

RADICALISATION OF THE LIBERAL A PACKAGE FOR THE POOR THE CHINESE GANESHA

A BIOGRAPHY OF NEPOTISM THE NAME OF THE GAME GALWAN AND FAMILY GRIEF



# OPEN

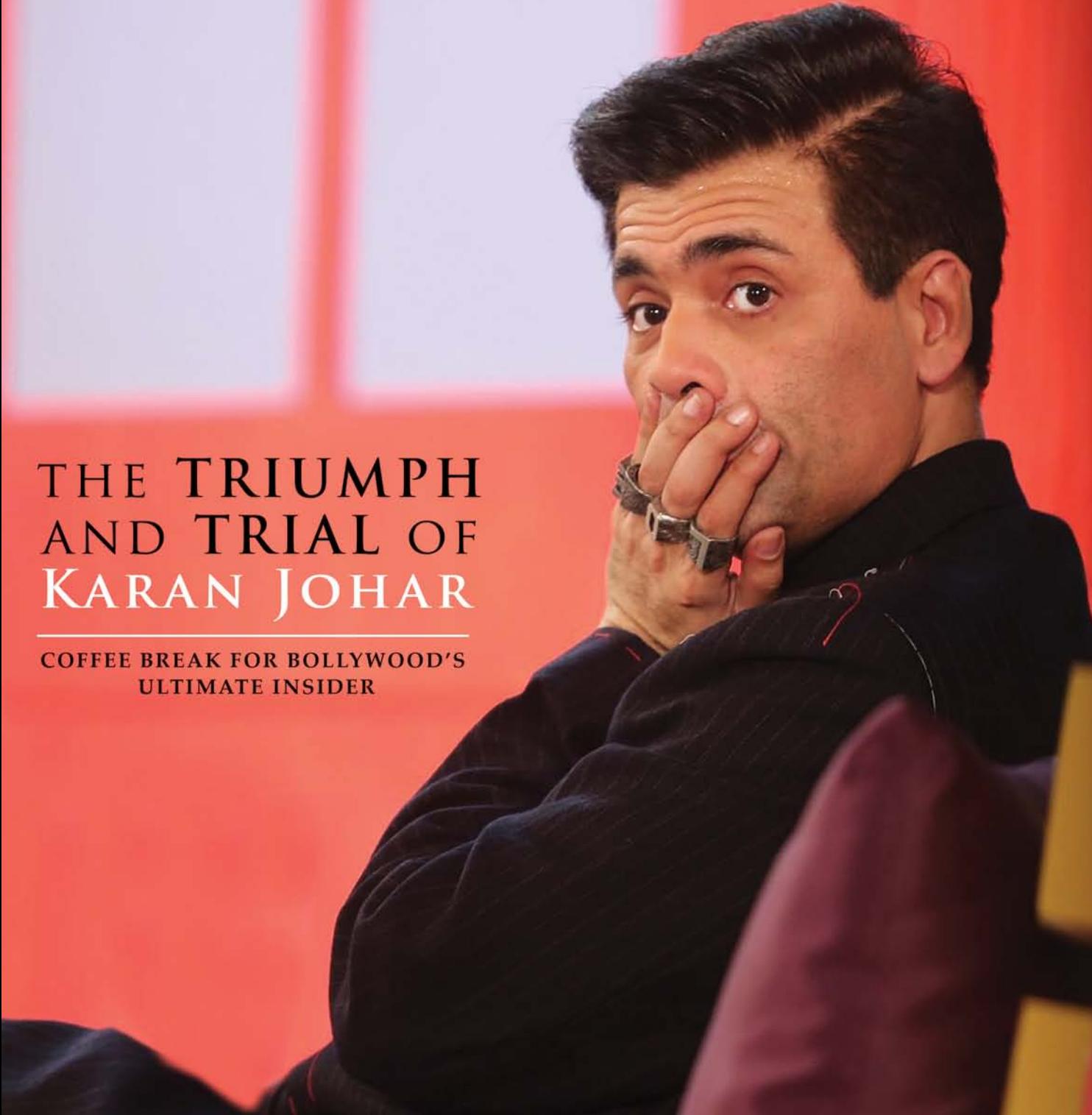


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## THE TRIUMPH AND TRIAL OF KARAN JOHAR

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Cover design by Saurabh Singh

# OPEN MAIL

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## LETTER OF THE WEEK

The real challenge of Western wokeness infesting Indian public discourse lies in retraining our brainwashed youth ('A Brief History of Wokeism', June 22nd, 2020). Indian universities are dominated by hard left cultural Marxists. Even right-wing governments at the Centre and states have failed to weaken their hold on young minds. While it is certainly not desirable that our universities be dominated by monochrome opinion, so to speak, and parochialise our campuses and classrooms, the rigid and totalitarian impact of virtue-signalling woke academics, often seen in the form of campus politics and violence, makes the sorry state of affairs amply evident. This is a dangerous trend.

Already, any alternative to the Marxist and liberal narratives has been effectively snuffed out in the so-called best universities in the West. Their schools are the only remaining battleground where alternative worldviews can still put up a fight. Otherwise, the Western academia has seen a silencing of all dissent by denying ideological challengers a platform for debate. It remains to be seen if these disturbing and thought-controlling ways of leftist academics can be countered in India and replaced with a more balanced atmosphere of discussion and debate. Taking control of administration is not enough.

Sunil Tung

### CHINA CHALLENGE

That the world of diplomacy is cut-throat was revealed yet again by China ('Is India Still Paying for Nehru's China-Submissive Policy?' by MJ Akbar and 'China Throws Down a Challenge to India' by Brahma Chellaney, July 6th, 2020). They did not even flinch in going from handshakes to hand-to-hand combat at the Line of Actual Control. The deployment on the border by both the countries may trigger a larger regional—global?—conflict. The Galwan Valley attack on Indian troops was gruesome. We have been taken aback by the crude method of attack. Though the ban on Chinese apps looks laughable at the

moment, it may blow up into a full-blown trade relations crisis.

Nikhil Krishnan

The greatness of a leader is judged only after their time. Jawaharlal Nehru's three Himalayan blunders are finally being genuinely understood and appraised. One, when he pulled back Indian forces from Kashmir on the advice of Sheikh Abdulla—that region would have been one and ours today. Two, when he rejected Nepal's overtures to join India in the 1950s. And three, when he accepted China's claim over Tibet. The last one was probably the most egregious of all his mistakes. No wonder, his image of a



visionary is being recast.

Ashok Goswami

Wars and killings will only set back Asia's two biggest developing countries on their path to prosperity. To resolve disputes on borders, countries should replace humans there with satellites for monitoring. This will avoid bloodspilling; after all, soldiers are only humans. Let the UN too keep an eye on the borders through its own satellites.

PVM Rao

### TOKENISM

Mere rebranding is not enough ('Unfair and Less Lovely', July 6th, 2020). As long as a whitening product sells, racist beauty will survive. Changing the name of a fairness cream is classic old wine in new bottle. In their long advertising history, grooming brands have done considerable social harm by reinforcing stereotypes. If these brands wish to rectify their errors and win back the trust of modern-age customers, a step no less than dropping off the entire range of fairness products should be acceptable.

Gaurav Pant

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

## RADICALISATION OF THE LIBERAL

**L**IBERAL IS THE desired adjective to any democracy where constitutional rights and obligations are still maintained. Liberalism is what a free world and an unfettered citizen are indebted to for their good fortune. The liberal ideal, in spite of its variations across continents, is what a world swinging between excessive anger and inflated triumphalism yearns for.

It was not so long ago that we assumed a liberal victory was inevitable as artificial systems fell apart. The collapse of communism may not have resulted in what liberal idealists had predicted. But the spontaneity of streets that contributed to the repudiation of the Lie was a validation of the liberal spirit; and it was the benefactors of the spirit, once in power, who had let the ideal down.

Still, in the end, liberalism, the most shared sentiment of power after World War II, remained undefeated by the ideology that promised the New Man in a Just World. And it took the insurgency of populists to shatter the ideal again, culminating in Brexit and Donald Trump. The rise of “liberators” who tapped into the anger of a people abandoned by the traditional Left and Right spawned an end-of-liberalism industry. Endology is a false science in politics. The end of liberalism was, in retrospect, a hasty obituary. What we saw was the failure of liberals’ conversation with power.

We are at that moment again: the liberal spirit is soaring. This moment is here partly because the populist, the new establishment politician, has never stopped playing the underdog. The populist’s sense of being persecuted is a political as well as psychological comfort. Now we are witnessing the failure of the populists’ conversation with power.

Liberals Rearmed demand too much. They want reparations for a ransacked past. They want to rebuild a past with the pieties of the present. They want memories to be erased and history to be rewritten as a morality play. They want the homogenisation of the mind to preserve the new doctrine of justice. This is not something that is happening only in the post-George Floyd America. It’s happening in societies where populists in power have ceded the constituency of empathy and sensitivity to the new retailers of resentment.

Liberals Rearmed announce the radicalisation of social-justice politics. Once

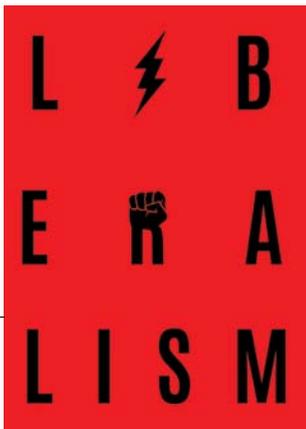
again, the world is a wretched place where, goes the liberal text, the vocal majority has stolen not just all the benefits of freedom but history too. The perpetuation of this text requires an enemy, as enemies have always come handy to the isms of the past. The new enemy is one who disputes the useful segregations of identity politics.

In the new liberal sociology, identity is biography. The individual whose freedom hindered by the state was always at the centre of liberal politics. The current social vivisection of the individual marks a new social order in which anyone subscribing to the inviolability of a cultural inheritance is a glorifier of an unjust past. Someone who carries the residues of historical oppression in his or her genes. Yesterday ought to be a lingering grievance.

Liberals today dominate the marketplace of grievance. They are not necessarily the reapers of resentment. They manufacture resentments to reclaim an imagined past. Theirs is not a struggle for power. It is a struggle against power. Power is not what brings change. In the new liberal theology, the struggle itself is the change. The struggle itself is justice. The struggle gives them an aura of martyrdom; it does also magnify the new evil—the national populist, the cultural elitist, the gender conservative, the racial collaborator...Categorisations are made according to the degrees of deviations from the doctrine of social justice.

Doctrinaire liberalism is not an oxymoron, any longer. The moment an ism claims complete ownership of truth, and pretends to be the sole reader of the past and the self-chosen arbiter of the future, it becomes an enforced faith. It denies nations a textured history, and a shared cultural story that is more than a moral lesson. It denies individuals the comfort of questions. It reduces the adversary to a bogeyman, and turns dissent into a referendum on that entity. It is a perfect case of liberals, borrowing from the hoary tradition of isms, turning liberalism into a lie, the only consolation being ‘I’ is in lower case.

No matter where you stood in the ideological divide, a liberal position was the oldest political expression of freedom. The liberal legacy of the rule of law and constitutional rights is what makes angry streets possible in a democracy. The closing of the liberal mind heralds the radicalisation of an ideal to which we are all indebted. ■



# OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

IT IS REMARKABLE, indeed unbelievable, how the global perceptions of China have changed in the past 50 years.

Throughout the 1970s, China was considered a strange and mysterious land practising a Marxism-Leninism that was quirky, if not a bit crazy. I remember occasionally tuning in to English-language broadcasts of Radio Peking on my short-wave radio and listening to the amusing rants delivered in a strange accent. These were full of vitriolic abuse against both 'American imperialist dogs' and the 'revisionist Brezhnev clique'—which I initially misheard as 'revisionist Brezhnev pig'. In our mind, and despite all the Maoist propaganda centred on barefoot doctors and the stupendous Great Leap Forward—actually an unmitigated disaster, China seemed a country full of absolute nutters. The Mao suits, the fanatical Red Guards and the unceasing bouts of denunciations and mob violence were symptomatic.

Travellers to China were few and invariably so ideologically driven that their glowing accounts of happy millions were treated with a mountain of salt, except by the left-inclined. The only exception was the Belgian Sinologist Simon Leys whose books published in the late-1970s indicated that all was not well in the communes of the workers' paradise. Alas, to the leftists, Mao Zedong was a cult figure who had even swum across the fast-flowing Yangtze Kiang. To others, he seemed more like the leader of an exotic religious cult. There was always a difference between those infatuated by the Soviet Union in the 1930s, when fascism posed an alternate challenge, and the Maoists of the 1960s and 1970s. If the idealism of the former was misplaced and based on selective indignation, the zeal of the latter always



struck me as abnormal. The present-day romanticism associated with the Naxalites, particularly in West Bengal, is difficult for those who lived through the great mess to comprehend. The detailed histories of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution by historian Frank Dikötter quite clearly reveal that Maoist China was nothing short of a nightmare. Yet it managed to draw in many thousands of what Lenin used to call 'useful idiots'.

Maybe the attraction had something to do with the images of the exotic Orient—personified by paintings of emperors and mandarins with long, drooping moustaches and the ubiquitous pigtail—that defined China. Recently, I read a fascinating book that I was drawn to by its cover. Written by an English historian, Christopher Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia* details the caricatured portrayal of China that prevailed in the West—but not exclusively in the West—till fairly recently. A passage from his book is worth repeating, if only to underline the disdain that greeted China in what Beijing now refers to as its 'century of humiliation'.

'In Britain, we preferred to keep our memories alive in the maybe too casual use of language: from the 'Chinese burn' in the school playground (with the comic book reaction of 'aiieeee') to bowling a 'Chinaman' on

the cricket pitch—a sneaky, left-arm unorthodox spin...; from the 'Chinese wall' of silence—with a 'chink' in it, of course—to untrustworthy 'Chinese whippers'... In television circles, a filming appointment at 2.20 pm was until recently known as 'Chinese dentist', as in 'Tooth hurtee?'... An order for 'fly ry' still seems popular with students on a boozy evening out—a legacy of pidgin English as spoken by Chinese people around Guangzhao who had difficulty pronouncing certain words...'

Grayling also suggested that 'Most Americans' knowledge of 'Confucianism' seemed to be confined to the pedantic aphorisms of the philosophical, fictional, asexual Hawaiian-Chinese detective from Honolulu, Charlie Chan: 'Hasty conclusions easy to make, like hole in water.' 'It is difficult to pick up needle with boxing glove.'... Often, Charlie Chan's fortune-cookie aphorisms were prefaced with the words 'old Chinese proverb', 'ancient Chinese philosopher say' or—of course—'Confucius he say.'

Today, few will care to revel in the stereotypes. China has ceased to be a laughing matter or the butt of jokes. On the contrary, there is now a mad rush among Sinologists and other China experts to try and seriously pierce the Chinese mind. This in turn has generated a huge body of pseudo-analysis by 'experts' with a slightly more than nodding acquaintance with conversational Mandarin. The tendency to either over-interpret or miss the wood for the trees is widespread, not least in India where we are still struggling to understand the adversary. I seriously recommend *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* by the Portuguese writer Bruno Maçães to gauge that we are dealing with a terrifying enemy—another Dr Fu Manchu, but multiplied by 20. ■

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# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## The Debt to Narasimha Rao

By TP Sreenivasan

**T**HE GREAT IRONY of Indian history is that the game-changing decisions on the liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy, as well as changes in foreign policy, were taken by a person who was considered prone to Hamlet-like procrastination—PV Narasimha Rao, whose centenary year is being celebrated throughout the country this year. Faced with unprecedented global changes, particularly the collapse of the Soviet Union, he reinvented himself and India. He must be remembered as an architect of post-modern India.

A scholar and a polyglot, Rao's forte was foreign policy, having served as the Minister of External Affairs. I had the privilege of being in the foreign service throughout his terms as foreign minister and Prime Minister. Mostly serving in multilateral posts, I had the opportunity to watch him closely and interact with him. He was precise in his analysis of the global situation, clear about India's strengths and weaknesses and firm about the path India should pursue. He patiently listened to advice, but formed his own opinions and decisions. His reputation for prevarication arose out of his priority to deal with important matters rather than the urgent ones. In cases where he thought the problems would be resolved in time, he just held on to the papers and returned them when the problems were solved.

The collapse of the Soviet Union shocked him and he hoped against hope that things would be reversed, but once he knew the situation had stabilised, he took quick decisions to open a mission in Israel as a way to the heart of the Americans and made marginal adjustments in policy towards Palestine, the Indian Ocean, disarmament and nuclear matters.

Having served at the Indian mission first during the Cold War (1980-1983), I needed to readjust my views and choose a new vocabulary as though the software in me had changed during my second term (1992-95).

I have had some conversations with Rao on nuclear matters when he was Prime Minister and, more significantly, afterwards when he came to the US for medical treatment. He was evasive on some details saying that he would take his secrets to his grave, but there were some nuggets of information which threw some light on the entire nuclear test episode.

For instance, the revelation made by a former official that it was Rao who encouraged Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to order the nuclear tests in 1998 does not tally with the circumstantial evidence available and the conversation I had with him after the nuclear tests. He told me that the tests of 1998 were unnecessary as he had found a way out of India's dilemma during his meeting in Washington with President Bill Clinton in 1994.

The popular belief is that Rao kept debating about the desirability of a nuclear test throughout his time as Prime Minister, primarily because of the constant prodding by both R Chidambaram and APJ Abdul Kalam.

According to that school of thought, Rao was very much on the verge of a test in 1995, when US Ambassador Frank Wisner confronted him with some satellite photographs to show certain activities in Pokharan and warned him of sweeping economic sanctions in the event of a test. Clinton is said to have spoken personally to Rao to dissuade him from testing in 1995.

However, the account of the events of that time by Raj Chengappa in *Weapons of Peace* presents a different picture. According to Chengappa,

**In March 1999, I had two long conversations with Rao at Washington airport. He asked me how the American reaction was to the tests. I asked him whether he had stopped the tests in 1995 after Clinton spoke to him. His reply was clear and sharp. He said there was no truth in that story and that he had decided in 1994 that India did not need nuclear tests**

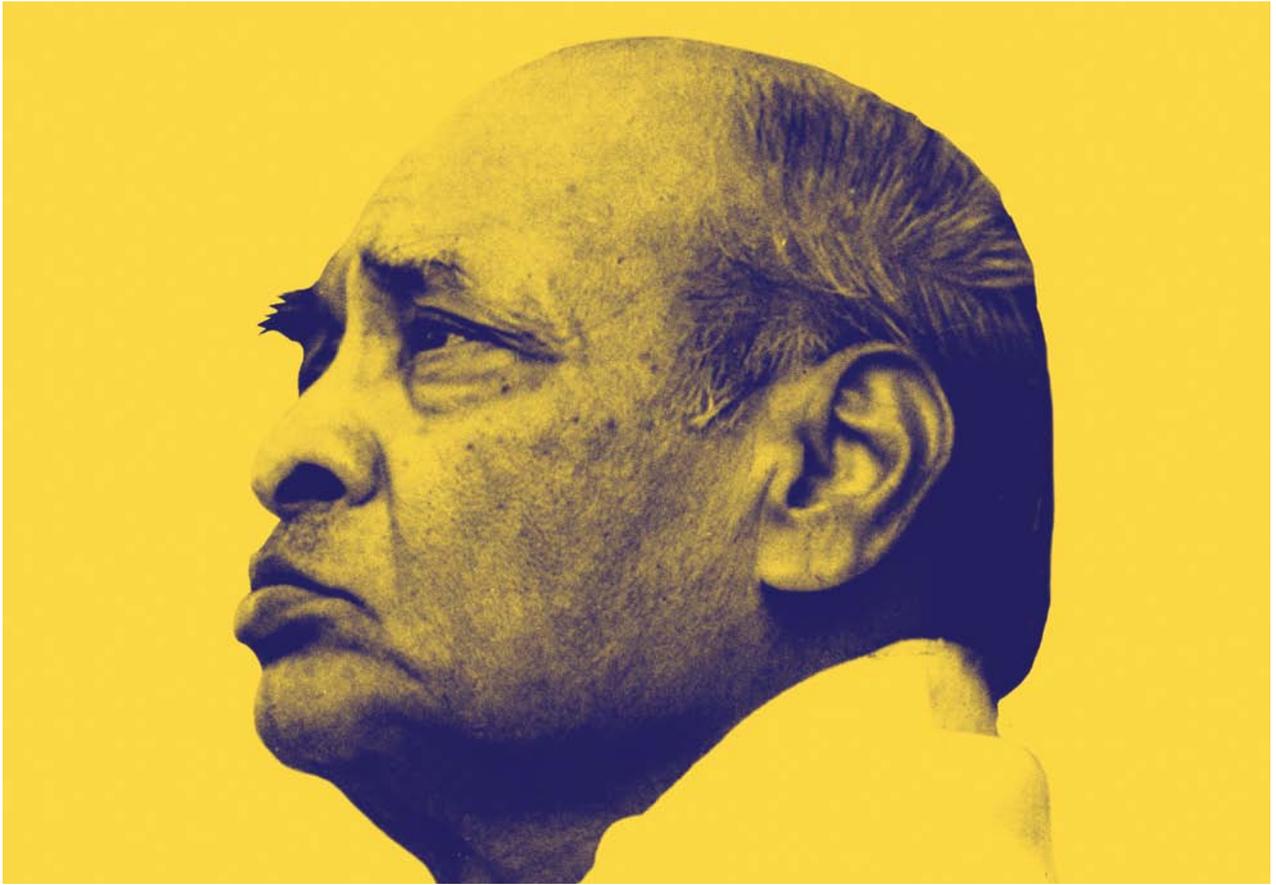


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Rao had no intention to test in 1995, though he had asked Chidambaram and Kalam to keep everything in readiness to carry out the tests in the shortest possible time.

