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Inside

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*“Ram is within all
Ram is for all”*

MODI REDEEMS A SACRED PLEDGE IN AYODHYA

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CONTENTS

17 AUGUST 2020

6

LOCOMOTIF
Modi, Ram and
the temple
By S Prasannarajan

8

INDRAPRASTHA
By Virendra Kapoor

9

**MUMBAI
NOTEBOOK**
By Anil Dharker

14

**HISTORY OF
THE PRESENT**
The end of
emotionalism
By MJ Akbar

16

SOFT POWER
The great Indian way
By Makarand R Paranjape

18

THE RACHEL PAPERS
The scent of India
By Rachel Dwyer

20

WHISPERER
By Jayanta Ghosal

22

OPEN ESSAY
Unmade by China
By Clive Hamilton
and Mareike Ohlberg



26



52



56

26

A Temple for a New India

Ayodhya brings out a deeper sense
of nationhood

By Swapan Dasgupta

34

Return to the Ideal City

There was no room for falsities in the welfare
state of Rama as depicted in the epic

By Bibek Debroy

37

The Original Existential Hero

We stay with Rama-the-human because of
his resemblance to us

By Arshia Sattar

40

The Awakening

The Ram temple offers itself as an opportunity
for a new generation to think for
themselves about this wave of history
and faith that has washed in, sweeping away
a great amount of historical angst and refuse

By Keerthik Sasidharan

44

A Year in the Life of Ayodhya

Events that have followed the Ram Rath Yatra
of 1990, culminating in August 2020,
are a collective testimony to LK Advani's
strategic thinking

By Kanchan Gupta

CRONACHRONICLES

48

WORKLESS AT HOME

What it's like to be suddenly unemployed
during a pandemic

By Rahul Pandita

52

LEFT ALONE

The psychological toll of recovering in isolation

By Nikita Doval

56

'GOOD CINEMA GROWS ON TALENT, NOT ON POWER'

Manoj Bajpayee on his new film and the
limits of the insider-outsider battle
By Divya Unny

60

READING AND SEEING

Several high-profile adaptations of
literary fiction prove that big books
can make for fine viewing
By Aditya Mani Jha

64

THE CAUCASUS CHRONICLER

Russian author Alisa Ganieva writes of
those alienated by urbanisation
and radicalisation
By Ullekh NP

66

NOT PEOPLE LIKE US

Action replay
By Rajeev Masand

Cover photograph PIB



LETTER OF THE WEEK

Not all heroes are 'individuals who through character keep the pages of history rolling in a virtuous direction' ('Portraits of Heroism in the Time of Pandemic', August 10th, 2020). While we still have stellar characters who possess the immense strength of the heroes of classical mythology, that is not necessary today. Brawns don't always win anymore in the age of mechanised armaments—the violence of victory is no longer visceral. For the modern hero, suffering, adversities, endurance, perseverance, and finally, victory over a stronger enemy—irrespective of whether the setting is a war—are more important. In fact, call it anachronism, but modern exegeses of premodern myths have also excavated such heroes from the past. If adversity be a necessity for heroism, then who are our heroes today? The migrant labourer who starts walking in towards his village thousands of kilometres away like the proverbial Christian pilgrim of medieval Europe. After all, if that is not looking adversity straight in the eye, what is? The health worker staying put at a site everyone wants to flee. The undertaker accepting to touch and handle what everyone wants to avoid like a curse. These acts must count as the greatest acts of heroism in independent India, for there is treasure awaiting them at the end, only more misery.

J Srinivasan



Happiness management is the underlying principle behind all social endeavours. This needs to be instilled in children from an early stage. Happiness should not become a boring topic but it should be enjoyed and made easy to learn in the curriculum. The pedagogic focus should be on strength, suitability, choice, freedom and likes in a friendly, helpful and supportive teaching environment, as suggested by commentators such as Roseanne Glickman, David Schwartz and Angela Cooze.

PV Madhu

THE REAL CULPRITS

The Kerala gold smuggling case is a reminder about what happens when bureaucrats usurp power and leadership fails ('Gold's Own Country' by Makarand R Paranjape, August 3rd, 2020). Why blame only middlemen? They are merely small-scale beneficiaries of a large chain, apparently linked to the state secretariat. How can people trust their politicians again in elections if they evade accountability in this murky alliance with bureaucrats and foreign consulates?

Ramachandran Nair

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HAPPY LEARNING

I welcome the New Education Policy's emphasis on smart management of the education administration, evident in its move of syllabus reduction ('Back to School', August 10th, 2020). The next step should be to reduce the size of extra-curricular projects too. Let us have knowledge and skills learning in a joyful, fun and relaxed environment. Education is not merely about covering the syllabus and producing robots that regurgitate definitions in front of interview panels or show the ability to memorise for marks. The Government should also think about increasing the emphasis on sports, happiness and life

skills in the curriculum of schools and colleges. Students should be trained to think joyfully and in terms of problem solving—not just complain about problems—as has become the paradigm in the West. In fact, England's curriculum can be a ready reference for India's textbooks in the future.

PN Sree Lekha

I would urge the Government to include happiness development in the New Education Policy. The Western world is already moving beyond GDP and per capita income to various measures of happiness. And much before them, Bhutan had already taken that leap of thought. Life is temporary.



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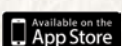
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By S PRASAN NARAYAN

Modi, Ram and the Temple

THESE ARE THE times when we need the mercy of gods and the prayers of the living. United by fear, and set apart by the love for life, we still wait for benevolence. In the city of Ayodhya, where in the epic imagination lived and reigned the ideal man and the model king, the prayers that swayed the passions and politics of India for decades were fulfilled on a Wednesday noon. It was a day when one man's pilgrimage would join the culmination of a displaced deity's epochal journey through the minds and courtrooms of India. As a piece of sacred land was dedicated to a god who returned home amidst Sanskrit chants and flower offerings, the pilgrim sat there facing the designated space where the first stone of the temple will be laid, as the chosen redeemer of a pledge to which his own power is indebted. That moment, for Narendra Modi, marked a passage to a future he hoped would be more liberating than lacerating, more reconciling than deconstructive, perhaps as much as it marked a god's turn to withdraw from the battles of the mortals. The most resonant invocation came from Modi, now maskless in front of the mike, revealing his overgrown hair and beard in white adding customary contrast to the starker colours of his *kurta* and scarf and of the general atmospherics, as if he just stepped out of a framed pantheon of saints for the occasion: "Ram is within all, Ram is for all."

Nearly three decades ago, Ayodhya was not an ideal place for gods and kings. It was the site where faith rearmed by politics announced its triumph by an act of profanity that shook the foundations of India's secular ethos that till then incorporated the idea of the nation and the tolerant attitudes of religions in spite of the enforced ideals of the socialist era. On demolition day, on the debris of a

mosque with a backstory of invasion and cultural vandalism stood the foot soldiers of aggrieved Hindu nationalism, which itself heralded the shattering finale of the long march of Indian politics' only charioteer who would eventually miss the destination he dreamed of all along. Ayodhya 1992 was an end and a beginning. The first notations of a life-changing shift in the politics of India were written in the detritus of a different India where bad memories had never been erased with such fury. India began anew, for better or worse.

Between Ayodhya 1992 and Ayodhya 2020, India amplified the sighs, struggles and assertion of nationhood. Atal Bihari Vajpayee in power, as India's first Prime Minister without a Congress ancestry, was the prologue. Even though it was the spirit of Ayodhya that brought him to power, he was not the face of masculine nationalism or resurgent Hindutva. It was the poetics of moderation, not the politics of angry gods, that set him apart as a reconciler in office and a raconteur on the stump. In retrospect, he was a pause, a calm interlude, in the Right's conversation with power. Modi changed everything, and it must be said again that he came to Delhi not on a chariot but on a promise of

modernisation. When he campaigned for India, the recurring T-word was not temple but toilet (the first hint of Swachh Bharat). That was not an omission, or an instance of caution. There was no need for him to stress something that was the very core of his political being, and the edifying imagery of his belief system. To reclaim what was his existential identity as a Hindu nationalist, he felt no need to sloganise, or to climb on to a chariot. To reassure India that he was the new nation builder, it only required a retelling of his record as an administration wizard in Gandhinagar. The twin planks on which he sought India's mandate were a Congress-free

That moment in Ayodhya, for Narendra Modi, marked a passage to a future he hoped would be more liberating than lacerating, more reconciling than deconstructive, perhaps as much as it marked a god's turn to withdraw from the battles of the mortals

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in Ayodhya, August 5



Power hypnotises those who are prone to the fantasies of glory, and, as told by Valmiki, the story of Ram is all about the idealisation of the human and the humanisation of power

India and a secure future—the story of Ram’s homelessness was too familiar to merit a retelling.

On August 5th in Ayodhya, the Modi who prostrated before Ram Lalla, did the multiple offerings and circled the sacred fire as the priests sang hymns to gods and goddesses including Bharat Mata, was a man with a political mandate bigger than 2014. On that December day in Ayodhya in 1992, it was hate and manic nihilism that reclaimed a god, and jubilation was followed by fear. On August 5th, there was no political theatre of the triumphant as Modi launched the construction of the Ram temple. There was a pronounced sense of understatement. A house for Ram had the legitimacy of the Constitution, which made August 5th not the concluding chapter of December 6th but a civilisational correction. And Modi, for his part, struck a fine balance between the pilgrim and the Prime Minister. He didn’t say the word Hindu in his speech; maybe there was no need, as there was no need in 2014 for him to utter the word temple. Even when

he spoke about Ramrajya, it was Gandhi’s version that he wanted to share on what he said was “the day of liberation.” The obvious was left out; it seemed political Hinduism’s first citizen wanted to liberate Ram from the aggressions and grievances of Hindutva, and dedicate him to the nation.

The modern Hindu, said Vivekananda, needs to “de-hypnotise” himself. “The way to do that is found in your own sacred books. Teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come, when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.” Power hypnotises those who are prone to the fantasies of glory, and, as told by Valmiki, the story of Ram is all about the idealisation of the human and the humanisation of power. A temple for such a god could also become a constant reminder for anyone, Hindu or not, who aspires to be a Perfect Man—or a Near Perfect Ruler. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

WHAT HAVE WE come to? In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, a nationwide disruption of everyday life, and a most worryingly sputtering economy, our policymakers, among other headaches, have to be constantly mindful of the monkey menace. Yes, you read that right. Monkey menace. For if the high and mighty of the ruling establishment and corporate elites love to reside in Lutyens' Delhi, so do apparently these grey-coloured primates. They follow no rules, make no distinction between young and old, tormenting everyone alike. You do everything possible to shut them out from your daily life, building iron grilles, keeping doors shut at all times of the day, but their fear still lurks around you. Indeed, those fortunate to live in the British-era houses with acres of green lawns ringed by the flower beds, carefully tended by the CPWD *maalis*, find it such a waste. Because they are afraid to stir out of the high-ceilinged living quarters, much smaller in comparison, for fear of the ferocious monkeys, which hunt in groups. Ministers of the realm, judges of the Supreme Court and High Court, top civilian and military officers, seem to have admitted defeat when it comes to taming the challenge of the free-spirited simians.

The natural instinct of monkeys being to frighten you instead of retreating in the face of a human challenge, recently at least two senior judges of the Delhi High Court found to their chagrin that monkeys were being regularly fed in front of their bungalows. Given that the old parents were under strict orders not to emerge from inside the house even for taking in some fresh air in the open unless they were accompanied by burly security guards, they accosted the monkey-feeders who regularly



come lugging the food in a mid-sized van. Told about an old order of the local government against feeding monkeys in public places, they turned hostile, asserting that nobody on earth could stop them from doing *punya ka kaam*. But why not feed the monkeys at the designated place earmarked by the Department of Forests and Wildlife? The response was unchanged: *Hanumanjee ki sena* cannot be confined to just one place. A good portion of the funds provided by the department and other charitable institutions for feeding the monkeys—and even dogs—finds its way into private pockets.

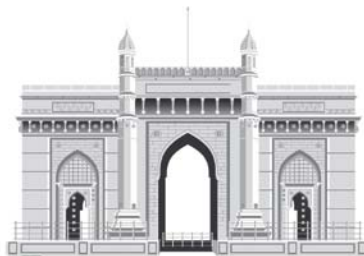
Yet, the animal lovers preen themselves as if they somehow are blessed with a superior conscience than the rest of humanity. Thanks to their stubbornness, some of the best bungalows in Lutyens' Delhi, especially on Kamraj Marg, Rajaji Marg and Krishna Menon Marg, come lower down in the preference list of VVIPs. In fact, Arun Jaitley was cautioned by Mulayam Singh Yadav not to settle for 2 Krishna Menon Marg due to the monkey menace. The former defence minister, who had lived in that house, said in his rustic style: *Arrey, jeena harama kar diya tha poorey parivar ka in bandaro ney*. Allotted a bungalow on Kamraj

Lane, a senior law officer preferred to stay on through Modi 1.0 in his private house, using the official house for an occasional dinner when monkeys mercifully vanish in trees or some such places. Want to experience monkey menace first-hand? Try driving, or better still, walking through Krishna Menon Marg on a Sunday morning.

AMAR SINGH, AN unattached member of the Rajya Sabha who died last week in a Singapore hospital of kidney-related complications, was one of the more colourful politicians. His street-smart ways, filmy language, earthy wit worked well in the socio-political milieu inhabited by a majority of politicians. In the last couple of years, he virtually led a lonely life, with the Samajwadis, iconic film stars and corporate bosses distancing themselves from him. But no other politician had the capacity to break into a filmy song or dialogue to make his point as the old Samajwadi did. As when the journalist-turned-politician Rajiv Shukla recorded the inaugural programme of the celebrity *Antakshari* show for his TV channel, *News 24*, on the India Gate lawns with the Jawan Jyoti forming an attractive backdrop. The two-member teams were to compete with one another. Amar Singh had the occasional film actor, Nafisa Ali, as partner. Arun Jaitley was to adjudge the best team. The friendly competition of filmy songs was into the third round when the Singh-Ali duo was asked to come up with a song beginning with the letter 'e'. Ali, who barely opened her mouth, looked at Singh who without waiting a second virtually jumped in his seat, singing in rhythm, *Eena, meena, deeka, bam, bam bo*, or words to that effect. As we said, Amar Singh was never lost for words. ■

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC brings in many new words and phrases into our consciousness. One I have just learnt is 'Worried Well'. It seems to suggest that someone has been a good worrier, but it's a serious phrase, seriously (if awkwardly) coined by the august National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru. It is used to describe patients who are perfectly well but make themselves believe they have contracted the coronavirus. Some of them say they have developed a dry cough, ignoring the fact that they have often had an allergic cough earlier; most believe they are Covid-19-positive but asymptomatic. In fact, left alone, which is often the case during the lockdown, they could worry themselves to death: in one case in Delhi, a 26-year-old healthy young man had a psychotic breakdown and needed psychiatric treatment. NIMHANS takes it seriously enough to issue an advisory to doctors.

If that's the case with healthy young people with no history of mental illness, just think of those who suffer from depression and/or bipolar disorder. How oppressive it must be for them to live under the pandemic lockdown! Inevitably, thoughts turn to mid-June at the height of the pandemic when the tragedy of Sushant Singh Rajput hit the news and a sordid drama followed, made worse by the entry of vile politicians. Even the Chief Minister of Bihar and the former Chief Minister of Maharashtra (and his wife!) have made their publicity-seeking comments.

Shorn of all the appalling media hype of television channels, and the Rajput family's late reaction (no doubt egged on by slimy politicians and manic TV anchors), what do we have? The medical reports say there

was no poison or drugs or alcohol in Sushant's system; his CA and police auditors have found no siphoning off of money from his account; and tellingly, the actor's last Google searches show that he looked for things like painless death, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and did a search of his own name, one assumes to see what was being said about him.

What does all this tell you? Here was a troubled young man, suffering from (and apparently being treated for) clinical depression. His only fault, in a film industry not famous for it, was to think too much. In January 2018, for example, he took to Twitter (handle: @intoxillectual) to reach bibliophiles the world over to share their thoughts and reading lists about books. He himself read about string theory and Jean-Paul Sartre and recommended books like *The Beginning of Infinity* by David Deutsch and *Brain Rules* by John Medina. 'Read them,' he urged, 'if the fabric of reality interests you.' He also had a highly advanced telescope to study the stars and nebulae when out on a location shoot, and in his social media account, he described himself as 'Photon in a double-slit'.

Extraordinary as all this is, what makes it even more special are details of his finances which have come out of the police investigation. His maximum balance seems to have been Rs 18 crore, which is tiny by film industry standards, yet he paid out Rs 2.5 crore towards GST. And incred-

ibly enough, donated Rs 3 crore for flood relief in Assam and Kerala (with zero attendant publicity).

The trouble with Rajput was that he didn't realise how very special he was, with exceptional empathy for his fellow human beings. If only he had known that his suicide would cause such distress to those nearest to him, I am sure he would still be around today.

AS I WRITE this, the next phase of Mumbai's 'Mission Begin Again' programme of unlocking has kicked in. Liquor shops can now open, shops on both sides of the street can operate between 9 AM and 7 PM, malls and market complexes are also allowed to re-open, all required to strictly observe social distancing and the wearing of masks, with the threat of being shut down if these rules are disregarded. Theatres, restaurants and food courts are still shut, as sadly, they should be.

In these dark times, we clutch at straws. The biggest is that for many consecutive days, there are more recoveries than cases of Covid-19-positive pointing to the possibility of plateauing and a downward curve. An unexpected side benefit of the lockdown is that for the first time in five years, there have been no rain-related deaths in the whole of July. No one has fallen into open drains in spite of flooding, simply because people are forced to stay in; that also has a direct effect on leptospirosis, the incidence of which has fallen from 94 in July last year to 14 this time around.

Gastroenteritis has come down from 994 to 53, hepatitis from 270 to just 1, with zero cases of influenza H1N1. I told you, we are clutching at straws, or to put it another way, searching with telescopes and binoculars for silver linings. ■

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

The Man Who Knew Too Much



AMAR SINGH
1956-2020

GETTY IMAGES

THERE IS AN ebullient Amar Singh, shepherding the Bachchan family at a media event where they had turned out to watch Baby B Abhishek shine. There is an enraged Amar Singh, prompting Amitabh Bachchan to take offence at how he had been described in an article as a power broker. And then there's a quieter, more reflective man, at the very exclusive Chambers at Delhi's Taj Mansingh, recalling how the 2010 kidney transplant had changed his life, made him susceptible to infection and made it impossible for him to savour his meals. He was a

shadow of his former self but as quick to emotion and singing an appropriate Hindi film song.

Anyone who has been around in Lutyens' Delhi long enough has a story to tell about Amar Singh. Born an outsider, in Kolkata, he owned the city with a swagger all his own, that took him from a liaison officer for Vam Organics for the Bhartias to becoming the man who famously bailed Bachchan out of bankruptcy by connecting him with yet another outsider looking for a place on the high table, Subrata Roy of Sahara. But while Roy ran a business that promised potential

profits to many, Amar Singh had only one asset to sell—his undying loyalty.

This quality took him to becoming Mulayam Singh Yadav's closest advisor as the Samajwadi Party supremo negotiated the new world of defence deals and corporate skulduggery that was worlds away from even the murky caste politics of Uttar Pradesh. In a world where provincial power had its first encounter with partying elites, Amar Singh became his friend, philosopher, guide. Slowly and steadily Amar Singh, the power broker from Burrabazar, was able to stitch together an alliance of politics, big business and Bollywood that would manifest itself in the epic acronym, created and popularised by himself: Triple A, Amar, Akbar, Anthony, aka Amar Singh, Amitabh Bachchan and Anil Ambani, bookended by Roy and Yadav.

This alliance took him to places he always dreamed of, from rubbing shoulders with Australian media mogul Kerry Packer and the best and brightest at Delhi's Ashoka Hotel in 2000 to hosting a banquet in Lucknow in honour of Mulayam Singh Yadav in 2005 attended by no less than former US President Bill Clinton. Amar Singh was a warrior, ready to take on anyone. It could be actor Shah Rukh Khan who tried to resolve a dispute between Amar Singh and the organisers at a film awards show in Dubai in 2004 over not being given front-row seats. It could be fellow Samajwadi Party member Azam Khan who he felt was trying to steer party control from under Mulayam's nose. But he was also available to help, whether it was a cash-strapped Boney Kapoor for whom he got financing from Roy or even merely to turn up at a book release function in memory of glam pal Sunanda Pushkar at a day's notice.

His passing away is the end of an era. The Age of Modi doesn't need power brokers or fixers, a word he loathed. In this New India, it's not who you know that matters, but what you know. Striking covert deals in the age of constant surveillance, by the state or social media, is almost impossible in an era where Prime Minister Narendra Modi is his own best connector, whether it is walking hand-in-hand in Denver with Donald Trump or shaking hands with Mark Zuckerberg.

The entire environment has changed. The Ambanis have come together, at least for public consumption, the Bachchans let their work speak for them, Roy has been on parole since 2017 and Mulayam Singh Yadav is struggling for survival in Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh.

