new dynasties can be built and with them production houses. Farhan Akhtar had to go from actor to actor with the script of *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) in his haversack before Aamir Khan agreed, that too for the role Akshaye Khanna had been slated for. Ditto for his sister Zoya who had to wait for seven years for an actor to play the lead in

her first film, *Luck By Chance* (2009) before finally settling for her brother. They were Javed Akhtar’s children but were anything but overnight successes. Both siblings now run their independent production houses—Excel Entertainment and Tiger Baby Films—making movies and longform series.

What does a producer bring to the table? Their Rolodex. And some Rolodexes have been built since childhood: Take Aditya Chopra (Yash Raj Films), Dharma Productions (Karan Johar), Balaji Telefilms (Ekta Kapoor, who is unusual in the number of outsiders she has transformed into stars), Excel Entertainment (Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani) or Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment (Sajid Nadiadwala). Bollywood does have professional studios, such as Reliance Entertainment, Eros, Disney, Sony and Viacom, but they depend largely on the established family firms for the stars. Stars such as Salman Khan have turned producers themselves now, but only a few make entertainment that is not centred around them or their extended family. Clean Slate, started by Anushka Sharma and her brother Karnesh Ssharma, is an exception. “We wanted to make the kind of films we wanted to see,” says the former cricketer and merchant navy sailor. Together the siblings have made some eclectic and brilliant choices, the most recent being the Amazon Prime series *Paatal Lok* and the Netflix allegorical film *Bulbbul* by Anvita Dutt.

**E**VERY NEWCOMER HAS to have a coping mechanism, a very thick skin, and an ecosystem that nourishes them. But often even if they play by the rules of the game, they lose. They may get invited to the right parties but may have to listen to snide remarks. Dwivedi recalls that it happened to him after his fifth successive flop as an actor when he was mocked by a senior, more successful actor at a party. He decided to cut his losses and turn producer. But not everyone has that mental strength. Says director Hansal Mehta, who has worked closely with actors Manoj Bajpayee and Rajkumar Rao: “There is so much pressure on the actors to look their best all the time whether it is exiting the gym or the airport. Based on that and the number of followers, the manager decides the brands they sport. The aspirations are anything but artistic. Managers tell you which parties to attend, what to wear, even whom to date.” Dwivedi adds, “Even something as simple as your hairstyle. I figured it out thanks to professional help much after I stopped acting.”

So, is it about outsiders and insiders or merely success and lack of it? Producer-director Vivek Agnihotri doesn’t buy the nepotism debate. “It’s your money, your child,” he says. What upsets him is when there is a deliberate decision to destroy a career. “I’ve had critics ridiculing me, but you have to be mentally and emotionally tough to handle it.” His way of negotiating is to keep his office door open for young talent. “At any given time, you will find young assistant directors, writers and technicians. Cinema cannot survive without innovation and R&D.”

As Mehta puts it, there are a lot of vultures out there, you need to learn to be a tiger. The Friday first-day-first-show doesn’t spare anyone. ■



# 'What Gives Me Optimism Is the Young White Generation'

**S**PIKE LEE'S latest film *Da 5 Bloods* is about four African American veterans who return to Vietnam to find the body of their squadron leader and some stolen gold, which they had helped hide. They must confront the ravages and immorality of the war.

**There seem to be several homages in the film. Am I right?** You are right. I have nothing but respect for Oliver Stone and his films about Vietnam [*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven & Earth*]. Oliver Stone is not just dreaming it, I mean he was there, he was in Vietnam. I also have a lot of love for my brother Francis Ford Coppola. There are two homages to *Apocalypse Now*, they are there for a reason. Look closely at the helicopter shot and you'll see Robert Duvall. And when you see these guys going up a river with the same pilot.

**What was it like filming in Southeast Asia?**

We shot the majority of the film in Thailand, Chiang-Mai, Bangkok etcetera, and we finished in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly called Saigon, Vietnam. It was one of the most enjoyable and informative experiences of my life. Because as far as the East goes, I've only been to Japan. This was my first time in Thailand. The people welcomed me and the cast and the crew and the Americans there with open arms—it was beautiful, beautiful. But it was hot, and we had to rush the shoot because we were trying to get ahead of the monsoon season.



*Spike Lee*

But there were many days where we had the worst pollution in the world because the farmers burn their crops at that time, but we were ready for it. All in all the experience was great and I look forward to going back.