In 1995, one of the shafts, which was opened for preparation, was found to be filled up with water three-fourths of the way to the top. The unusual activity that the US satellite picked up in November 1995 was the repair work that was undertaken at that time. Rao's reply to Wisner was that he should tell his President: "I always keep my word." The truth is that he never cleared the tests, says Chengappa.

In March 1999, I had two long conversations with Rao at Washington airport on his way to Boston and back. He was weak, but his memory and mind were as sharp as ever. He was in a contemplative mood and appeared to be ready to open his heart. An opportunity presented itself, when he asked me how the American reaction was to the tests. I asked him whether he had stopped the tests in 1995 after Clinton spoke to him. His reply was clear and sharp. He said there was no truth in that story and that he had decided in 1994 that India did not need nuclear tests. Somewhat taken aback, I prodded him further. He explained that his meeting with Clinton in 1994 was decisive in this matter. He said that, for the first time, the US had agreed to move decisively to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons and he, in turn, agreed not to test.

This appeared too simplistic an explanation to me and I told him that subsequently, the US had declined a proposal from us that India and the US should make such a declaration

at the United Nations. The US had informed us in New York that any bilateral understanding of this nature could not be brought to multilateral fora. At this point, Rao changed the subject and refused to be dragged into any further discussion on it.

A note, said to have been handed over to Vajpayee by Rao with the words 'Now is the time to accomplish my unfinished task', may not have been a reference to the nuclear tests at all. It was well known that he and Vajpayee had an exceptional equation, particularly on foreign affairs, as they were both in the Nehru mould. Rao may well have expected Vajpayee to accomplish his unfinished task, in general.

As for the word Rao had given Clinton in 1994, the details have gone to the grave with him. Interestingly, in our many conversations with the Americans after the tests, no one mentioned the commitment given by Rao.

The end of the Cold War posed unprecedented challenges to India, including a certain nostalgia about the Soviet Union. But his erudition and sense of realism enabled him to shape a new political and economic profile for India.

Narasimha Rao was undoubtedly the architect of India's policies in the new unipolar world. It is heartening to see that a grateful nation is finally giving him his rightful place in the galaxy of India's great leaders as his centenary is being celebrated. Whether he is honoured with the title or not, he is a Bharat Ratna. ■



*TP Sreenivasan is a former diplomat*

PORTRAIT • FACEBOOK

# AD TWISTING

**The social media giant's refusal to censor political speech leads to a boycott by corporate advertisers**

**F**ACEBOOK IS NO stranger to controversies. For years it has been accused of doing little to counter misinformation, abuse, privacy breaches and even election interferences, the criticism becoming particularly sharpened after the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal. But none of this has had any impact on Facebook's growth. It has continued to grow both in membership and profits year on year.

But there is a move now to hurt the social media giant where it hurts. Over 500 of some of the biggest corporations, on the call of some civil rights groups in the US, are currently carrying out an advertising boycott of the platform. These include Unilever, Coca-Cola, Verizon, Hershey, Starbucks and a number other big ad spenders. Facebook executives have been trying to placate, arranging daily calls with ad firms and bringing in new rules. But none of these have so far been deemed enough. It appears Facebook is going through its worst crisis.

It is facing an advertising boycott and taking a reputation hit at a time when corporate groups are being pushed to take tough stands. Internally too, Facebook employees, many of who openly rebelled against founder Mark Zuckerberg over his handling of US President Donald Trump's posts some weeks ago, are reported to be using the boycott to push for change in the way it handles contentious topics.

The call to boycott the platform first came a few weeks ago when a coalition of civil rights and left-wing groups came to form what they call Stop Hate for Profit. Soon, high-profile allies joined in. According to reports, these include actors, supermodels, politicians and even Prince Harry and

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



his wife Meghan. The couple apparently called up CEOs of some of the platform's biggest ad buyers and pushed them to join the boycott.

The changes being demanded in regulating political speech on the platform, as some have pointed out, are deliberately opaque. *The Wall Street Journal* in an opinion piece points out, 'Facebook is being told to have its enforcers root out political speech and artistic expression based on deliberately opaque criteria. The activists also want Facebook to use algorithms to more closely surveil "private groups" as well as remove any that focus on 'climate denialism'. 'Watch out if you debate climate projections in what you thought was a private forum. They also want Facebook to fact-check speech by politicians, but don't expect claims consistent with officially sanctioned social-justice ideology to face any scrutiny.'

The current boycott is part of a larger struggle going on to control the public square of online opinion. As the election nears and protests and riots take place in the US, social media platforms find themselves increasingly being pushed to take sides. Twitter, for instance, began putting 'fact checking' labels, most famously on some of Trump's tweets. The online message board Reddit recently banned a 'subreddit' linked to the President and the Amazon-streaming platform Twitch temporarily banned a Trump campaign account a few days ago over breaking rules.

Facebook finds itself torn between two competing ideologies. Those on the right complain the platform is too censorious, those on the left want more speech regulation.

Zuckerberg's point so far has been that Facebook should not police what political speech since it is already highly scrutinized. He has argued that people should be able to see what politicians say, even when their claims are false or objectionable. This issue came to the fore about a month ago when after riots broke out in the US, Trump tweeted that 'thugs are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd... when the looting starts, the shooting starts...' While Twitter put a warning label over the tweet starting a row between the White House and the platform, Facebook decided to, amidst much criticism, leave the post up.

But Zuckerberg has somewhat begun to buckle under the pressure of the boycott. The platform has announced it will label posts which breach its rules, but this hasn't satisfied critics.

What will worry the platform, as the boycott drags on, is the hit it will take to its reputation. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

**ANGLE****CAN GOD BE BIASED?****The conceptual flaw in asking Him to take Covid out as Uddhav Thackeray did****By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

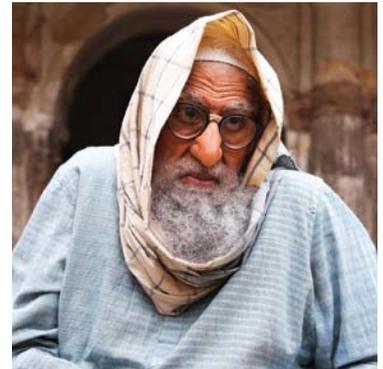
**U**DDHAV THACKERAY, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, the worst Covid-affected state of India, went this week to the temple town of Pandharpur on the occasion of Ashadashi Ekadashi and asked the deity there for a miracle, not just for Maharashtra but the whole of mankind, to get rid of Covid-19. A *Times of India* article reported on it: ‘Referring to Lord Vitthal as Maui, or mother, he said: “On behalf of the universe, I am offering prayers to Maui for a miracle to put an end to the Covid pandemic from this day of Ashadhi Ekadashi. How are we to carry on with life like this, covering our mouth with a cloth strip?” Later, he reiterated the sentiment on Twitter, where he added heft to his appeal to Lord Vitthal by saying man was down on his knees and there was no medicine or any other cure for the disease yet.’

Who, even if he is an atheist, can quarrel with such a sentiment? If god doesn't exist, it doesn't matter. And if he does, then what's the harm in entreating his services? As the great mathematician Blaise Pascal argued, you lose nothing by believing and stand eternity to gain if it is true. However, the matter is not settled so easily for Thackeray's request. Let us assume for the purposes of the present that god exists and that he actually hears the prayer. What would he do then? Almost certainly nothing. From the standpoint of god, why would human life have any more value than that of a virus? They are both part of

his creation and, going by the numbers alone, he probably is more partial to viruses. They were there hundreds of millions of years before man and outnumber us by trillions and trillions.

Religions have got out of this impasse by postulating that man is the final creation of god. That everything from the virus to dinosaur onwards was leading to our species. Since god never really explains anything in clear terms, this is probably as good an argument as any. Except, there is the issue of space. If man in a small planet called earth was the end of creation, then what was the rest of the universe all about? You want to build a house and have your favorite folks residing in it, you don't buy a billion acres of desert around it. In fact, it probably indicates the opposite—the end objective was the desert and the house an unintended accident, a bug in the operating system that took life.

The unimaginable scale of everything in the universe and the minuteness of humans in it is the biggest argument against man being the centre of anything. Why should a virus think any less of itself just because of size when man's size is as small in relation to bigger things around? The purpose of prayer, however, does have psychological utility. If you believe there is someone out there only waiting for your request to take a novel coronavirus out of his blueprint, then you will feel better. And without a vaccine that is a salve. ■

**IDEAS****RESPECTABILITY**

In the last couple of years, the notion of the prestige of the theatre screen began to be pushed about. How ‘big’ films, which really meant those that featured superstars and directors and elaborate productions, needed to be watched on a large screen. This was of course the result of the rise in digital piracy and the emergence of OTT platforms. The so-called smaller films with lesser known stars could be watched online. The Covid outbreak has thrown all those fuzzy notions out of the window. Some months ago, the online release of movies with relatively big stars such as *Gulabo Sitabo* and *Shakuntala Devi* caused a lot of consternation among multiplex chains. Now Disney + Hotstar has announced as many as seven films featuring some of the biggest current stars like Akshay Kumar and Aalia Bhat will be released straight on their platform. A movie big or small can be watched anywhere, even on a mobile phone. ■

**WORD'S WORTH**

**‘Stone Age. Bronze Age. Iron Age. We define entire epics of humanity by the technology they use’**

**REED HASTINGS** CEO NETFLIX



By Bibek Debroy

# Revisiting the Pandavas

The Mahabharata gives a dharmic reinterpretation of misfortune

**T**HE *YAKSHA PRASHNA* incident from the Mahabharata should be familiar territory. Most people have heard of it. But on the internet, I recently found a query. How many questions did the *yaksha* ask Yudhishtira? The answer was also given: 18. I wish it were that simple. The *yaksha* did not number the questions he asked Yudhishtira. Therefore, I have decided to revisit this and give you a complete version. The Mahabharata is divided into 18 sections known as *parvas*. One of these is known as ‘Vana Parva’ or ‘Aranyaka Parva’, where the exiled Pandavas wander around in the forest. Both ‘*vana*’ and ‘*aranya*’ mean forest. Within the ‘Vana/Aranyaka Parva’, there is a sub-section known as ‘Aranya Parva’. ‘*Aranya*’ means wood used for kindling and this *parva* is named after kindling-wood. The *yaksha prashna* occurs in ‘Aranya Parva’.

The Pandavas left the region known as Kamyaka and went to the beautiful region known as Dvaitavana. They went towards the sage Markandeya’s enchanting hermitage, where there were succulent roots and fruit. All the Pandavas began to live there with Draupadi, controlled in their vows and living frugally on a diet of fruit.

While Yudhishtira was seated with his brothers in the forest, a Brahmana swiftly approached and sorrowfully spoke these words to him. ‘I left my kindling-wood and the churning-rod [used to light fire through friction] leaning against a tree. But they stuck to the antlers of a deer that rubbed itself against it. O king! The great deer rushed away at great speed from the hermitage, using giant leaps. Swiftly follow the footprints of that great deer. O Pandavas! Bring those back to me, so that my fire sacrifice is not spoilt.’ Hearing the words of the Brahmana, Yudhishtira felt sorry. He grasped his bow and left with his brothers. For the sake of the Brahmana, they prepared themselves and swiftly dashed after the deer. The Pandavas saw the deer at a short distance and shot barbed arrows, hollow arrows and iron arrows at it. But the *maharathas* could not pierce it. While they were trying in this way, the great deer disappeared. Seeing the deer disappear, those intelligent ones were exhausted and sorry. In that dense forest, they sought shelter under the cool shade of a banyan tree. Their limbs were sore with hunger

and thirst and they seated themselves.

When they were seated, Nakula spoke to his eldest brother, with a heavy heart and lack of patience. ‘Dharma has never been given up in our lineage. Nor have objectives been lost through laziness. We are superior to all beings. O king! Why has this disaster befallen us again?’

Yudhishtira said, ‘There are no limits to misfortune. Nor effects or causes. Dharma distributes it, depending on merits and demerits.’

Bhima said, ‘The attendant dragged Draupadi into the assembly-hall like a servant. There is no doubt that we are confronted with this calamity because I did not kill him then.’

Arjuna said, ‘I tolerated the extremely harsh words spoken by Karna, which penetrated the bones. There is no doubt that we are confronted with this calamity because of that.’

Sahadeva said, ‘There is no doubt that we are confronted with this calamity because I did not kill Shakuni when he defeated you at the game of dice.’

After this, King Yudhishtira spoke to Nakula. ‘O Madri’s son! Climb a tree and look in the 10 directions. Look for water that is nearby, or trees that grow near water. Your brothers are exhausted and thirsty.’ Following these words, Nakula swiftly climbed a tree. After looking in all the directions, he told his eldest brother, ‘O king! I can see many trees that grow near water. I can hear the cries of cranes. There is no doubt that there is water somewhere here.’ Kunti’s son Yudhishtira, steadfast in his truth, then told him, ‘Swiftly go and fetch some water.’

On his eldest brother’s instructions, Nakula agreed and quickly rushed towards the place where the water was. He saw the crystal-clear water, surrounded by cranes. Just as he was about to drink it, a voice was heard from the sky. ‘O son! Do not be foolish enough to do this. I have obtained possession of this earlier. O Madri’s son! Answer my question. You can then drink the water and take it.’ But Nakula was very thirsty and ignored these words. He drank the cool water. Having drunk it, he collapsed and fell down. When Nakula did not return for a long time, Yudhishtira spoke to his brave brother Sahadeva, the scorcher of enemies. ‘O Sahadeva! Your brother has been gone for a long time. He is your immediate elder. Go

and fetch your brother. Bring water too.' On hearing these words, Sahadeva proceeded in that direction. He saw his brother Nakula, lying down dead on the ground. He was sorely tormented at the sight of his brother. But he was oppressed by thirst. He rushed towards the water and the voice spoke these words. 'O son! Do not be foolish enough to do this. I have obtained possession of this earlier. Answer my question. You can then drink the water and take it, as you wish.' But Sahadeva was very thirsty and ignored these words. He drank the cool water. Having drunk it, he collapsed and fell down.

Then Yudhishtira spoke to Vijaya. 'O Bibhatsu! [Both Vijaya and Bibhatsu are Arjuna's names, as is Gudakesha.] O destroyer of enemies! Your brothers have been gone for a long time. O fortunate one! Go and bring them and the water.' At these words, Gudakesha grasped his bow and arrows. The intelligent one grasped his unsheathed sword and proceeded towards the lake. Arjuna saw his brothers, the tigers among men who had gone to fetch water, lying down dead on the ground. On seeing them, as if asleep, Arjuna, lion among men, was extremely distressed. He raised his bow and looked around in the forest. Savyasachi [another of Arjuna's names] could not see any beings in that great forest. He was exhausted and rushed towards the water. As he rushed towards it, the voice was heard from the sky. 'Why are you approaching? You will not be able to drink the water by force. O Kaunteya! O descendant of the Bharata lineage! If you are able to answer my questions, you will then be able to drink the water and take it.' Having been thus restrained, Partha said, 'Show yourself and then restrain me. You will not be able to speak again in this fashion when my arrows pierce you.' Saying this, Partha invoked his arrows with mantras. He displayed his skill at shooting arrows targeted at sound, enveloping the directions. He unleashed many showers of barbed arrows, hollow arrows and iron arrows towards the sky.'

The *yaksha* said, 'O Partha! What purpose do these exertions serve? Answer my questions and then drink. If you do not answer the questions, you will cease to exist as soon as you drink.'

But having unleashed his invincible arrows, he was overcome by thirst. Ignoring the words, he drank and collapsed and fell down. Kunti's son Yudhishtira then spoke to Bhimasena. 'O descendant of the Bharata lineage! Nakula, Sahadeva and the unvanquished Bibhatsu have been gone for a long time, having gone to fetch water. O fortunate one! Go and fetch them and bring the water.' Having been thus addressed, Bhimasena left in the same direction, where his brothers, tigers among men, had fallen down. On seeing them, Bhima was distressed and was oppressed by thirst.

The mighty-armed one thought that this must have been the work of *yakshas* or *rakshasas*. He thought, 'I will certainly have to fight today. But let me drink the water first.' Partha Vrikodara, bull among men, was thirsty and rushed towards the water.

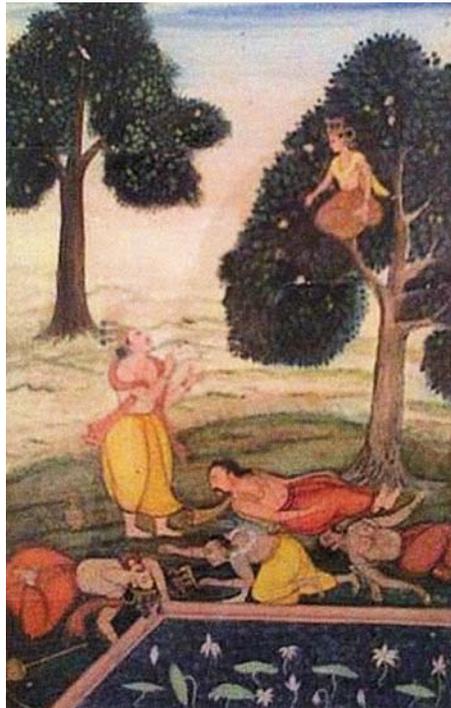
The *yaksha* said, 'O son! Do not be foolish enough to do this. I have obtained possession of this earlier. O Kaunteya! Answer my question. You can then drink it and take it.'

Bhima ignored the *yaksha's* words. He drank, collapsed and fell down. At this, the king who was Kunti's son began to think. Tormented in his mind, the mighty-armed one arose. He entered the great forest, bereft of the sounds of people. It was infested with *ruru* deer, boar and birds. There were dark, colourful and beautiful trees, abuzz with the sounds of bees and birds. The immensely fortunate one entered the forest and saw the beautiful pond, as it was covered with a net of gold. It seemed to have been created by Vishvakarma. It was covered with a bed of lotuses. He was exhausted and approaching the lake, gazed at it with wonder.

He saw his dead brothers. He saw Arjuna dead, with his bow and arrows scattered, and Bhimasena

and the twins, motionless and bereft of life. He shed tears of sorrow and breathed hot and deep sighs. Using his intelligence, he began to think. 'Who has killed these brave ones? There are no marks of weapons on them. Nor are there any signs of footprints. I think it must be a great being that has killed my brothers in this way. I must reflect on this with concentration. Perhaps I will find out after drinking the water.'

We will learn about the conclusion in the next column. ■



**'DHARMA HAS NEVER BEEN GIVEN UP IN OUR LINEAGE. NOR HAVE OBJECTIVES BEEN LOST THROUGH LAZINESS. WE ARE SUPERIOR TO ALL BEINGS. O KING! WHY HAS A DISASTER BEFALLEN US AGAIN?'**



By Keerthik Sasidharan

# The Fraying of America

The Covid crisis brings back an old battle over the powers of the state

**I**N A FEW YEARS, or perhaps in a few decades, when we look back to this time, there will be only one question: why did America stumble so badly in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic? At the time of going to press, Dr Anthony Fauci, the face of the pandemic in the US, testified to the US Congress on June 30th that daily cases could exceed 100,000 per day. With over 120,000 people dead, 14.21 million unemployed, the near bankruptcy of industries like airlines and hotels, highly partisan and dysfunctional government branches in Washington DC, an exploding reliance on the government to prop up asset valuations and daily life—it is no stretch to say that America finds itself in a position it is often not used to: unsure of what to do next.

To make matters worse, there is also a great social fraying underway that manifests in the most trivial (and yet all too politically fraught) of discontents: a refusal to wear face masks in public. To many, this is a state of puerile resistance and paranoid foolishness that speaks to political partisanship gone mad. The reality is however more complex. Should a modern-day Alexis de Tocqueville visit America again, he'll find a people who are, as individuals, generous, thoughtful, free-spirited, egalitarian and enterprising. But as a collective, their politics has transmogrified them into a people who willingly condone a competitive race to the bottom where the miserable, paranoid, rent-seeking and violent xenophobes among them live freely. The mythologies of American politics, rightly, rely on the individual to construct the nation's self-image, but the reality of American politics has vividly relied on the debasement of rhetoric and casual cruelties that crowds always enjoy. This, of course, is true in most democracies. But America, or rather American politics, has historically found means to extricate itself from such downward spirals in the form of leaders who can speak a language of ennoblement which they borrow freely from their assorted church traditions that speak of brotherhood and neighbourly love. From JF Kennedy to Barack Obama, the cadences and lilt of that tradition has produced a feel-good nationalism that is more sentiment than substance. The cynic, or the realist, understandably, will point to innumerable instances of structural injustices within American society. But to belabour this

point is to miss the forest of progressive victories in American society—from gender equality to gay rights—for the trees of American atavism that continues to seduce many to indulge in the original sin of America: violence against blacks and other minorities. But today, that language of amity, hope and promise is largely missing and when spoken, including by Barack Obama on Zoom chats, it smells like yesterday's fish.