Amar Singh's finest hour may well have had the seeds of his eventual downfall. In 2008, his deal-making saw the Sama-

jwadi Party backing the UPA Government on the nuclear deal and saving the day. But this caused the cash for votes scandal, where essentially a sting operation carried out by the BJP to trap the Congress and Amar Singh got caught on tape. Amar Singh eventually went to prison for this and this was when most of his friends dropped him.

Herein lay Amar Singh's greatest tragedy, his inability to distinguish himself from those he helped. The first rule of doing favours for the powerful is to not assume they will be indebted to you forever. You can be a privileged guest at the high table but you can never be a member. This was one of his cardinal mistakes, expecting Jaya Bachchan to follow him when he was expelled from the Samajwadi Party or expect that his bold face buddies would visit him in jail.

He realised this as much, but too late. In an interview given in 2013, Amar Singh said: 'The Big Man's syndrome is that they always think they are obliging you. They think that by having dinner with you, they have honoured you. They eat your food but won't appreciate it. They will say things like, "there was too much sugar in your sweet dish, it has given me diabetes or the salt was strong, my blood pressure will haunt me. Life is a big teacher. It has taught me one lesson that these so-called big people, like Ambani and Bachchan, feel that they are obliging you, and giving you mileage by allowing you an opportunity to serve them.'"

The socialist socialite was never too far away from the headlines, even if he often

created them himself. Whether it was his carelessness in getting caught on tape, discussing intimate details with Bollywood starlets, or in constantly carping about the Bachchans and how they had let him down, there was never a moment when he was not playing the hero in his own private movie fantasy. He also made the mistake of assuming a political lobbyist could easily make it to the next level of mass leader. As his struggles to set up an independent party with actor and sometime MP Jayaprada showed, the wall between a backroom behind-the-scenes worker and a mass politician is almost as impenetrable as that between the master and servant. Keeper of secrets, advisor to the famous, a fearsome enemy to have, a man who helped many stars stay afloat and brought many others down to earth, Amar Singh will be remembered for epitomising the age of excess—of coalition politics, business turbulence and Bollywood's neediness of cash to maintain the flash. ■

Anyone who has been around in Lutyens' Delhi long enough has a story to tell about Amar Singh. Born an outsider, in Kolkata, he owned the city with a swagger all his own, that took him from a liaison officer for Vam Organics for the Bhartias to becoming the man who famously bailed Bachchan out of bankruptcy by connecting him with yet another outsider looking for a place on the high table, Subrata Roy of Sahara

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

PORTRAIT • EBRAHIM ALKAZI (1925-2020)

A COLOSSAL ACT

The grand old man of Indian theatre

EBRAHIM ALKAZI COULD lightly wear the title 'Renaissance Man'. A polymath and builder of institutions, he reigned in the world of theatre and art. His legacy prevails not only through actors such as Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah and Rohini Hattangadi, but in a more fundamental way in how theatre is taught and practised today. Alkazi truly created a cosmopolitan actor and theatre. His scholars were taught the Greek tradition and Sanskrit drama. His plays were staged in front of Jawaharlal Nehru at Meghdoot Theatre and for 5,000-6,000 workers at Swatantra Bharat Mills. The Padma Vibhushan recipient worked on the proscenium stage, the arena stage and the bylanes of cities. While he is best known as a theatre director, his sketches of Christ remind one of FN Souza's crucifixions.

Alkazi was born in Pune to a wealthy family in 1925. In a 2012 interview to Rajya Sabha TV, he spoke about his trilingual childhood. At home, his father insisted they train in Arabic, the language of their roots and the 'language of the Quran Sharif'. He grew up surrounded by Arabic at home, and English and French at school. These three languages opened up "a whole new world, opened up half of mankind" to him. He grew up in a neighbourhood in Pune, surrounded by Parsees, Anglo-Indians and Maharashtrians. He was one of nine siblings and attended a Jesuit school, St Vincent's High School. He speaks fondly of the Jesuit priests who first introduced him to theatre. During his college years in Bombay at St Xavier's, he continued with theatre in the Parsee groups and in Bobby Padamsee's Theatre Group. In 1947, he joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London. In the 2012 interview, Alkazi is asked which of his many achievements he is most proud of. He answers without a moment's pause, "The National School of Drama."

His answer is echoed by generations of students and teachers at Delhi's

NSD. Alkazi's 15-year tenure at NSD (1962 to 1977) as its director didn't simply mould an institution but sculpted theatre in India and anointed him the 'Father of Modern Indian Theatre'. He directed over 50 plays, including famous productions of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* and numerous Shakespeare and Greek plays.

Theatre director Anuradha Kapur, who taught at NSD for over three decades and served as its director from 2007 to 2013, says in no uncertain terms, "NSD's amazing history, its honourable history would not have happened without him." According to Kapur (who still remembers watching his plays as a 12-year-old in Delhi), Alkazi's greatest contribution is that he elevated theatre from a "hobby" to a "profession". And he did this by taking trouble over the smallest component, fussing over carpentry joints, for example, and ensuring that his students knew the entire history of garments. He was invested in every aspect, from the *paan* stain in the toilet (which, according to legend, he scrubbed himself at NSD) to the button of an actor's coat. Kapur says he was known to even check the library cards of his students to ensure they were reading frequently and widely.

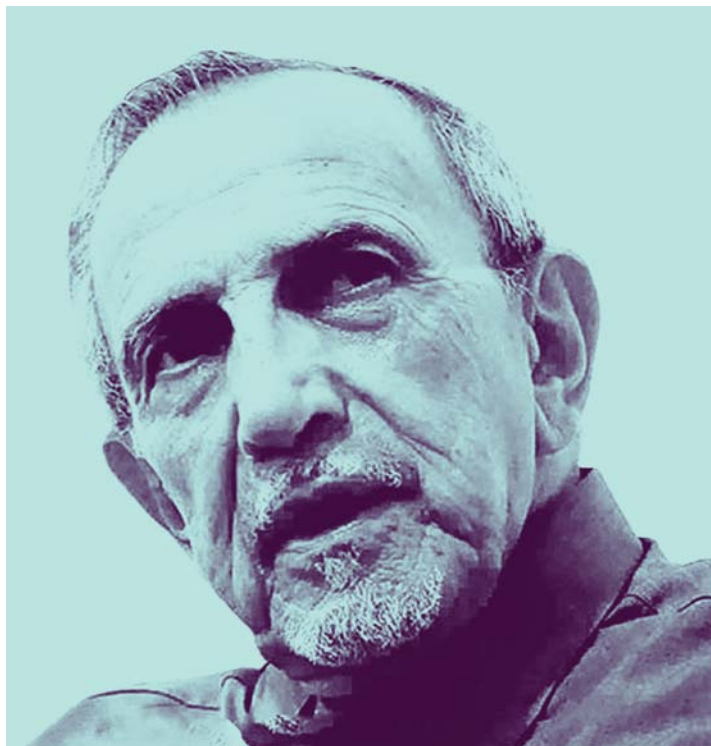
Alkazi's reputation as a disciplinarian is cemented by anecdotes, where he'd tell tardy students, "If you are not dead, you need to attend the rehearsal." This was part of his bigger vision to build an ethos of accountability. He took theatre from a pastime to a profession because of the scale and expertise of his productions. No one in India had seen plays like *Andha Yug* staged at the ruins of Feroz Shah Kotla.

Kapur adds that Alkazi had a "horizontal understanding of art" where he drew from various disciplines and traditions and gave his students and NSD a "cosmopolitan imagination". Having been associated with the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group early in his career, the visual arts were essential to his repertoire. Alkazi's association with artists, such as MF Husain and Tyeb Mehta, informed his art and his theatre.

Alkazi's own mastery with the paintbrush came to the fore at an October 2019 exhibition of his early canvases titled *Opening Lines* curated by Ranjit Hoskote. Hoskote celebrates Alkazi for being both the "paterfamilias of Indian theatre" and for his intrinsic playfulness. For him, Alkazi truly embodies "a lively cosmopolitanism that is not only Westernisation, but one that embraces all our traditions and our own cultural selfhood and consciousness". ■

By **NANDINI NAIR**

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



ANGLE



THE USUAL AILMENT

On unpaid Covid health insurance claims in a dysfunctional system

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

INDIA'S HEALTHCARE IS mostly non-existent, as Covid has just reemphasised, but an inkling of the state of even its functioning parts could be seen in a hearing at the Supreme Court this week. The public interest litigation was over insurers not paying Covid-19 patients in full and the court asked the Government to ensure that they do it. A *Times of India* report said it told 'Solicitor General Tushar Mehta to "take care of the insurance companies" who are allegedly slashing the reimbursement amount due to Covid patients. It has been the general complaint that the cost of Covid-19 treatment has risen because of an increase in the number of consumable items—from PPEs to face shields—by doctors, nurses and health workers, but the insurance companies were not reimbursing the billed amounts for consumables by hospitals. Mehta said that the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority has already issued strict instructions to all insurance companies that the entire cost of consumables has to be included in the Covid treatment.'

This is really no surprise. Searching for any Indian who has ever had his health insurance company pay the entire amount that he claimed would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Companies are even brazen in not paying. There is an enormous mountain of consumer court rulings in favour of patients that just get ignored. But that doesn't really mean the health insurance companies are solely to blame either. They are just one part of the problem.

Their revenue model is to maximise premiums and minimise payouts. This is done through a statistical process of risk evaluation when someone takes a policy. So long as companies can calculate risk, they can decide on how much premiums to charge. If someone, had, say diabetes, then the risk of coverage increases and a greater premium is charged.

Two, India being India, however, a large number of those who take health insurance don't fill in the truth, either deliberately or because the person filling the form is the agent whose only interest is in the commission. He often doesn't even bother to ask for any pertinent health information. The agent has nothing to do when the time to collect a claim comes because that is a different department.

Three, when private hospitals realise that a patient is insured, costs are inflated. The insurance company has to thus deal with—the incomplete information they got from the patient which made them charge a lesser premium, and the overcharging by hospitals. And, since the standard of ethics of the company itself is no greater, they are out to pay less even if all the necessary conditions were met.

Why would a system that operates like this in ordinary times behave any better during a crisis? Besides, there is the fundamental flaw in the demand being made that claims should be settled in full just because there is a pandemic. To ask the Government to force private companies to do summary payments is ironical given how cautious the Government itself is when it comes to payments. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

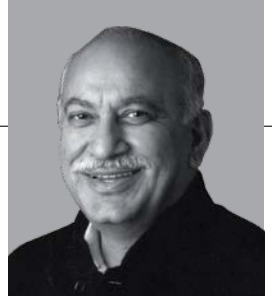
COMMENTARY

In a few days from now, several individuals will board a flight to the UAE to be part of the high-profile team of IPL's commentators. There will be one fairly prominent name missing—the former cricketer-turned-commentator Sanjay Manjrekar. Five months ago, he had been removed from the BCCI's official commentary panel. Had Manjrekar been sacked if he had failed as a commentator would not have rankled. But what has happened it appears is that he has upset some cricketers. Manjrekar claims he has been informally told some players do not like him. For a period, even Harsha Bhogle had been left out in the cold for an unexplained reason. All this will now ensure that commentators will be wary of uttering anything that might displease team members. Cricketers will now indirectly control what the commentators say. This will only make the game poorer. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'What I want most from being a television commentator is to be able to feel that, when I say something, I am talking to friends'

RICHIE BENAUD COMMENTATOR



By MJ Akbar

The End of Emotionalism

Development is the only alternative

GOVERNMENTS DON'T DO small print in their messaging. There is a psychological baseline in advertising which believes that the heavier a font the more likely you are to be believed. A typeset shout has too long a history for it to be easily finessed. People think you have something to hide or, worse, allege when you whisper.

And yet, it was the comparatively small print which caught my eye in the traditional brochure brought out by Jammu and Kashmir to mark the first anniversary of its transformation into a Union Territory. The subject in discussion was critical to any test of good governance: Jobs for Youth. The large print mentioned that 10,000 posts had been filled and 25,000 more jobs were in the short pipeline. But it was a less visually apparent 'special weightage' clause which caught my eye.

It said that 'Candidates whose family member neither is nor has been in government service' would now be given priority in hiring.

Think about it. This marks a radical reversion of an operational law of government hiring across the land: nepotism.

Nepotism has been one of the biggest burdens of government over the last seven decades of Indian democracy. In the first phase, it was largely restricted to the lower tiers of government, before it crept and then raced up the power ladder. A principal endeavour of most inside the comfort zone of job security, or the rewarding realm of politics, has been to get an offspring or relative into the system before age opens the departure gates. In many places, this had evolved from timorous claim to aggressive entitlement.

Here is a conscious clause which says that in Jammu and Kashmir preference will be given to those who do not have a family member in government. The temptation to use an exclamation mark at the end of the previous sentence is almost irresistible.

In 1957, a Yugoslav Communist theorist, Milovan Đilas, authored a book called *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*. He argued that the communist structure, in theory an advocate of classless society, had formed

a new class of party and state officials which used, enjoyed and disposed of national property and resources for its own convenience rather than the national good. India went many steps ahead of Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc. In Kashmir, the small circle of self-generating political and bureaucratic elite quietly used emotionalism to appropriate government funds to the extent that it could, and left most of the rest in a purgatory of neglect.

In that cross-party dispensation acquisition, seepage, waste and inertia became the four clogs that blocked or eroded development. Funds would be announced, and sanctioned, but only a trickle reached the people. One could cite many examples. But nothing was more egregious than the sheer inertia of government after the devastation of the 2014 floods in Srinagar. It epitomised a disease that was destroying the body politic. This could not have happened without protection, or indeed participation, by the political elite, who loved the flavour of cream even more than they enjoyed the taste of cake. The Kashmiri people had to make do with token gestures.

How was this economic injustice sold to the people? Behind a veil of sanctimonious emotionalism, with identity-politics at the core of the multi-party cover-up. No one in Delhi had the will to interfere with an unsustainable maladministration, heavily invested in stagnation. The people's frustration, whenever it simmered, was easily diverted into emotional violence.

As course correction, this small step against nepotism, accompanied by some large strides in development, was long overdue.

One year is insufficient as evidence of any radical overhaul, but the statistics of the first year of performance under the direct dispensation of a Union Government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi offer evidence of an unprecedented positive economic narrative.

All facts are not equal, and scales of measurement vary. But it is undeniable that while all social spending ameliorates the present, what protects the future is a tilt towards the young. For the first time, the right of a child to free and

A police officer offers flowers to a health worker in Srinagar, May 27



GETTY IMAGES

The most impressive gains have been in health and power. An outlay of Rs 7,500 crore, with Rs 881 crore for upgradation, has already seen 60 projects completed, and another 80 ready to start by March 2021. Medical colleges have had 1,400 seats added. A tele-radiology network is serving those in remote and inaccessible areas. Universal healthcare is now a right, not a wish. Over 350,000 homes have been electrified, benefiting more than 1.5 million people—only those who have suffered the bitter cold of Kashmir can truly appreciate the warmth that electricity brings

compulsory education has been extended to Jammu and Kashmir. Fifty new colleges with 25,000 additional seats have come up in the past year. A joint venture between Tata Technologies and the government is in the process of setting up two centres of innovation and skill development. Five nursing colleges, seven medical schools and two new AIIMS hospitals are being built.

A 10 per cent reservation in jobs has been given to economically weaker sections, with other quotas for OBC segments, Pahari-speaking citizens and residents who live in danger along the Line of Control and the International Border. Senior citizens are now entitled to maintenance and welfare.

The most impressive gains have been in health and power. An outlay of Rs 7,500 crore, with Rs 881 crore for upgradation, has already seen 60 projects completed, and another 80 ready to start by March 2021. Fourteen hundred seats have been added to medical colleges. A tele-radiology network is serving those in remote and inaccessible areas. Universal healthcare is now a right, not a wish. Over 350,000 homes have been electrified, benefiting more than 1.5 million people—only those who have suffered the bitter cold of Kashmir can truly appreciate the warmth that electricity brings.

Till June 2018, only seven ongoing projects had been completed, utilising only 27 per cent of allotted funds. In the past year, the figures have risen to 17 more, and 54 per cent of funds have been used. Bottlenecks in road constructions are being cleared and highways speeded up. All con-

tracts have now been awarded for the 624 MW Kivu, 1,000 MW Pakal Dul and 850 MW Ratle hydroelectric plants. The mission is to take water to every home and every field. Work has begun on the Shahpur Kandi multi-purpose project, which had been pending for seven decades.

Experience has made us cynical. Opponents laugh at statistics, and the neutral yawn. The proof of this pudding is going to be in the eating (the older a cliché the more likely is it to be true; or it would not have survived).

But the good thing about development is that it is demonstrable. You can see it if it exists. There are either five new nursing colleges or there are not. It cannot be hidden. It is not notional. Any observer, or journalist, can count to five easily.

Democracy is a shrill business. You can be reasonably sure that if these institutions were non-existent, television cameras would have been transfixed upon the blank space. Opposition leaders who use social media would have turned the Twitter bird into a hawk.

Development is the only answer to emotive politics, even if it may not always work as a complete antidote. Prime Minister Modi has made development his central mantra with an important codicil: development for all, and for the poor most of all. After experiments and hiccups, Jammu and Kashmir has entered the full range of this mantra. ■

MJ Akbar is an MP and the author of, most recently, Gandhi's Hinduism: The Struggle Against Jinnah's Islam



By Makarand R Paranjape

The Great Indian Way

The rebuilding of the Ram temple is the triumph of resacralisation

AUGUST 5TH, 2020.

A Today, everyone is talking of Ayodhya. And the grand Ram temple to be built there. For the ceremonial foundation-laying, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has flown to the sacred precinct. On the solemn occasion, present with him are Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Governor Anandiben Patel and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Sarsanghachalak Mohan Rao Bhagwat.

As one ordinary Rambhakt (devotee of Ram), who has walked all the way from Rajasthan to Ayodhya to participate in the function, puts it, "It is a day of great satisfaction, even elation for millions. Today, Ramlalla, for so long crying in a tent, will prepare to reascend his throne." This *tambu* (tent) to *takht* (throne) transformation is nothing short of the reassertion of faith and hope in the persistence of civilisation rising up from the ravages of centuries of subjugation and suppression.

The erstwhile Babri Masjid, instead of being seen as a sad reminder of conquest, vandalism and religious intolerance, was sought to be turned by pseudosecularists into a symbol of the Republic, to be defended at all costs. Given that believers in Islam can pray anywhere and that mosques can be dismantled or shifted, the decades-long dispute over the site was more political than theological.

However, proven to be built on top of a destroyed temple, not even a sacred site to Muslims, the mosque, reduced to rubble, could not fuel discord forever. The heated, at times bloody, controversy over its control died a quiet death with the historic Supreme Court verdict of November 9th, 2019.

Our historians tried to whitewash, evade or shamelessly lie about the carnage and devastation that the Muslim conquest of India caused. But the cultural memory of people did not allow us to forget. Nor indeed the surviving contemporary evidence: from the top of the subcontinent, the Hindukush (literally Hindu-killer) mountains to Kanyakumari, there is hardly a historic shrine or icon that does not bear the marks of defilement. At the very least, you will see a broken nose, the telltale mark of the religious vandal, theologically justified by an intolerant iconoclastic creed and materially rewarded by spoils of pillage.

Yet, despite so much carnage, mayhem and demolition, the peaceful reassertion of Sanatana Dharma is almost an inevitable miracle.

The Ram temple will be built in Ayodhya!

No wonder, this is a defining moment for the Indian republic. Much more so even than the restoration of the Somnath temple in Prabhas Patan, Saurashtra in Gujarat, in March 1951. Because it was so contested, the rebuilding of the Ram Mandir, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6th, 1992, signals a decisive shift in India's self-understanding and self-assertion.

MODI, IN HIS speech, likened the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to India's independence struggle, recalling the commitment and sacrifice of millions. It was a difficult, often uphill, endeavour, a fight characterised by the offerings of the living and the propitiations of the dead. Modi, recalling all those who had participated in it, bowed to them.

Similarly earlier, Bhagwat, remembering some of the key protagonists such as Ashok Singhal and Mahant Ramchandradas, who passed away before they could witness the day, said that they, and millions like them, were present in spirit, though not in body.

Both averred that the Ram Mandir would represent not just India's ancient values, but also the meaning of modern India. It would be a symbol of unity, faith and purified intention. Because, notwithstanding the relentless attempts to destroy us, India had not only survived, but also managed to raise her head high in the comity of nations.

Ayodhya, too, would be transformed—socially, culturally and economically. The *mandir* would unite *nara* with Narayana, the human with the Divine. The foundation-laying was the triumph of Indian values of truth, non-violence, faith and rule of law. It was the Supreme Court that announced the verdict in favour of the temple. That was India's way. As opposed to the iconoclasm and vandalism of the past.

History was also repeating itself. Just as all sections of India united to contribute to Sri Ram's victory over Ravan, all the

denizens of Gokul helped Krishna save them under the Govardhan hill, just as various castes and communities united under Shivaji and Suhel Dev to fight for *svaraj* or autonomy, and all sections of society joined Mohandas K Gandhi in our freedom struggle, Modi said that persons from every part of the country had contributed to the making of Ram Mandir.