**There is a kind of war going on in the US right now in the form of peaceful protests against police brutality on coloured people. We've seen many protests in the past too. Are you optimistic that this time change will come about?**

Well, I have always been optimistic, I think *Do the Right Thing* (1989) is a very optimistic film. I made that 31 years ago. Look at the murder of Eric Garner, you have to ask yourself how much has changed? So, I mean my mindset is day-by-day, and that was

during the pandemic. So, it has not changed day-by-day. But what gives me optimism is to see the young white generation, my young sisters and brothers who have joined us in the streets, so, that has been very, very uplifting for me, that it's not just brown or black people. It's our white brothers and sisters too. Which you saw in the Civil Rights movement, that is history repeating itself, which I saw growing up as a kid. I'm seeing it again today.

**Do you think there are lessons to be learnt in regard to what's happening in the US?**

Well, I think it is very important that people look at what is happening in America, but more important, look at what is happening in your own country, because the United States of

America is not the only place that has racial problems. I think that the guy in Brazil is very lucky. Because what that guy in Brazil is doing, people are not looking at because of other world matters.

**You said you are optimistic about change in the US, but what has changed?**

Well, here's the thing, there have been changes. But the black people are still killed in this country, left and right. That's how I look at it. Black people are still being killed many times by the police, and to add insult to injury, these murderers walk free. There are four cops in Minnesota involved in the killing of George Floyd, only one was arrested at first, the other three were arrested after the protests took place. ■



**RAJEEV MASAND**

## Stars Unlocked

As the lockdown eases across the country, film folk are slowly attempting to return to a life of normalcy.

**Abhishek Bachchan** was spotted at a suburban post-production studio earlier this week, presumably to complete dubbing his scenes for either the Amazon Prime Video series *Breathe*, whose second season he stars in, or the **Harshad Mehta** biopic he recently wrapped that is expected to drop on a streaming platform in the weeks ahead. Wearing a precautionary mask, Abhishek was spotted leaving in his car a few hours after he arrived for the dub.

Meanwhile in Hyderabad, pre-wedding celebrations for actor **Rana Daggubati** and his entrepreneur-fiancée **Miheeka Bajaj** continue. The bride-to-be shared pictures of herself from a ceremony held over the weekend, but since Rana was not in the pictures, fans speculated that it was possibly a 'bride's' side event. Only a little over a month ago, the couple shared photographs from their engagement ceremony and their families have revealed that the wedding could take place in August.

## Shooting May RRR resume

Roughly 25 per cent of his film still to be completed, *Baahubali* director **SS Rajamouli** could likely soon resume shooting of *RRR* in a phased manner. The film, which stars Telugu superstars **Ram Charan** and **NTR Jr** (aka **Tarak**), has twice shifted its release date and speculation is now rife whether it can make its January 2021 release. After wrapping schedules in Hyderabad, Vadodara and across locations in Bulgaria, this period saga was meant to be filming in full swing until production was halted on account of the coronavirus.

**Ajay Devgn**, who, according to rumours, is cast as a mentor figure to the freedom fighters that the two leading men play in this period saga, shot with the team in Hyderabad earlier this year. But **Alia Bhatt**, who also stars, hasn't yet shot a day. The actress, whose shooting dates are divided between **Sanjay Leela**

**Bhansali's** still-under-production *Gangubai Kathiawadi* and *RRR*, is expected to complete both films once shooting resumes. Word coming from Hyderabad is that Rajamouli has agreed to do a two-day test shoot with minimal crew and all safety precautions in place. Based on that the filmmaker will decide if it is advisable to return to full-fledged filming immediately. There is some talk that the crew will move into Ramoji Rao Film City on the outskirts of Hyderabad if they decide to resume in full scale. Like *RRR*, the balance portions of *Kaante* director **Sanjay Gupta's** unfinished gangster drama *Mumbai Saga* are also expected to be completed in the Ramoji Rao campus next month.

## Hot Right Now

*Laila Majnu* stars **Tripti Dimri** and **Avinash Tiwary**,

who star in *Bulbbul*, this week's new release (on Netflix), are in especially good form playing *bhabhi* and *dewar* in an early 20th century tale of male entitlement, female oppression and a bloodthirsty witch. Dimri is especially lovely as a fragile (child) bride whose fate is decided by the men in her life. Big props also to director **Anvita Dutt** and producer siblings **Anushka** and **Karnesh Sharma** for gambling on relative newcomers (and 'outsiders') to topline the by-no-means-modest production that delivers a stinging feminist message with originality and flair.

Responding to reports that the annual 10-day Yulin dog meat festival has kicked off in China this week, actors **Anushka Sharma** and **Kartik Aaryan** took to social media to express outrage. Anushka asked on Instagram: 'What will it take for them to learn?!' Kartik, put up a picture of himself with two lovable mutts, adding the caption: '*Har saal dil tode hain yeh Yulin Festival waale* [Every year the folks at Yulin Festival break my heart].' Both actors were praised for taking a stand and their posts were circulated widely. ■



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