Ever since the tragedies of 9/11, the catastrophic Iraq War of 2004-2012, the Great Financial Crises of 2007-2010, the 2020 pandemic and the personal and public catastrophes that have followed have ripped the bandages over long-suppurating wounds. To this end, 2020 may very well turn out to be analogous to us asking about America what we now ask, with the benefit of hindsight, of Germany in 1933 (how could Hitler rise to power?) or India in 1947 (why did the country partition into two?) or Russia in 1917 (how did the Bolsheviks take over the country?) or Japan in 1905 (how could Japan defeat Russia?) or even France in 1789 (why did they storm the Bastille?). A year in which events followed, one after the other, and each of them began to accrete a density that history grants to some events which steers nations on a different path of history than previously expected.

The slow-moving present catastrophe will inevitably be traced back to the atmosphere of vitriol, division and demoralisation that has entirely been of the Trump administration's making. This includes his near pathological need to appear powerful, unchallenged irrespective of the facts and the truth of the hour. The result of this abnormally delinquent leadership was not just an unprepared administration when the pandemic struck but also one that made things worse for technocrats who served in it by obfuscating reality itself, often solely to manage political messaging about the pandemic.

None of this—no matter how the presidential elections in November turn out—speaks to the deeper and relatively less tractable question: would America under a different president have had different results? The answer, irrespective of whether it was Republican or Democrat, is a qualified maybe. From Gerald Ford, who ordered mass anti-flu vaccination in 1976 despite much criticism, to Barack Obama who tackled H1N1 epidemic with considerable alacrity and seriousness, American politicians across party lines have repeatedly



**In small ways, the resistance to wear masks is the ordinary American's way of challenging the transformation of the state from an entity defined by constraints and laws imposed on the executive to one that has total dominion over human bodies in the name of an emergency**

leveraged their access to resources and the power of the bully pulpit that the presidency offers. Till right now, when along with Trump's intransigent behaviour, other forces of historical contingency have revealed.

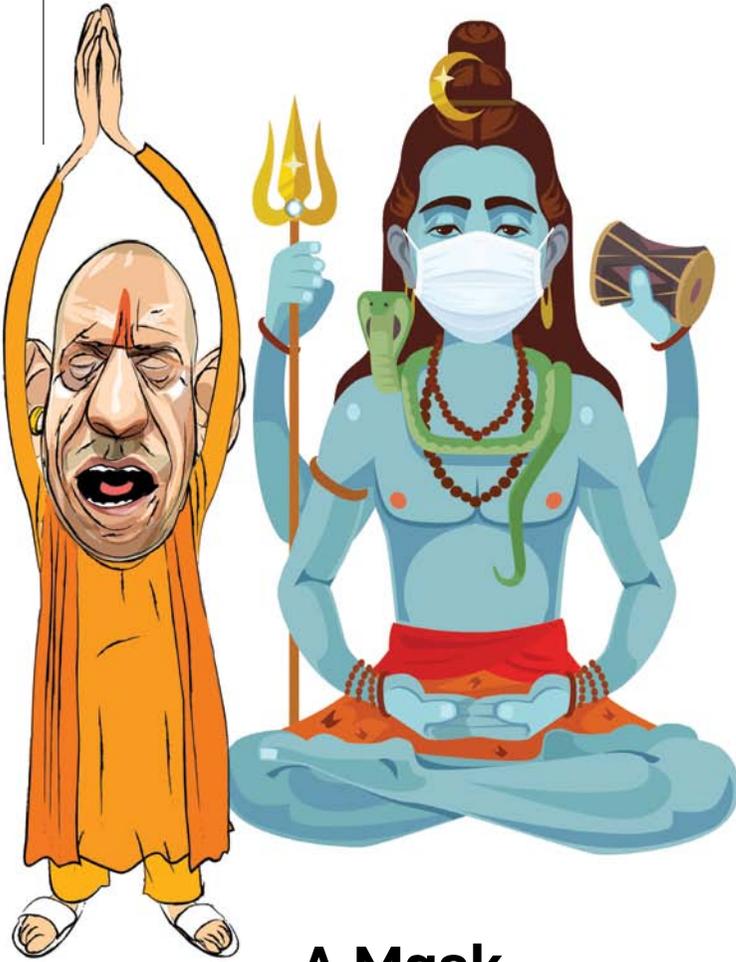
The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben famously noted that in ancient Greece, they had two separate words for what we commonly call 'life'. One was 'zoe', which referred to all that were alive, which was common across animals, microbes, humans and the gods. And the other was 'bios', which referred to life that was contingent upon human endeavours. Thus, for Aristotle, there could be 'life of the mind' (*bios theoretikos*), 'life of pleasure' (*bios apolaustikos*) and the 'political life' (*bios politikos*). But what he called 'zoe' was largely outside the schema of politics. For much of Western history, this distinction was often maintained—between the living and a 'qualified life'. The

consequence was an understanding of political power that was often located in the frameworks developed by juridical-legalistic institutions. Few countries took the legalistic boundaries of the state more seriously than America—the result of which was a natural resistance to state power, which is ingrained widely in its political consciousness. In Asia, however, this distinction was often murkier. The state has traditionally been indistinguishable from the *mai-baap* or the benevolent Confucian overlord who is in charge of deciding what constitutes a good life itself.

However, with the beginnings of modernity, the traditional Western state—with America as the final holdout against this trend—has increasingly asserted its power on the very body of all beings. This, the French philosopher Michel Foucault argues, has arrived in our social life in various forms—including the state arbitrating on what constitutes mental insanity. Thus, over the last 150-250 years, we have had elaborate mechanisms and modalities that seek to assert bodily control over all life itself, which in turn has birthed a form of state power that is different from the traditional Western ideas of a sovereign contained by juridical norms. The acrimonious, and occasionally violent, debates over abortion in America is a testament to this deep schism in the American people's ideas of what sort of state power ought to be used to control or liberate the human body. To add to this, following the German theorist Carl Schmitt, the state was understood to be that entity which had the '*power to declare a state of exception*'.

But now, with the Covid-19 pandemic, what we have is an amalgam of two forces: one, the state of exception has become a permanent norm and two, the realm of *zoe* (bare life, as Agamben translates it) has pressed its way into the *polis*. Thus, when we see ordinary Americans

resist an imposition to wear masks, it is hardly surprising they are often 'traditionalists' and ones who rely on American history, invoke claims of freedom, to resist the normalisation of a state of exception where the state makes demands over their bodies. In small ways, it is their way to challenge the transformation of the state from an entity defined by constraints and laws imposed on the executive to one that has total dominion over human bodies in the name of an emergency. Like all fossils, they appear odd and laughable. But they also speak to an era of political consciousness that we have largely forgotten. Unfortunately for them, much like the dinosaurs in the face of an asteroid, the stubborn allegiance to the past makes them uniquely unsuited to face the totalitarian powers of an unforgiving enemy that is only 10 nm long but still demands collective action coordinated by a strong state. ■



## A Mask for God

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath got into an unexpected controversy when he went to a temple to pray and offered a new mask to the deity there. As a sanyasi who usually gives flowers and fruits in temples, the opposition asked why he was giving a mask. They said he was ridiculing god. Adityanath's reply was that, in Hinduism, god is like a family member who eats as everyone eats, and in winter, even woollen shawls are draped over him. A BJP leader defended Adityanath by arguing that he was, in fact, seeking blessings and protection from god against Covid-19.

## WHICH LANGUAGE?

Home Minister Amit Shah and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had an interesting language conundrum. Shah first sent a letter to Banerjee in Hindi, which she can read but not write in. Her advisors suggested sending a Hindi translation instead. Banerjee said it won't sound natural. Some asked her to reply in Bengali as tit-for-tat. She said that even though Bengali is her mother tongue, she was not anti-Hindi. She thinks in south India they are sensitive about the Hindi issue but it wasn't something that she felt upset about. So she is replying in English, which seems a fair middle ground.

## Back in Action

Because of the lockdown, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) had been inactive. They were not able to operate or go to different metropolitan cities and states. But now they are back on the job and sending fresh summons and showcause letters for interrogations. The ED again sent a notice to senior Congress leader Ahmed Patel over the AgustaWestland case. The Congress thinks this is being done because the Bihar elections are coming. The BJP and the Centre say that it is because of instructions from the court.



## Media Matters

After the controversy over news agency PTI's coverage of China, the Prime Minister is not happy with media management. Modi thinks there is a small group trying to play a negative role. Even during a warlike situation, they are friendlier to inputs from the Chinese media, suggesting possible Chinese inroads in the Indian media. The Government has formed a small group of ministers, including Prakash Javadekar, Kiren Rijju, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, et al, to take feedback from different sections of the media and intellectuals on how to address this issue.

## Remembering Rao

Former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's centenary was marked recently but the Congress, which he led once, organised no event. The ostensible reason was the lockdown, but the fact is the Congress has always ignored Rao after the Gandhi family retook control of the party. But Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted on the day and praised Rao. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's media advisor Sanjaya Baru tweeted that Singh should have given Rao the Bharat Ratna and that it remained a black mark against his tenure. Rahul Gandhi also put up a tribute on Facebook for Rao.

## Session Deadline

Parliament's Monsoon Session is due but it doesn't seem likely to be held given the lockdown. Rajya Sabha Chairman and Speaker M Venkaiah Naidu was considering holding standing committee and consultative committee meetings but a majority of the MPs were not enthusiastic. But there is a constitutional issue. After the conclusion of one session, within six months, another must be held. Now September 23rd is the deadline for it, since March 23rd was the last date of the previous session. The buzz is the Government could suggest holding the session just for a week to pass some important bills.

## Hindu 'Appeasement'

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan bowled a political out-swing recently when he announced that the Pakistan government will give Rs 10 crore to build a Krishna temple. It had been a demand of Pakistan's minority Hindus for a long time. No government had agreed but Khan has now done it. The temple will be constructed in Islamabad. Another demand was for a cremation ghat for Hindus and Imran is doing that too, just behind the temple.



## MINISTER AT LARGE

Assam Deputy Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is close to Home Minister Amit Shah. When he left the Congress and joined the BJP, his expectation was to be made Chief Minister, but the BJP gave the post to Sarbananda Sonowal. Assam elections are due next year and Sarma has proven to be a great asset for Shah, even in the recent operation in Manipur to retain their government. But the BJP can't change the Chief Minister either. One proposal is to make Sarma a Central minister. He could then be used in managing different states for the party. Indira Gandhi often used this formula. Will Modi be ready to do that?

## WHAT MOVIE?

A movie on Samajwadi Party patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav is shot and ready for release in August but his son, party chief Akhilesh, is not very happy. Apparently, Mulayam told him he does not know anything about the movie and is not associated with it.



By **SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY**

# ANYONE FOR THE CHINESE GANESHA?

*The struggle is less against those who threaten a rock here and a waterfall there than with those who threaten the idea of India*

**L**IKE VS NAIPAUL'S Mrs Mahindra in a New Delhi colony, I, too, "am craze for foreign." But while Mrs Mahindra's highest ambition was that her elder son should "marry foreign", mine is to acquire a Chinese Ganesha that looks Chinese before such artefacts follow the banned mobile apps into an underworld where everything is available for a price. The little pink and blue plaster Ganesha I picked up in a fair in Singapore is so petite I had to turn it over to make sure of the 'Made in China' sticker.

At least Narendra Modi's "We worship Lord Ganesha" did not distinguish between *desi* and *videsi*. Nirmala Sitharaman's disapproval of foreign Ganeshas would also have displeased the Hindu student in England who declared "Mlechha cows aren't sacred!" to justify devouring underdone steak. Kartikeya is the god of war but Ganesha is a warrior always getting into scraps. If it's not Parashuram muscling into forbidden place, it's the demons, Madasura (arrogance), Mohasura (confusion), Kamasura (lust), or Chandra Dev who had the temerity to laugh at him.

Newspaper reports of the conflict in Ladakh are suggestive of Manohar Malgonkar's vivid descriptions in *Distant Drums*, unmatched by any other Indian writer, of the wildest frenzy of hand-to-hand fighting that no training pamphlet ever envisaged. 'It was noisy, ferocious, ugly, dehumanised: it was close quarter fighting at its horrible, insane worst.' Ganesha could have led Malgonkar's Satpurus bellowing the battalion's long-drawn-out war cry "*Har-har Mahadev; Har-har-har Mahaaaaadev!*" as they grappled with intruders on Ladakh's bleak heights. But the real battle is less against those who threaten a rock here and a waterfall there than with those who threaten the idea of India.

Abroad, Ganesha is made from Venice to Vietnam, from Bali to Bangkok, in Baccarat crystal, Waterford glass and Royal Selangor pewter. But China alone makes him at an affordable price for India's mass market. Modi naturally reveres as a global oracle the aptly named GaneshaSpeaks Team which predicted his ascendancy. But he diminished the miracle of Hindu universalism by boasting, "There must have been some plastic surgeon at that time who got an elephant's head on the body of a human being and began the practice of plastic surgery." Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream of "achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [that] has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times" was more uplifting for being more practical.

As Kunwar Natwar Singh once claimed, Indians belong to Eternity beyond the confines of History. They can take a wider view of war and peace ignoring little squabbles over lakes and glaciers that pin people down in the present. Rome conquered Greece but "conquered Greece took captive her conqueror", as Horace declared for all time. Hindu astrology and medicine were revered in imperial China and two huge pagodas from the 10th or 11th centuries in the southern port of Quanzhou—Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta knew it as Zayton, seat of an Indian community—testify to China's flirtation with Hinduism. Like Buddhism, it flowed on to Japan where the



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

**BETWEEN THIRTY AND FORTY COMPANIES IN CHINA MAKE AND EXPORT HINDU GODS. THE TRADE IS WELL ORGANISED, PRICES ARE COMPETITIVE AND DELIVERY IS ON TIME. NOTHING COULD CONDEMN THE AATMANIRBHAR BHARAT ABHIYAAN SLOGAN MORE RESOUNDINGLY THAN ABANDONING THESE ADVANTAGES**

elephant-headed god became Sho-ten.

The KaalaChakra, Wheel of Time, exhibition Subrahmanyam Jaishanker helped to organise in Singapore when he was high commissioner there, stressed the Indian provenance of religion in 'the Indianized States of Southeast Asia.' That marshalling of fascinating evidence lying neglected in India's treasure-houses may not have been necessary. No matter how vicious the Chinese might be on the steep slopes of the Galwan river, they don't beat about the bush when it comes to intentions or intrusions.

Their plan in Ladakh was proclaimed far and wide when Xi appointed Lieutenant-General Xu Qiling Western Theatre Command supremo. Crème de la crème of the *taizidang* or princelings, as the children of party veterans are termed in the nepotistic oligarchy that is communist China, he has on his

hands the blood of Tibetans and of the Tiananmen Square massacre. It's not Beijing's fault if no one in Delhi had heard of him or of the *taizidang's* relentless rise to power since the mid-1980s. In fact, General Xu's ascent was one reason for coining the term *taizijun* for military officials with a *taizidang* background. Indian strategists missed the significance of the appointment just as they had overlooked China's National Highway 219 running for 10,000 km through Aksai Chin or the 5,000 Pakistani soldiers disguised as shepherds and herdsman swarming in the Kargil hills.

The drama has shifted to the deceptive tranquillity of Pangong Lake on whose frozen surface the legendary 19th century Dogra general Zorawar Singh is said to have trained his cavalry before invading Tibet, thereby enabling Dr Karan Singh to boast, before Modi played ducks and drakes with his

ancestral Jammu and Kashmir, that his was the only princely state to extend India's external frontier. This was also where Major Shaitan Singh's troops made a last heroic stand against a major Chinese offensive in 1962, the scene memorably captured in Chetan Anand's film *Haqeeqat*. Pangong Lake grips public attention now because the four-kilometre road China built between Fingers 4 and 8—spurs of the Chang Chenmo mountain jutting out to the water's edge—unilaterally altered the Line of Actual Control in China's favour. Again, Indians noticed nothing.

THE AMERICAN POET Ogden Nash either mixed up his races or succumbed to the war hysteria that was building up in 1938 when he wrote:

*How courteous is the Japanese;  
He always says, "Excuse it, please."  
He climbs into his neighbour's garden,  
And smiles, and says, "I beg your pardon";  
He bows and grins a friendly grin,  
And calls his hungry family in;  
He grins, and bows a friendly bow;  
"So sorry, this my garden now."*

The Tonghuai Guanyue Temple in Quanzhou, China



ALAMY

**HINDU ASTROLOGY AND MEDICINE WERE REVERED IN IMPERIAL CHINA AND TWO HUGE PAGODAS FROM THE 10TH OR 11TH CENTURIES IN THE SOUTHERN PORT OF QUANZHOU TESTIFY TO CHINA'S FLIRTATION WITH HINDUISM. LIKE BUDDHISM, IT FLOWED ON TO JAPAN WHERE THE ELEPHANT-HEADED GOD BECAME SHO-TEN**

When we went to live in Singapore, my one-time professor, the late P Lal, sent me the poem beautifully copied in his elegant hand but with two changes. He replaced Japanese with Chinese, and in a display of Indian pride and prejudice, changed "So sorry" to "So solly". I didn't need the "Likee soupee...likee speechee" story to know that the Chinese do not speak like that. Nor did they pretend it was a social call when they moved into Galwan Valley. It was like the courtship scene in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Having defeated the French forces at Agincourt, England's King Henry sought to wed the French king's daughter, Katherine, who asked in bewildered broken English how she could "love de enemy of France". Honest Harry promptly assured her she couldn't and shouldn't. Far from being the enemy of France, he was France's stout friend "for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it; I will have it all mine..."

Old, ailing and unable to rebut enemy pretensions, Katherine's father had self-respect enough not to endorse them. He didn't declare to the utter dismay of patriotic Frenchmen and the delight of the English invaders that there were no foreigners on French soil and no French posts in English hands. France had no smart opposition leader to accuse the king of being afraid to look the English monarch in the eye. Or to wail, "Please tell us when

and how you are going to throw the English out." They knew that if the English were not trespassers in France, they were its legal owners. The defending French would then be reduced to intruders.

That piquant reversal of roles recalls that many years ago the Irish Republic anticipated India's current dilemma in identifying the origin of mobile phones, electronic toys and, indeed, of chicken rice. Being next door to England, the Irish already knew all about "Benares brass" made in Birmingham. The immediate provocation was the imitative ingenuity of "Britain of the East", as Japan was called. Dublin therefore passed a law insisting that all curios should disclose the country of origin. The Japanese complied scrupulously. Every piece of fake Celtic silver emerging from the assembly line factories of Kobe and Kawasaki was stamped "Made in Japan". But the writing was in Gaelic, Ireland's ancient language which few modern Irish and no foreign tourist—the main buyers—could read. Sales soared, as visitors lapped up what they thought was the indecipherable stamp of authenticity.

An irreverent English friend with a stall in the Portobello Road antiques

market used to refer to my few Ganesas as “your herd”. They can’t compare with Ambassador Veena Sikri’s dazzling floor-to-ceiling array. The 1995 milk miracle passed them by apparently because they are not worshipped. But they are global. The first was a chunk of iron shaped by Javanese Muslims. Next came one from Muslim Malaysia. Bali produced a lovely pot-bellied genial gentleman in watermarked wood, and Hanoi a dark, squat and sturdy figure like Viet Minh fighters. Murano’s gaudy glass recalled a long-dead colleague, Niranjan Majumder, quoting the same Naipaul passage but spelling ‘foreign’ as ‘phoren’ because he thought the ‘ph’ sound better conveyed the arriviste Mrs Mahindra’s social aspirations. I am fondest of a cute little Thai brass boat with Ganesa selling a cluster of bananas reminiscent of the canals that used to criss-cross Bangkok and boats that did brisk business as shops and eateries. My newest acquisition is a parting gift from the former Japanese consul-general, Taga Masayuki, who had no idea of my interest, yet sent me a small original painting of Ganesa by the Japanese artist, Shine-e Misako.

Sitharaman’s objection to foreign Ganesas can’t be rooted in a dislike of display since an extravagantly monogrammed jacket that some might mistake for a superior livery is the height of sartorial sophistication in her party. Nor can cost matter to a Government that spent Rs 3,000 crore on a statue while surrounding farmers were desperate for water, and has budgeted an awesome Rs 20,000 crore on reinventing the past through Delhi’s Central Vista Project. The patriotic element must be even more inconsequential since Vallabhbhai Patel’s statue is smothered in some 6,500 bronze panels forged by China’s Jiangxi Tongqing Metal Handicrafts. Luckily, the deal was done before the border exploded.

Clearly, the former defence minister hasn’t grasped Ganesa’s vital role in these perilous times. He can help to fight the enemy without but—possibly even more pertinent—he can save India from the siege within. Ekadanta on a humble mouse demonstrates his conquest of the pest which destroys 50 per cent of India’s foodgrain. Most of his avatars involve slaying demons as he changes his mount from the familiar mouse to a peacock and then a lion to fight arrogance, desire, anger, greed, illusion, inebriation, jealousy and the overpowering human ego. He ties a snake up in knots as his belt, writes fluently with a tusk for a quill, and hurls another tusk as a deadly missile at an irreverent Moon.