Sri Ram himself is a combination of good qualities which make him an inspiring and ideal national hero for generations to come. Sri Ram is also the most compassionate ruler, worrying about the welfare of the weakest and most wretched of his subjects, down to the humble squirrel. That is why the temple is so important.

(*a + yuddha*) or non-killing (*a + vadh*), may also be interpreted as not being won or defeated by war or violence. If we go into the very depths of these notions, we will grasp their inner significance: a city presided by an ideal ruler will have no war or killing. No wonder the notion of Ayodhya has an appeal far and wide, beyond the borders of present-day India.

The temple symbolises our coming of age, combining the best of classical, medieval, modern—and futuristic India. It is a monument to learning, not just to belief. It should be not just be inclusive, but radically non-exclusive, welcoming visitors of all faiths from all over the world; it should also attract non-believers, secularists, and communists by its art and architecture.

Above all, it should be a monument to reconciliation and conflict resolution, not to revenge histories and triumphalist self-assertion. After all, Ram Rajya symbolises commonweal and *sarvodaya* (the welfare of all), not the domination of one class, religion or community over others. The Ram Mandir should therefore be a monument befitting not just Raja Ram but Ram Rajya.

But what is Ram Rajya? In *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Raja Rao says, 'The Kingdom of Rama has been the dream of the Indian mind. The tiger will, according to the tradition, drink water at the same stream as the deer, and the elephant will never dream of the lion. ... Sri Rama protects dharma.'

In a lecture delivered on May 24th, 1972, at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC, Rao defined as it as the marriage of wisdom and power: "Every government promises its subjects happiness of one style or the other. Whether it be the holy Roman Empire or, the American revolution or the Hindu state, they would create a condition or conditions for the total fulfilment of man,

this fulfilment being that realisation of God, of Truth or Peace."

This goal can only be reached through sacrifice, that is making sacred, something that only 'the sage of sages: the Guru, the Raj Guru, the wise being behind the King' could do in the Hindu idea of polity. The rebuilding of the Ram Mandir is the triumph of this resacralisation against all odds. This is the true meaning of *svaraj*. This is the Great Indian Way.

Thus in the 'Kingdom of Sri Rama, wisdom and power have to be divided only to be irrevocably married'. ■

The Ram temple *bhoomipuja* site in Ayodhya, August 5



THE RAM TEMPLE SYMBOLISES OUR COMING OF AGE, COMBINING THE BEST OF CLASSICAL, MEDIEVAL, MODERN—AND FUTURISTIC INDIA. IT IS A MONUMENT TO LEARNING, NOT JUST TO BELIEF

Modi emphasised that both the *saguna* (with qualities) Ram of Tulsi and *nirguna* (formless) Ram of Nanak and Kabir were true. Buddhists and Jains also revered Ram and Ayodhya. There are Ramayanas in practically every major language in India. Sri Rama is symbol of India's unity in diversity. In Indonesia too, which is the world's largest Muslim country, Sri Ram is still respected in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, China and other parts of the world.

The idea of Ayodhya or Avadh, which means non-war



By Rachel Dwyer

The Scent of India

Smelling my way through a cultural maze

C OVID-19 IS MAKING me nostalgic. It's not possible to travel to India currently, and I would love to be spending some of the monsoon there, preferably in Goa with not much to do. I'm watching films (mostly Bengali, with some Hindi serials and the occasional new film such as *Raat Akeli Hai* and *Gulabo Sitabo*, and, of course, *Indian Matchmaking* and *A Suitable Boy*) and reading (most notably, *The Burning*) satisfies the eye and the ear, but the other three *jnanendriyas* (organs of perception) are missing—the nose, tongue and skin. Film theory has discussed the haptic, or idea of touch, but the nose and the tongue are left aside. While food satisfies the tongue and some of the smell, the other smells of India have to be remembered rather than experienced, even though smell itself is one of the most powerful ways of evoking memories.

I read James McHugh's fascinating *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture* (2012) that examines the many texts which comprise a *Gandhashastra*, which deals with smell in great detail, looking at perfumery and the role of perfume in courts, religious practices as well as the private erotic world, the aesthetic and ethical implications of smells, the use of sandalwood in Buddhism and even sections from the *Matangalila* (The play of elephants) on elephants and smells. This focus on the Sanskrit cosmopolis will be supplemented by sections in Emma Platt's just released book, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* which focuses on the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Smell is shown as part of the good life, the aesthetic and considered life, and the Indian cultural history of smell is a fascinating topic. I wondered about smell today in India.

This topic, of culture and smell, has become a serious subject. The books of Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez, which are ostensibly reviews of perfumes, have introduced many to the idea of perfume beyond just smells, or part of a routine of seduction (they point out that the smell that drives men wild is bacon—or, perhaps, coffee and sambar?), but they show that perfume is an art, often an abstraction of smells, a message, a structure of smelling.

I'm fascinated by these books and by much other

writing about perfume but I also like things that just smell nice. Flowers, of course, smell good but so do attars which are often soliflores, that is a single good smell rather than a perfume, notably petrichor and *khus*, the smell of the cooler in north India, which as vetiver is a key ingredient in many perfumes, suddenly evokes India.

Sandalwood is a dominant smell in homes and in temples, as incense or the burning wood, though it's a long time since I've been able to buy the oil in the Cauvery emporium in Mysore, although they still have incense and sandalwood carvings. Nowadays, Mysore sandalwood is too precious for many Western perfumes where it is often replaced by inferior Australian sandalwood and synthetics. I love Guerlain's 'Samsara', whose name first attracted me to the perfume, but I can't imagine not filling cupboards and drawers with round cakes of Mysore sandalwood soap from the Karnataka Soaps and Detergents Limited.

McHugh writes wonderfully of the role of garlands in religious practices. Sanskrit courtly literature abounds with the poetics of flowers which evoke colour, season, region, as well as smell. In Kalidasa's play, *Shakuntala*, flowers are mentioned in many verses both as part of the description of nature and the use of them as ornaments. It is when Shakuntala is attacked by a bee that flies out from the jasmine that King Dushyanta steps in to defend her. The bee and the flower are such a part of Indian romantic poetry from these ancient lyrics to the Hindi film, where the man is the bee and the woman is the beautiful and fragrant flower.

I miss the old sequence of Hindi film lovers coming closer and closer together as the camera moves away to two flowers touching to represent the kiss. I recall a paper I read as a student about the 'sniff-kiss' by Edward Hopkins (1907), where one sniffed the other rather than kissed them with the mouth.

Song lyrics abound with the Urdu words, *khushboo* and *mahek* but I can't think of any (though I'm sure I'll be told) of many with *sugandha* and so on. I falsely recalled *Vande Mataram* referring to the fragrance of India but it does not do so directly.

The only two films I have seen about smell in Hindi—or partly in Hindi—are *Aiiyyo* (2012) and *Axone* (2020). Both are comedies, the former where a Marathi girl (Rani Mukerji)



Dushyanta and Shakuntala, oil on canvas

falls in love with a Tamil boy (Prithviraj Sukumaran) mostly because of his smell. The latter is about the everyday racism faced by a group of Indians from the Northeast who want to cook the dish of *axone*, which is said to be very smelly because of its fermented soybeans and their neighbours refuse to let them do it. Smelling *axone* is now one of my tasks when I can go back to Delhi—or, better still, to the Northeast. In *Raat Akeli Hai* (2020), I recoiled on recollecting the smell of the Kanpur tanneries, which must be one of the most unpleasant things I have smelt.

The smell of the night-blooming jasmine or *raat ki rani* and the tuberose are among my favourite 'Indian' smells, though the former is native to the West Indies and the latter is native to Mexico, while the *mallika* (jasmine) is found in Sanskrit poetry, associated with the season of summer and Akka Mahadevi's Mallikarjuna: 'Lord (Shiva) as white as jasmine'.

I have never smelt ichor, the fluid of rutting elephants, but it is said to smell sweet and attract bees. Ganesh's elephant head is often described as surrounded by bees. Bhavabhuti's play, *Malatimadhava*, composed in the eighth century, comes with an invocation to Ganesha:

*When Shiva dances and Kumara's peacock, drawn by the
exultant thunder of Nandi's drum,
Has sent the frightened Snake King spiralling into his trunk,
May Ganesha's frantic head-shakings which make the heavens buzz
With bees that swarm from his temples, long protect you.*
(Translation by Michael Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*)

Before I first went to India, at the end of my first year of studying Sanskrit, I read Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* (The Lineage of Raghu). In Canto IV, Raghu's *digvijaya* (conquest of the regions) of India described the country in a very different way from his *Meghaduta* (The Cloud Messenger). It has evocative descriptions of the country, often evoking its smells. Lakshmi holds a lotus-umbrella over Raghu, who is compared to the mango fruit as distinct from his father, the mango blossom. The canto begins with the lotuses and *kasha* flowers of autumn and the beauty of lotus lakes, while Raghu's war elephants produce excessive ichor as they compete with the smell of the *saptaparna* blossoms. Raghu marches first to the east, through forests of palms and betel trees, then to the south where his elephants perfume the Kaveri with their ichor. The army crosses the southern mountains fragrant with pepper, cardamom and sandal trees. In Kerala, an inversion occurs as the women's usual saffron hair powder is replaced by the dust kicked up by the soldiers, while the latter are covered with the pollen of the scented *ketaka* flowers carried in the wind. The bees abandoned the *punnaga* flowers, preferring the sweet smell of the elephants' ichor, while in the north, the soldiers sit on stones perfumed by the navels of musk deer.

Bad smells are also culturally marked. Some are hated by all whereas others are controversial, being markers of group identities. These can erupt into serious conflicts as people talk of 'the Other' as smelly. In India, the smell of meat cooking is mouthwatering for some but hateful for others. Brits aren't too sure about the smell of frying garlic, which I like to smell but don't like to eat. I love the smell of *hing* but it's called asafoetida or 'stinking grain' in English while *kala namak* (rock salt), even in *chaat masala* but especially in *jal jeera*, is banned from our house, about the only thing my husband refuses to eat. *Methi* (fenugreek) smells good in food but I don't like the smell of it transferring from currency (smell it!) to my wallet. Fishy smells are always problematic even for fish eaters. I remember the horrible smell at Somnath and I grew up next to a fishing town. In the Mahabharata, a woman is called Matsyagandha (she who smells of fish), but Sage Parashara gives her the fragrance of musk and so she is known as Yojanagandha (she whose fragrance spreads for miles) as well as Satyavati (the mother of Vyasa.) So I recall the smells that evoke India. My dominant recollection of the smell of Delhi is winter. Less the burning fires but running the risk of asphyxiation from the naphthalene balls that have been keeping precious winter woollens safe. Many people say Mumbai smells bad but I love flying into the city and the way the smell of the sea, *methi* and warmth fill the plane even before the doors are opened. How can you not love a city which calls what, I think is a stinky drain, 'Love Grove Pumping Station'? But Mysore is the most fragrant with sandalwood, pepper, cardamom, coffee as well as the ghee of Mysore *pak* and the Mysore dosas, perhaps at Mylari.... Let's hope this Covid is over soon. ■

POSSIBILITY OF A RETURN



Many in the Congress think that Sachin Pilot may return to the party. The source of the rumour is said to be a phone call from Sonia Gandhi to Pilot who had enquired about her health after hearing about her hospitalisation. He was assured that it was a just a routine check-up. Pilot also called Rajasthan Congress leader CP Joshi on his birthday. Another development that fuels this rumour is the BJP supposedly telling the speaker of the Assembly informally that it will not bring a no-confidence motion against the Ashok Gehlot government, which had been destabilised by Pilot's rebellion.

Sonia is still said to be personally warm towards Pilot and should he wish to return, she could facilitate it.

FIGHTING FIT

Former Gujarat Chief Minister and Congress leader Shankersinh Vaghela, once upon a time a political guru of Narendra Modi when they were both in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, has tested positive for Covid-19. He had been hospitalised and Modi called him there to enquire about his health. Vaghela has since returned home. He is working out in his gymnasium daily and has lost weight. Even at 80, Vaghela seems fit and fine.

Tread Slowly

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat recently said at a conference in Madhya Pradesh that the Sangh is not excited about breaking up the Congress or other parties. He said that probably several dissident leaders are interested in joining the BJP because it is in power. Bhagwat advised the party to go slow on this. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP succeeded. But it failed in Rajasthan to break the ruling Congress. After Bhagwat's advice, the question is whether the party will try it again in West Bengal, Bihar and Assam.



Missing Man

Congress general secretary and Rahul Gandhi loyalist KC Venugopal, who was recently made a Rajya Sabha MP from Rajasthan, has become a target for some in his party. The complaint is why he had been away when Sachin Pilot tried to break the party in the state. Even as the media was writing about what was going to happen, why didn't he try to contact Pilot and sort the problems out? If other leaders like Ajay Maken and Randeep Singh Surjewala were firefighting, why not Venugopal? Even when the Congress faced a crisis in Karnataka, a state he was in charge of at the time, Venugopal was in Kerala. He had told the high command then that nobody in the state was keen to see him get involved.

Walk of Life

Will Rahul Gandhi start a nationwide tour in January if the pandemic gets over by then? Recently, senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh met him and proposed such a tour from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Singh's argument is that in a vast country like India, despite all its digital advances, physical meetings remain more useful. And that this has been the norm from the days of the freedom struggle with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi, did it and Digvijaya Singh himself did the same for the Madhya Pradesh elections that the party won. Singh wants Rahul to start in January on Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary—and retake the party presidency after completing the yatra.

Transfer Speculations

Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) joint director's transfer from Kolkata has raised a lot of eyebrows. Pankaj Srivastava has been made CBI additional secretary in Delhi and it was being touted as a routine transfer. But what makes it curious is that he was the key person in the investigations against Trinamool Congress leaders in the chit fund scam. His transfer a year before the Assembly election might be beneficial for the Trinamool. On the other hand, he still retains the additional charge of Kolkata zone. There has been no new officer appointed in his place yet. The state BJP says there is no question of any dilution in the investigation and that Srivastava had been keen to move to Delhi for career reasons, given that high-level CBI posts are to be found there. But some say a new officer is coming soon and it is not possible for him to go to Kolkata frequently for investigation in pandemic times.



Crisis Management

While the Ram temple bhoomipuja ceremony went off flawlessly, the days leading up to it had been a time of stress for Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. The reason was that a priest of the core group that would conduct the rites became infected with Covid-19. Adityanath immediately took action and sent him for treatment. He then changed the team after talking to the senior sadhus of the temple.

ALL-PARTY VIRUS?

There had earlier been a lot of trolling about how Covid-19 had affected mostly non-BJP leaders. In Maharashtra, for example, it was said that Shiv Sena leaders were infected, not the BJP. Now that Home Minister Amit Shah has been found positive and several BJP leaders are in home quarantine, that campaign has stopped.



By **CLIVE HAMILTON** and **MAREIKE OHLBERG**

UNMADE BY CHINA

How the Chinese Communist Party has been reshaping the post-Cold War world order by remoulding nations, societies and institutions from within

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST Party is determined to transform the international order, to shape the world in its own image, without a shot being fired. Rather than challenging from the outside, it has been eroding resistance to it from within, by winning supporters, silencing critics and subverting institutions.

Whereas analysts on both sides of the Atlantic continue to agonise over whether to label China an opponent or even an enemy, the CCP decided this matter thirty years ago. In the post-Soviet world, it saw itself surrounded by enemies that it needed to defeat or neutralise. While the CCP and its supporters in the West like to speak of a ‘new Cold War’ being waged against China, the Party itself has all along been engaged in an ideological struggle against ‘hostile forces’. For the CCP, the Cold War never ended.

The reshaping of alliances and the remoulding of the way the world thinks about it are essential to the Party securing continued rule at home, as well as to its reach and eventually making China the number one global power. The Party’s plans have been explained at length in speeches and documents. Its implementation strategy is to target elites in the West so that they either welcome China’s dominance or accede to its inevitability, rendering resistance futile. In some nations, mobilising the wealth and political influence of the Chinese diaspora, while at the same time silencing critics within it, is central to the strategy.

Backed by its enormous economic clout, China engages in arm-twisting, diplomatic pressure, united front and ‘friendship’ work, and the manipulation of media, think tanks and universities—all these tactics overlap and reinforce each another. Some people claim that Beijing’s influence around the world is no different to that of any other country. While not everything the Party does in this respect is unique, the scope, degree of organisation, and eagerness to use coercion distinguish the CCP’s actions from other nations’ diplomatic activities.

As the world’s largest factory and second-biggest economy, China has been a magnet for Western businesses and many Western politicians. Some industries are heavily dependent on access to China’s huge market, and Beijing is willing to use this dependence as a political weapon. In the words of one close observer, ‘If you don’t do what Beijing’s political leaders want they will punish you economically. They put the economic vice on politicians around the world. They have been doing it for years and it works.’

At times, the vice has been tightened in conspicuous ways. After the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in Canada in 2018, for example, imports of Canadian soybeans, canola and pork were blocked. Beijing reacted in a similar way in 2017 when South Korea, in response to aggression from the North, began installing an American antiballistic missile system. Beijing took forty-three retaliatory measures, including banning Chinese tourist groups to South Korea, driving a large Korean conglomerate out of China, barring K-pop stars, and blocking imports of electronics and cosmetics. Beijing was still punishing South Koreans in October 2019 when it demanded that the prestigious Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, in New York State, exclude



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

AS THE WORLD'S LARGEST FACTORY AND SECOND-BIGGEST ECONOMY, CHINA HAS BEEN A MAGNET FOR WESTERN BUSINESSES AND MANY WESTERN POLITICIANS. SOME INDUSTRIES ARE HEAVILY DEPENDENT ON ACCESS TO CHINA'S HUGE MARKET, AND BEIJING IS WILLING TO USE THIS DEPENDENCE AS A POLITICAL WEAPON



three Korean students from its top orchestra if it wanted a planned tour of China to go ahead. Citing the damage to Eastman's reputation in China if the tour were to be cancelled, the dean agreed to leave the Koreans behind. Only after an outcry by students and alumni did the school decide to cancel the tour.

When Daryl Morey, general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted his support for Hong Kong protesters in late 2019, Beijing's backlash was instantaneous. (The torrent of criticism on Twitter appears to have come from trolls and fake accounts in China.) The televising of Rockets games to its huge fan base in China was suspended. Sponsors withdrew. Beijing raged that Morey had 'hurt the feelings of the Chinese people'. The state broadcaster, China Central Television, redefined freedom of speech to exclude 'challenging national sovereignty and social stability'. Desperate to protect its growing market in China, the US National Basketball Association issued a fawning apology that read as if written by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department.

While only a few examples of extreme punishment are needed in order to sow fear in everyone, Beijing prefers to keep

its threats vague and thus deniable, to keep the targets guessing. As Perry Link puts it, vagueness frightens more people because no-one can rule themselves out, and those in the frame therefore 'curtail a wider range of activity'. Beijing has become the world's master practitioner of the dark arts of economic statecraft, in part because in recent decades Western nations' commitment to free-market policies makes them reluctant to manipulate trade for political reasons. That's why the world was shocked when Donald Trump launched a trade war against China in 2018. While he is wrong on many other things, Trump is right that Beijing has been systematically violating the principles of international economic engagement and getting away with it.

Beijing's vast program of infrastructure investment abroad, known as the Belt and Road Initiative, is the ultimate instrument of economic statecraft or, more accurately, economic blackmail. It provides an outlet for China's construction industry and enormous capital reserves, while at the same time supplying the investment needs of other countries who are short of capital and excluded from mainstream sources of finance. The offer of low-interest loans is hard to resist,

especially when they come without environmental or other conditions.

However, the objectives of the BRI, also known as the New Silk Road, go well beyond providing an outlet for surplus Chinese capital or helping poorer nations develop; the initiative is Beijing's primary mechanism for reordering the global geopolitical system. Xi Jinping's signature policy is now so closely integrated with almost all Chinese government activity abroad—commercial, technological, academic, cultural—that it cannot be separated from the PRC's overall diplomatic engagement.

Xi Jinping has repeatedly referred to the BRI as essential to his vision of constructing 'a community of common destiny for humankind'. While the idea might sound good to Western ears, its aim is a Sinocentric world; that is, the one envisaged by the hawks elevated by Xi to the top leadership positions. They view a China-led world order as an essential part of the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese people'.

So the BRI is the most powerful vehicle by which Beijing is changing the postwar international order. In a revealing 2015 speech, defence strategist and retired PLA major-general Qiao Liang described the BRI purely as the vehicle for China to achieve dominance over the United States. It represents, he stated, China's new and irresistible form of globalisation, the success of which will be measured by the renminbi displacing the dollar as the world currency, leaving the United States 'hollowed out'. While Qiao is a pusher of boundaries, the geostrategic rationale of the BRI is also made plain elsewhere, such as the leaked minutes of a 2019 Chinese-Malaysian meeting on a BRI project, which noted that despite the project's 'political nature', the public had to see it as market-driven.

The adjective most frequently attached to the BRI is 'vast', and when China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, said in April 2019 that the BRI 'does not play little geopolitical games', he was speaking the truth. The former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Nayan Chanda, describes the BRI as 'an overt expression of China's power ambitions in the 21st century'.