The last two of Ganesa’s eight incarnations are the most relevant. The seventh—Vighnaraja, Remover of Obstacles, riding

**GANESHA CAN HELP TO FIGHT THE ENEMY WITHOUT BUT HE CAN SAVE INDIA FROM THE SIEGE WITHIN. EKADANTA ON A HUMBLE MOUSE DEMONSTRATES HIS CONQUEST OF THE PEST WHICH DESTROYS 50 PER CENT OF INDIA’S FOODGRAIN. MOST OF HIS AVATARS INVOLVE SLAYING DEMONS**



(L-R) Benzaiten, Kangiten (Sho-ten) and Bishamonten at the Daisho-in temple in Miyajima, Japan

a serpent into battle—appeals most to the popular imagination for it promises liberation from the stranglehold of Mamasura, and an idyllis of peace and righteousness. But Vighnaraja’s triumph is possible only because the eighth incarnation, Dhoomravarna, destroyer of vanity, pride and selfishness, mounted on his little mouse, succeeds in conquering Ahamtasur, the ego that is the most destructive and malevolent of the demons to possess India’s soul.

Given Ganesa’s versatile genius, we can never have enough of him. Between 30 and 40 companies in China make and export Hindu gods. The trade is well organised, prices are competitive and delivery is on time. Nothing could condemn the secondhand *Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaans* slogan more resoundingly than to abandon these advantages for shoddy, expensive images just because they are homemade. That would betray Vighnaraja, defeat Dhoomravarna and lose the war to defend the idea of India. I hope China makes and exports a Chinese-looking Ganesa—preferably one in a Mao jacket—for my collection before that ultimate disaster. ■

*Sunanda K Datta-Ray is a journalist and the author of several books. He is an Open contributor*

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# The TRIUMPH and TRIAL of KARAN JOHAR

South Mumbai snob, son of a beloved producer, director of six blockbusters, everyone's best friend and a celebrity who wears his designer shoes as easily as his boldface nickname, Karan Johar finds himself cast as the fall guy in the drama around Sushant Singh Rajput's death

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

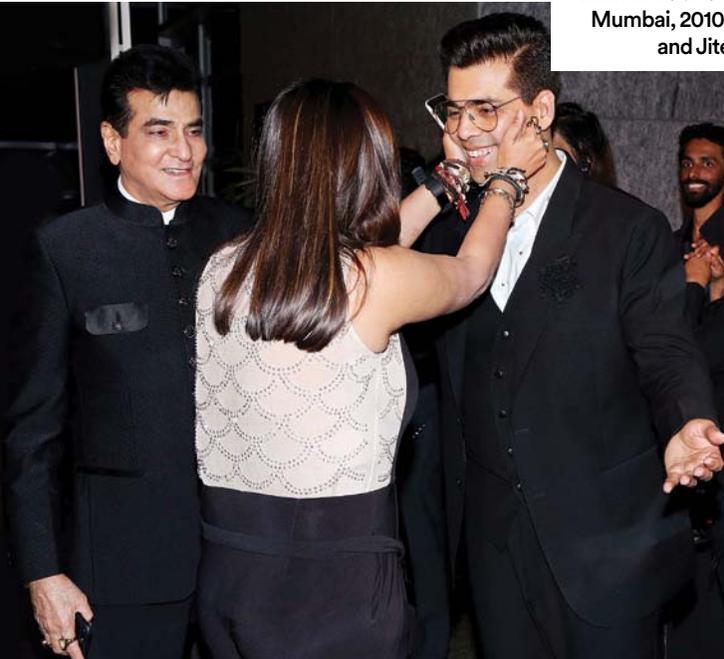
**I** told your father many years ago that I would always look after Karan, but I lied. I'd like to tell him that Karan has looked after me by giving me such wonderful movies. On behalf of Aryan and Suhana, I'd like to thank you for looking after me. May Allah give you so much happiness that you can spread it all." That was Shah Rukh Khan thanking Karan Johar in an episode of *Koffee with Karan* in 2011 in his typical larger-than-life way. What was Karan doing? Surreptitiously wiping his tears and looking all sorts of awkward.

No matter how many off-the-wall Milanese labels he discovers for India, no matter how many beautiful people collect in





(clockwise from top) with Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol in Mumbai, 2009; with Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan in Mumbai, 2010; with Ekta Kapoor and Jitendra, 2018



GETTY IMAGES

**AT 48, THE LONELY BOY WHO LIVED IN MALABAR HILL WITH PUNJABI-SINDHI PARENTS WHO WERE MUCH OLDER HAS BECOME A SHINING ADVERTISEMENT FOR INDIA'S SOFT POWER, FROM THE SKI SLOPES OF DAVOS TO THE CLASSROOMS AT HARVARD, GIVING IT RESPECTABILITY AND RATIONALE**

his 8,000-sq-ft duplex Bandra home, no matter how many movies he makes about people like himself wasting away from heart-break, and no matter how many forums he wows with his ability to outspoke and outthink most of Mumbai moviemakers, he will always remain the young man who learnt on the job, brushing Kajol's hair, buying Shah Rukh's clothes and filling out a train seat on the sets of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), best friend Aditya Chopra's debut directorial movie that discovered the NRI demographic for India.

Twenty-five years have passed and Johar has stepped into the shoes of his beloved producer father Yash Johar aka Tom Uncle, but he still remains the always sensitive, somewhat insecure and often fretful south Mumbai snob with a Hindi film front bench-er's sensibility. Discount the pout, the greying hair, the Tom Ford glasses, the Amiri sweatshirts and Christian Louboutin shoes, and Karan Johar in his mind will still be the overweight boy asked to be the anchor in any tug of war back in Green Lawns School.

than Rohit Shetty, son of late fightmaster Shetty now known for directing big-budget spectacles with monster laughs and high-decibel car crashes; and he may live less lavishly than superstar Shah Rukh Khan—but Johar is perceived as the ultimate insider, the presiding deity of a clique that controls access to all-night parties and 2 AM gossip sessions that propel the stories we read and the images we consume, on and off the screen. So overwhelming has Johar's cultural presence become that his three-letter celebrity nickname 'KJo' has become larger than the reality of the remarkable career of Karan Johar the filmmaker.

And that is his biggest tragedy. Everyone's favourite host and *dost*, and the industry's most articulate spokesman, finds himself cast aside, baffled by the silence of those whose careers he has built or sustained. This too shall pass, he believes, but being at the receiving end of theories which hold him accountable for the system that caused the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput has clearly shaken him. The hashtags, the trolling, the loose talk



**“At his age, he has been able to do what others have tried to for their entire lifetimes. He has done his dad proud by making Dharma Productions a household word”**

– ANIL KAPOOR actor

**“Karan wears so many different hats and he is in so many different places, he's made himself a very large symbol. And he's attracting a lot of flak for that. I'm sure it's not all deserved, The truth is always complicated”** – SAIF ALI KHAN actor



At 48, the lonely boy who lived in Malabar Hill with Punjabi-Sindhi parents who were much older has become a shining advertisement for India's soft power, from the ski slopes of Davos to the classrooms at Harvard, giving it respectability and rationale. His father was production manager for Ajanta Arts, set up by Partition refugee, actor and director Sunil Dutt, and then for Navketan, one of the earliest Punjabi family firms set up by actor Dev Anand. Separating from Navketan, he set up Dharma Productions in 1976 and made it a byword for mega-cinematic experiences, with movies such as Amitabh Bachchan's *Dostana* (1980) and *Agneepath* (1990), which were both remade by Johar junior.

He may wield less power than the late producer and director Yash Chopra's son Aditya Chopra, who now runs Yash Raj Films; his movies may make much less money at the box office

on social media along with clips excavated from past seasons of *Koffee with Karan* which suggest some careless sniggering around Sushant have caused him to go into silent mode, unfollowing all but eight accounts on Twitter (where he has over 17 million followers).

It's not that he has not faced controversies before. In 2009, when *Wake Up Sid* was released and Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena protested against the film's use of Bombay instead of Mumbai, he rushed to Thackeray's home. In 2016, he had to endure similar outrage when he apologised to those who were ready to crucify him for casting a Pakistani actor in his semi-autobiographical *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*. When he shot a video expressing his love for the country and respect for the armed forces at the height of the anti-Pakistan hysteria, he was eviscerated by both the left, which should ideally have embraced a secular

socialite, as well as by the right, which equates him with everything that it stands against—the privilege of family lineage and its attendant benefits: addressing erstwhile megastars as Uncles and Aunties and knowing industry babes and bros since when they were babies and babas.

Ironically though, he, along with Aditya Chopra, is almost solely responsible for the cultural aesthetic that dominated the second half of the '90s: the consumerist choices unleashed by the liberalisation of 1991 mixed with a return to a ritualised tradition studded with choreographed Karva Chauths and synchronised *sangeets*. Coinciding with the rise of a more politically conscious Hindu, his films were also able to tap deep into the insecurities of NRIs who had left India for economic progress but remained fearful about their eroding ethnic identity. Johar was able to give them a happy balance—a blend of *kundan* and *kangan* wrapped in Gucci and Prada—in the trilogy of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* in 2003 (which he wrote but was directed by Nikhil Advani).

Anil Kapoor has seen Johar grow up since his childhood, acting in the 1989 Doordarshan science fiction children's serial *Indradhanush*. Kapoor says: "I've seen him as that bright kid who used to act in the serial. I've seen him evolve as a filmmaker and director in his 20s to becoming one of the country's most prolific and trendsetting creative minds. At his age, he has been able to do what others have tried to for their entire lifetimes. He has done his dad proud by making Dharma Productions a household word." Indeed, when Johar took on the directorial reins of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* at Shah Rukh Khan's prompting—they had spent long days together discussing it while shooting *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*—his father's production company was going through a downslide thanks to cost and time overruns on *Duplicate*, directed by Mahesh Bhatt. The Johars felt Bhatt had let them down by letting the film, which starred Shah Rukh Khan in a double role, run into delays. Johar's second film, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, which starred a leading light or two from every Bollywood clan (Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan; Hrithik, son of Rakesh Roshan; Kareena, granddaughter of Raj Kapoor; Kajol, granddaughter of Shobhana Samarth) made Dharma rich again. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* established its equity.

By 2004, when Johar launched his chatty show, *Koffee with Karan*, taking the space previously occupied by the regal Simi Garewal, India was ready to enjoy guilt without guilt. His cinema

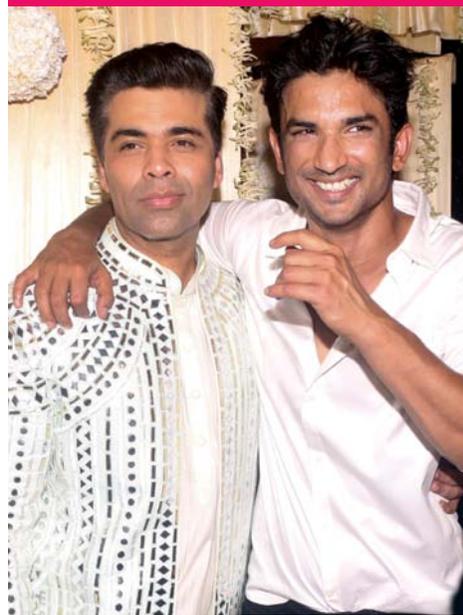
though became darker in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006), as relationships around him crumbled and family was no longer the sacred grove he had imagined it to be. Sons could challenge their fathers and friends could become lovers as the dining table turned into a war zone.

His own politics evolved, with *My Name Is Khan* (2010) emerging as a strong, secular narrative, in the face of growing global Islamophobia. Kaushik Bhaumik, associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, notes the many fluxes Johar's public reputation has seen—from being the purveyor of soft cultural Hindutva, to begin with, to actual respect for his projection of the LGBTIQI issue in Dharma's *Kapoor & Sons* (2016 film directed by Shakun Batra). Says Bhaumik: "Reputations within the film world and what gets projected from there to the public are notoriously fickle. If the industry feels the big commercial houses are helping out *hatke* [Bollywoodism for 'offbeat'] cinema, then they are praised. If not, then they are attacked. Yet everyone knows that the big commercial houses producing *hatke* cinema is really all about consolidating their hold on the market. They never are or were really interested in that kind of cinema."

By 2015, when high-profile alliances between art and commerce underwhelmed at the box office—Dibakar Banerjee's *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi!* (starring Sushant Singh Rajput) and Anurag Kashyap's *Bombay Velvet*—the industry fell back more and more on tried-and-tested formula. Disney India, which had bought UTV Pictures, stopped production, Fox Studios' collapse was imminent and Yash Raj Films backed out of its three-film deal with Banerjee and withdrew its backing for Shekhar Kapur's *Paani* (which was to star Sushant). It took Kangana Ranaut to articulate this on *Koffee with Karan* in 2017 by calling him the "flag bearer of nepotism" and suddenly the middle class began to feel self-righteous about talent not being given a chance in the industry.

India had changed too. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi encapsulating the idea of *naamdaar* versus *kaamdar* (scion vs worker), the sentiment of 'being excluded', 'not being given a chance' fitted in very much with the mindset of a public that felt powerless—that all power was in the hands of the elite and the only way the powerful could be kept in check was via the demand for merit to be given a chance. More people aspiring to get into the industry than ever before meant that the industrial decline hit them the hardest; they felt Bollywood was shunning them. In politics, Rahul Gandhi became the symbol of entitlement; in

With late Sushant Singh Rajput, 2017



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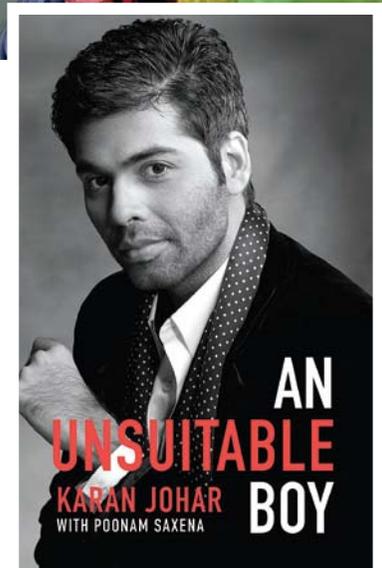


(left) On the set of *Koffee with Karan*; at the launch of *India's Got Talent* with Malaika Arora (left) and Kirron Kher in Mumbai, 2018



FOTOCORP

**HE MAY WRITE IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AN UNSUITABLE BOY, OF HIS EXPERIMENTS WITH SEX, INCLUDING PAYING FOR IT ONCE AND BECOMING A MEMBER OF AN ELITE INTERNATIONAL DATING SITE, HIS STRUGGLES WITH ANXIETY, BUT NO MORE. HIS FIERCE EXERCISE OF THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY IS AT SUCH ODDS WITH HIS PUBLIC PERSONA OF LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT THAT IT ENRAGES PEOPLE WHO FEEL THEY HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO EVERY ASPECT OF THOSE THEY MAKE FAMOUS**



Mumbai cinema, it was Karan Johar. Saif Ali Khan, who was sharing the couch with Ranaut on the day she attacked Johar, says, “[Since] Karan wears so many different hats and he is in so many different places, he’s made himself a very large symbol. And he’s attracting a lot of flak for that. I’m sure it’s not all deserved, The truth is always complicated.”

But no one seems to have time to listen to that. If Johar has given breaks to star children such as Alia Bhatt and Varun Dhawan in *Student of the Year*, he has also experimented with directors and writers from varied backgrounds, from St Stephen’s graduate director Shakun Batra, to Hussain Haidry, dialogue writer of Jo-

har’s soon-to-be launched Mughal epic *Takht*. Recent movies that he has directed himself—*My Name Is Khan*, *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (with its strong underlying interreligious love triangle between two Muslims and one Hindu) and now *Takht*, which tells the tale of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb—should have made Johar the darling of left-liberals. But even they feel hesitant to speak up for him at this moment of backlash. It’s not merely fear that they too will become victims of orchestrated public censure, but also the discomfort with Johar’s pragmatism. As a producer’s son who is now a producer himself, Johar will shake hands with anyone or everyone in power to survive.

That's not all. Sangita Gopal of the University of Oregon feels it is because Johar doesn't allow anyone else to control his narrative. He will be an open book, but only so far and no further. There is a deep anxiety about his sexuality, she says, which he refuses to feed. Instead, he has found a new way to have a family, by having twins, Roohi and Yash, through surrogacy in 2017, and have them address him as 'Dadda' and his mother as 'Mamma'. He may make cute Instagram videos starring them, but he will not reveal more than he wants to about the surrogacy. He may admit in public to having fallen in love only twice in his life, but he will not give anyone the satisfaction of knowing their names. He may write in his autobiography, *An Unsuitable Boy* (2017), of his experiments with sex, including paying for it once and becoming a member of an elite international dating site, his struggles with anxiety, including going to a psychologist and taking medication as advised, but no more. His fierce exercise of the right to privacy is at such odds with his public persona of

letting it all hang out that it enrages people who feel they have every right to every aspect of those they make famous. There is another aspect to his personality: it is completely without self-pity and self-loathing in a culture of resentment where even winners want to feel like losers.

Anil Kapoor, who is playing Shahjahan in *Takht*, describes him as "always giving" like his father. There are other qualities that come to mind. Generous: In 2006, in his old Khar office in Mumbai, eating a plateful of pears during one of his many diets, he had time to talk about Kajol who was returning to cinema with Yash Raj Films' *Fanaa*. Respectful: In 2009, at a media conclave, before a session with Shah Rukh, he asked whether they could use the platform to speak about gay rights. "No need," said Shah Rukh. Johar, who has spoken at length about he reagrds him as his elder brother, subsided, quietly. Creative: In 2016, unshaven and dressed in a tracksuit, he was directing Ranbir Kapoor and Anushka Sharma in 'The Breakup Song' as well as

## IN 2016, KARAN JOHAR HAD TO ENDURE OUTRAGE WHEN HE APOLOGISED TO THOSE WHO WERE READY TO CRUCIFY HIM FOR CASTING A PAKISTANI ACTOR IN HIS SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL *AE DIL HAI MUSHKIL*

A scene from  
*Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*



simultaneously entertaining representatives from his producers, Fox Star Studios. Nervous: In 2017, while about to go on stage to be in conversation with Sholay director Ramesh Sippy, he laughed and said, “I can’t shake the interviewer in me, can I?”

The problem with Karan Johar is that he makes everything he does look so easy, whether it is directing six hit films, running a successful production house, being the host of a talk show which is the stuff of water-cooler conversations, a reality-show judge to show us his slumming-it side, a Sridevi fan who can dance to all her songs and an avid film student who can recall every Raj Kapoor shot and every Subhash Ghai trolley take.

It is also easy to forget that he is a bridge, not only between old-style Punjabi families that controlled feudal Bollywood and new-age networks and studios run by professionals, but also between north Indian sensibilities and southern dramatics. Without his backing that came via his friendship with actor and producer Rana Daggubati, *Baahubali* would not have become a pan-Indian blockbuster. He is a compulsive collaborator, always looking to associate with the next new thing, whether it was being part of the explicit *AIB* roast of Arjun Kapoor and Ranveer Singh in 2015 or presenting the highly acclaimed *The Lunchbox* in India in 2013.

Johar’s company, Dharma Productions, now run by childhood friend CEO Apoorva Mehta, has emerged as a production house that is slowly embracing new forms of storytelling, from indie movies such as *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, which stars Janhvi Kapoor and will soon be broadcast on Amazon Prime, to the lavish superhero spectacle *Brahmāstra*, directed by Ayan Mukerji and starring Ranbir Kapoor. Johar has experimented with the OTT platform, directing an episode each in *Lust Stories* and *Ghost Stories* for Netflix himself (where he has allowed himself more liberty whether it is in the depiction of an orgasm or in a transgressive granny) and also produced movies made for OTT such as *Guilty*, which revolved around the MeToo movement. With his track record of burnishing stars such as Shah Rukh Khan and discovering newbies such as Ananya Panday and Tara Sutaria (who starred in *Student of the Year 2* in 2019), a spot in any film directed by him is most coveted. It usually means success at the box office, in India and abroad; a spot on *Koffee with Karan*; advertisements by Dharma directors; and nominations at award shows. Even for a star child of a somewhat successful actor such as Chunky Panday, for Ananya it is a dream launchpad. As she said so infamously in response to a storm of criticism in



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(Above) With father Yash Johar in Singapore, 2004; as a child actor in *Indradhanush*



another chat show earlier this year, her father has never been in a Dharma film or appeared on *Koffee with Karan*. Getting both was part of her journey and her “struggle”.

Now though, the backlash against him is growing strong by the minute. He has already quit the board of the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image (MAMI), which has been running the successful MAMI film festival since 1997, and now there is news that the popular *Koffee with Karan* may not be renewed. Criticised for giving breaks only to sons and daughters of actors, he finds himself being trolled across the board. Is he the *très chic* gatekeeper to Bollywood’s ultra-exclusive club, just an accidental collector of starlings or an obsessive attention seeker with his home videos and reality-set Instagram shoots?

Karan Johar may well be the man who loves to ask questions, but there are some answers he chooses not to give. Coupled with the silence of others who fear being singled by the outrage, he may become emblematic of a churn in the Hindi film industry. ■

# OLD HABITS

Monument to Napoleon Bonaparte and his four brothers in Ajaccio, France



# DIE HARD

For much of history, with society functioning on the basis of kinships, **nepotism** was legitimate. Demands of the modern state made it a liability to be contained but even now its practice in the private sphere is a fuzzy ethical question

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**



**I**f nepotism, at its heart, is essentially a question of equity, then who can be more aware of it that someone enlightened in the full sense of the word; who through rigorous introspection is said to have become aware of all laws governing one's inner self and outside. The Buddha himself. And yet, what is his own record on this front? He made the first novice, a category called trainee monk in the Sangha, his own son Rahula. And this was years after the establishment of the order, so it is not as if other deserving teenagers couldn't have been offered this first. It is a little like starting a new division in a company just so that the proprietor's son could get trained. Rahula would also go on to become one of the 10 principal disciples of the Buddha. Who also is the Buddha's personal secretary, who was like a shadow along with him in his vast journeys? Ananda, his cousin. Who was another leader of the Sangha before turning apostate? Devadatta, another cousin. Who is the first woman allowed to enter the Sangha and lead the nunnery? Mahapajapati Gotami, Buddha's stepmother. All this is more interesting if you consider that the Buddha's





## GIFTED POLITICIANS WITH NO FAMILY BACKGROUND OFTEN GATE-CRASHED, LIKE CICERO. BUT WHO ACCOMPANIED CICERO IN THIS JOURNEY TO POWER? HIS YOUNGER BROTHER WHO MANAGED A HIGH POLITICAL CAREER ON THE BACK OF CICERO'S GENIUS

venture into self-discovery began by leaving his family. As an enlightened person leading an organisation, he seemed quite comfortable in again making contact and then peopling them into high posts. Should we then conclude that enlightenment led him to nepotism? But that is being facetious. It wasn't a thought that crossed his mind because nepotism was fundamental to the stability and growth of social organisations for most of history.

In tribal societies, before kingdoms came into being, members were connected solely by lineages. Those from a common bloodline could be depended on to not kill each other if they met on a road. Security, survival and growth were entirely dependent on kinship. Even when kinship societies developed into republics or monarchical states, reliance on family remained the mainstay. The prime example of this in ancient history is the greatest empire the world ever saw—the Romans. They were governed initially by a group called Patricians, comprising of blue-blood families. Young men still had to show their mettle but they all came from a common pool of elites. For instance, in the career marked out for such youths, there would be an initial long tenure in the army under the mentorship of a general who was associated with the family. After leaving the army, the man found a career in politics, where the same family ties welcomed him. All the political offices were reserved. When the larger common population of Rome began to rebel against such privileges, they got their Plebian representatives. But it was also tied to families in that class now. Very gifted politicians with no family background often gate-crashed the group, like the famous orator Cicero, a lawyer who went on to reach the highest office possible in Rome then. But who also accompanied Cicero in this journey to power? His younger brother who managed a high



A bust of Cicero from Sabbioneta, Italy

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political career on the back of Cicero's genius. Usually, people who broke through the moats of nepotism then (and possibly even now) were not out to upend the system—just become a part of it.

Over time, societies created institutions that sought to prevent nepotism, but often with limited success. Like the Catholic Church, which stepped into the vacuum left behind by the collapse of the western Roman Empire. Priests, from the Popes downwards, were forbidden from marrying and having children. This, one would think, would be a pretty good check against nepotism. But then, the pull of the family can manifest in other ways. For more than 500 years, starting with the beginning of the previous millennium, the Church saw a phenomenon termed 'Cardinal-Nephew' in which the Pope would appoint his

relatives as Cardinals. In *The Pope Encyclopedia*, Matthew Bunson writes about it thus: 'The custom that flourished, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by which a pope would name as his chief minister and most important advisor a nephew or similar relative who was elevated to the rank of cardinal and thereafter oversaw many of the most vital elements of papal administration. The practice was not invented in the sixteenth century, as papal nepotism had long been an established part of the pontifical court.' Many nephews were predictably incompetent and corrupt but a few did manage to earn their stripes. He adds: 'While the cardinals were often immature and at times quite incompetent, they also had a common fondness for amassing wealth and patronizing artists and architects. Thus, Scipione Borghese helped discover the genius of Bernini and built the immense and grandiose Villa Borghese near Rome. The most remarkable of the cardinal nephews was St Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), one of the foremost saints of the age and a brilliant

reformer of the Church.’

The biggest testament to nepotism in history is the monarchy. The crown is inevitably passed on to children—even if they are little babies—as a matter of right. And with a divine imprimatur too, because kings got their right to rule directly from the heavens, and this transmitted by blood. As if god himself gave sanction to such nepotism and every family member was a part of the cabal that held absolute power over everyone in the land. This might have been a feature of political evolution, but if you want a recent and famous example of a commoner turned king by pure merit who then wholeheartedly embraced nepotism, there is Napoleon. He began life as a soldier. Military and political genius made him dictator of France at a young age. He then decided it was time to become emperor and got divine sanction for it through the Catholic Church. Under him, France conquered large swathes of Europe and a lot of it was simply handed over to his brothers. In *Napoleon: A Life*, biographer Andrew Roberts wrote about his nepotism in these extracts: ‘In January 1806 Napoleon made his first really significant error of statesmanship, when he offered his brother Joseph the throne of Naples, saying: ‘It will become, like Italy, Switzerland, Holland and the three kingdoms of Germany, my federal states, or, truly, the French Empire.’ Joseph was crowned king on March 30, and Louis (Napoleon’s younger brother) became king of Holland in June. This reversion to the pre-revolutionary system of governance struck at the meritocratic system for which Napoleon had initially stood, installed largely inadequate brothers in key positions and stoked up problems for the future. In December 1805 Napoleon was writing to Joseph of Jérôme (another younger brother): ‘My very positive intention is to let him go to prison for debt if his allowance isn’t enough...It’s inconceivable what this young man costs me for causing nothing but inconvenience, and being useless to my system.’ Yet within two years he had made the utterly unchanged Jérôme king of Westphalia.’

**N**apoleon wanted to establish a dynasty but would regret his nepotism. His brother made a mess of Spain. Jerome, put in charge of an army during the Russian invasion, failed to prevent a Russian withdrawal because of incompetence. A decisive victory was lost and the ensuing campaign would destroy Napoleon’s reign. Roberts writes: ‘Napoleon was to spend an inordinate amount of time complaining about his brothers, and would even joke of one, ‘It’s really unfortunate he’s not illegitimate’, but he kept them on long after their failures were clear...Napoleon felt he could trust his siblings more than others outside his family—although that was not borne out by events—and he wished to ape the dynastic aggrandizement of the Habsburgs, Romanovs and Hanoverians. ‘My brothers have done me a great deal of harm,’ Napoleon admitted years later in a characteristic bout of honest self-evaluation, but by then it was far too late.’

This is a fundamental issue with nepotism—it can come at a steep price. In a meritocracy, people have to work for years to

One of the Two Busts of Cardinal Scipione Borghese by Gian Lorenzo Bernini at the Galleria Borghese, Rome



**FOR MORE THAN 500 YEARS, THE CHURCH SAW A PHENOMENON TERMED ‘CARDINAL-NEPHEW’ IN WHICH THE POPE WOULD APPOINT HIS RELATIVES AS CARDINALS. ONE OF THESE CARDINALS, SCIPIONE BORGHESE, HELPED DISCOVER THE GENIUS OF THE SCULPTOR BERNINI**





## THE MUGHAL EMPIRE WAS AT ITS PEAK DURING AURANGZEB'S REIGN. THEN ITS POWER VANISHED BECAUSE THE SONS AND GRANDSONS WHO CAME AFTER HIM WERE INCOMPETENT. WHO WOULD HAVE A PROBLEM WITH NEPOTISM IF IT DID THE JOB?

establish their ability. Nepotism bypasses that and leaves it to luck whether the appointment will work out. The Mughal Empire was at its peak during Aurangzeb's reign and then its power vanished as if it had all been hollow because the sons and grandsons who came after him were incompetent. Otherwise, who would have a problem with nepotism if it did the job? The small subset of those bypassed might be sore but the larger community would have no quibble with it so long as their interests were protected. But that is rarely how it pans out. Because nepotism's risk was clear, there were enjoinders to keep a check on it. In *Arthashastra*, Kautilya warns against favouritism in appointments even if he also says people appointed should be from good families, which seems like one of those ethical dilemmas only reserved for present times. The Chinese, thousands of years ago, first came out with a system of examinations to appoint bureaucrats by merit and root out nepotism.

What finally made nepotism bad in both principle and law was the emergence of the modern nation-state that had been forced to shed all vestiges of tribal societies. The very scale and

organisation of the state demands that it not be managed by a close network of relatives. The state also cannot be not modern because of competition from neighbours around who are on the same political journey. The price of incompetence could very well mean being swallowed up. A defining character of the modern state became what political scientist Francis Fukuyama calls 'impersonal institutions'. In *The Origins of Political Order*, he writes: 'Once states come into being, kinship becomes an obstacle to political development, since it threatens to return political relationships to the small-scale, personal ties of tribal societies. It is therefore not enough merely to develop a state; the state must avoid retribalization or what I label repatrimonialization.'

When nepotism is identified as wrong in the public sphere, it is natural to extend the argument to the private sphere. But here it enters a fuzzy area. A country is owned by everyone and so everyone has an equal right to its positions. But if it is a private business, why should the owner be answerable to anyone except himself? Bollywood is put up as an exemplar of nepotism but what exactly is wrong is not spelt out beyond the fact that outsiders don't

get opportunities. But why does it become the responsibility of the insiders to give it? If Karan Johar, as is accused, only gives opportunities to star kids and keeps the flag of nepotism going, then he also takes the loss if any of his movies fails. Meanwhile, the film industry is replete with examples at all levels, from superstars to spot boys, who create their own space despite being outsiders. The late Sushant Singh Rajput, whose death triggered off the latest debate, is now portrayed as a victim of nepotism. But he is in fact an example of the opposite, someone who came in from the outside without any connections and made it as a big star. Also consider how ironic it can get when the standards of nepotism are applied in the private sphere. The actress Kangana Ranaut has been one of the most outspoken about nepotism in Bollywood. Ranaut's manager is her elder sister. From the standpoint of the community of managers of actors, or those who aspire to be managers, what does that look like? ■

Aurangzeb with his son Azam and courtiers, Mughal miniature, c 1650



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# The Politics of Healing

The extension of free food for another five months promises to help not just poor labourers but industry and agriculture as well

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

**I**n a short address to the nation on June 30th, Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended free distribution of foodgrain to poor citizens for another five months. Usually, such steps are welfarist in nature but this time, a forward-looking economic policy came bundled in the Prime Minister's package. This step will not only alleviate distress among poor citizens but will also help agriculture and industry in the crucial period as India unlocks and restarts its economic engines.

The rollout has the makings of a gigantic distribution effort. Modi said that 80 crore people will benefit from the scheme—the Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)—and will be given five kilograms of rice or wheat, depending on their preferences, until November. In addition, every family will be given one kilogram of chickpeas for five months. In all, 20 million tonnes of foodgrain will be distributed during these months.

Distributing foodgrain at this time makes immense sense for the Government from a welfare-cum-political perspective. More importantly, there is plenty of economic sense in taking the step. At the moment, the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) granaries are overflowing. In June, the FCI had a hoard of 83.2 million tonnes of wheat and rice, up from 64.2 million tonnes in May, and even further from approximately 57 million tonnes in April. Given some monthly fluctuations, this pile has only grown higher since January. With the kharif crop on the way, unless this figure is managed, these stocks will become almost unmanageable. This year, with a very good monsoon, there will be a bumper rice crop.

Some of these potential problems can be gleaned from the math involved in managing the gigantic hoard. If it were a simple matter of the Government buying and selling wheat and rice on the spot, life would be much simpler. It is not. The Government buys when the cropping seasons end and has to maintain a minimum stock that ranges from 21 to 41 million tonnes at different times in any given year. Usually, it stocks up far beyond those norms: not buying whatever farmers offer, especially wheat and rice, breeds political discontent. But piling up imposes huge costs: there are costs associated with storage—interest payments keep going up even as the quality of wheat and rice continues to decline if these are stored beyond a point.

PIB



In that sense, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to the Government to not only help the poor but also help itself financially and administratively. In his speech, Modi hinted that the total cost of the food programme since April, when the free distribution began, will add up to a tidy figure of nearly Rs 1.5 lakh crore. Usually, the costs of distributing wheat and rice are shared between the Union and state governments according to set formulae evolved under the National Food Security Act, 2013. But this is an extraordinary time when state finances are stressed. As a result, the Union Government is bearing all the costs, including that of distributing these grains to migrants who have been on the move. This alone is approximately Rs

3,109 crore. This is over and above the cost of distributing wheat and rice from fair price shops (ration shops) in states and Union territories, which is again being borne by the Centre.

A far more important economic effect was hinted at by Modi when he said: "We have seen a dream for the whole country and some states have really done well. We are requesting other states also to take it forward. And, what is that? Now, One Nation, One Ration Card is also being implemented. Major beneficiaries of this will be those who go to other states in search of employment."

Since March, a reverse migration of labourers from urban areas back to their homes in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh has been on in a haphazard fashion. In the first fortnight of May



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Prime Minister  
Narendra Modi  
addresses the  
nation, June 30

Photos GETTY IMAGES



Migrant workers queue up in Ghaziabad to board buses, March 28

alone, the Indian Railways ran 1,600 'shramik special' trains from various points in India ferrying more than 2.1 million labourers. By the first week of June, the number of these trains had gone up to 4,197 and the number of travellers had swelled to 5.8 million people. All went largely to eastern India. There are no accurate figures for how many workers reside in states other than their home state. In 2016, the *Economic Survey* estimated the size of the migrant workforce at 100 million. There are other estimates that peg inter-state labourers at anywhere from 12 to 18 million persons. Going by the latter figure, the migration in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic has been huge by any standard.

This is especially troubling as India finally unlocks and starts economic activities again. The shortage of labour in the industrial zones of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu is likely to be severe. Without a workforce, industry cannot restart and the workers who have already moved (around 5.8 million) will take some time to return. It is unlikely that this will happen before the end of the monsoon season this year as many of these labourers will now double up as farm labourers in their home states. The steady rise in demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) hints at this possibility.

What is important now, from an industry perspective, is to ensure that migrant labourers who remain in urban areas don't feel the pressure to move back. That can be done only by provid-

ing them incentives to stay back. Work was one big incentive, one that disappeared during the lockdown. But some amount of food security, as is being done under the PMGKY, can go a long way in keeping them back. There has been plenty of hand-wringing about the Government not doing anything to help industry tide over a difficult time. Ensuring that labour is available at hand when work reopens is one big step in extending a helping hand. It helps both industry and the workers who have lost so much in this crisis.

The third advance estimates for the output of rice this year, released in mid-May, peg the crop at nearly 102 million tonnes. Usually governments—both Union and states—pick up anywhere up to a third of what farmers bring to the market. Every year, these purchases are roughly matched by the amounts released by the FCI for various uses—for example, under the National Food Security Act. But very often, the outgo is less than the fresh stocks that are brought in for storage across the country. This year, with warehouses already near breaking point with stored grains, the distribution under PMGKY promises to free up vital space for storage.

This can only help the rural economy. If, at some point, the Government decides to step up purchases beyond what it does normally, that will need storage. Usually, in the absence of proper storage space, wheat and rice end up being stored in open spaces. Rain and pests usually make short work of the produce. Economists have always spoken in favour of releasing more stocks for the poor as a remedy. This time, the Government has done that. It



Stock of rice at a regional food corporation warehouse in Allahabad, May 1

dismal data for the fourth quarter of 2020 was released, agriculture was one bright spot.

These are early days and the economic prognosis for 2020 remains grim. But the green shoots being seen in the rural economy, the weakest link in the Indian economy, promises to raise the demand for industrial output like chemicals and fertilisers over the next six to eight months. In recent years, there has been plenty of talk about the ‘decoupling’ between the rural and urban economies in India. This year is giving India a dose of realism: the rural sector remains a very important cog in the economic wheel.

The Government probably realises this. Since March, when the first help programmes were launched, a disproportionate share of the money disbursed has gone to rural areas, be it to the returning migrants or on account of direct and indirect help to farmers. This needs to be pushed up. There are ways in which this can be done. For one, foodgrain purchases can be stepped up beyond the usual one-third of what farmers bring. For another, the mini-

num support price for different crops can be raised as a one-off measure. This may seem like a huge increase in Government expenditure especially when public finances are strained. But this can pay off in short time. Ample availability of food for urban areas is essential to keep workers there. It will also help keep food inflation in check, a step that can go some distance in preventing generalised inflation—which usually climbs up through food and fuel prices—and ultimately help the central bank keep interest rates sufficiently low. In recent analyses, economists have hinted at inflationary pressures picking up in the second half of the year due to broken supply links, especially for food and consumer items.

To that extent, the Union Government has done well to release more food. Stored food has its own costs and giving it away for free is not costless as many activists and academics assume. But there is no better opportunity than a global pandemic and the worst crisis the Indian economy has faced in a very long time to be generous with dishing out government stocks of food. If anything, greater generosity will help India more in this crisis. ■

is interesting to note that this prescription is almost always made by economists of a leftist persuasion.

Grain purchases by the Government are a vital source for injecting money into the rural economy. During crop purchase seasons in April (for wheat) and September (for rice), thousands of crores of rupees is disbursed to farmers for what they sell in markets. In a depressed economy, this is a very important raincheck.

There are incipient signs of a rural economic pickup. Data released by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy shows that in the week that ended June 21st, the rural unemployment rate fell to 7.26 per cent from 10.96 per cent in the previous week. The job loss rate has been the slowest in the last three months. Much of this is welcome news as the huge reverse migration had raised fears of massive worklessness in rural areas. A strong monsoon and a bumper crop have actually raised the demand for work. When supplemented with MGNREGS jobs, which have also seen a spike, this bodes well for economic revival. There are other data points as well: early trends suggest that tractor sales—an important indicator of the rural economy’s health—have picked up in June. Even when the

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**THERE HAS BEEN PLENTY OF HAND-WRINGING ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT NOT DOING ANYTHING TO HELP INDUSTRY. ENSURING THAT LABOUR IS AVAILABLE AT HAND WHEN WORK REOPENS IS A BIG STEP. IT HELPS BOTH INDUSTRY AND THE WORKERS**

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# BIKES AND VITA

Our changed lives at the peak of the

By **RAHUL PANDITA**

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

**I**n Delhi's satellite city of Gurugram, where I have been living for the last 10 years, I have never seen as many cyclists on the road as I see now. There always have been serious cyclists here, and on weekends, especially, you can see them in their tight, bright apparel, pedalling furiously on the GFR, the Gurugram-Faridabad road. But now, even on weekdays, as I begin my morning run from one end of the Golf Course Road, I see new people besides the regular ones: middle-aged men, in twos or threes, perhaps office colleagues or neighbours, or small families, husband, wife and the young daughter or son, their masks on, struggling with the pedal, and then bringing their masks down as breathing becomes laboured.

It is from the sense of mortality that the Covid-19 crisis has induced among most of us that we are now paying attention to our physical and mental wellbeing. Initially, when the first lockdown began, many of us kept ourselves busy with things at home. This was a time when we were trying new things like how to make Dalgona coffee or how to bake banana bread; we were opening new Instagram accounts to upload pictures of our experiments. The number of Covid-19 positive cases was very low. But we were taking precautions. We downloaded online delivery apps, learning to wash everything in mild detergent or at least wipe things with disinfectant wipes. In the West, people hoarded toilet paper; here, we hoarded sanitisers and packets of Maggi noodles.

People were forced to let go of their maids and helpers. Suddenly, men who were always saying that men and women need to share responsibilities realised that they now have to actually share responsibilities. A friend who accepted the responsibility of mopping the house twice a week realised how difficult it was to sit on the haunches and mop the floor from one end to another. He suddenly began talking about robotic

vacuum cleaners. Ultimately, he discarded the rag and settled for a new-age mop with a long handle that you can wring by pushing down a lever of sorts.

Then there are people who are realising new things about the behaviour of their spouse or children. For working couples, it used to be a different realm to converge at the house in the evening and ask each other polite things and then settle with Netflix. Those few hours were still difficult with children, but you managed by playing with them a bit and then feeding them while playing some cartoon series on your I-Pad. But now, everyone is home.

A friend who works from home says she would send her children to school, and after her husband left for office, she would make herself a cup of tea and savour the peace till late afternoon when the kids came back from school. But the kids have a couple of hours of online classes where she is forced to sit with them. Afterwards, she says, she asks Alexa to play a song,

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**IT IS FROM THE SENSE OF MORTALITY THAT THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS INDUCED AMONG MOST OF US THAT WE ARE NOW PAYING ATTENTION TO OUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING. INITIALLY, WHEN THE FIRST LOCKDOWN BEGAN, MANY OF US KEPT OURSELVES BUSY WITH THINGS AT HOME**

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# M I N S

p a n d e m i c



but no sooner has she done it than her younger one barges into the room and shouts: Alexa, stop. There is no going to the park or to play areas in shopping malls. The kids have become cranky; so have the adults.