Like other so-called parallel institutions created by the Chinese government, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRI pretends to pose no challenge to countries' existing institutions, while incrementally realigning their interests and shifting the global balance of power. A key part of the CCP's thinking on global and regional power dynamics is the identification of a 'main contradiction' and a 'main enemy' to unite against. On a global scale, that enemy is the United

THE BRI IS ABOUT THE PROJECTION OF POWER THROUGH CONTROLLING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE. IT NO LONGER MAKES SENSE TO CONFINE DISCUSSION OF THE BRI TO BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS, BECAUSE IT SPROUTS EVERYWHERE, FROM THE SILK ROAD NETWORK OF THINK TANKS, MEDIA AGREEMENTS, AND TIES BETWEEN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS, TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SISTER CITIES AND 'PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE EXCHANGES', ALL OF WHICH ARE INCORPORATED INTO BRI MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING



States, which needs to be split from its allies and isolated.

Brexit, dissension in the European Union and the election of Donald Trump have created a strategic opportunity for Beijing to weaken the transatlantic alliance and further erode European unity. Long seen by the CCP as the largely irrelevant junior partner of the United States, Europe is now viewed as the great prize. By winning over Europe, the CCP hopes to convince the world that China is the 'champion of multilateralism' and a much-needed counterweight to US hegemony and unilateralism. Beijing wants to mobilise European support for its initiatives in the developing world.

Despite all the news stories about 'debt diplomacy', 'global connectivity' and 'win-win cooperation', it's apparent that the BRI's goal of strategic rebalancing is to be achieved not only by the political clout that goes with infrastructure investment, but also by a subtle and multi-pronged

program of global thought management. The BRI is about the projection of power through controlling the terms of the debate. It no longer makes sense to confine discussion of the BRI to business and economics, because it sprouts everywhere, from the Silk Road network of think tanks, media agreements, and ties between cultural institutions, to the establishment of sister cities and 'people-to-people exchanges', all of which are incorporated into BRI memoranda of understanding.

Today, the CCP remains deeply anxious about 'ideological infiltration' by hostile forces bent on regime change in China. As a manual published by the Central Propaganda Department in 2006 explained, 'when hostile forces want to bring disarray to a society and overthrow a political regime, they always start by opening a hole to creep through in the ideological field and by confusing people's thought'. This Cold War mentality is vital to an understanding of the CCP's international activities, which are first and foremost the global extension of the Party's desire for regime security. ■

This is an edited excerpt from Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World

by Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg
(HarperCollins India; 432 pages; Rs 599)



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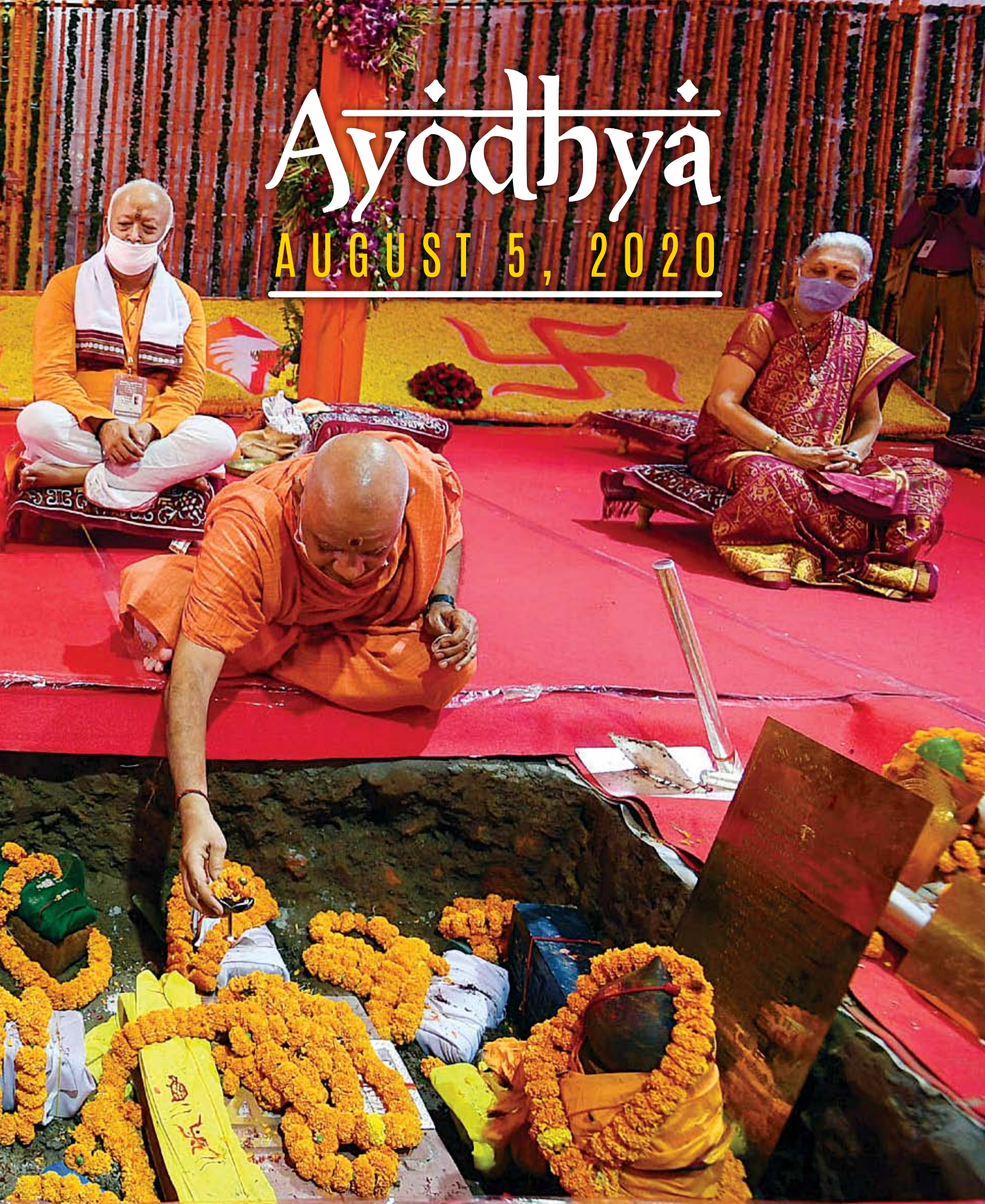


Prime Minister Narendra Modi performs bhoomipuja at the site of the proposed Ram temple in Ayodhya, August 5

*“A golden chapter is being written
The Ram temple will be a modern*

Ayodhya

AUGUST 5, 2020



*on the banks of the Sarayu.
symbol of our culture”*

NARENDRA MODI



Prime Minister Narendra Modi offers prayers to Ram Lalla in Ayodhya, August 5



Narendra Modi
performs puja at
Hanuman Garhi
temple in Ayodhya,
August 5

*“The temple will
be built with bricks
of love, respect and
brotherhood”*

NARENDRA MODI



COVER STORY

What the
RAM TEMPLE
does is to link
nationhood to
a deeper and longer
perspective,
incorporating
INDIA'S
entire cultural
inheritance, from
antiquity to
the **PRESENT**

By Swapan Dasgupta

In 1989, discerning observers of Indian politics noticed a curious phenomenon: the rash of excitement in villages and small towns over the ritual consecration of bricks embossed with the words Shri Ram. Like the mysterious *chapattis* that were quietly passed from village to village in 1857 indicating ominous developments, the bricks, lovingly wrapped in saffron cloth, were ceremonially taken in procession to nearby collection centres for eventual despatch to Ayodhya. They were to be used for the construction of a grand temple at the very site where Lord Ram was believed to have been born. Some 200,000 Ramshila bricks, including some from Hindu communities overseas, were despatched to Ayodhya. Each brick told a different story, but they also indicated something else—the people’s involvement in the campaign to ‘liberate’ Ram Janmabhoomi.

The manner in which a simmering local dispute in the town of Ayodhya came to capture the national imagination in the three years between the Ramshila pujas and the *karseva* of December 6th, 1992 that led to the demolition, in an act of mass frenzy, will always fascinate future historians. That the Ayodhya upsurge was accompanied by meticulous mobilisation of people by an unstructured coalition of forces—including those well outside the radar of public life—is obvious. The more relevant issue is why Ayodhya became a focal point of Hindu disquiet. Equally fascinating is the protracted war between raw sentiment and an entrenched Establishment that is heading towards a possible conclusion.

The limitations of mass mobilisation at a time of pandemic ensured that the numbers of

Ram *bhakt*s that arrived in Ayodhya to personally witness the *bhoomipuja* of the proposed temple on the afternoon of August 5th was small. It was a far cry from the bloody *karseva* of October 30th and 31st, 1990 and the one on December 6th, 1992, when the Babri Masjid constructed in 1528 by an army of occupation was flattened by bare hands and pickaxes. On those occasions, the country witnessed shows of defiance and assertiveness by both devout and angry Hindus who had assembled in Ayodhya from all over the country. Their actions had triggered furious controversy, not to mention state repression, and the mobilisation was both preceded and accompanied by communal violence. In March 1993, Mumbai experienced a deadly bout of serial bombings—the first example of Muslim retribution.

August 5th was very different. Thanks to the very different media environment from 1992, most Indians watched Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertake the *bhoomipuja* on their television sets. Almost every one of the countless news channels in different languages covered the occasion live and embellished it with devotional songs and other Ramayan attractions. Without

any prompting, people did pujas inside their homes or in their local temples. Except for West Bengal, where, using the lockdown as a pretext, the authorities clamped down on public celebrations, including those in roadside temples, the day passed off without trouble. It was a day marked by happiness and dignified observance of a momentous occasion. The consecrated bricks, kept in storage for nearly 30 years, were now ready for use.

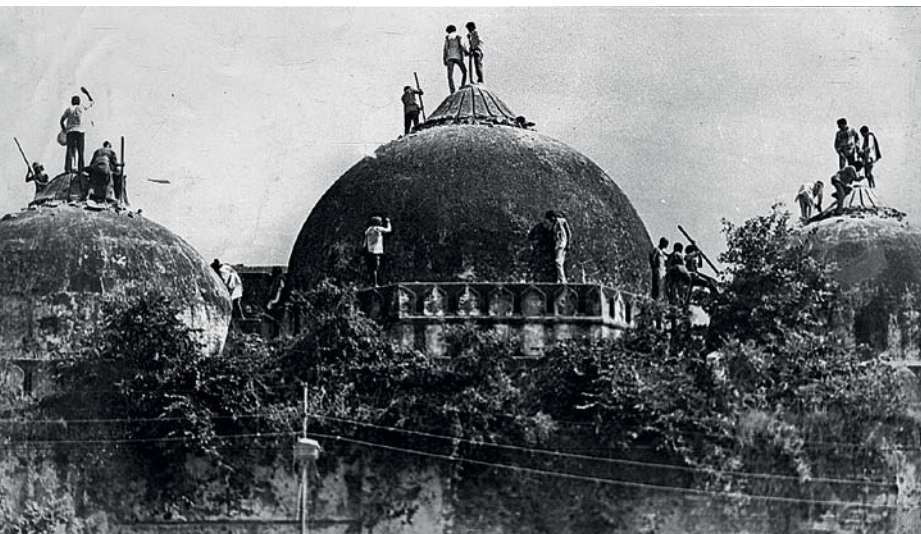
Yet, there was no escaping the fact that the environment of India has changed beyond recognition in the 28 years between the demolition of the Moghul shrine and the *bhoomipuja* for the new temple.

First, whereas three decades ago, the slogan ‘*mandir wahin banayenge*’ had provoked sharp divisions, even within Hindus, the reaction to the *bhoomipuja* suggested a spectacular level of Hindu unity. The manner in which the media competed among themselves to give the best coverage to the puja in Ayodhya was revealing. It suggested that the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple had become a part of the national common sense. Lord Ram, it seemed, had finally



Embossed bricks from 1989 as seen in Ayodhya on August 4

GETTY IMAGES



GETTY IMAGES

Kar Sevaks atop the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, December 6, 1992

come home to independent India to be honoured in a manner befitting his status.

Second, unlike 1992 when nearly the entire Establishment, including the judiciary, had united in rubbishing the *kar sevaks* who had taken the law into their own hands, there were hardly any significant expressions of disquiet. Yes, some intellectuals lamented what they perceived as the legitimisation of a criminal act. Others despaired of the assault on secularism involved in the presence of the Prime Minister at a purely religious occasion. However, apart from the Left, almost all the non-BJP parties tried to ensure that they weren't perceived as being opposed to the move. Their only refrain was that Ram belongs to everyone and not merely the BJP.

Arguably, the co-option of the Indian Establishment into the Ram temple project had a great deal to do with the Supreme Court's judgment in a case that had dragged on for nearly seven decades. No doubt, the apex court's belated sense of urgency owed

almost entirely to the personal interest in the matter by the erstwhile Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi. In the past, political leaders opposed to the temple were inclined to put the ball in the legal arena because they lacked the resolve to take the final call. While the BJP had quite clearly committed itself to the Ram Janmabhoomi cause as early as 1989, a party such as the Congress dithered between making Hindus happy and displeasing the Muslim community. At various times in the past, Congress Governments had attempted to be too clever—Rajiv Gandhi's conduct being an example—or allowed events to take their own course—as PV Narasimha Rao did on the day of the demolition. However, when confronted by the BJP's aggressive stand, it tried to skirt the issue but without a happy outcome.

The unhappy position of the Congress is worth dissecting. Beginning from the freedom movement till the mid-1980s, the Congress was the natural party of the Hindus. Without necessarily embracing Hindu nationalism and despite the excessive secularist zeal of Jawaharlal Nehru, it occupied the solid middle ground of the Hindu consensus. It was this position that in turn allowed it to secure the support of the Muslim community leaders, particularly the more conservative elements who were happy at the party's non-intrusive approach to Muslim personal laws. Indira Gandhi displayed a markedly pro-Hindu tilt from 1980 to 1983 but as far as Muslims were concerned, this was offset by her unrelenting opposition to the bigger enemy, the BJP.

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement was the single most important factor in the breakdown of the Congress consensus among Hindu voters. The highly emotional mobilisation around the Ram temple that began in 1988-1989 had a far greater impact among Hindu voters than the Congress realised. The reversal of the Shah Bano judgment by Rajiv Gandhi, the rise in Muslim fundamentalism globally after the beginning of the war in Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran in 1979 and, finally, the spate of communal riots in the 1980s provided the context for the growing appeal of Hindu nationalism. Between the elections of 1989 and 1991, the Congress lost the support of Hindus in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and it has never been able to recover from that loss. Today, despite Rahul Gandhi's frenzied temple visits and his pathetic attempts at reinventing himself as a committed Hindu, the Congress is no longer seen as the natural home of all middle-of-the-road Hindus. Its position as India's default party has been erased after the two devastating defeats in 2014 and 2019. No wonder, it has become marginal to the explosion of Hindu pride that followed the advent of Modi.

Finally, there is a crucial question that the *bhoomipuja* and Ram temple construction throw up. Has the Indian state ceased to be

It is by now understood

that the proposed Ram temple will be much more than a mere place of worship where the devout Ram *bhakts* will come to pray to Bhagwan Ram. It is viewed by many as the emerging symbol of a New India that has come forth as a consequence of a movement Modi linked with the freedom struggle

secular? Has it become an expression of Hindu majoritarianism, as the critics of Modi claim?

In January 1993, barely a month after the demolition of the Babri shrine and amid the highly charged mood of the times, Girilal Jain—once a pillar of the Congress Establishment who had moved over to the side of Hindu nationalism—put forward his assessment of the event in *Organiser*: ‘The structure as it stood, represented an impasse between what Babur represented and what Ram represents. This ambiguity has been characteristic of the Indian state since Independence. In fact, in my opinion, no structure symbolised the Indian political order in its ambivalence, ambiguity, indecisiveness and lack of purpose, as this structure. The removal of the structure has ended the impasse and marks a new beginning.’

Jain was certainly very prescient in detecting the symbolic ambiguity of a so-called mosque that had, since 1949, become a *de facto* Ram temple. In many ways, the structure epitomised the ambiguities of the post-Independence state and the very Indian connotations of secularism. Some of these had come to the fore in the debate over the reconstruction of the ruined Somnath temple, a debate that involved Nehru on the one hand and KM Munshi and Rajendra Prasad on the other. India’s secular character had also been at the centre of concerns over the various anti-cow slaughter and anti-religious conversion legislation passed by different Congress-controlled state governments in the 1950s and 1960s. However, these ambiguities had wilfully been glossed over. The hard secularism of Nehru had coexisted, even if uneasily, with the pro-Hindu tilt of Congress stalwarts in the states—Pandit Sampurnanand and DP Mishra being two important exponents of alternative views. However, till the formal injection of ‘secularism’ in the Preamble to the Constitution, this debate never assumed juridical overtones; it remained, by and large, an internal debate of the Congress. The Ayodhya movement brought the debate into the realms of competitive politics.

Since 1992, and until the *bhoomipuja*, an additional complication developed vis-à-vis the site of the erstwhile shrine. The Moghul structure had been well and truly demolished and a

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that all stately wisdom
begins and concludes with
the Constitution**

makeshift Ram temple erected at the site of the *garbagriha* (sanctum sanctorum). This awkward arrangement was upheld by various judicial orders. The courts, despite their dim view of the demolition, had never quite mustered the resolve to remove the temple altogether. This strange arrangement, too, was highly symbolic. It indicated the end of the old ambiguity and the emergence of a new one—of a Hindu order that was barricaded and barred from coming into its own. It is in this context that the proposed Ram temple is extremely significant.

In his speech on the occasion, the Prime Minister presented the proposed temple as a symbol of modernity. In a spirit of reconciliation he glossed over the tradition of Ram as a warrior king who had undertaken and won a difficult war against Ravana. Instead, he emphasised Ram’s notion of kingship and the idea of Ram Rajya and sought to link it with notions of good governance in contemporary India. It was a very momentous address whose significance will be increasingly realised in the coming years. Yet, there is another aspect of the Ram temple that he didn’t address.

It is by now understood that the proposed Ram temple will be much more than a mere place of worship where the devout Ram *bhakt*s will come to pray to Bhagwan Ram. It is viewed by many as the emerging symbol of a New India that has come forth as a consequence of a movement Modi linked with the freedom struggle. So far, the enduring legacy of the freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi has been the recovery of national sovereignty and the Constitution which Modi once described as India’s only holy book. In that case, what will be the relationship between the Constitution and the new monument to a New India?

One of the biggest issues confronting the notion of constitutional patriotism is the underlying assumption that 1950 is Year Zero and that all stately wisdom begins and concludes with the Constitution. What the Ram temple does is to link nationhood to a deeper and longer perspective, incorporating India’s entire cultural inheritance, from antiquity to the present.