Many are now realising that it was easier to be in office than to spend the entire day on Zoom calls. At least in the office one could put up an excuse for this work or that. But now there is no excuse. You are expected to be home, unless you have cough and fever, and you have to get to a quarantine facility.

Days into the lockdown, many of us began to test the waters a little by stepping out to buy groceries. By this time, small circles had begun to appear outside shops; they looked sinister, as if tiny alien bikes had attempted wheelies. A guard pointed a temperature gun at you and let you in if your temperature was normal. Around the same time, the scientific community was going berserk. *No, do not wear masks. No, wear masks. The droplets reach X distance. No, they reach only X-10 distance. No, they reach X*

*distance, but by then they are incapable of spreading infection. Do not step outside for exercise. No, it is important to exercise, but maintain social distancing.*

Family WhatsApp groups began to dole out remedies, ranging from gargles to garlic. Giloy, which only made appearance during dengue season in Delhi, regained its importance. I did a search on my WhatsApp and found 103 references to it in various groups I am part of.

The migrant worker tragedy had blown up in our faces by this time. We looked at streams of workers, their bundles on their heads, walking day and night to their native places. For many of us, it was our reminder in a long, long time that there are people in this country who are so poor that if they do not work for a few days, they will have no food to eat. A friend said that not all of them were migrating back because they had nothing to eat, but a panic had been created and they wanted to go away since their neighbours had left. I said perhaps that is true; but I





reminded him of college days when he would run home at the first sign of an impending fever.

Midway into the lockdown, people realised that many among them would end up losing their jobs or facing severe pay cuts. Many in senior positions were asked to identify a certain number of people in their team who have not been ‘performing’ and sack them. Many had plans of purchasing a car or a house, but that has been shelved for now. According to the latest figures, residential sales in the top seven cities in the first quarter (as compared to the same period last year) are down by 81 per cent. New launches have fallen by 98 per cent in the same period.

As more and more people lost their jobs, particularly in sectors like restaurants and retail, savings began to dry up. A friend who has been involved in relief work said that he had begun to receive SOS calls from people who had secure jobs and were suddenly sacked and now had no money to even pay their rent or their children’s school fees.

As we opened from the lockdown, people began to come out. This was already predicted by many; it was said that the pandemic would end socially before it ended medically. Gradually, one returned to the marketplace and found the queues outside cafés for takeaways.

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**MANY OF US HAVE NOW CONSCIOUSLY STOPPED TRACKING PANDEMIC NEWS. BUT EVERY NOW AND THEN YOU HEAR OF A FRIEND’S FRIEND WHO PASSED AWAY IN SOME HOSPITAL; YOU HEAR OF TERRIBLE HOSPITAL BILLS EVEN AFTER A PERSON’S DEATH**

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By reflex, people were extending their hands towards each other and then pulling them back at the last minute, remembering the image of the virus. The pack of dogs that had started to think they had taken over began to sulk again on the margins, looking at people they had forgotten existed. Of course, in posh markets, citizens who may have denied salaries to their maids and drivers had left so much Pedigree in bowls that a lot of it got wasted. Many of those who had thronged the market after the lockdown was lifted have retreated back to their homes once the cases began to pile up in what is evidently a sign of community spread.

The next thing to worry about is the electricity bill, since all air-conditioners are on at people’s homes in this terrible heat. The maids and helpers have started trickling back in; the RWA uncles are still acting as extrajudicial bodies, but their breeches are beginning to fade.

Many of us have now consciously stopped tracking pandemic news. But every now and then you hear of a friend’s friend who passed away in some hospital, away from near and dear ones; you hear of terrible hospital bills even after a person’s death.

And then you buy an oximeter. And pop yet another Vitamin C tablet. And take out your cycle even farther than the previous day. ■



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# Are Indian Slaughter

The rising number of Covid-19 cases in the meat industry worldwide

**C**ovid-19, the pandemic which has destroyed the world as we knew it, emerged from the ‘wet markets’ of Wuhan. The market offered exotic variety, including ‘120 wildlife animals across 75 species’, according to the *South China Morning Post*. ‘Wet’ markets are huge open-air stalls which sell fresh seafood, meat, fruit and vegetables. Most ‘wet’ markets sell and slaughter live animals on site—a crowd of puppies, pangolins, bats and eels, besides the regular chicken, fish, etc—packed tightly into cages. In China, these are staple food. ‘Wet’ markets also sell wild animals and their meat. The Huanan market at Wuhan, for example, has a wild-animal section where live and slaughtered beavers, snakes, porcupines and baby crocodiles, among other animals, go up for sale.

Why are these markets called ‘wet’? Because there is liquid in these places: live fish splashing in water and melting ice keeping meat cold. But the ‘wet’ also includes the blood and entrails of slaughtered animals. If a buyer chooses a puppy, it is pulled out of the cage and slaughtered in full view of the animals as well as people. Apart from blood, the frightened animals also expel faeces and urine, making the market unclean and unhygienic. China has never ordered the closure of its ‘wet’ markets as they’re an important source of affordable food and livelihood.

In January, China banned the sale and consumption of wild animals as food. The government temporarily closed the Huanan market after it was identified as one of the early sources of Covid-19. Scientists suspect that the virus may have jumped from one species to another, and then on to humans. ‘Wet’ markets, where lots of different species of animals live in tight clusters and inhuman conditions and where humans come into contact with them, are ideal sources for transmission of zoonotic diseases. Animals play an essential role in transmitting zoonotic infections.

On June 11th, Beijing confirmed a Covid-19 case, ending 55 days without reported local transmissions. Since then, the outbreak has grown out of proportion. Beijing had previously reported its last case of Covid-19 transmission in mid-April. The current outbreak began when a man with no history of recent travel tested positive for SARS CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, and was hospitalised the next day. He was infected at the Xinfadi Agricultural Wholesale Market, an enormous 112-hectare market consisting of 2,000 stalls selling meat and seafood, with 10,000 customers and workers visiting daily.

Meanwhile, there is an intense debate going on in Germany on why slaughterhouses have become one of the most common sources of coronavirus outbreaks across the country. Germany’s

largest single outbreak of Covid-19 took place at an abattoir in North Rhine-Westphalia. More than 2,000 people contracted Covid-19 in the Gütersloh area and have been linked to the Tönies slaughterhouse.

Three large slaughterhouses have closed in England and Wales after nearly 250 workers tested positive for the coronavirus, while the Unite union said there were suspected outbreaks at five other sites across the UK. A meat-processing site owned by Asda in West Yorkshire took 48 hours to confirm an outbreak after about 150 workers fell ill with the virus. The Kober plant, which supplies bacon to Asda supermarkets and

An abattoir in Mumbai



REUTERS

# houses Safe?

raises concerns about potential pandemics **By NANDITHA KRISHNA**

employs more than 500 people, has closed with a test-and-trace programme under way. The UK's main supplier of supermarket chicken, 2 Sisters Food Group, closed its Anglesey plant for 14 days after 58 people tested positive. In Wrexham, 38 staff have tested positive at Rowan Foods, which makes food for supermarkets across the UK.

The cluster of new cases in meat-processing plants raises concerns about potential pandemics similar to those seen in France and the US, where nearly 25,000 meat and poultry workers were reported to have contracted Covid-19 with at least 91 deaths.

Is there a message here? But surely! When will we learn that slaughterhouses and meat plants are not conducive to good health?

It all started with the Mad Cow Disease or Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Britain in the mid-eighties. Subsequent research indicates that the first probable cases of BSE in cows occurred during the 1970s. Two cases of BSE were identified in 1986. Mad cow disease spread like wildfire among British cattle in the mid-1980s, after they were fed the processed animal remains of sheep infected with scrapie, a brain-wasting disease. The outbreak was then amplified and spread throughout the UK's

cattle herds by feeding bovine meat-and-bone meal that contained the remains of other cattle, who developed the disease, to young calves. In other words, by cannibalising the calves. Cattle are herbivores. Feeding them any form of meat—leave alone the remains of their parents—is unhealthy and cruel. The spread to humans resulted in Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), a fat degenerative brain disorder, which is transmitted to humans by eating BSE contaminated food.

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**SLAUGHTERHOUSES  
HAVE NOTHING TO DO  
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SLAUGHTERHOUSE? THE  
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AND BLOOD FLOWING  
ALL AROUND**

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The Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) was discovered

in 1976, the majority of cases occurring in Africa. Ebola first broke out in 2014-2016 in rural Guinea in West Africa, spread to urban areas and crossed borders within weeks, becoming a global epidemic within months. EVD most commonly affects people and non-human primates (such as monkeys, gorillas and chimpanzees). It is caused by a group of viruses in the genus Ebolavirus. The virus is animal-borne, with bats or non-human primates being the most likely source. Animals infected with the virus transmit it to other animals, like apes and monkeys, till it reaches the top primates—humans. Initially, the virus spreads to humans through direct contact with





A slaughterhouse in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh

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**WE SEE REPEATED CASES OF DISEASES JUMPING FROM ANIMALS TO HUMANS, BUT SLAUGHTERHOUSES AND WET MARKETS CONTINUE TO FLOURISH. THIS IS A RESULT OF HUMAN GREED AND STUPIDITY**

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AP

the blood, body fluids and tissues of animals. It then spreads to other people through direct contact with body fluids of a person who is sick with or has died from Ebola. The butchering of bats and handling of raw meat was the source of infection. 11,315 people died from the disease in six countries: Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, the US and Mali.

**T**he SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV) was identified in 2003 and is yet another animal-sourced virus from an uncertain animal host—perhaps bats—that spread to other animals (civet cats) and then infected humans in the Guangdong province of southern China in 2002. SARS has reappeared four times—three times from laboratory accidents (Singapore and Chinese Taipei) and once in southern China, where there is evidence of animal-to-human transmission.

In spite of all the evidence of animal-to-human transmission, the Central and state governments in India have not examined whether our slaughterhouses are the sources of this pandemic. No testing has been done in any slaughterhouse or on their workers. I can hear the self-appointed left-liberals condemning this as an act to suppress one community. Please. We all want to save our skins and knowing the source of this steady rise in numbers is essential.

In India, the slaughterhouse was a British invention, to supply beef for their steak to the Englishmen. Robert Clive built the first slaughterhouse in Calcutta in 1760, with the provision that the butchers should be Muslims, thereby ensuring a Hindu-Muslim divide over cow slaughter. The Mughals did not permit cow slaughter until Aurangzeb, who is recorded by historian J Gordon Melton as ordering a cow to be slaughtered within the premises

of a Jain temple. There is recorded evidence of a cow slaughter trial presided over by the later Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar. For the Mughals, banning beef was a pragmatic decision, to avoid provoking Hindus to rebellion, which would have disrupted agriculture and hindered tax collection. This Mughal policy changed with the advent of the East India Company, whose sole purpose of territorial expansion was to find and export raw materials to industries back home. And beef steak was necessary to keep the Englishman content.

Slaughterhouses have nothing to do with either Muslims or Islam. They are a source of disease and ill health. Have you ever visited a slaughterhouse? Even if you are not affected by the piteous cries of animals watching others being slaughtered and knowing that their turn will come, the filth and unclean conditions are deadly—faeces, urine and blood flowing all around. How can this be anything but a source of ill health? We know that chickens are pumped with antibiotics, while male chicks are put through shredders even while alive, pelletised and made into chicken feed. They come to the table in various forms of chicken—biryani, butter chicken, murg masala and so on.

This pandemic is a message from nature, that we have to respect other species. Human exploitation of animals is unpardonable and stupid. We see repeated cases of diseases jumping from animals to humans, but slaughterhouses and wet markets continue to flourish. This is a result of human greed and stupidity. To quote Ian Fleming, “Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.” Human beings are their own enemy. ■



*Nanditha Krishna is a historian and an environmentalist. She is Director, CPR Institute of Indological Research in Chennai*

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# From the FRONTLINE of GRIEF

For the families of men killed in action over the years, the bloody border clash between India and China has reignited painful memories

By **NIKITA DOVAL**



THE HOUSE IN Dehradun was everything Subedar Ajay Vardhan and his wife Laxmi had wanted. It was July 2014. A Junior Commissioned Officer with 14 Garhwal Rifles, Vardhan, posted in Kupwara in the Kashmir Valley, was on leave for the housewarming ceremony. He could not stop talking about what he wanted to do with the place—from a kitchen garden to a bedroom for his ageing parents, his wife Laxmi recalls. It was his only visit to the house.

That same year, on December 1st, when Laxmi dialled his number at 9.30 PM—a

daily ritual between them—there was no answer. She thought he was asleep. Vardhan, 43, was in fact engaged in a gun battle with terrorists in Kupwara. He would go on to kill two terrorists and save his men in the course of the encounter before succumbing to his own injuries. Six years later, Laxmi, in her mid-thirties, still expects him to walk through the front door of the house. His parents refused to move in with Laxmi after his death and she never set up the kitchen garden. Keeping Laxmi, their son Akshit, 14, and daughter Bhumika, 16, company, and a constant reminder of his absence, are Vardhan's uniform and the Kirti Chakra he was awarded in recognition of his bravery.

On June 16th, news started trickling in of a deadly clash between Indian troops and soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. India lost 20 men, including a colonel, along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. Tral, Handwara, Nagrota, Uri, and now, Galwan. Every few months, Indians familiarise themselves with yet another troubled district where there has been an encounter and lives lost. Every in-



REUTERS

cident opens a fresh wound in the hearts of thousands of families that have lost loved ones, some decades ago, on the frontline. Some of them have been memorialised in the public eye, their raw grief captured for headlines, while others have quietly mourned. When a fresh incident on the borders flashes on TV, they all relive the horror of a single day that changed their lives forever—the mother who still cooks her son's favourite dishes on his birthday although he will forever be 22; the child who, after four years, believes her father will return with biscuits; a father whose hands shake when he recounts, 15 years later, the moment a senior officer rang his doorbell one ill-fated morning.

"I was 18 when I went to work in an ordnance factory and first met an army officer. Since then, I had dreamt that my son



The Tricolour being draped over the body of Havaldar Sunil Kumar, who died in Galwan Valley, in Maner, Bihar, June 18

would wear olive green. I just didn't realise though that it would be for such a short while," says Mushtaq Ahmed Khan, father of Major Salman Khan, who was killed in action in 2005, in Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir. Major Khan, who was 26, was rewarded with the Shaurya Chakra for his bravery. Fifteen years is but a blink in the passage of time when you have lost a child, says Mushtaq Ahmed Khan. "Upon seeing him in uniform one day, his General Officer Commanding (GOC) called up the Commanding Officer (CO) and suggested that he be recommended as an aide-de-camp for the President of India. Salman requested his CO not to do so. He said that he wanted to serve on the frontline. He got his wish," Khan says.

According to the home ministry's annual reports, there has been a steady increase in the number of security forces personnel killed in Jammu and Kashmir since 2015. Ninety-one lives were lost in 2018, according to the home ministry's 2018 annual report, and 78 in 2019 according to unofficial sources (the ministry's 2019 report is awaited). Among the 19 soldiers killed in action in Uri in 2016 was Barun Dalui's elder brother Sepoy Gangadhar Dalui. Dalui had been commissioned only two years before the incident. Barun remembers him as a gifted runner who had always wanted to join the armed forces but dreamt of a white-collar job for his brother. Watching the Bollywood blockbuster *Uri* was a bittersweet

experience for the family that battled both pride and sadness. "Like most men who join the army, he had developed a certain fearlessness," he says. A bust of Dalui near his house at Jamuna Balia village in West Bengal's Howrah district, is garlanded every September 18th, the anniversary of his death.

"He turned vegetarian after joining the army, saying he had taken an oath to protect life and thus could not justify eating meat. Some days, I find my mother sitting next to his photograph weeping quietly," says Barun, 17. He is now in his second year of BA at Sovarani Memorial College in Howrah. "Dada always said army training and life is too rigorous. I will not be able to take the hardships. He used to tease me

about being plump,” Barun shares with a smile in his voice.

For a vast majority of Indians, it was Kargil that brought home the emotional cost of war. It was the first conflict to be beamed into our living rooms, with its images of Tricolour-draped coffins and grieving family members. But in the ensuing debate on nationalism and the role of the soldier, the families that made the ultimate sacrifice appeared to fall by the

ley clash last month, the Rai family was sitting down for a meal at home in Lucknow. It felt like 2015 all over again, when Colonel MN Rai was killed in action in Tral, Jammu and Kashmir. No one ate that day. “Each loss throws our life out of gear,” says Priyanka Rai, who is in her mid-thirties and is the widow of Colonel Rai. “I don’t have patience for people who glorify the loss of our men. May they never face what we have faced. This is a grief that doesn’t

tional ex gratia amount. The AGI amount, which ranges from Rs 40 lakh to Rs 75 lakh, is paid out within a week of death. Compensation, however, is a state subject and the Centre’s role ends with pension and ex-gratia payments. Some states like Punjab recently hiked the compensation for families from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 50 lakh. In Telangana, Chief Minister KC Rao announced an ex-gratia of Rs 5 crore for the family of Colonel Subhash Babu, killed in Galwan. West Bengal, which also lost two men, announced a sum of just Rs 5 lakh, sparking a debate about the value of a life lost on the frontlines. A death on the line of duty usually comes with promises of jobs and allotment of land to the grieving family, announced at photo-ops with local politicians. But what happens once the cameras depart?

Mahadevi Koppad, 30, widow of Lance Naik Hanumanthappa Koppad, of 19 Madras, who died at the Army Research and Referral Hospital in Delhi in February 2016 after miraculously surviving an avalanche in Siachen, has been through this. The job offers that had been publicly extended to her by the state have not materialised. The media, which had pestered her for interviews as her husband fought for his life, upon his rescue six days after being buried under deep snow, no longer seeks her out. She is not on the politician’s radar either and her own husband’s family—his three elder brothers and mother—does not support her, citing losses in agriculture. ‘Jayashri’ to her husband’s family, and simply ‘Jaya’ to her late husband, Mahadevi gave up not just an acre of land that belonged to Hanumanthappa, allowing his brothers to cultivate cotton, sweet corn and groundnut, but also his favourite dog Shiny. She settled in Belagavi, Karnataka, to give her six-year-old daughter Netra a good education. “We haven’t visited Betadur [Koppad’s village] since December 2019,” she says. “Despite all the attention around the time of death, we are left alone to fend for ourselves.” All her four letters to the state government for employment have gone unanswered. Union Minister Smriti Irani, too, had offered her a job with the Central Silk Board but when officials approached her, they made it clear it was

## Grief, courage and determination often get passed on to the next generation. **Alka Rai’s mother, Priyanka, says her daughter will wear the olive green one day and give a ‘proper salute’**



Alka Rai salutes her martyred father, Colonel MN Rai, in New Delhi, January 29, 2015

wayside. Grief, they would soon find, was isolating unless sublimated into collective pride. “You are put on a pedestal you never asked for. There is a strange expectation that your principal emotion should be one of pride rather than sorrow. It is a death for a larger purpose. We respect and acknowledge the sacrifice, but the sorrow will outweigh the pride, any day,” says Subhashini Vasanth, widow of Colonel Vasanth Venugopal who was killed in action in Uri in 2007 while leading from the front.

When TV channels were confirming the death of 20 soldiers in the Galwan Val-

fade. It only intensifies.” The family has a photograph of Colonel Rai on every wall of the house, and even today, on every birthday, the first piece of cake is offered to him.

The biggest concern for the Indian army when it loses a man is the financial future of his family—parents, wife and children. At present, the compensation structure for those killed in action includes an ex gratia amount from the Centre, Army Group Insurance (AGI) benefits, pension, leave encashment and other components. In case of death in Jammu and Kashmir, the state grants an addi-

a temporary posting for a year.

Mahadevi's story is not the exception but the norm. Subhashini Vasanth has been waging a lonely battle for the possession of a piece of land she is entitled to as part of Colonel Vasanth's compensation. Major Khan's father, too, never got the piece of land he was promised. What families do seem to get is endless bureaucratic hassle, red tape and humiliation. "I have come back home from government offices and cried in desperation and disgust. People don't want to honour the promises made to men who have laid down their lives for the country," says Subhashini, who is in her mid-forties. Khan's family eventually gave up the fight but Subhashini keeps at it as a matter of principle. "You promised this to my husband. Either fulfil it or remove this provision."

**F**OR WIDOWS WHO aren't well educated or financially stable, the future seems to hold no promise. Mahadevi's mother died when she was a child, and she was forced to grow up to take care of the house and her two brothers. She lost her father to heart failure 15 days before her husband's death. "My brothers work in construction. They are painters. They take up jobs across the state and are away a lot. When I married Hanumanthappa in 2012, he promised to take care of me—and he did." The couple spent a magical year together in Bathinda, but their joy was shortlived. Subsequent postings would not be as easy. "When he came home for the holidays in 2015 and told us about Siachen, I sent him off with a smile. When he was gone, I was on my own again."

The West Bengal government had given the Dalui family Rs 2 lakh as compensation, an amount criticised even then. And when it finally came to the family, it was Rs 1.5 lakh. Gangadhar's father, Onkarnath, still works as a farm hand earning a daily wage. The family relies largely on Gangadhar's pension of Rs 33,000 for subsistence.

The silver lining is that men in uniform tend to look out for the families of their colleagues. There are phone calls,



## For the widows of soldiers killed in action, it is a lonely struggle. What is still missing is a pan-India network that connects the families of those killed in action, officers and jawans alike

« Subhashini Vasanth receiving the Ashoka Chakra for her late husband Colonel Vasanth Venugopal from President Pratibha Patil, January 26, 2008

invitations to events and help extended where possible. Ajay Vardhan's daughter Bhumika was diagnosed with a stomach tumour within a year of his passing. His Commanding Officer from when Vardhan had been commissioned in the unit, then a serving major general, made it a point to keep in touch with the family. Laxmi was getting her daughter treated in a private hospital because she wasn't sure what her entitlements were: "He arranged for us to be brought to Delhi for treatment at the army hospital; he even assigned two soldiers to be with me. At a time when our own families withdrew citing commitments, hinting that I had got enough money from the government, it was the army that stood by me."

What is still missing is a pan-India network that connects the families of those killed in action, officers and jawans alike. Subhashini started the Vasanthratna Foundation for Arts (VRFA) in 2007 to serve as a liaison between agencies, government and the next of kin of men killed in action, but it has now evolved into a "more holistic system of caring for the families". With archaic notions of widowhood—and in cases like that of Vardhan's, estrangement from extended families—there is also loneliness that widows must

deal with. "It has been so long since someone asked me how I am. After Vardhan's passing, it was my daughter's illness that really pushed us over the edge as a family," says Laxmi. Subhashini is now looking at taking VRFA pan-India. There are other efforts in this direction. Barun Dalui's family has become part of a network called *Desh*, run by two civilians, Adrija Sen and Anusuya Mitra, which aims to connect families of those killed in action.

Grief, courage, determination—the strands that connect the families of men who have over the years laid down their lives for the nation—often get passed on to the next generation. Subedar Ajay Vardhan wanted his son to become an officer and his widow really hopes her son Akshit will fulfil that dream. Mahadevi wants her daughter to serve in the army when she grows up. Alka Rai was only 11 when she was photographed saluting her father's pyre and chanting the Gorkha war cry. It is an image that still gets shared on social media all these years later. "Is this the salute they want to remember a man as brave as my husband by? No. She will wear the olive green one day and give a proper salute. And that is the photograph with which I want to remember my husband," says Priyanka Rai. ■



# WHAT'S IN A GAME?

A SUBCULTURE AROUND PUBG MOBILE HAS BEEN

**O**

IN A RECENT AFTERNOON, Kanishk Shah sat in a jeep scouring an island for two players that hid somewhere. "There," he shouted, referring to a window in a house far away, where he had somehow miraculously seen some movement. Within a few seconds, two small spots of blood burst on the screen. Shah had shot one player; the other was finished by his teammate.

It was a grisly, but somewhat tame, end to an over hour-long game on the popular mobile version of the first-person shooter game *PUBG* (*PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*).

"*Kya boring game tha* [What a boring game]," Shah shouted, presumably into the headset.

For the over 15,000 gathered watching this match live on YouTube, this was far from boring. The comments stream was bursting with 'oh my gods' and 'good mornings', and with requests for tips such as the correct technique of throwing grenades.

All through the game, Shah had entertained these queries with enthusiasm, responding to compliments with 'oh, thank you', even when they ceased to surprise.

But right now, he was in no mood. "*Kya*



# GAINING MOMENTUM DURING THE LOCKDOWN

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

boring game,” he repeated again.

Shah, who goes by the alias ‘Slayer’, is considered to be among the top professional players of this game in India. When he streams his matches, usually late in the nights, hordes of youths log in. Some come in the hope of picking up tricks that they can implement in their own games, many just come with a request to be acknowledged by their idol during a game, but the vast majority, Shah says, just come to watch a match unfold like one would switch on a cricket game.

In the last few months, ever since the lockdown, Shah has noticed that the

numbers logging in have spiked. “Usually there is a time slot, it’s usually night-time, when you get like 15,000 people watching your game. But right now, anytime you start playing, doesn’t matter what time in the day or night, man you find that kind of number always there,” he says.

The mobile version of *PUBG* has been something of a phenomenon ever since it arrived in India about two years ago. According to various reports, out of the estimated 500 million-plus who have downloaded this game on their phones, between 140-150 million of those have happened in India alone, points out

Sidharth Kedia, the CEO of Nodwin Gaming, the Indian esports company that organises *PUBG Mobile*’s professional tournaments in India. “That makes India the No 1 territory for the game,” he says. “If you ask me about DAU (daily active users) and MAU (monthly active users), there are no official figures. But last I heard, between 30 to 40 million play the game daily. About 60 to 80 million on a monthly basis.”

At one end of this phenomenon is the casual gamer. Individuals, usually a group of friends, who play this incredibly addictive game, where they must—like the premise of the Japanese film *Battle*



**“WE’RE SEEING 400 TO 500 PER CENT KIND OF GROWTH IN WATCH-TIME, PLAY TIMES, INTERACTIONS, REGISTRATIONS. IT’S LIKE EXPLODING RIGHT NOW”**

**AKSHAT RATHEE** co-founder and managing director, Nodwin Gaming



**“LAST I HEARD, BETWEEN 30 TO 40 MILLION PLAY THE GAME DAILY. ABOUT 60 TO 80 MILLION ON A MONTHLY BASIS”**

**SIDHARTH KEDIA** ceo, Nodwin Gaming

*Royale*—survive on an island by killing opponents. But this game is not built only to play. It is equally thrilling just to watch. And here, we come to its other end. As the game’s popularity has increased—a new breed of professional players like Shah, celebrities in this gaming world, have come forth.

A subculture just a year ago—often viewed with suspicion by adults—has now burst forth into the mainstream. Mainstream brands, such as cola and mobile companies, now sponsor events, Bollywood actors tap into celebrity gamers to promote their films. Most of the matches in tournaments are streamed on online platforms, such as YouTube (one tournament is also streamed on Hotstar), but some of them are even making its way to TV (MTV telecasts condensed versions of long games).

An entire ecosystem has now come up around this game. There are professional teams and players, a majority of them still in colleges or schools; many established foreign esports companies are now entering the Indian market and setting up their own teams; there are managers, coaches, social media influencers in the gaming world who stream *PUBG* matches as a source of livelihood, casters or commentators who analyse and break down what is going on in the game, and a crowded audience of passionate and mostly adolescent fans.

A game already growing rapidly over two years has now exploded with the Covid-19 outbreak and the resulting lockdown. “We’re seeing 400 to 500 per

cent kind of growth in watch-time, play times, interactions, registrations. Everything. It’s like exploding right now,” says Akshat Rathee, the co-founder and managing director of Nodwin Gaming. “It’s become crazy.”

**I**T WAS SOME TIME around 2015, says Siddhant Joshi, when he realised it was pointless to pursue gaming professionally. “I figured I wasn’t good enough at the world level. And there was no point just being the best in India. You couldn’t make enough money that way,” he says.

Joshi had spent what appeared like a lifetime playing games by then. Although he had done so casually throughout his childhood, it was in London, where he was pursuing a Business Administration degree, that he got introduced to the world of professional esports and realised how this passion could be taken up professionally. Six months into a sales job in a chemical manufacturing company in Muscat, Joshi resigned and returned to India to become a full-fledged professional gamer. “I didn’t like the job. Besides, the internet connection was so poor, you couldn’t play games,” he says.

When Joshi quit playing, he reoriented his career to become a manager instead. “I already had all this experience. So I figured I could use it to help others,” he says.

The esports scene was changing around that time. New teams were being formed, young players were coming up the ranks, professional players were drawing salaries, and some like Joshi were

becoming managers. At some point, Joshi began to manage two teams for a newly formed Indian company Entity Esports—one that played *Defense of the Ancients 2 (DOTA-2)* and the other for *Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CSGO)*.

In about a year’s time, this scene was going to explode. And it wasn’t going to be with *DOTA-2* or *CSGO*. It was going to be with *PUBG Mobile*.

Rathee likes to compare this moment with how cricket became popular in India after the country’s 1983 World Cup win. How colour TV sets, made widely available a year ago after Indira Gandhi nationalised picture tube companies so people could watch the Asian Games held in Delhi in 1982, resulted in Indians getting hooked to cricket after they watched the 1983 World Cup campaign on TV. “It’s quite the same right now,” he says. “Every kid now has a phone, and *PUBG Mobile* has become so big that everyone now plays and watches it.”

His colleague, Kedia, also uses a cricket analogy when talking of the popularity of the game. Esports has the world over traditionally been a console or personal computer-led medium. “In India, this was like the Test format of esports, something for the purists. When *PUBG Mobile* came, esports in India became mobile-based. And we entered the T20 phase,” he says.

“We’ve only scratched the surface, I think,” says Varun John, a caster (or commentator) who analyses and hosts discussions around the game on various platforms. A former sound engineer who casually played games, he became



**“PEOPLE STILL DON’T  
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**VARUN JOHN**  
PUBG caster



a professional caster a year ago, because he understood gaming and could talk a lot about it. “People still don’t quite appreciate how rich and complex this game is. If you ask me, it is made for TV like other sports,” he says.

Entity Esports now is one of the top professional teams in India right now. Earlier this year, when the well-known US esports company TSM (or Team SoloMid) entered the Indian market, they partnered with Entity Esports. And Entity (which now goes with the name TSM-Entity) has neither a *DOTA-2* or *CSGO* team, but one only of *PUBG Mobile* (consisting of four players and a coach).

When the Covid outbreak occurred and upended the lives of so many, for Joshi’s TSM-Entity *PUBG Mobile* squad, their lives remained unaltered. They awoke at noon at their bootcamp in Mumbai—where the team lives together before tournaments—and apart from a few small breaks, sat in front of their mobile phones till three in the morning.

Most professional players tend to be in their teens. This is also when their gameplay skills and reflexes are sharpest. By your mid-20s, a gamer’s skills begin to deplete. TSM-Entity’s coach Abhijeet Andhare, a professional player until a year



ago, Joshi says, moved to coaching because at 29, he found himself not sharp enough.

Shah, who is 23 years old, realises he says that he might have about four or five years as a professional gamer left in him. He used to play occasionally in the *PUBG Mobile* squad run by Naman Mathur, arguably India’s most well-known *PUBG Mobile* gamer who goes by the name ‘Mortal’, before a spot opened up in another team (Team Ind).

“The way I look at it, I’ll play four or five years. Then maybe, if I can make a strong online presence, I can move full-time into

streaming games,” he says.

The explosion in the popularity of this game among youths—a majority of them tend to be male and still in school—and the sharply divided loyalties among fans, however, has a flipside. It tends to be very toxic.

“There is a lot of constant abuse. So if a [professional] player says something that people watching don’t like, or they say kill another fan favourite in the game, people go overboard. They abuse, create pages to troll people. There have even been instances where family members [of a player] have been threatened online,” says Joshi. “It’s just very, very toxic.”

Payal Dhaare, a 19-year-old gamer who is pursuing her college degree in Jharkhand, says it is particularly difficult to be a female gamer. “Nobody takes you seriously... The gaming fraternity is nice but the audience can be terrible sometimes. When you achieve something in the game—say a new record or a new level—they will say someone else is playing for you or they will link you constantly with someone else. They will create new pages with your name or troll you,” she says. “They don’t appreciate, we are gamers too.” ■

# THE LADY WITH A

# KWII

By Aditya Mani Jha

SALON



Tripti Dimri in *Bulbbul*

**W**RITER-DIRECTOR Anvita Dutt's film *Bulbbul*, Bollywood's latest Netflix Original,

is a horror movie set between 1881 and 1901 in rural Bengal. *Bulbbul* is stylishly shot and crisply edited, with an array of Gothic-adjacent shots of crumbling havelis and eye-catching tableaux lit up in the red-crimson-pink spectrum. It is also a supremely confident revisionist narrative—its protagonist, the titular Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri), is a former child bride turned *chudail* (witch) who exacts bloody revenge upon the incorrigibly monstrous men of her village, including her abusive paedophile husband Indranil and his developmentally disabled identical twin Mahendra (Rahul Bose in a double role), scions of a rich and powerful zamindar family.

*Bulbbul*, notably, has been produced by the 32-year-old actor Anushka Sharma and her brother Karnesh Ssharma. The siblings' Clean Slate Films has now produced a trilogy of sorts—Anshai Lal's *Phillauri* (2017), Prosit Roy's *Pari* (2018) and now *Bulbbul*—where debutant directors have engaged with supernatural narratives in increasingly effective ways (each successive film has been better than the last one). In all three, we see a feminist 'rewriting' of folktales, fairytales and other assorted mythologies, wherein ghosts, witches and demons act as agents of female vengeance, correcting historical injustices. The ghost in *Phillauri* seeks recognition as the poet behind her dead lover's songs (which is to say, she seeks creative agency); *Pari* is an allegory for reproductive rights; and *Bulbbul*'s titular witch is a vigilante, targeting local paedophiles, rapists and incorrigible wife-beaters.



Anushka Sharma in *Pari*

FE

## The unleashing of female vengeance in onscreen feminist rewritings of myths

The Clean Slate trilogy is by no means alone in this project—across the 2010s, we have seen several other examples of the subgenre, including Amar Kaushik's 2018 horror comedy *Stree*, Kannan Iyer's 2013 thriller *Ek Thi Daayan* and the 2015 romantic comedy *Shaandaar*. To varying degrees, all of these films engage with the conventions of 'canonical' mythologies. As the decade has progressed, the dominant narrative mode has shifted gradually from allusion (referencing tropes like *chudail* or Prince Charming or Cinderella) to revision (adding feminist plot twists that are essentially wish-fulfillment fantasies). At the same time, the dominant genre has shifted from different strands of comedy (ranging from social satire to slapstick) to flat-out horror.

Until not too long ago, the idea of a vengeful female spirit demanding accountability from Bollywood's leading men was the realm of either comedy or over-the-top pathos. In *Great Grand Masti* (2016), a typically crass, innuendo-laden Indra Kumar comedy, the villain of the piece is a horny female ghost named Ragini (Urvashi Rautela) who preys on young men. As our heroes discover, she was killed by a snake and died a virgin. Because of this, Ragini is now perpetually on the lookout for virile young men with whom she can engage in '*masti*', the film's euphemism for sex.

In the world of *Great Grand Masti*, female sexuality exists either as a series of progressively embarrassing objectifications (the 'village belle', the 'milkmaid' and so on) or as an event that's equal parts scary and hilarious, like every single appearance the oversexed Ragini aspires to be. She's even named to evoke the heroine of Ekta Kapoor's contemporaneous 'horrex' (horror plus sex) film

and TV franchise, *Ragini MMS*. During the movie's climax, the film's three male protagonists save the day by pairing Ragini up with an equally horny male ghost, Babu Rangeela (Shreyas Talpade), who 'tames' her (the 'taming' bit is reinforced with *Rangeela*'s signature cowboy hat) via sex.

In the past, when not going the comedic route, Bollywood embraced over-the-top jump scares and hackneyed genre conventions in films like *Raaz* (2002) *Bhoot* (2003) and, to a much lesser extent, *Talaash* (2012), all of which featured the spirits of female murder victims, hell-bent on exacting revenge. Veteran direc-

**THE FOREST  
is where Bulbbul  
the witch brings  
justice, by killing  
wife-murderers, abusers  
and other assorted  
male predators**

tor Priyadarshan used this idea as a red herring in his 2007 horror comedy *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*. Vidya Balan's character Avni's dissociative identity disorder makes her believe that she's Manjulika, a medieval courtesan whose lover was beheaded by a sadistic king who happens to be Avni's husband's ancestor. In-character as Manjulika, Avni keeps trying to kill her husband in retaliation—but the audience only finds out that Avni is the 'ghost' after the interventions of an eccentric psychiatrist, Aditya (Akshay Kumar). Science, therefore, acts as the mediator between mystical and modern knowledge systems in this case.

*Stree* (2018) was an altogether different beast, an accomplished comedy that incorporated supernatural elements in service of its larger satirical goals. Here, the setting is Chanderi, a small town in Madhya Pradesh haunted by the titular Stree, the vengeful spirit who whisks away young men during the four days of an annual festival (ironically, devoted to the Mother Goddess). During the course of the film, the origin story ascribed to its antagonist is rewritten along feminist lines—we learn that Stree was a famous courtesan in her lifetime, before she was murdered along with her lover on the eve of their marriage. The town's jealous failed suitors were the culprits and since then, Stree has hunted down Chanderi's young men as punishment.

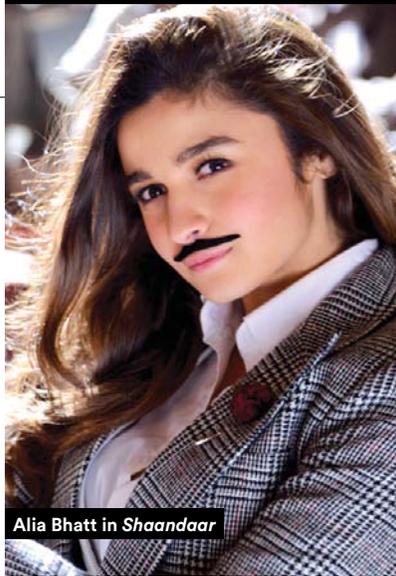
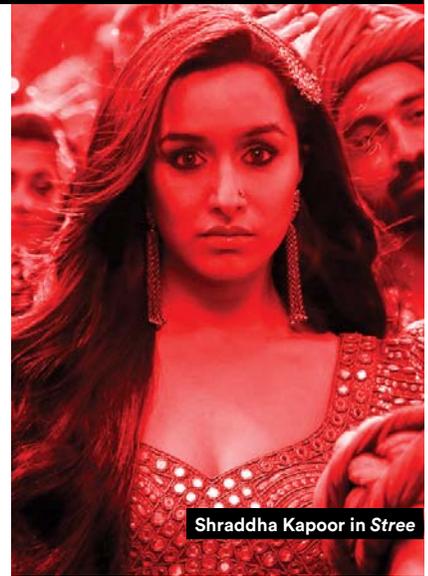
But even here, in this act of rewriting, there were concessions to the canon and therefore to the societal status quo—during the climax, the film's female lead, an unnamed woman (Shraddha Kapoor) who has been tracking Stree's whereabouts for years, is revealed to be a witch. She was helping the protagonist just so she could access Stree's braid, the source of her supernatural abilities (this is an old, old witch trope). The last scene sees the unnamed woman magically adding the braid to her own and then vanishing into thin air. The trope of the manipulative, selfish woman duping 'innocent young men' (of which the film has quite a few) is subtly reinforced, as though the director wanted to suggest that #NotAll-Witches have feminist concerns.

The first film in the Clean Slate trilogy, *Phillauri* (2017), was the first concrete example of this tonal shift from humour to rage—female rage representative of the larger churns in Indian gender politics. Up until now, the

humour in films like *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* or *Stree* was akin to the ‘negotiation tactics’ employed by compilers of folktales/fairytales (like the Grimm brothers): topics considered unfit for ‘polite society’ were indirectly referenced via humorous or fantastical elements—anything that ensured that the authors couldn’t be accused of ‘realism’.

In *Phillauri*, on the whole a comedy about a female ghost, Shashi (Anushka Sharma), haunting a soon-to-be-married young man, reveals its grim origins in the second half. We learn that Shashi was a popular poet in her village circa 1919—but since the sociopolitical realities of her Punjabi village (Phillaur) would not allow for a female poet, she uses the pen name ‘Phillauri’ and publishes in local weeklies. Because of this, everybody thinks her poems have been written by Roop Lal (Diljit Dosanjh), a handsome, well-loved male singer who also lives in Phillaur. Soon, the two fall in love, decide to get married and also reveal to the world that Shashi is really Phillauri. But before that can happen, Roop Lal is killed in Amritsar on April 13th, 1919—right after recording some of Phillauri’s songs at a studio—in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

*Pari* and now *Bulbbul* have escalated this game to hitherto unseen levels in Bollywood. In *Pari*, man and Satan fight over who gets to control female bodies. Anushka Sharma’s character Rukhsana is a demonoid, born after a demon named Ifrit (the son of Satan) raped hundreds of women to further his bloodline—her mother being one of them. Around the time of her birth, a brutal Bangladeshi professor named Qasim Ali spearheads the Qayamat Andolan, determined to imprison these pregnant women and kill their demonic offspring upon birth; this last bit is depicted in horrific, exceptionally shot sequences featuring some decidedly medieval-looking instruments of torture. Significantly, during the climax of the film, the protagonist’s betrothed Piyali (Ritabhari Chakraborty) cannot bring herself to kill the pregnant Rukh-

Alia Bhatt in *Shaandaar*Shraddha Kapoor in *Stree*

**STREE WAS  
a different beast, an  
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sana who goes into labour shortly after attacking her—the memories of Piyali’s own (supposedly traumatic) abortion are too raw.