The rules governing public life are spelt out in the Constitution but India’s sense of nationhood and its self-identity are captured by the new Ram temple. The emerging new order in India deems that the Constitution and the Ram temple must complement each other, rather than be in a state of conflict. ■



Swapan Dasgupta
is an MP and India’s
foremost conservative
columnist



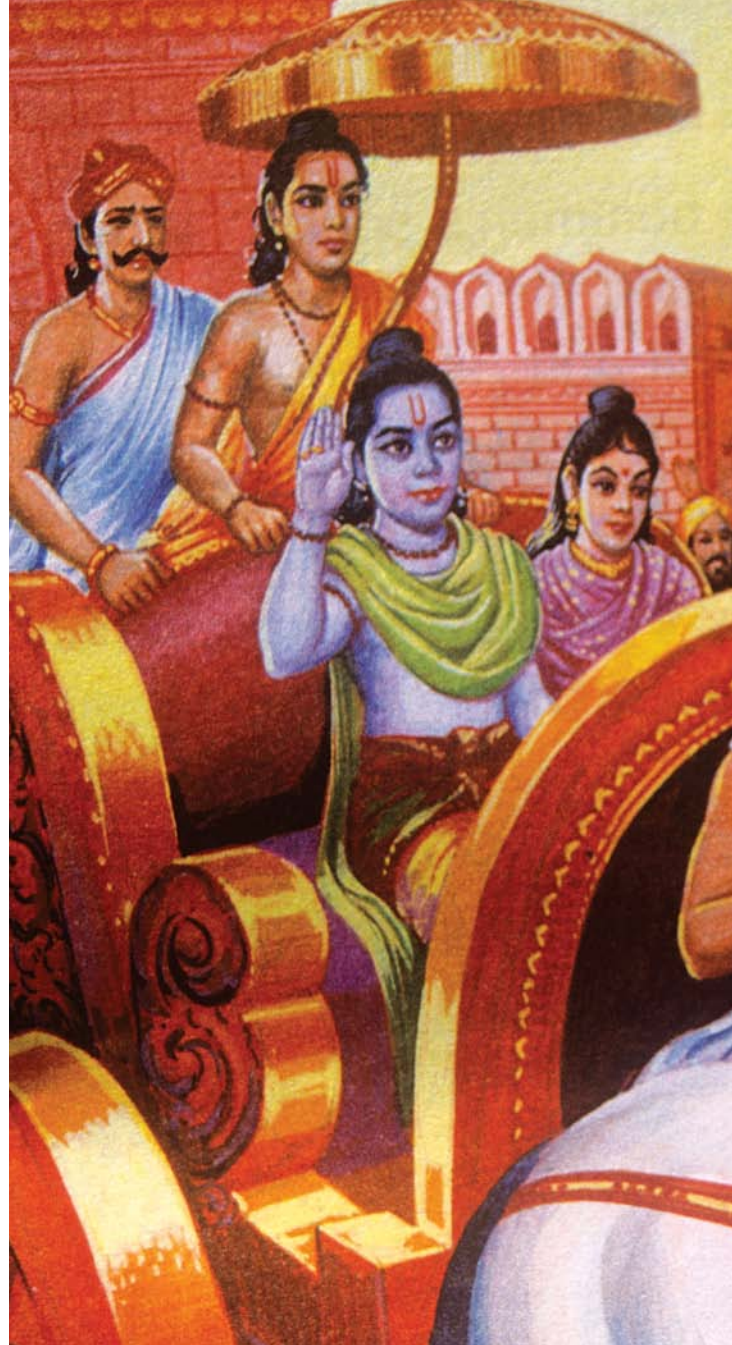
COVER STORY

Return to the Ideal City

There was no room for falsities in the welfare state of Rama as depicted in the epic

By Bibek Debroy

Ayodhya was the impregnable city, the city that could not be assailed. In the Valmiki Ramayana, in 'Bala Kanda', there are wonderful descriptions of Ayodhya, when Dasharatha was the king. (In everything I state, I will stick to the critical edition of the Valmiki Ramayana.) This was the kingdom of Kosala, located on the banks of the Sarayu. Ayodhya was the capital of Kosala. Manu constructed this city, which was twelve *yojanas* long and three *yojanas* wide. (A little after this description, we are told that the fortifications extended for another two *yojanas*, beyond the city's perimeter. A *yojana* was between 12 km and 15 km.) It was beautiful and spread out, divided by highways. The large royal roads were laid out well. These were always sprinkled with water and flowers were strewn on these. There were gates and arches. There were ma-



ALAMY

chines and implements of war everywhere, constructed by all manner of artisans. There were tall walls with standards, surmounted by hundreds of *shataghnis*. (A *shataghni* is a weapon that can kill one hundred at one stroke.) There were moats that were difficult to cross. Thus, the fortification was impossible for others to breach. Hence, the name Ayodhya. There were mango groves and a giant wall formed a girdle around the city. The city was laid out like an *ashtapada* board (an eight-by-eight board, used for the original form of chess). The palaces were embedded with jewels and were as beautiful as mountains. There were inner quarters for women and the place was like Indra's Amaravati. It was encrusted with gems everywhere and the mansions were like celestial vehicles. The houses were densely constructed on level ground and there was no space between these. There were stores of *shalirice* (a fine variety of rice) and the water was like the juice of sugarcane. There were drums, percussion instruments,



A sketch of Rama and Sita departing from Ayodhya

veenas and cymbals. These were sounded loudly, proclaiming that this was the best city on earth.

The archers there were skilled and dexterous of hand. But they did not use their arrows to pierce someone who was alone, someone who was without heirs, or someone who was running away. The place was full of thousands of such *maharathas* (great warriors). Everywhere, that city was also full of a large numbers of dancers and actors. There were bards and minstrels. There were horses, elephants, cattle, camels and donkeys. Large numbers of vassal kings came from the frontiers to offer tribute.

There were extremely learned people in that best of cities, happy and with dharma in their souls. The men were satisfied with the riches they had obtained themselves. They were truthful in speech and not avaricious. In that supreme of cities, there was no one who had not accumulated some amount of riches. There was no household without riches in the form of cattle, horses, wealth

and grain. There was no man who was lustful, ignoble or cruel. One was incapable of seeing an ignorant person or a non-believer in Ayodhya. All the men and women were extremely controlled and devoted to dharma. They were joyful and good in conduct, like unblemished *maharshis*. There was no one without an earring, without a head-dress, without a garland and without some means of finding pleasure. There was no one who did not have a bath, nor anyone who did not smear the body with unguents and fragrances. There was no one who did not have the best of food. There was no one who was not generous, no one who did not decorate the body with ornaments. No one could be seen without ornaments on the hands, nor one who was heartless. There was no one who did not light the sacrificial fire. There were thousands of Brahmanas who performed sacrifices. There was no one in Ayodhya who was without a means of subsistence, nor anyone of mixed *varna*. There was no one who was a non-believer, no



COVER STORY

one who was a liar, nor anyone who was not extremely learned. There was no one who was jealous or incapable. There was no one who was not learned. There was no one who was distressed or disturbed in mind, no one who was miserable. There was no man or woman who was poor or ugly. In Ayodhya, one was incapable of seeing a person who was not devoted to the king. All the four *varnas* worshipped gods and guests. All the men possessed long lifespans and were devoted to dharma and the truth. We often have a notion of Rama-rajya. But in governance and prosperity, Dasharatha's Ayodhya was no different. I will skip the details about the various species of horses and elephants, all listed in the Valmiki Ramayana.

How did governance work? Dasharatha had eight brave and illustrious advisors. They were pure and devoted and were always engaged in the king's tasks: Dhristi, Jayanta, Vijaya, Sidhartha, Arthasadhaka, Ashoka, Mantrapala and Sumantra was the eighth. There were two officiating priests, supreme among *rishis*: Vasishtha and Vamadeva. There were other ministers too. They were prosperous and great-souled, learned in the sacred texts and firm in their valour. They possessed energy, forgiveness and fame. They smiled before they spoke. Because of anger, desire or wealth, they never spoke false words. There was nothing that was unknown to them, in their own kingdom, or in that of others, whether it had been done, was being done, or was being thought of. This was ensured through spies. They were skilled in administration and their affections had been tested. (By the king, so that they did not yield to nepotism and other relationships.) At the right time, the appropriate punishment was imposed, even on their own sons. They were devoted to accumulating the treasury and the army. They caused no violence to even men who were unfriendly, as long as they were blameless. They were brave and always full of enterprise, devoted to the science of governing. They were pure and always protected those who resided in the kingdom. In an attempt to fill up the treasury, they did not cause violence. After examining a man's strengths and weaknesses, they imposed extremely stiff punishments. Pure and singleminded, all of them governed together. In the city or in the kingdom, there was no man who was a liar. There was no man who was wicked, addicted to another person's wife. Every-

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thing in the kingdom was peaceful and the city was also like that. All the ministers were well-attired and well-decorated, excellent in conduct. For the sake of the king, their eyes of good policy were always open. They obtained their good qualities from their preceptors and were renowned for their valour. Because of their intelligence and decisions, they were famous in foreign countries too. Those ministers were devoted to providing advice that brought welfare.

After 'Bala Kanda', we continue to have intermittent references to Ayodhya. After all, there is a *kanda* known as 'Ayodhya Kanda' too. Rama enters Ayodhya and starts to rule towards the end of 'Yuddha Kanda'. We have a description of Rama-rajya there. Rama

sacrificed excellent horses at one hundred *ashvamedhas* sacrifices and gave away copious quantities of *dakshina*. As long as Rama ruled the kingdom, no widows lamented. There was no fear from predatory beasts. There was no fear on account of disease. There were no bandits in the world. No one suffered from lack of riches. The aged did not have to perform funeral rites for the young. (That is, the young did not die before the old.) Everyone was cheerful. Everyone was devoted to dharma. They looked towards Rama and did not cause violence towards each other. As long as Rama ruled the kingdom, people were without disease and devoid of sorrow. They lived for one thousand years and had one thousand sons. The trees extended their trunks and always had flowers. They always had fruit. The rain showered down at the right time. The breeze had a pleasant touch. People were satisfied with their own tasks and performed their own duties. As long as Rama ruled, there was no falsehood in the subjects and they were devoted to dharma. (This was Treta Yuga, when dharma was more prevalent than in Kali Yuga.) Rama ruled the kingdom for ten thousand years.

Like many texts, the Valmiki Ramayana also ends in a somewhat tragic way. We have that in 'Uttara Kanda'. (The critical edition excises large parts of 'Uttara Kanda'.) In 'Uttara Kanda', we are told the Sarayu, with the sacred waters, flowed in a westward direction, half a *yojana* from Ayodhya. When it was time for Rama to leave the earth, he and his brothers went to the banks of the Sarayu. The citizens of Ayodhya, all of whom had followed Rama, went to the divine world of Santanika. Kusha ruled in Kushavati and Lava ruled in Shrivati/Shravasti. Ayodhya was deserted. ■



Bibek Debroy has translated
the Mahabharata and
the Valmiki Ramayana
into English



Ayodhya

COVER STORY



An illustration from Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, c 1775

The Original Existential Hero

We stay with Rama—the human because of his resemblance to us. We see our own lives reflected in his: we recognise the oppositional pulls of family and society, we experience the tensions between love and duty, we struggle with the often unbridgeable chasm between personal happiness and a larger good

By Arshia Sattar

Over the last four decades, the achingly beautiful story of Rama, prince of Ayodhya—his exile, his abducted wife, his glorious victory over the *rakshasa* king made possible with the help of his magnificent monkey companions and his triumphal homecoming—has been placed at the centre of a religious nationalism predicated on hierarchies and exclusions. Now, more than ever, as this robust, diverse and generous tradition that feeds our art forms and our stories is narrowed to a single telling and a single ideology, it is appropriate to remind ourselves just how rich and widespread Rama's story is. In doing so, we might well consider why it is that Rama himself continues to haunt our cultural discourses, centuries after his story was first told on the northern river plains of the Indian subcontinent.

We are not clear about the origins of the story we now call the *Ramayana*. What we do know is that between the 5th century BCE and the 3rd century CE, a beautiful Sanskrit text developed around this story and was attributed to a poet-sage named Valmiki. Something about this story excited the imaginations of individuals and communities so much that hundreds of Rama stories proliferated across South Asia and beyond. They are told in text and in song, in dance, music, painting and sculpture, each unique in itself but still conforming to a fundamental structure of characters and events such that these stories together now constitute a tradition.

What is it, then, about this story that refuses to be contained, either by the time in which it was written or by the space that it purports to occupy? Why are there so many Rama stories? Why do they take positions of opposition and subversion as much as they act as mirrors that both complement and supplement the many-layered and multi-faceted narrative that responds so pliantly to the needs of the teller, be the teller Kampan (*Ramavataram*, 12th century CE) or Tulsidas (*Ramcharitmanas*, 16th century CE), Mani Ratnam (*Raavan*, 2010) or Samhita Arni (*The Missing Queen*, 2013)? Why does each historical and political moment feel the need to



COVER STORY

appropriate the Ramayana to its needs? How is it that artists of all kinds find emotions in the story that can be explored and newly expressed? Devotees of Rama might not find the need to ask or answer these questions but for the rest of us, who situate ourselves differently in relation to Rama, the questions we ask (if not the answers we find) will surely tell us something about ourselves and our own quest for meaning, both aesthetic as well as existential.

Thirty years ago, AK Ramanujan reminded us that by acknowledging the multiplicity of Rama stories, we are able to comprehend more fully the majesty of the Ramayana itself. He argues that these many Ramastories are not 'versions' of a fixed 'original' story. Rather, they are fullblown and deeply felt reconfigurations of a story that is already known. The story is told again because it arises from a question that the prevalent (or dominant) story does not answer. It is retold because we believe that the story can answer the questions that we are asking, that it can include us within its rich tapestry of love and longing, of trust and betrayal, of difficult choices and shattered dreams. The focus of our anxieties and our aspirations is Rama, the central character of the story, from whom the most is demanded both within and without the story, perhaps as a result of his being both human and divine.

Kamban, author of Tamil *Ramavataram* of 12th century CE



Ever since the theology of Vaishnavism indelibly coloured the story of the 'perfect man', devotees and believers have kept Rama in their minds as part of their faith and religious practice. A story of god's presence among humans and his infinite grace provides a reassurance and certainty that is unmatched by anything profane. For this reason alone, the divine presence and all it promises should be recalled fully and frequently by the devotee. But those of us who approach Rama's story without religious belief will have other reasons, perhaps equally passionate, for our attachment to it. I believe we remain committed to retelling Rama's story over and over again because we have not been able to come to terms with the troubled love and the heart-wrenching loss in the lives of Rama and Sita. The story haunts us because it is tragic, ending in a separation between a husband and a wife who have loved each other through much trial and tribulation. Some of us have sympathy

for both Rama and Sita, some of us find it difficult to understand what motivates the characters in the story to behave in the ways that they do, be it Dasharatha, Kaikeyi, Ravana or Rama. Whatever our question, we return to the story, rather than to history or sociology, to find the answer.

Over the same centuries that wove righteousness and divinity into the story of the god who lives as a man among humans, women have been made uncomfortable by Rama's actions towards Sita after he brings her back from Lanka. For a man such as him, or even for a god such as him, to be so disturbed by marketplace gossip about his wife's chastity that he banishes her, pregnant and alone, into the forest simply does not make sense. Lest we believe that it is only the feminisms of modernity that have opened up this critique of Rama, women's songs in the eastern dialects of Hindi such as Maithili and in Telugu

and Marathi (to name just a few examples) from hundreds of years ago will assure us that even our ancestral mothers and sisters were troubled by Rama's behaviour and found words with which to reprimand him, to caution Sita and to sympathise with her predicament. It is worth pointing out that these songs and ditties are usually the purview of non-Brahmin women but in more places than we care to notice, mothers, wives, sisters have found in the silence of the Ramayana's women a place that they can fill with their own voices. I would argue that it is this discomfort with a figure so lauded and honoured by traditional social and religious groupings that keeps Rama alive in the minds and hearts of women. As long as patriarchies perpetuate a rigid and uninflected idea of Rama as the paradigmatic Indian male, women will be compelled to respond with resistance and subversion, even if those forms of expression continue to lie outside the so-called canon of the text.

My personal attachment to the Valmiki Ramayana also revolves around the love story between Rama and Sita and my continual attempts to understand how Rama could have treated the woman he loved more than anybody the way he did. Valmiki's text implicitly suggests various reasons for Rama's unexpected behaviour, reasons and motivations that are rooted in his own inner conflicts which are all too human. It is clear that Rama is mad

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(Left) A scene from Mani Ratnam's *Raavan*; *The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni



What binds us, the non-believers, to Rama is his essential humanity: his grief, his desire to always do the right thing and finding that sometimes, actions based in his best intentions have had the worst consequences for those that he loves

with grief when Sita is abducted. He mourns for her as one would for a beloved that has died. I believe this is crucial to understanding how he treats Sita once he has her back. For a constellation of reasons that involve dharma, his impending kingship and the destroyed reputation of his own father who succumbed to his love for a woman, Rama decides that once Sita has been taken away by Ravana, he will never really be able to have her back. She will always be stained by her separation from him and her confinement in the house of another man, however involuntary those might have been. Although he is utterly heartbroken at what he knows will eventually be a continued (perhaps permanent) separation, Rama does everything needed to rescue his wife. He claims that the repeated tests of her chastity are not for him, they are for the world to know that she has remained both faithful and safe from sexual aggression. I may not agree with Rama's reasons for doing what he does, but at least I know that he has them and that they might arise not from a lack of circumspection but from an excess of it. This quality of considering the choices before him, aware that they might not lead to ease or comfort, brings me to Rama. It does not push me further away from him.

Surely, this is the very nub of our continued engagement with Rama and his story: how do we reconcile ourselves to the fact that 'good' people do 'bad' things? Vaishnava theology, which elevates Rama to being an avatara of Vishnu, relieves its followers from

having to contend with 'good' and 'bad.' Such questions haunt those of us who come to the story without surrender to Rama's divine nature and status. What binds us, this latter group of non-believers, to Rama is his essential humanity: his grief, his desire to always do the right thing and finding that sometimes, actions based in his best intentions have had the worst consequences for those that he loves. Rama's existential conflicts are the same as ours—he must negotiate the compulsions of his personal desires against the expectations that others have of him.

We stay with Rama-the-human because of his resemblance to us. We see our own lives reflected in his: we recognise the oppositional pulls of family and society, we experience the tensions between love and duty, we struggle with the often unbridgeable chasm between personal happiness and a larger good. A single politically and socially dominant Ramayana story shows us one way of resolving these conflicts, a way that is idealised by patriarchal hegemonies into the only way for us to be 'good' in the world. When those of us who seek to challenge these and other hegemonic structures in our retellings of the Ramayana, we are talking back to power in a language that we have made our own. Power cannot pretend that it does not understand our words, for it is their language we are using, it is their language that we have taken away from them. The Rama story haunts us because we know it can be ours, too. ■



Arshia Sattar is an author and translator. Her forthcoming book is *Maryada: The Search for Dharma in the Ramayana* (HarperCollins)



COVER STORY

The Awakening

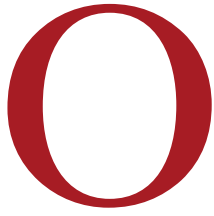
The Ram temple offers itself as an opportunity for a new generation to think for themselves about this wave of history and faith that has washed in, sweeping away a great amount of historical angst and refuse

By Keerthik Sasidharan

Ram Ki Paidi on the eve of the Ram temple foundation-laying ceremony in Ayodhya, August 4



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One of the extraordinary, but often little remarked, aspects of the Mahabharata is that the epic reaches us after having percolated through the minds of various narrators. In the first indexical chapter called 'Anukramanika' which provides a bird's eye view of what is to follow, we—

along with the sages who lived in the Naimisha forest—hear the epic from Ugrashava, who tells us that he had heard the epic when Vaishampayana narrated it at King Janmejaya's snake sacrifice, who in turn had learnt it from Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, the editor-author of the epic. But in turn Ugrashava tells that Vyasa had also taught the epic to his son Shuka, who in turn had sung it to the Gandharvas and the Asuras, leaving open the idea that other versions of the great epic of the Bharatas are out there. Before long, what one realises is that the Mahabharata, like a postmodern text, throbs with self-awareness about its own origins, the narrative multiplicities contained within, the various modes of transmissions involved and the possibility that other recensions may tell the story differently. In all of this, the reliance on 'memory' as the means to instantiate a particular telling of the epic remains vital. To this end, the ability to recall—which we call, quite blandly, 'memory'—has acquired an extraordinary number of valences during the course of Indian history.

From the simple act of remembering an event or thing, to thinking of memory as a cure for psychological states (such as when a depressed Hanuman is told his origin story to awaken him), to recalling that which was forgotten due to Fate or a clever dramatist (as in, when Dushyanta remembers Shakuntala in Kalidasa's *Abhijñana Sakuntalam*), to models in Nyaya philosophy wherein memory (*smṛiti*) fuses with sustained awareness (*pratyabhijñā*) to constitute imagination (*bhavana*), to an omniscient recollection of previous and futures lives (what the Jains call '*kevalin*'), memory has had more valences in our cultural past than we realise in our secularised present. In our times, memory is deemed pregnant with the possibility of supervening the political status quo—a possibility that the Czech-French writer Milan Kundera summarises as 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.

Perhaps nowhere is the interplay between memory and forgetfulness mined more fruitfully in the Indian tradition than in the Ramayana. Here memory and forgetfulness sometimes appear in the same character. Hanuman, who famously remembers Rama for all eternity, is often mysteriously forgetful as well. To the amusement of children for centuries, in the 'Yuddha Kanda' of the

Ramayana Hanuman goes in search of a cure for the wounds that Ravana's son Indrajit had inflicted on Lakshmana. But despite the guidance and instructions of Sushena, an aged physician-ape in Sugriva's simian army, to look for the *sanjivani* herbs upon arriving at the Gandhamadana Hills, Hanuman forgets what it is that he is looking for. 'I have forgotten the very thing for which I have come here,' says Hanuman in Valmiki's Ramayana. Later in the epic, after the War of Lanka, Hanuman is instructed by Rama to head to Ayodhya, scope out the nature of his brother Bharata's intention—Was he amenable to his elder brother's return? Did he have mala fide intentions? And so on—and return to report the status. But, once more, Hanuman forgets to follow through and, instead, ends up bonding deeply with Bharata. More strikingly, even Rama himself every so often 'forgets' who he truly is. In turn, he is prompted by others who emerge onto the scene and remind him of his true nature, which is that he is an avatar of Vishnu tasked with ridding the world of Ravana, who embodies chaos and cruelty despite all his learning. In essence, even Rama who is according to Hindu tradition the embodiment of Dharma, of righteousness codified by procedure and precedent, every so often needs a prompt and reminder of what truly matters.

Unlike texts where the author can devise the means to remind characters and readers of the narrative needs of the plot, cultures and civilisations arrive at other ways to institutionalise memory.