Despite being technically sound and well-written, style and substance never quite come together for either *Phillauri* or *Pari*. *Bulbbul*, however, succeeds on both these fronts, as Dutt uses metaphor after metaphor perfectly. Through a rhyming pair of scenes in the first and second halves, the idea of the *bichhua* or scorpion toering becoming a marker of patriarchal control via matrimony is established. The story’s ecofeminist elements are even stronger. Right from the beginning, the forest adjoining the protagonist’s village is the site where Bulbbul the witch brings justice, by killing wife-murderers, abusers and other assorted male predators. Bulbbul, then, is also a kind of forest deity (like Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; the climax even resembles some Willow shots visually), balancing the tyranny of man with the unpredictability of nature. Take the moment when the corpse of the still-human Bulbbul is reanimated by and as the witch—we see a statue of

the Goddess Kali that seems to whisper into the air and the whisper-breeze floats across the forest and into Bulbbul. Divinity, while bestowed by Kali, is thus midwived by the forest.

Crucially, the Clean Slate trilogy also has a complex relationship with realism. The fantastical elements aside, these stories are peppered with carefully chosen real-world references that anchor the audience to a place and a time. *Pari* alludes to the Bangladeshi refugee crisis post-1971, while *Phillauri* uses the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as a *deus ex machina* ending. Here, too, *Bulbbul* comfortably outshines its predecessors—in a bravura moment, Bulbbul tells her confidante, the warm-hearted Dr Sudip (Parambrata Chattopadhyay), that her London-educated brother-in-law Satya (Avinash Tiwary) is ‘playing Sherlock these days’—which is to say, he’s out hunting for the witch every night, convinced that there’s a scientific explanation for the murders. This part of the film, after all, is set in the late 1890s or early 1900s; Sherlock Holmes first became a mainstream success in 1891, when ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ was published by the *Strand* magazine.

Whether *Bulbbul* ushers in a new, unchained era of Indian feminist ‘rewriting’ remains to be seen—this is a genre teeming with possibilities, as the works of writers like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, as well as filmmakers like Ana Lily Amirpour have shown us. But for now, Clean Slate should be applauded for giving us one of the best Indian horror movies of the decade. ■



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# The Drawing Room Writer

Diksha Basu's new novel is irreverent and glamorous. She tells **Urvashi Bahuguna** there is more to literature than tortured stories

**T**HERE'S AN EASE with which novelist and essayist Diksha Basu leads readers through middle-class and upper-middle-class lives in New Delhi. A resident of this metropolis, I read both of her novels, set in my wealthy but grossly inequitable city, in an uninterrupted sitting or two. In her debut, *Windfall* (2017), she had examined the cultural impact of extreme and unexpected good fortune on a previously middle-class family in east Delhi. Her forthcoming second novel, *Destination Wedding* (Bloomsbury; 304 pages; Rs 499), is similarly preoccupied with the workings of money. She follows several families hosting and attending an over-the-top, multi-event gathering in (what is presumably) central Delhi.

There's a certain dissonance between the setting of the novel (a large gathering enabled by international travel) and the extraordinary circumstances we are living through, but *Destination Wedding's* interest in toxic masculinity, privilege, capitalism, self-absorption and ignorance tethers the story to a familiar reality. The engrossing and discomfiting mix of complicated characters ended up being a welcome respite and distraction as they made me laugh and occasionally cringe, and evoked empathy and anger.

Basu says, "People tend to dismiss writing about the one per cent as being somehow frivolous or trivial (unless, of course, all the wealthy people you write about are evil capitalists who eventually get their comeuppance)." She clarifies that her novels feature a cross-section of society: "My characters are never sitting in ivory towers. They live and breathe and interact with the bustle and cacophony of cities where it's impossible to stay separated." One of the reasons Basu, who resides in Mumbai, loves liv-



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

ing in an urban Indian city is that one has to participate in the complicated fabric of the place. There are various windows through which a writer can look at the world, and the one that she has chosen for her work focuses on "the crossroads of poverty and wealth, the haves and the have-nots, the blurred line where the marginalised meet the mainstream".

One of the ways in which she explores this tension and unequal co-existence is through the friendship between Tina, who works for a streaming network, and Sid, an aspiring artist from Dharavi

who hopes to be cast in one of her shows. She loves seeing characters from completely different worlds connect with one another on the page. What do humans have in common when there appears to be nothing at all in common? One of the questions that drives the novel is, "Do we surround ourselves with people who are mirrors or windows, and how does that change how we see the world around us?"

One of the recurring images in the story is clothing as armour and a marker of status and desirability, as characters splurge on designer wear, women are

'treated' to clothing and characters style themselves in specific ways to distinguish themselves from others. When asked about the research the sartorial details required, Basu pointed to her life. Married to a music producer in Bollywood, she follows the advertising campaigns he works on. She flips through glossy magazines, scrolls social media, observes the hoardings, shops at the malls. Several of her friends work in the film and fashion industries. "The world I write about is my world," she says, "I live in it and write about it with affection."

Arguing that only the rich may believe money cannot buy happiness, she points out that an artificial marker of wealth such as clothing speaks volumes on human desires and dreams. Expounding on the importance of wealth indicators in the novel, she says, "Money can buy you food and a safe home and healthcare and can give you the false impression of control and all of those things contribute to happiness. It's very difficult to be happy when you're not safe."

for writing, but now is my time to live more quietly and thoughtfully and channel my wilder instincts onto the page." In the three years that she has been writing the novel, she's also had two babies. Time has since changed shape for her. She no longer has the luxury of long hours of staring into space, so she now writes in short bursts with laser-sharp focus. She believes that has "infused this book with energy and a sense of urgency".

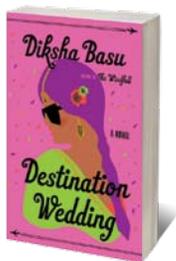
With each book, essay, story or article, she writes what she wants to read and hopes that it subsequently finds an audience. While she is grateful to have readers, she puts the thought of them out of her mind as she writes.

The book's cover is reminiscent of Kevin Kwan's bestselling *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), a novel that shares a similarity or two with *Destination Wedding* and whose fans may enjoy the latter. "It was one of the rare and wonderful instances when the cover was perfect in one try," says Basu, "It's eye-catching and irreverent and fun and a little bit glamorous—all things

as the classic chicken-or-egg conundrum where it's unclear whether the industry is reflecting the preferences of the reader or the reader is following the tone set by the industry. She doesn't believe the only way to make serious points is through pained and tortured books that are "let's face it, mostly written by writers living in comfortable homes waiting for someone to bring them a hot cup of tea".

She points out that people will identify themselves as "reader" on their social media or dating bios, but that one never sees "TV watcher". She finds that reading's role as a stamp of intellectual elitism does a great disservice to the medium by making people feel excluded. She is an avid reader now, but she wasn't always. There is a pride associated with childhood stories of hiding out after bedtime with a torch. "That's great, but it shouldn't be a stamp of pride or achievement. I was a restless child and had a lot of energy and, despite growing up in a home full of readers and books, I didn't manage to escape into books until later," she says. Even then, for quite a while, she dipped in and out of her reading habit as she discovered other loves and interests.

"For quite a while, I thought I didn't have the right to have loud opinions on literature, because it felt like you needed establishment permission," she says, "I would say I got over that only while doing my MFA in creative writing, while studying with the [author] Gary Shteyngart. Gary was the one who made me feel I didn't need anyone's permission to write or say what I wanted to." Sometimes, it feels as though "books can only be treated with hushed tones and reverence" but, Basu says, "fuck that". She acknowledges that with a big publisher and an audience she's hardly anti-establishment, but she wants everyone to be able to be excited by books, tweet and argue about books, read them on e-readers or as hard copies or whatever makes one happy. "Stop saying you love the feel and texture of books and implying that people who are reading electronically are somehow doing it incorrectly," she says. "We don't need to guard literature." ■



“ MY CHARACTERS ARE NEVER SITTING IN IVORY TOWERS. THEY LIVE AND BREATHE AND INTERACT WITH THE BUSTLE AND CACOPHONY OF CITIES WHERE IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO STAY SEPARATED ”

DIKSHA BASU author

On a similar note, she views her stable home life with a reasonable bedtime and little socialising as a necessary contrast to the interpersonal turbulence she explores in her fiction. She says, "To anyone observing me, my life must seem dreadfully dull, but that dullness allows me to be fully involved in the drama on the page. I don't know how anyone could possibly have the mental bandwidth to write a novel and carry on an affair at the same time."

She's grateful for the wilder, more exciting choices she made in her twenties: "Living life, sometimes foolishly, is crucial

I hope my novel is." She thinks books with fun covers tend to get dismissed as "frothy" or "light"—"That's frustrating, but I've made my peace with it."

"We fetishise sadness and suffering in literature. I suppose because those are more difficult things to go through in life, we decide they're more worthy or noble on the page, and then we feel those things ought to be written about with a heavy hand," she says. "The industry echoes a lot of this right back by lauding 'serious' literature or by deciding what is 'serious' literature in the first place." She views it

# A Nationalist before Nationalism

*The political evolution of Dadabhai Naoroji*

IF ONE WERE to recall the most important political event in the life of Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), 'the grand old man of India', chances are it would be his victory in the 1892 British Parliamentary election from Central Finsbury. It was an achievement against all odds: a 'colonial' from India had won a seat in the House of Commons overcoming racism and limited resources. Many will term that event the culmination of his career. But beyond that it is unlikely if anyone except a Naoroji scholar will recall anything further about his time in London.

Reading Dinyar Patel's **Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism** (Harvard University Press; 320 pages; Rs 699) reveals the high point came less than a year later, on the night of June 2nd, 1893. Displaying keen strategic sense, Naoroji outwitted the conservative opposition. When most Members of Parliament (MPs) called it a day, Herbert Paul, Naoroji's friend and the Liberal MP for Edinburgh South introduced a resolution for civil service reform favouring simultaneous examinations for the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in Britain and India. The ICS was the 'steel frame' that maintained colonial power in India and was a British preserve, jealously guarded by a set of measures designed to keep Indians out. Holding examinations in Britain was one such tactic as it gravely disadvantaged Indian candidates with most never making it there. That night Naoroji and his friend achieved a victory of sorts when the resolution sailed through. It is another matter that the demand was not conceded until much later.

Patel writes, 'Once the speaker had tallied the ayes and nays, 84 votes for the resolution and 76 against, the undersecretary of state for India realized to his utter horror that embarrassing defeat was his fate, not Paul's. The vote marked the first defeat for Gladstone's ministry since the 1892 general elections. And it had been brought about by the prime minister's fellow Liberals.'

This biography of Naoroji brings back vividly the struggles of Indian nationalists in the 19th century, a period that was particularly difficult for such activities. The issue was not just of colonial repression but one of political imagination itself. What was India? Was it even possible to imagine India without British rule? When Naoroji began his career in 1848-1849, such questions did not even arise. Among educated Indians—who were truly a microscopic minority—British rule was a blessing. From rule of law to modern administration, the new rulers brought something that India had not known.

If one sketches a timeline from 1849—the beginning of his life as a teacher—to his first critiques of colonial education poli-

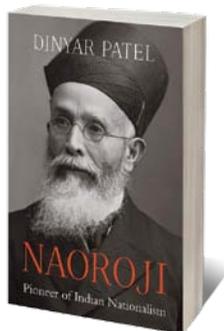
cies in 1860s, there is a gap of more than a decade. The first hint of the Drain Theory came in 1867 in an address before the East India Association, 'England's Duties to India'. Soon after that, he carried out a pioneering estimate of India's national wealth. In all, it took this highly educated Indian roughly two decades of sustained intellectual work to penetrate the way in which colonial exploitation worked. Making Indians aware of these complex mechanisms took considerably longer. By the time the celebrated resolution for holding simultaneous civil services examinations was passed in the House of Commons, another

20 years had passed. When Naoroji departed from Parliament, Indian nationalism had acquired form, however nebulous it may seem from contemporary vantage. By 1906, when he was called to Calcutta as a compromise candidate to paper over differences in a faction-ridden Indian National Congress, Swadeshi as a political idea had acquired some currency. Swaraj, as a goal with a definite shape, was to follow a bit later.

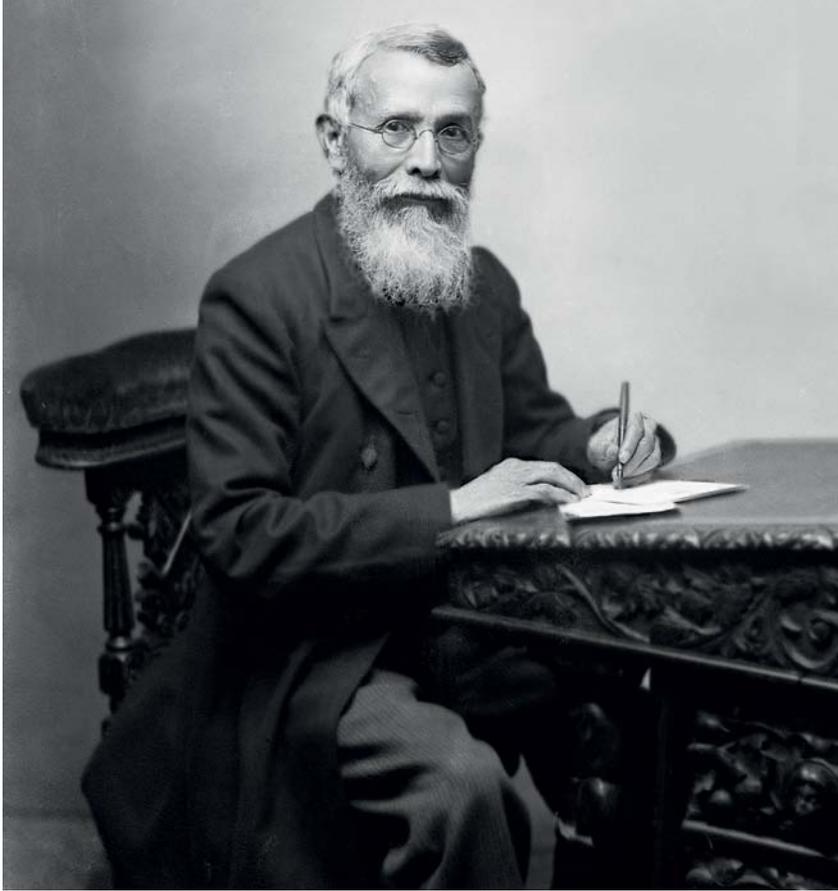
Naoroji's ideas, based on economics, marked the first phase of Indian nationalism. They continued to breathe life long after the British left India.

But no one bothered to enquire their rationality in vastly altered circumstances; they became an article of faith and to question them became heresy in nationalist circles. Consider the Drain Theory. The ICS survived after August 14th, 1947. But the theory's link with Indian poverty—something that Naoroji had advocated forcefully—was no longer considered important. It is another matter that in absolute, and even relative, terms the number of Indians who were poor continued to rise for decades after 1947. Another idea—foreign investment is damaging for India—continues to thrive until this day. Naoroji can be excused for not asking why anyone would make capital-intensive investments such as railways in a capital-starved country like India without a high rate of return. From his vantage, the money drained out of India, be it salaries and pensions of ICS officers or interest payments on investments, and the grinding poverty of India seemed to have an irresistible cause-and-effect relationship. The question is about the damaging afterlife of these ideas.

Even as these ideas inspired policy after 1947, politically they began losing steam as soon as independence was gained. 'Indians', after all, were not really defined as a people. A large fraction of Muslims chose a radically different destiny in an Islamic homeland. As a compromise, in what remained of India a hybrid nationalism was forged. It was based, in part, on economic ideas and, in part, a secular imagination. Politi-



GETTY IMAGES



Dadabhai Naoroji's ideas, based on economics, marked the first phase of Indian nationalism. They continued to breathe life long after the British left India. But no one enquired their rationality in vastly altered circumstances; they became an article of faith and to question them became heresy in nationalist circles

cal vicissitudes have eroded it to a point that now, in the 21st century, it is considered by many merely as an ideological prop to keep Hindus, the majority in the country, at bay. This may not be strictly true: the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Government in India now actively promotes economic self-reliance to the point that it resembles import substitution industrialisation of the era when economic nationalism had absolute sway. Whatever be the truth of its limitations, it is safe to say that economic nationalism did not possess the imagination and vitality that its cultural variant does.

None of this rubs on Patel's book. The exceptional scholarship of the book lifts it far above the ruck of political biographies. As a form, biography writing turned into hagiography long ago in India to such a point that it debased the genre itself. In Patel's hand, the meticulous sifting through the mass of Naoroji papers turns it into a survey on the origins of nationalism in India. Every schoolchild has heard of the Drain Theory but it is presented as a *sui generis* idea, one that has no origin: it is simply a political singularity of sorts. In reality, as Patel shows, it had a long gestation in the mind of a person who was, to begin with, not a politician but a professor of mathematics. There are other biographies of Naoroji. But the emphasis of Patel's book is on his subject's political evolution. That stitch-

ing together of ideas over time allows comparisons with other journeys from imperial subjecthood to nationalist leadership. The comparison that springs to mind is with Gandhi.

Both nationalists began their lives as loyal subjects and ended as Indian nationalists. There could not be a more cheese-and-chalk comparison: Naoroji was an intellectual; Gandhi followed what he thought were divine commands. Naoroji had to face far bigger challenges in the heart of the empire; chance favoured Gandhi far more generously. But in many important ways what Gandhi did would not have been possible without Naoroji. This is not just about prior 'spadework' but about reaching a threshold of disappointment with the empire, at a personal level for the two leaders and for the masses in India. Naoroji's bitterness by the end of his career was obvious to his contemporaries. It also imparted a valuable lesson to later nationalists: the British would not compromise on anything meaningful. His life journey highlighted the limitations of constitutional means to secure even minor rights.

In the modern world, political ideas and events are cast in deterministic light. Just a century earlier, chance played a much bigger role. Patel's book should be read as a testimony to how an early nationalist waded his way through chance and adversity to lay the foundations for his successors. ■



**RAJEEV MASAND**

## Kareena's Stepping Stone

**Kareena Kapoor Khan**, who completed 20 years in Bollywood earlier this week, says the failure of her debut film *Refugee* was a reality check. She tells me she was rattled when the film bombed, given that it was a big launch for **Abhishek Bachchan** and her. But when she looks back, she says it taught her the unpredictable ways of the business early on.

"People praised me in the film, but the film didn't work. Even my family thought, 'Ok, it's good, it's happened at the start. This will make her stronger,'" she remembers. But Kareena was never meant to debut in *Refugee*. She had originally picked **Rakesh Roshan's** *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai*, introducing the filmmaker's son **Hrithik**. She even shot for the film, before 'creative differences' led to her leaving during production. **Ameesha Patel** replaced her.

*Refugee*, she says, taught her how to tide over flops. "I don't let it get to me anymore." Some films she cringes at the mere mention of and others she's satisfied with. "But I like to think that I've grown, and that I've never taken my privilege for granted." Twenty films done, she's looking forward to the next 20. "But there's no plan. If there's anything this year has taught us, it is to not make plans because anything can happen!"

## Priyanka Goes over the Top

By the time you're reading this, **Priyanka Chopra** could be in Berlin shooting the new *Matrix* film. She is expected to join **Keanu Reeves**, **Carrie-Anne Moss**, **Neil Patrick Harris** and **Jonathan Groff** in the German capital where production has resumed under director **Lana Wachowski**. After kicking off the shoot in California in January, production on *Matrix 4* was halted because of Covid-19. Priyanka's scenes are expected to begin filming in the iconic Babelsberg Studio.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday it was announced that Priyanka has signed a two-year multi-million-dollar first-look television deal with Amazon Studios, under which she will produce fiction and non-scripted shows for the over-the-top

streaming giant. She has said that since it is a global deal she can create content in "whatever language I want".

Priyanka and husband **Nick Jonas** are already committed to producing a reality show where couples will get the big fat Indian wedding experience. She's also starring in **Russo Brothers'** globe-hopping *Citadel* show with *Game of Thrones'* **Richard Madden**. And then she is producing a film in which she will star as **Osho** groupie-turned-lieutenant **Ma Anand Sheela**. All these are for Amazon Studios. For rival Netflix she's starring in **Ramin Bahrani's** adaptation of *The White Tiger*. It seems unlikely she will be able to squeeze in a Bollywood project anytime soon, though rumour has it **Sanjay Leela Bhansali** wants her for a film he may be producing. Don't rule it out. Priyanka is the same girl who flew into Mumbai from Los Angeles and went straight to set to complete *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), then flew back two days later to jump into *Quantico*.

## Hot Right Now

**Hrithik Roshan** and **Alia Bhatt** lead a clutch of Indians who've been invited to join the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences as it diversifies membership. Others include casting directors **Tess Joseph** and **Nandini Shrikent**, filmmakers **Shirley Abraham**, **Amit Madheshiya**, **Nishtha Jain** and **V Senthil Kumar**, costume designer **Neeta Lulla**, visual effects supervisors **Vishal Anand** and **Sandeep Kamal** and screenwriter **Sabrina**

**Dhawan**. They will have voting rights in their areas and receive the coveted Academy screeners ahead of the Oscars.

## Not Right Now

In a tone-deaf move, the folks at Disney+ Hotstar, as part of their virtual announcement earlier this week of films heading straight to streaming, assembled **Akshay Kumar**, **Ajay Devgn**, **Abhishek Bachchan** and **Alia** for a conversation with **Varun Dhawan**, leaving out **Kunal Kemmu** and **Vidhut Jamwal** whose films were also part of the lot. Both complained on social media, further fuelling the 'outsiders versus insiders' debate. ■



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