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Among these, solutions devised by early Hindu and Buddhist traditions to ameliorate this problem of forgetfulness—be it of our reliance on and sustenance of the gods or the debt we owe to our ancestors—the most prominent has been to construct architectural assemblages in the privacy of homes as aedicules for worship or in public in the form of monuments. In both cases, the act of remembering the past and the gods is married to physical edifices that can withstand the elements. So strong is this commingling of stone structures and ideas of the hereafter that even to this day in Tamil Nadu, funerals are still sometimes referred to as *kal-eduppu* (awakening or erecting the stone). Over time, these structures—some of them were

hypaethrals and others were closed-roof structures—acquired and accreted upon themselves other meanings, including the idea that within these structures were housed the gods. A vast litany of terms and their cognates—*mandira*, *sthana*, *griha* in Sanskrit; *podiyil*, *manram*, *kottam*, *koyil*, *madom* in Tamil; *vihara*, *palli* in Jainism-Buddhism-inflected usage—has been used over the last three millennia to accommodate what is, ultimately, a public space for that most private of acts: communion with oneself and the unseen that thrives amid us.



COVER STORY

In our own lifetimes, perhaps the most widely watched and eagerly anticipated structure is the creation of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple. But this structure comes up at a time when we have largely forgotten what temples have often meant to societies—and simply insist on thinking of these as places of worship. It is a testament to the aetiolation in our thinking and the inability to think past colonial readings or the lack of vocabulary in our republic's secular discourse which insists on reading the temple as merely a Hindu church or a Hindu mosque. It has not helped that over the past 40-odd years, the legal quagmires and violent discontents with which the Ram Janmabhoomi movement has often been aligned with has uniformly traduced our understanding of the temple as the byproduct, or the end goal, of a property dispute and a political project. To this end, the result has been a curious desiccation of our understanding of the role temples have played in India's collective imagination and, more importantly, a failure to ask what particular role the Ayodhya temple will play in the future of India. Those who litigate in the public square on the proposed Ram temple in the name of 'secularism' often forget that temples have rarely existed outside the social environs in which they are part of. The consequence is that temples accrete norms, find means for new negotiations between their devotees and their needs and ultimately acquire a bivalent character—which, on the one hand, is steeped in ritual and procedure, and, on the other, acquires the all-too-real functions that any thriving institution needs. Temples, in this sense, are texts built out of stone—where the reader and the author are in perpetual tension on the question of interpretation.

Unlike a particular church or mosque, contrary to how it is often portrayed, a temple is a more elastic and capacious site of social renegotiations. In parts this capaciousness is born out of the understanding of how the gods emerge into a particular space. In most common forms of Christianity and Islam, it is the community of worshippers that transforms space into a formal church or a mosque. In both cases, the space or geography itself has little codified meaning and all meaning arrives through the presence of devotees. In contrast, in most Hindu traditions, the very process of transfiguring space into a temple involves the act of inviting the gods who are out there and placing them into an enclosed space. Elaborate rituals are devised to house the gods, who aren't often amenable to human entreaties and efforts to situate them. In exchange for taking away the gods' freedom to meander and make playthings out of our lives, humans offer to worship the gods to sustain their prowess. Intimately tied to this metaphysics of space and consecration are questions like who

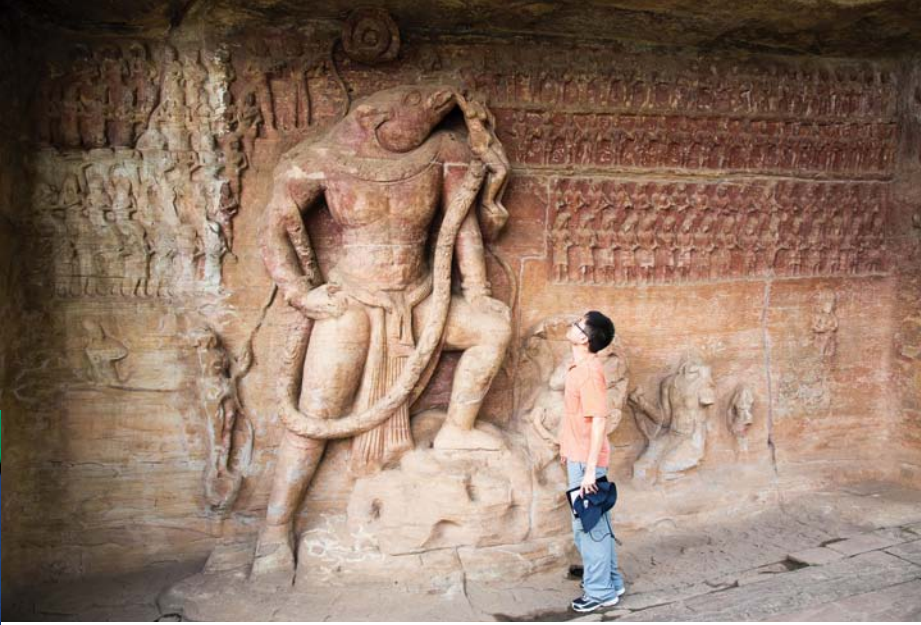
For much of the colonial period, the **Maha Bodhi temple** at Bodh Gaya in Bihar—which was then controlled by Naga Sadhus, not Buddhists—the primary object of veneration and prayer for Hindus was the Bodhi tree. The idol inside the temple—a Buddha with a Vaishnaivite mark on his forehead—was secondary



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can do the invitation, how does one speak to the gods, what is the signification of worship, what kind of gods are acceptable, what is the relationship among them? The different answers to these questions have led to an efflorescence of religious expressions and social functions. Three relatively less common examples should help us see the diversity of interplay between the temple and the societies in which it finds itself.

At the Udayagiri caves, near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, over the past century, archaeologists have patiently worked to shed light on inscriptions that speak of the tenure of Chandragupta II and Kumaragupta I in the 4th-5th centuries CE. What makes Udayagiri fascinating is the coming together of ritual, kingship and religion. Here, we learn of Chandragupta II's *rajasuya yajna*, which consecrated him as *chakravartin* (the emperor), by describing himself as *paramabhagavata*, the most prominent of devotees of Vishnu. To this end, in Cave 8, there are verses recorded in the *anustubh* metre that describes the consecration of a cave into a shrine and Chandragupta II's blessedness courtesy the worship of Narasimha. This place of worship was crucial in the construction and legitimization of a sovereign, who governed over diverse principalities which



Vishnu as Varaha Avatar in the Udayagiri caves in Madhya Pradesh

had agreed to the legitimacy of Chandragupta II's powers. This is a roundabout way of saying that right from the Gupta era—to say nothing of Ashoka nearly a millennium earlier—there were ideologically coherent claims of state formation that was linked to the creation of formal places of worship.

On the other end, in Tamil Nadu's South Arcot district is a temple of Draupadi Amman—the heroine of the Mahabharata as the Mother Goddess—outside which are smaller temples to other deities who are guardians of the place. One of these deities is the figure of Muttaal Ravuttan—a godhead with a belly, who demands meat and toddy as offering. And there is one other detail: Muttaal Ravuttan is a Muslim warlord who is the descendant of north Indian horseriders who had arrived into Tamil country. In some versions of his origin story, Ravuttan agrees to abandon Islam in order to serve Draupadi after she appears in his dream and prevents him from killing his sister. In this case, the temple of Draupadi Amman becomes a site of complex social negotiations over generations where historical chronology of belief formation is largely irrelevant.

For much of the colonial period, the Maha Bodhi temple at Bodhi Gaya in Bihar—which was then controlled by Naga Sadhus, not Buddhists—the primary object of veneration and prayer for

Hindus was the Bodhi tree. The idol inside the temple—a Buddha with a Vaishnavite mark on his forehead—was secondary. Later when the questions of temple ownership rose to the fore, the *mahant* transformed the Buddha from a Vaishnavite avatar into a Shaivite manifestation of Rudra by smearing his forehead with vermillion and describing him as Shiva's dreaded form of Mahakala Bhairava. In his wonderful biography of Anagarika Dharmapala, the great Sri Lankan reformer-radical, the author Steven Kemper quotes an anonymous author who had complained about this transformation of a deity into a shapeshifting being.

As the temple at Ayodhya slowly awakens into form, two things are clear. One, the politics of how the temple came to be will slowly erode and only ideologically convenient summaries will remain. Two, the more interesting aspect is not the politics of the temple's history, but

rather how Hindus deal with the creation of a longheld collective aspiration. What kinds of eclecticism, esotericisms and engagements from across India will accrete upon this temple? Will its practices and presence resemble the relatively homogenous temples of the Swaminarayan sects or will it resemble the swirling chaos of the *ghats* of Varanasi where traditions have stained and coloured the space over millennia? Will the leaders of the temple's administration find it within themselves to be innovative by transcending caste or geography as Adi Sankara did millennia ago when he created traditions wherein Veerashaiva men from Karnataka became priests at the temples in Kedarnath, Namboodiri Brahmins from Kerala at Badrinath or priests from Nepal and Maharashtra at Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu. The Ayodhya temple, which has come at great human cost—in blood and time—ought to be seen as an opportunity that allows for the diversity of worship of Rama across India and beyond to burble up into public view. The temple now offers itself as a site for a new generation to think for themselves about this wave of history and faith that has washed in, sweeping away a great amount of historical angst and refuse. In turn, it has produced a clearing, an opening, a new cloistered ground unto which much ritual and ceremony will be poured freely. All the while, man will anxiously ask that oldest of questions he has asked himself since the dawn of religious consciousness: will the gods accept this offering? ■



Keerthik Sasidharan is an author who lives in New York City. His forthcoming book *The Dharma Forest* will be published by Penguin India

Lal Krishna Advani
on his Ram Rath
Yatra in October 1990





COVER STORY

A Year in the Life of Ayodhya

Events that have followed the Ram Rath Yatra of 1990, culminating in August 2020, are a collective testimony to LK Advani's strategic thinking

By Kanchan Gupta

Having visited Ayodhya several times over 1988-1989 to report on the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, there was no way I was going to miss being there on October 30th, 1990. BJP leader LK Advani's Ram Rath Yatra, which had begun from Somnath, was to have culminated at Ayodhya on that day which was to also witness the start of '*kar seva*', or voluntary work by Hindus, to prepare the ground for the Shri Ram Mandir to commemorate the place of his birth. An old dilapidated three-domed mosque, built by Babur's commander Mir Baqi in 1528 and called Babri Masjid, stood at the site held sacred by Hindus as Ram Janmasthan. Mir Baqi had built the mosque, as was proved by the Archaeological Survey of India's excavation and deposition by archaeologists and historians in court later, after demolishing a temple. Much of the structure, including the granite pillars with intricate carvings of Hindu motifs, was visibly built with the remains of a temple. It was obvious to any visitor.

The mosque had remained locked for decades after an idol of Ram Lalla, or baby Ram, appeared under its central dome in 1949. The Faizabad district court had ordered the reopening of the disputed structure for *darshan* and worship in 1986; that coincided with the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) launching a vigorous campaign for the liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi. Three years later, in 1989, hoping to stall the rising tide of Hindu anger over his Government's abject capitulation on the Shah Bano judgment and blunt the Opposition's campaign against corruption in the Bofors deal, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had allowed the VHP to conduct a formal '*shilanyas*' or foundation stone-laying ceremony for the proposed Ram Mandir. That did not quite help Rajiv Gandhi—the Congress lost the General Election and VP Singh became Prime Minister, propped up by both the BJP and the Left.

If seven days is a long time in politics, a year is an era. The anti-corruption agenda of 1989 had transmogrified into Mandal politics in 1990, threatening to rip apart India's social fabric as never before, pitting Hindu versus Hindu, caste versus caste. Advani stepped into the breach with his Ram Rath Yatra. As he would explain later, it was important to present the nation with a unifying cause that would bring together Hindus and prevent Hindu society from fracturing and splintering along caste lines. That cause, Advani decided, was Ayodhya with its central theme of Shri Ram, the great unifier. Events that have followed, culminating in the Shri Ram Mandir Bhoomi Puja on August 5th, are a collective testimony to Advani's strategic thinking.

The Ram Rath Yatra, however, did not reach Ayodhya after setting off from Somnath. Lalu Prasad, then Chief Minister, ordered the district magistrate of Samastipur to arrest Advani as his *rath* trundled into Bihar. That singular act led to the BJP withdrawing its support to VP Singh which, in turn, triggered a slew of events, including the police firing on *kar sevaks*, killing a large number of them, on October 30th and November 2nd, 1990. That incident marked a watershed in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, making a negotiated settlement of the nearly five-century-old dispute non-negotiable.

So there I was in my office at Statesman Building in Calcutta, as the city was then called, trying to figure out whether I should go ahead with my planned visit to Ayodhya. It was essentially meant to cover the arrival of the *rath yatra* in Ram Ji ki Nagri and Advani's moment of triumph. But now that Advani had been arrested, and Mulayam Singh Yadav, then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, had decided not to let anybody enter the temple town, let alone conduct *kar seva*, it didn't make much sense to go ahead with the visit. On the other hand, it would be interesting to check out how exactly did Mulayam Singh plan to stop the hordes of *kar sevaks*,



COVER STORY

who had already started out for Ayodhya from various parts of the country, from entering the town which could be reached, apart from by rail and road, by simply walking through the surrounding fields. The day before I left for Lucknow en route to Ayodhya, my editor asked me to look for birds in the sky: Mulayam Singh Yadav had told an obliging media “*Parinda nahin paar hone dunga* (I won’t let even a bird to fly into Ayodhya)”.

By now, the road from Lucknow to Ayodhya had become familiar and I had a fair idea how long it would take me to reach Faizabad, where journalists would park themselves in the two hotels, very spartan and with rudimentary services, that then existed in the vicinity of Ayodhya. The hotels were located, by happenstance but to the great convenience of visiting mediapersons, right across the local post office, or PCO, from where stories could be filed without much effort, unless the telex machine was down, in which case we had to shout into a Bakelite phone, reading out the story to a disinterested sub-editor at the other end who would laboriously write it down. If both the telex and the phone were down, the only way of communicating with our offices was through telegram. The only problem was that the pages with strips of text pasted on them could be stuck together by the time the telegram reached the newsdesk.

In which case, it went into the wastepaper basket. But we digress.

It turned out to be a rather long drive with several diversions and many check-points along the highway. This is how the routine went: The ramshackle Ambassador car in which I was travelling would be flagged down by policemen every few kilometres. They would peer into the car, open the dicky, look at my bags and then ask me where I was going. Ayodhya. Why? To report for my paper. ID card? Yes. The card would pass from grimy hand to grimy hand and each of them would stare at it balefully for a few minutes. It would then do a reverse journey and reach me. After a flick of the hand, the driver would resume the journey. At the last checkpost, a young police officer, possibly a deputy superintendent of police, told me that my ID card would take me up to Faizabad and not beyond. I would have to get a permit from the district magistrate’s (DM) office to visit Ayodhya.

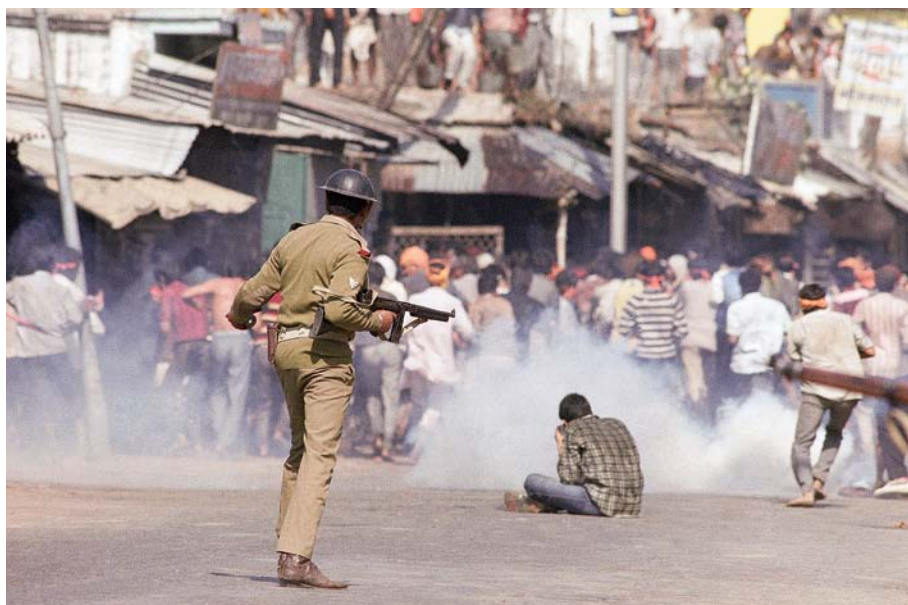
It was late afternoon when I reached the hotel where I had booked a room. As usual, the place was crammed with journalists, most whom I had met on previous visits to Ayodhya. A sort of camaraderie had developed amongst us. The DM’s office was to issue permits in the evening. We set forth in a group with the legendary Mark Tully leading us. At the DM’s office we were told

to wait—the wait lasted for a couple of hours. Armed with the small pink cards, we returned to our hotel only to find there was a power cut. Was that an attempt to stop the media from filing stories?

We were loafing outside the hotel when a local resident, who seemed to know Tully, came with information about senior RSS, BJP and VHP leaders sneaking in through the fields around Ayodhya. Till well past midnight, we kept going from village to village, speaking to strangers, each of whom would tell us some more stories of having spotted this or that leader at this or that place. At one point we were too tired to pursue the leads any further. But Tully Sahib would not give up. It was almost dawn when we returned to our rooms, without having met any of the leaders who had sneaked in. (We were to discover the next day that Uma Bharti had cropped her hair and sneaked in riding a motorcycle. Ashok Singhal, the moving spirit of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, was also in town, as was Sadhvi Ritambhara and several others.)

After resting for a couple of hours, we left for Ayodhya. A strange sullen silence hung over the town, the only sound was that of the clanging bells of Hanuman Garhi. The one-and-half-kilometre road to the disputed Babri structure had been barricad-

Police fire tear gas at kar sevaks in Ayodhya, November 2, 1990



There were pools of
coagulating blood, broken glass bangles, bits of
clothes. Some of the kar sevaks grievously wounded
by the raining police lathis sat down, others
staggered along towards Ayodhya, only to be
beaten with lathis again. Then came the tear gas

ed. There was a sea of khaki—armed PAC (state armed police) men were swarming all over the place. I was hanging around with Manoj Raghu-vanshi and his *Newstrak* team. Manoj, with his large build and scowling face, was elbowing his way through the PAC jawans, making a path for us. Suddenly, almost magically, the lanes and bylanes of Ayodhya came to life as hundreds of *kar sevaks* began pouring in, seemingly appearing from nowhere. Cries of 'Jai Shri Ram' rent the air. The *kar sevaks* marched up to the barricade where they were stopped. Tens became twenties, twenties became fifties, fifties became hundreds. There was khaki on one side, saffron on the other. Neither side budged an inch.

After a while we went to the bridge over Saryu river and it was a sight to behold: hundreds of men and women were trying to cross the bridge, only to be met by *lathi*-wielding policemen. They were struck with full force, they fell down bleeding, they stood up, and they started walking again. The bridge was littered with rustic shoes and worn slippers. The small bundles the *kar sevaks* had carried with them on their journey lay around pitifully. There were pools of coagulating blood, broken glass bangles, bits and scraps of the clothes they were wearing. Some of the *kar sevaks* who were grievously wounded by the raining police *lathis* sat down on the bridge, others staggered along towards Ayodhya, only to be beaten with *lathis* again. Then came the tear gas—canister after canister was fired at the *kar sevaks*, a large crowd now, snaking well beyond the other bank of Saryu. But I did not see anybody turning around and walking back. They just kept surging ahead, step by another step.

Manoj said we should go and find a vantage point for ourselves before the crowds overran the place. As we were walking towards the barricade, something extraordinarily dramatic happened. A sadhu jumped into a UP Police bus that had been parked near Hanuman Garhi, got into the driver's seat and drove it at break-neck speed through the barricades towards the Babri structure. With the barricades down, the crowd rushed in from all sides, almost sweeping us from our feet. We scurried to a raised platform where we stood and watched Mulayam Singh's arrangements to stop even a bird from flying into Ayodhya come crashing down as the air reverberated with thousands of voices chanting "Jai Shri Ram".

I was standing next to Manoj, and there was a sadhu standing

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next to me, when the PAC began firing at the crowd of *kar sevaks*. By then, some of them had reached the Babri structure and clambered atop the domes and raised saffron flags. Among them were Ram Kothari and Sharad Kothari, the 'Kothari Brothers' from Calcutta. A helicopter came sweeping in, and we heard sniper shots. That was a momentary distraction. A bullet came and hit the sadhu standing next to me, a large crimson spot appeared on his forehead, and he crumbled on the spot. Manoj pulled me aside and we ran for cover. That moment was subsequently frozen on the cover page of a popular magazine called *Probe* which was published from

Allahabad and is now defunct.

Later that evening, I filed my story, as did the others. We went with the official claim of '17 killed, many injured in the firing to control unruly mobs'. With curfew imposed and all passes cancelled, it was impossible to fact-check that claim. Three days later, the *kar sevaks*, wounded but not defeated, returned to continue their march to Ram Janmasthan. Some of them managed to reach the disputed structure, some climbed atop it with saffron flags, only to be clobbered and shot by the PAC. On that day, the bodies of the Kothari brothers were found in a lane near Hanuman Garhi. There were stories of how they had been dragged out of a house and shot dead. Till date, nobody knows for sure.

In 2017, Mulayam Singh, pretending repentance, admitted 28 *kar sevaks* were killed over October 30th and November 2nd, 1990. Those who know better peg the number of fatalities at 56 or more. Rajnath Singh, the editor of *Swatantra Bharat*, was the only journalist to dare Mulayam Singh and call his bluff. He was hounded out of his job.

In many ways, 1990 determined the denouement of the passion play called Ayodhya. After October 30th that year, there was to be no going back, there could not have been any going back. Those who thought otherwise clearly have no feel for the pulse of the masses whose consciousness is rooted in the life of Shri Ram, for whom 'Jai Siya Ram' are three words that lie at the core of India's civilisation and culture, faith and religiosity. I recall ending my report along these lines; my conclusion was excised by my editor who thought I was exaggerating. I wonder what he thinks today. ■



Kanchan Gupta is a political analyst and chairman of Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation

Workless at Home

What it's like to be suddenly unemployed during a pandemic

By **RAHUL PANDITA**

The Covid pandemic has lent a severe jolt to India's pre-existing economic slowdown. The impact of the pandemic now has resulted in a surge of job losses.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 122 million people lost their jobs in March and April alone. Most sectors are affected, but those hit the worst include aviation, food, tourism and entertainment.

The Government's data reveals that the pandemic has adversely impacted over 555 million workers, with the unemployment rate reaching 27.1 per cent in the beginning of May. The employment rates may have eased since the unlocking process began, but the crisis is far from over.

In the IT and BPO sector alone, 30,000 jobs have been lost, while estimates reveal that twice this number are on leave without pay currently. Hotel industry experts say that around 35 per cent of the industry may shut down, which could climb to half by the end of this year. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has estimated that around 30 lakh jobs may be lost in aviation and its allied sectors.

Openspoke to dozens of people, young and middle-aged, who have lost their jobs

"MANY WHO HAD PAID ME AN ADVANCE FOR DESIGNING FESTIVE WEAR ASKED ME TO HOLD ON TO IT, SAYING THEY WOULD GET BASIC CLOTHES MADE OUT OF IT LATER"

Joe Mansoori





Photograph by **RAUL IRANI**

“EVEN BEFORE THE LOCKDOWN, THE FIRST ONES TO STOP TAKING CLASSES WERE THE ELDERLY PEOPLE SINCE THEY ARE AT MAXIMUM RISK”

Krishna Kumar Mishra

due to the pandemic. Many, including pilots and top chefs and software engineers, have been laid off. But they were not willing to come on record. Some feared that their industries were vengeful and talking about how their previous companies treated them would affect their future job prospects. Many did not want to be identified as they hoped that the lockdown will ease up further and they will join back, if not in their previous job, then at a new place.

But some chose to speak about their experience of losing a job or source of livelihood. Here is the story of five of them.

Joe Mansoori,
45, Designer, Mumbai

Till March this year, Joe Mansoori was a successful designer. He ran a studio and workshop from Mumbai's Bandra area, catering to over 250 clients, including several actors from Bollywood and TV industry (he has been a stylist to actors like Juhi Chawla and Raveena Tandon). His workshop employed 15 workers, who worked on designs made by Mansoori, especially bridal wear.

From March, as the coronavirus scare became pronounced, Mansoori's orders took a big hit, till it came to a point where he says he was not even earning Rs 500.

Initially, Mansoori tried to work it out.

“I told my workers that I would still pay them 50 per cent salary,” he says. But soon it was clear that he could not sustain himself. He had to shut his studio as he could no longer afford to pay the monthly rent of Rs 1 lakh. He rented a godown where he had to dump his machines and cloth material. He also had to let go of his workers.

Around this time, Mansoori's biggest deal of the year, a bridal trousseau order from a client in London who was to have a wedding in Tuscany, came a cropper. “The client called me and said: ‘we will let you know,’” says Mansoori. Similarly, many other orders, including several from NRIs, got cancelled simply because the weddings got cancelled or they got curtailed down to a handful of guests. TV shoots and films got cancelled, too, resulting in further loss of work. “Many who had paid me an advance for designing festive wear asked me to hold on to it, saying they would get basic clothes made out of it later,” says Mansoori.

As he stayed home with his ailing mother, Mansoori fell into depression. “Every morning, I would wake up startled, thinking what will happen now,” he says. After he locked himself in his room for two days, Mansoori's sister came and took him out. “I love my work, so I cried because I was no longer able to do it,” he says. He had to undergo a few sessions of therapy to get out of it.

Currently, Mansoori is supported by

his sister and a few friends from the entertainment industry. The medicines for his mother and the grocery and electricity bills are taken care of by them. “Earlier, I would sometimes just venture out and buy snacks for a few hundred rupees. But now, I am so conscious of spending money because someone is supporting me,” he says.

But Mansoori still thinks that he is lucky that he has a support system. He speaks to his workers who have returned to their villages and are finding it difficult to run their households. “The other day I met someone in my society's departmental store who wore proper clothes. He said he was not a beggar but someone out of job. He requested me if I could buy a little milk for his infant. He refused when I offered a little grocery as well,” says Mansoori.

He now waits for the crisis to be over. “I want to return to my work, and so do my workers,” he says.

Krishna Kumar Mishra,
42, Yoga teacher, Delhi

For almost 20 years, Krishna Kumar Mishra has been teaching Yoga in Delhi. Originally from Madhubani, Bihar, Mishra's clients are either young professionals who have a paucity of time or elderly people who hardly venture out of their homes. So Mishra visits them at their homes to

teach each one of them thrice a week.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, Mishra had about 10 regular clients, ensuring a steady income for his family—a wife and two school-going children.

But as the lockdown began, Mishra found himself stuck at home without any source of income. “Even before the lockdown, the first ones to stop taking classes were the elderly people since they are at maximum risk,” he says. Then others stopped as well.

Only recently, three clients have resumed classes online with him. “But it is very difficult to sustain on so little,” he says.

The Yoga institute Mishra is affiliated with has 32 teachers, including him.

“I KNEW THAT THE MARKET WAS LOW AND SO MANY PEOPLE HAD LOST THEIR JOBS. BUT I STAYED OPTIMISTIC”

Neil Anthony Plumb

Most of them are finding it difficult as people are scared to come in touch.

“I hope this is over soon,” he says. “I would have never imagined it.”

Neil Anthony Plumb,
33, Network Engineer, Hyderabad

On May 26th, Neil Anthony Plumb was working till 4 pm when he got a call from his company’s HR department. Plumb worked as a network engineer for three years in a software development company. “I was told that the company had to let go of some people and I was one of them. I was given a compensation for three months and asked not come to office from the next day,” he says.

Plumb’s wife works as a PR officer in an educational institute and was also forced to take a 50 per cent salary cut from the time the Covid lockdown began. So when Plumb lost his job, he felt scared. “My heart was in my mouth,” he says.

But Plumb says that he soon took stock of his situation. He had seen the migrant

crisis unfold a few weeks ago and told himself that there were millions of people who were less fortunate than him. That helped, he says.

The couple then took a trip to Vizag where Plumb’s in-laws live. He says he started looking at it as a break, and at the same time began looking out for a job. “I knew that the market was low and so many people had lost their jobs. But I stayed optimistic,” he says.

Luckily for him, it worked out. He was called for an interview; after many rounds through video conferencing, he was asked to join.

“I know I am lucky. But it pays to keep faith,” he says.

Chetna Asopiya,
34, Talent acquirer, Mumbai

Chetna Asopiya has worked in talent acquisition for companies like Star TV. A little less than a year ago, she was scouted by a start-up company dealing with business-to-business lifestyle. “I





Photograph by RAUL IRANI

“I HAD BEEN WORKING IN THIS COMPANY FOR MORE THAN 10 YEARS. IT WAS DOING WELL, SO THE THOUGHT THAT I WILL LOSE MY JOB HADN’T EVEN CROSSED MY MIND”

Bilal Ahmed

had always wanted to work in a start-up because I found it very exciting,” she says. So, she joined immediately.

But as soon as the coronavirus crisis struck, her company said that it was finding it difficult to sustain and had to lay off people. “There was no support, no empathy. They just called us and said they were letting us go,” she says.

Suddenly, she found herself without a job; it is then that she began to feel low. “I kept on thinking, why me?” she asks. “I felt as if there were some problem with me and forgot that so many talented and hardworking people around me were losing their jobs in a similar fashion,” she says.

She struggled with her lows for two

weeks before she decided to look up, telling herself that there could be a silver lining to the situation. “I realised it is a good time to take stock of my life and see what I am really good at,” she says.

Chetna has now started designing coasters which she has put up online for sale. “So far, I have only got 20 orders, but I can make it grow,” she says.

Once the crisis is over, Chetna hopes that she can return to work. “The most important thing, meanwhile, is to not sit idle and overthink, because that will get you nowhere. It is important to stop feeling sorry for yourself,” she says.

Bilal Ahmed,
36, IT Manager, Noida

Bilal Ahmed worked in a travel company for over 10 years as an associate engineering manager. From March, his company asked its employees to work from home.

On March 27th, just a few days after the first lockdown, the company addressed over 60 employees in batches over a Zoom call and asked them to go on leave without pay for three months, extendable if need be. “We were asked to get in touch with HR if we wanted to, and we did. But nothing came out of it,” he says.

Bilal is married and suddenly found himself without a job and EMIs to pay, including one for a house loan he had taken earlier. “I had been working in this company for more than 10 years. It was doing well, so the thought that I will lose my job hadn’t even crossed my mind,” he says.

In desperation, he lodged a complaint with the Chief Minister’s Office and the Prime Minister’s Office and with the Noida District Magistrate. “The Government had issued advisory that no company should leave its employees in the lurch,” he recalls. But nothing came out of it.

In June, the company extended their furlough. With no income, Ahmed says his friends are helping him pay his EMIs. But he is not sure for how long this can go on. He is looking for a job, but knows that it could be difficult given the current scenario. “But I am hopeful,” he says. ■

Left Alone

The psychological toll of recovering in isolation

By **NIKITA DOVAL**

On his first evening in the ICU, Ismail Dean, 22, thought his cousin was lying beside him. Only it wasn't the living breathing brother he had grown up with, but the way Dean saw him last: a lifeless body in a cloth bag. "I started panicking and I looked up and everywhere around me were only bodies of Covid patients. It was a pile and I was stuck in it." What Dean experienced that night was a bout of hospital delirium, common among older patients, particularly those in the ICU. But now, it is increasingly being seen in Covid-19 patients such as Dean. Extreme anxiety and isolation from any human interaction—the medical staff attending to you in PPEs only reinforces that isolation—are some reasons why patients are experiencing these hallucinations, leaving them scared, even after they have tested negative.

Dean's stint in the ICU at Nichani hospital in Chennai lasted only three days. Now, the business executive is back at his home in the city. His last Covid-19 test came back negative and he's looking to resuming his life again as his home isolation has ended, but fear persists. "I spent so much time worrying about who all I would have infected as I was absolutely asymptomatic till my test came back positive in the first week of June." He had been making errand runs, albeit with gloves and masks, and fretted over everyone he might have come in contact with. He wanted his sister to retrace his steps, from petrol pumps to grocery stores, to warn everyone. "What if I killed someone? Added to this was the guilt of bringing the virus home—my father had also tested positive. My partner became very evasive when I broke the news, was reluctant to talk. My friends dismissed my diagnosis as a joke and then when they realised I was serious, they stopped taking my calls. It was almost as if they feared catching the infection." Dean is in fact convinced that it was emotional turmoil that worsened his condition leading to his stint in the hospital. His breathlessness started a day after his partner and friends avoided his calls. "I feel that if I had got the required emotional support, then I would have never had to go to the hospital. My father remained asymptomatic throughout. For me, the emotional cost of the infection was more intense than the physical one."

Dean is not the only such Covid-19 patient. Increasingly, the biggest challenge for those who are diagnosed positive but are only mildly symptomatic is the psychological fallout. From isolation in windowless rooms on empty floors almost menacing

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



EXTREME ANXIETY AND ISOLATION—THE MEDICAL LATION—LEAD TO PATIENTS HALLUCINATING

in their eeriness to feeling completely friendless and alone in an alien city to crushing anxiety even when locked in your own home with your family just a few feet away, men and women across the country are finding that it is their emotions they have to be the most careful of.

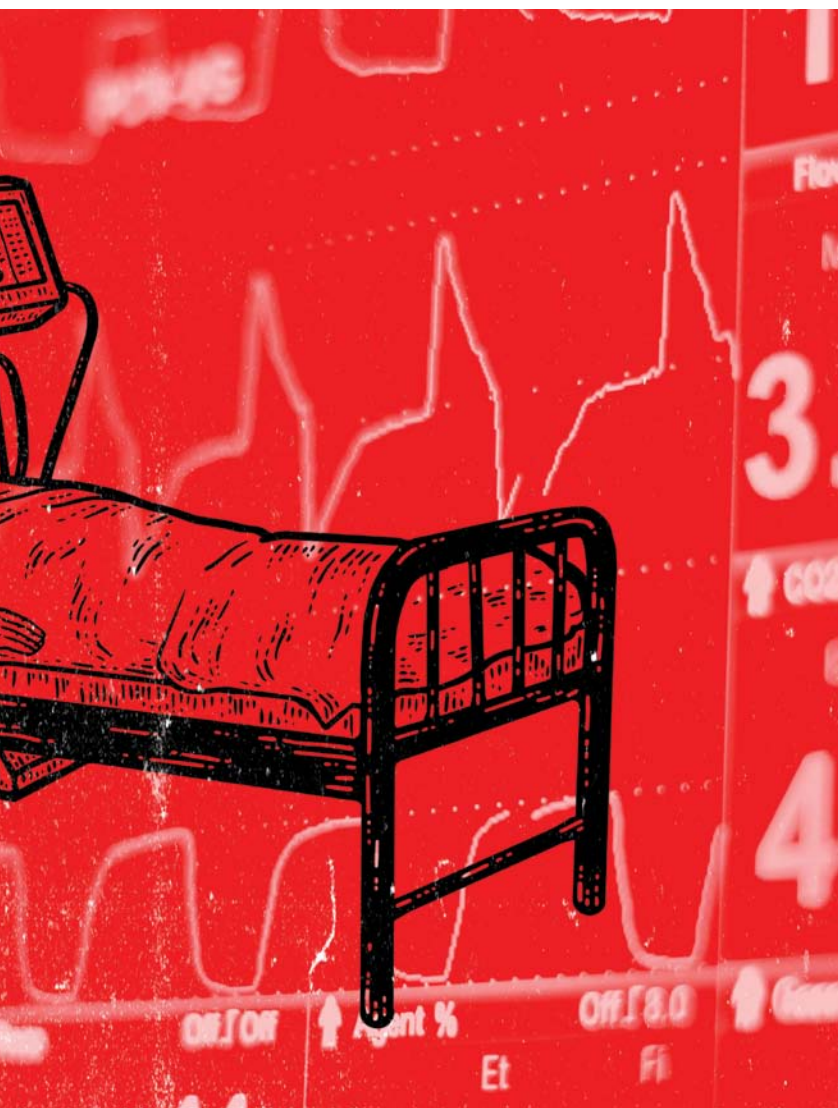
"For me, it was not a matter of if but when I will catch the infection," shares Dr Syed Faizan Ahmad, 25, a general surgeon at Silchar Medical College in Assam. Ahmad has only recently moved to Silchar and by his own admission had not settled in enough to make friends when he was put in isolation for 14 days. "I took the news of my diagnosis very well, in fact I actually thought I could

work in the isolation ward." But the reality was quite different. Ahmad's situation remained stable throughout, but anxiety was his companion from the minute he walked into his room in the isolation ward. "You would think that things that you enjoy—social media, movies—will keep you busy, but no. Your room is a prison cell and you endlessly pace up and down. You crave human contact." Ahmad chose to not tell his family in Etawah, Uttar Pradesh until the fifth day of his diagnosis when he was sure that his condition wasn't going to worsen. His first phone call to them was like water to a parched man.

It has been over four months since Covid-19 was declared a

pandemic, but our knowledge of the disease, its expressions and even how the infection travels is still changing almost every day. Pandemics are as old as time and yet this is an unprecedented situation for almost everyone alive today, historical pieces about the Spanish influenza notwithstanding. "There is a generalised sense of vulnerability and worry. There is significant uncertainty. So even before people are affected by the virus they are affected by the Covid narrative of isolation and helplessness," says Dr Achal Bhagat, psychiatrist, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, Delhi. The extreme narrative built around controlling the disease, from lockdowns to sealing apartments and colonies puts people further at edge. "The emotional impact of all this starts becoming evident in the form of loneliness, fear, anger and self-blame," says Dr Bhagat. At its worst, this can manifest itself in suicides, as are being reported from across the country. More and more hospitals across the country are now introducing counselling for Covid-19 patients.

Medical science has time and again proven how important social interaction is for not just our mental but also physical health. "Human empathy and contact are very important during the time of a health crisis. The immune system responds faster if loved ones are around. Even in the most critical of diseases, a patient is never alone unless it is required medically. But that is not the case with Covid," says Dr Nikhil Modi, a pulmonologist with Apollo Hospital. For instance, Dr Ahmad realised this the first time someone walked into his isolation room. "I had been wearing a PPE kit on my rounds and I never gave a thought to what it might be doing to patients until I was on the other side." As a doctor, he says, patients will pick cues from your expressions when you talk to them. They feel reassured by your tone, eye-contact. There is a greater give-and-take. A PPE kit renders a medical staffer completely unapproachable. "Till the person would speak I would not even know what their gender was." He is scheduled to start his rounds this week and has promised himself that when he talks to Covid-19 patients this time, he will make more of an effort.



**STAFF ATTENDING IN PPES ONLY REINFORCES THAT ISO-
AND SCARED EVEN AFTER THEY HAVE TESTED NEGATIVE**

That is certainly reassuring for Rohit Sachdeva, a radio show host with a Delhi-based channel. Known to his audience as Yuvi, Sachdeva was admitted into a hospital when he suspected he was Covid-19-positive. Quarantined for two weeks in the Philadelphia Hospital in Ambala, Punjab, where his family is, he isn't even sure if there was anyone else on the floor. "The room was windowless. Every day I would walk 60-70 steps to pick up my food which would be left at the end of the corridor and the only person I saw was the doctor. But if you asked me to identify them, I wouldn't be able to, because I never saw their face." Sachdeva's major symptom was a persistent stomach ache and while he knew there wasn't anything to worry about, the isolation made him think otherwise.

Distress during an illness often leads to psychosomatic symptoms. A development professional who did not wish to be identified spoke about how his resting heart rate was higher by almost 20 counts every time he checked but the doctors told him that it was probably his body's heightened reaction to his anxiety. "Till date I don't know if it was an actual symptom." He finally tested negative after three weeks of home isolation in the first week of July but says that even on the road to recovery, every small thing would make him worry. "For instance, I would wake up parched in the middle of the night. It's such a small thing that you wouldn't even think about in ordinary times. But for me it could well have been another symptom," he says.

While the world has been alert about the dangers of Covid-19, its impact on mental health remains underemphasized despite warning from experts. In fact, within a week of the lockdown in March, the Indian Psychiatry Society had released a survey stating that the number of reported cases of mental illness in India had risen by 20 per cent. Economic distress and uncertainty about the future compound the problem.

The narrative around the Covid-19 remains centred on those who succumbed to it, including healthcare professionals who died in the course of attending to patients. Milder cases, while a well-documented fact, don't occupy the same mindspace in the public discourse. "People who survive without an event do not have reason to spend time countering the narrative. Many who do speak of recovery sometimes broadbrush the nuances of the experiences and describing these could be retraumatising," says Dr Bhagat. In an ideal world, there would be a non-judgemental caring health system, but right now it is "inflexible, distant and bureaucratic", he says. Patients are aware that their families cannot be with them, but the absence still rankles. Dean says he was upset with his mother for not coming to see him even though he knew she had to be with his father (who was home-quarantined) and the lockdown would have made it impossible for her to come. "The practical side of me knew what the problems were, but I still felt abandoned." Usually, in hospital wards patients end up forming bonds with each other, exchanging notes on health and life, but that is not the case in a Covid-19-struck world. "Such is the fear that Covid patients feel if we interact with each other, would we end up jeopardising our recovery? Maybe my strain is weaker and the other person's is not? All of this makes the experience very difficult," says Dr Ahmad.

Quite a few of the patients *Open* reached out to spoke about how consumption of news and social media made the experience tougher for them. Both Dean and Sachdeva were in isolation when the actor Sushant Singh Rajput killed himself. Both mentioned how it shook them up completely, adding to their sense of despair. "Frequent checking of symptoms, the narrow focus on [those] who did not make it, all these contribute to a potent cocktail. It is best to keep your phone aside when not talking to people. In fact I would go a step further and recommend that this is all you use it for, talking to people," says Sachdeva.

Nearly everyone *Open* spoke to has recovered, with a few being in the last days of their quarantine. The reaction of people around them has been an eye-opener though, because most do sense hesitancy in friends and family in coming in contact with them. Dean reveals how an uncle refused to let his wife's body come home. Sachdeva's home quarantine ended on July 10th. He now wants to make a video detailing his experiences for social media to address the fear, uncertainty and, yes, the stigma around the disease. "If more and more former patients speak up, it will help destigmatise this as well as offer moral support to those who

"THERE IS A GENERALISED SENSE OF VULNERABILITY AND WORRY. THERE IS SIGNIFICANT UNCERTAINTY. SO EVEN BEFORE PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY THE VIRUS THEY ARE AFFECTED BY THE COVID NARRATIVE OF ISOLATION AND HELPLESSNESS"

Dr Achal Bhagat psychiatrist



are currently positive." The Telangana government is in fact considering asking former Covid patients to step up as volunteers for counselling, while in Chennai, a support group has sprung up of such patients to provide counselling.

At the time of going to press, India had 19 lakh cases of Covid-19. A serological survey conducted in Delhi has found that one in every five individuals has antibodies, indicating the presence of a large number of asymptomatic patients. The fatality rate however continues to be low. It has been argued that the country could have a milder strain of the virus though there is no evidence to back this. What could have played a role is that the bulk of India's population is considerably younger. While most people who have been infected mildly and have recovered will also go on to leave the trauma of their one month or few weeks of isolation behind, the larger looming problem of mental health cannot be ignored. "Diverse groups of people are likely to have mental health needs related to Covid-19. From those who have suffered but recovered, to those who may have unfortunately lost someone to children growing up in these times, everyone may need access to mental health skills to cope. And for that we need to move away from the stigma of seeking help for mental health. It does not have a vaccine," says Dr Bhagat. ■



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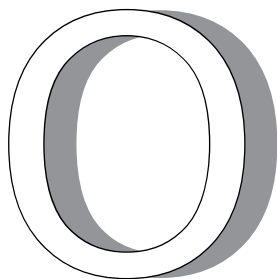
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'Good Cinema Grows on Talent, Not on Power'

Manoj Bajpayee's new film tells of an ageing cop in a polarised city. The actor speaks to **DIVYA UNNY** about the limits of the insider-outsider battle onscreen and offscreen





ON ONE SIDE, a majestic, big-bellied Ganesh idol gets decorated by its maker. On the other, a frail, ageing *hawaldar* removes his police uniform on his final day of duty. Ganesha's face seems to gleam with joy as jewellery is carefully placed around his waist. While *hawaldar* Bhonsle's shoulders droop with the burden of having to let go of his identity of decades. Ganesha moves through the city announcing his arrival, while Bhonsle quietly locks himself into his home, awaiting a future he can't foresee. The day sets and night looms, before a new journey begins, for both.

This is how Manoj Bajpayee's latest release *Bhonsle* opens its world to us. Its first look was launched at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, and India has had to wait two years for it to land here. Directed by Devashish Makhija, it deals with a polarised Mumbai. From art works dedicated to its titular character to spirited discussions around the insider-outsider debate, *Bhonsle* has already created a dedicated online fanbase. Dealing with the volatile yet prevalent conflict between Marathis and 'bhaiyyas' (north Indians) in Mumbai, *Bhonsle* brings our attention to human empathy and fairness, hardwork and inclusiveness. Manoj Bajpayee, who has also produced the film is a tad surprised by the response an uncompromisingly artistic film like *Bhonsle* has received.

Speaking from his home in Mumbai, one Bajpayee has returned to after spending three months of the lockdown in Uttarakhand, he says, "For such a film to touch all the right chords with the audience, and not the festivalgoing ones, but the audience that's choosing to subscribe to the film [on *Sony LIV*], is very heartening. People are talking about the film being slow paced, in the same breath as they are dissecting the complexities of Bhonsle's character and life around him. When you see this, you really start questioning if you know your audience well enough, and if you have done justice to them. It's made me

understand that for years our filmmakers and distributors have dictated what the audience should watch, without understanding the audience completely. It makes me wonder if we have given them a fair chance to understand and appreciate brilliant cinema, and *Bhonsle* has done that."

Bajpayee realises that *Bhonsle* may not have found takers had it been a regular theatrical release, but the democratic nature of OTT platforms and the fact that cinemas aren't running currently seem to have worked to the film's advantage.

Playing the role of Ganpath Bhonsle, Bajpayee is clearly in his element, and this is easily among the top five performances in his three-decade-long career. He shines, as a 60-something retired constable, fighting loneliness and struggling for relevance in a society, where the youth around him are driven by caste divides and trifling insecurities. Bhonsle doesn't say much, but he carries within him the melancholia of an ageing man with no family or friends to fall back on and lives the same routine life.

Thanks to director Devashish Makhija and cinematographer Jigmet Wangchuk's poetic visual design, you can sense Bhonsle's searing loneliness. We've seen Bajpayee play a similar part once before as Professor Siras in *Aligarh* (2015), but though their age and personalities seem similar, he insists that there's a world of a difference between the two. "Bhonsle is not poetic and he's a very strong man where nothing can shake him, except the nothingness around him. Siras on the other hand enjoys his loneliness, enjoys his music. They both seem similar, quiet people. But their conflicts and their environments are different, so are their priorities, which is why I had to approach both characters very differently," he says.

More than a new artistic challenge, the film has brought to the forefront an age-old human-versus-human fight. An immigrant himself, Bajpayee moved from Bihar to Mumbai more than 25 years ago, but still

"Where my characters belong to is just one aspect of their personality. And for me they all belong to the story they are trying to tell" **Manoj Bajpayee** actor

doesn't feel completely at home in Mumbai. "The awareness that this isn't your home never really leaves you. It stares at you every day, and you just about come to terms with it. When I was starting out, I had to hold onto my pride, my dignity despite knowing that I have no one to fall back on here. I was stubborn to make it, and that's perhaps why my fears didn't override me," he says.

He came into the limelight in 1998, in the role of the Marathi man Bhiku Mhatre in *Satya*, and now, after all these years, he plays a Marathi man again, who brings sanity and balance to a divided society. "Where my characters belong to is just one aspect of their personality. And for me they all belong to the story they are trying to tell. For me, the local-versus-immigrant conflict is one that's bigger, it traces back to our history. It's always existed. In all these years, every time I went to a foreign country, like America or the UK or Germany, I saw the same fight. And I would always ask myself why are we so insecure as humans? Bhonsle answered all those questions. He's an ideal man and he'd ask you to talk about an open drain outside his society instead of which community deserves more jobs. He will ask you to focus on the real problems in the state. In that sense Manoj Bajpayee's politics of concern matched that of Bhonsle the character," he adds.

While he might have built a home in Mumbai, Bajpayee still feels uprooted. "When my daughter visits my village, she will be a visitor there. But for me I will be going back home. I think it's the same for everyone who has left his roots behind. I feel free when I go back, a sense of freedom that I never feel in my own space in Mumbai. A space I strived and sacrificed so much to earn. A lot of people around me now face the same fears. I always tell myself that it's important to acknowledge that, and provide people the opportunities I got," he says.

On the other hand, a parallel debate of a similar nature looms large within the film industry. Bajpayee's conversation with film director Shekhar Kapur where they spoke about how Bollywood



A SCENE FROM
BHONSLE

"When I went to foreign countries, I saw the same fight. And I would always ask myself why are we so insecure as humans? Bhonsle answered those questions"

Manoj Bajpayee

as an industry needs to become less threatening, and not sabotage young artists, has been repeatedly quoted, in reference to Sushant Singh Rajput's death. It stands out as a sensible voice in all the noise. Rajput's death raised many questions about how outsiders are treated within Bollywood, answers to which Bajpayee believes don't lie in lynching the so-called 'insiders', but encouraging existing new talent. "This industry, I always maintain, belongs to everyone. We forget the journeys of hugely successful people like Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Vijay Anand. Who were they surrounded by? Writers from Punjab, UP, Bihar, all over the country. They would include real artists as part of their space, spend time with them, create new stories, celebrate festivals with them, and the result is the kind of cinema we have in the 1950s and 1960s. This is the real nature of our film industry. How and when did that change? It's only in the last 20 years this kind of increasing divide is seen. Even when I came in, all I was told is I needed hit films to be accepted in the industry. Nobody cared if I had connections

or relationships in Bollywood," he says.

Bajpayee feels the film industry should be more inclusive. But he thinks it is changing. "The power structure is being questioned every day, and when there is a healthy debate around it, it puts the power structure on the back foot and forces them to question their conduct. You can't allow one set of people to say that this is the industry and the rest are on the fringe. This industry will die if this exclusivity will emerge and become stronger. Any good cinema grows on talent, not on power. We have to start intentionally and consciously pushing new talent and I think it's upon each one of us. Let's make this space more democratic so people are not scared of dreaming big within Bollywood. It shows in every little aspect—how we treat our newcomers, how we treat our subordinates on set, how we treat women in the industry. Every area needs to be looked into, and people need to change their ways to make it healthy and conducive to good work," he adds. It's a fight, which he believes, requires numerous participants to persevere till the end. "I feel like we are at the brink of a big change in the industry. Change for the better, where the culture is not of blind items and disruption, but creation. I just hope we all see it through."

Despite his achievements, he believes he would someday like to have the option of leaving it all behind. "I have played parts in my career like in *Gali Guliyaan* [2018] or *Shool* [1999] where the characters have taken everything from me. It's sometimes at the risk of my mental sanity. But that's what I live for. I love to perform and I go to great lengths to achieve what I need to. But I think if I can let go of everything I achieve, and am not afraid to do so, it's truly liberating too. My wife sometimes says I shouldn't be pressured into doing a film just for survival. She's okay to sell everything and pack up and go live in a village or in the mountains if it comes to that. That's liberating for me, and true freedom comes from that. Not from holding onto the name or fame. It's also when you're able to pass on the baton to the next generation." ■

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TELEVISION



▲
A scene from
A Suitable Boy

▼
A scene from
Normal People

Reading and Seeing

Several high-profile adaptations
of literary fiction prove that big
books can make for fine viewing

By Aditya Mani Jha



IN A BEAUTIFULLY performed scene from the first episode of Mira Nair's BBC mini-series *A Suitable Boy* (adapted from Vikram Seth's 1993 novel of the same name), we see young Lata Mehra (Tanya Maniktala), a university student circa 1951, gently disagreeing with her English professor—a pompous, portly man dubbed 'the great white whale' by Lata's brother-in-law Pran, who teaches in the same department. Lata has just turned in a paper on James Joyce for a class on 'British Masters of the 20th Century'; her professor wants her to choose a different subject since Joyce is not on the syllabus. 'Apart from everything else,' the professor snickers, 'James Joyce is Irish.' Lata retorts that TS Eliot is on the syllabus despite being an American. 'TS Eliot is a great writer,' the professor says, horrified at the dissent. 'And Joyce is not a writer young ladies should be reading at all!'

This short exchange, by itself, tells us so many things about 1950s India (including and especially north India, where Lata's story is unfolding): the education system's colonial hangover, the way women's lives are policed and the unmistakable whiff of Victorian morality. It's a reminder of the strengths of literary fiction—the way a skilled practitioner like Seth can, with a few quick brushstrokes, cover several intersecting sociological themes at once.

A Suitable Boy has been adapted for the screen by Andrew Davies, who is a British favourite when it comes to literary adaptations (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and so on). It's one of several high-profile adaptations of literary fiction 2020 has seen—a roster that includes bestsellers like Eleanor Catton's 2013 Man Booker winner *The Luminaries*, Sally Rooney's Booker-longlisted 2018 novel *Normal People*, Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, Jane Austen's *Emma* and Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*.

Among these, it could be argued that *A Suitable Boy* and *The Luminaries* had the hardest tasks at hand: these are massive

books—doorstoppers, really. To condense the 1,500-odd pages of the former and the 850-odd pages of the latter into six tight hour-long episodes is no mean feat. And the two shows go about their business very differently.

A Suitable Boy, of course, resembles the great novels of previous centuries (think Tolstoy, Austen, Trollope and Dickens) in its sweep and scale—Seth follows four interconnected families (the Mehras, the Kapoors, the Chatterjis and the Khans) across the early 1950s, in a wide-ranging tale involving forbidden love, Hindu-

Muslim conflict, the politics of the Nehru era and even a fascinating little arc on India's early forays into industrial growth. The book's two protagonists, Lata Mehra and Maan Kapoor (Ishaan Khattar), are both involved in doomed romances: Lata is falling in love with Kabir Durrani, a dashing history student in her college, while Maan is besotted with the much older Saeeda Bai (Tabu, in yet another outstanding performance). Kabir is 'unsuitable' because he is a Muslim man; Saeeda doubly so because she is a *tawaif*.

Davies and Nair condense entire sections of the book in fast-moving, well-chosen bits of dialogue, taking care to maintain some of the most recognisable ones verbatim, like the book's iconic opening line, spoken by Lata's mother Rupa Mehra: "You too will marry a boy I choose." There's also a distinct emphasis on approachability—some of the novel's darker scenes (like an intoxicated Maan pawing his sister-in-law on Holi, part of the novel's first chapter) have been axed from the screenplay. In other words, this is a classically 'faithful' adaptation of the novel, helped in no small measure by some inspired casting choices, like the

always-dependable Aamir Bashir as the genteel Nawab of Baitar, a family friend of the Kapoors.

By the time the second episode (which aired recently) ends, Ishan Khattar comes into his own as Maan Kapoor. To hold one's own opposite Tabu is an impressive feat for a young actor. Look out, also, for a brief exchange with his father Praan (Ram Kapoor) in the second episode, where he's both naive and conning at the same time.

The Luminaries, which was added on Netflix last month, takes a diametrically

opposite approach to adaptation.

How much does one change the source text, while adapting a massive novel into a mini-series—what is an acceptable amount of divergence? Can you change the beginning and the end? How about 'point of view' characters, not to mention the protagonist? Can you switch the order of your

reveals, so that a deliberately fractured narrative on paper becomes a much more linear one onscreen?

Remarkably, *The Luminaries* does all of these things while also somehow preserving—indeed, amplifying—the source text's key elements. It's a well-written, superbly shot piece of fantasia sure to win over a new legion of fans for the novel. The 34-year-old Catton has written the screenplay herself, which makes sense given the bulk and formal complexity of the book.

Set during the Otago Gold Rush of the 1860s, the narrative begins with Walter Moody, a British lawyer, chancing upon a council meeting of sorts at the Crown Hotel, even as he heads to Hokitika, a small town on the West Coast of New Zealand. A dozen local men have gathered to discuss a string of recent crimes—a prostitute named Anna Wetherell has tried

**ANDREW DAVIES AND
MIRA NAIR CONDENSE
ENTIRE SECTIONS OF
A SUITABLE BOY IN
FAST-MOVING, WELL-
CHOSEN BITS OF
DIALOGUE, TAKING
CARE TO MAINTAIN
SOME OF THE MOST
RECOGNISABLE ONES
VERBATIM**



to end her own life after being suspected to be involved in the disappearance of a wealthy prospector. At the same time, a life-changing amount of gold is discovered in the hut of a down-on-luck drunk. Slowly, steadily, Catton builds upon this foundation to give us a host of meticulously sketched characters, revealing a complex web of murder, conspiracy and intrigue—all ‘hooked’ around a fortune in gold, of course.

The show streamlines the novel’s expansive, digressive storytelling to a large extent. While the book has its male characters on narrative duty for the most part (although there are no first-person chapters, most narrative strands have a clear POV character), the show is told mostly from the perspective of Anna Wetherell (Eve Hewson), the prostitute who has a star-crossed romance with the prospector Emery Staines (Himesh Patel). Shortly after being separated from Raines, Wetherell is taken under the wing of Lydia Wells (Eva Green), an innkeeper/madame looking to swindle her husband, Crosbie Wells (Ewen Leslie), out of the bag of gold he has just returned with after months out in the gold fields. Lydia’s lover, an ex-convict called Francis Carver (Marton Csokas), is helping her in this scheme, contriving to keep Staines occupied in the gold fields even as she grooms Wetherell into becoming her apprentice.

A side-by-side comparison of the book’s and the show’s Hokitika council scenes (which opens the novel, but doesn’t appear in the show until the fifth episode) is revelatory. In the book, this is a classic stage-setting exercise, wherein Catton reveals both the structure and the slow-burning pace of the narrative. We learn, through the book’s opening note, that the plot features 12 ‘stellar’ characters (the 12 men gathered at the

Crown Hotel) inspired by the zodiac system, seven ‘planetary’ characters and one stationary, earth-like character (Crosbie Wells) around whose death the plot revolves. The two lovers, Staines and Wetherell, are the ‘luminaries’ of the title, being guided by the sun and the moon, respectively. The 12 stellar characters each display the traditional personality traits of their zodiac sign, and they interact with each other according to the predestined movements of the night sky.

In the show, however, the scene takes place much after we know a fair bit about each of the 12 stellar characters and their respective roles within the Hokitika ecosystem. As for the astrologi-

thing, Each of us is a living constellation of habits, desires, notions, memories, all shaped by the circumstances of how we’ve lived and what we’ve been through.’ At this point, the camera starts panning to each character one by one, as Wells’ voiceover reveals each of their astrological analogues. ‘Blood: Aries, Money: Taurus, Knowledge: Gemini....’

IT’S IMPORTANT TO note that a straightforward exposition like this may well have come across as mediocre literature, which is why Catton wrote this very differently in the book. Within the context of a streaming show, however, one designed in part for binge-watching, the scene works as a stunning denouement for themes that were hitherto hinted at but never fully explained. Broadly speaking, this is the strategy Catton the screenwriter favours—she upends the book’s structure, so that the whodunnit parts are evenly distributed across the six episodes, unlike the book where the last 50-odd pages feature a disproportionate amount of plot movement.

Catton is the third young novelist in 2020 to be involved with adapting their own work for streaming. Sally Rooney’s work on the *Normal People* series has already been well-regarded by audiences and critics. Bestselling American author Brit Bennett signed a seven-figure HBO deal last month, for a miniseries adaptation of her recent novel *The Vanishing Half*. All three of them are in their 30s. This is an indication of two things: first, of the streaming era’s ever-expanding influence on the world of letters; and second, that no amount of handwringing by purists will change the fact that some of the smartest writers in the world right now are working in TV. ■



▲
A scene from *The Luminaries*

cal themes, we’re somewhat familiar (thanks to Lydia Wells being an enthusiast who teaches Wetherell the basics) but it hasn’t quite come to the fore yet. We know that Staines and Wetherell are ‘astral twins’, two people whose fates are intertwined on account of being born in the exact same moment under the exact same sky (by which to say, born not too far from each other). So when Walter Moody sees the 12-member ‘council’ at the Crown Hotel, Catton gives us a descriptive voiceover by Lydia Wells that explains *The Luminaries*’ astrological underpinnings: ‘Think of the sky as a looking glass. What you see is who you are. Who you are, of course, is no simple

Home Away

Displacement as a state of mind

By Sharanya Manivannan

TWENTY YEARS AFTER Annie Zaidi left JK Puram, an industrial colony in Rajasthan's Sirohi district that her mother's teaching job had taken their family to, she returned to try to learn whose land it had truly been. But, as a man authoritatively named Mukesh Gameti Bhil Adivasi tells her, 'The people of his tribe who lived in the hills beyond JK Puram didn't lose farmland during the setting up of the township. What they did lose is impossible to articulate.'

In *Bread, Cement, Cactus*, her non-fiction exploration of displacement and belonging, Zaidi tries to articulate some of those lost intangibles, presenting her personal and familial histories against a backdrop of concerns that range from the usurping of indigenous heritages to the persistent traumas of the postcolonial subcontinent ('...was Partition concluded in 1947, or was it initiated?'). These essays travel across the places where the author experienced some facet of the question, or the calling, of 'home'.

Occasionally, the author maintains an elegant restraint, such as when tracing her paternal Punjabi Hindu bloodline to Pakistan alongside the irony of how it is her Lucknowi Muslimness that is (always derogatorily) associated with another nation, while also being reticent on her parents' divorce and father's demise. Elsewhere, a sentimental abandon buoys the narrative. She eloquently describes being moved while driving to take a screenshot of a map in which mandirs and dargahs were clustered together in a way she feared would change in time; of sensing the ghosts of the 6,000 people murdered by the British in the 1857 massacre of the city then known as Ilahabad; of

performing a ritual at the confluence of three rivers that reflected her own and India's erstwhile syncretic fluidity; and of her late arrival into the study of Urdu, her cherished grandmother's tongue, a language poignantly described as being 'homeless in the land of its birth'. So much of Mumbai-based Zaidi's heart is evidently in Uttar Pradesh, the land of her birth, along with tangibles such as an ancestral home and the graves of beloveds. She admits a particular attraction to burial grounds, and describes how the word *mittican* mean either soil or corpse, pronouncing the tie between body and location.

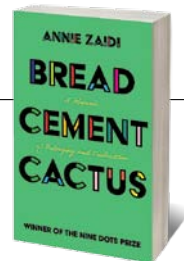
The body—the gender-ed body, caste-d, class-ed body—is also a home, and becomes the cause of other displacements. Zaidi cites a census statistic that marriage is the largest reason for internal migration in India, with 98.4% of nuptial

migrants being women. The pursuit of bloodlines reveals the tyranny of blood purity, including marital rape, underage marriage and the ways in which families are permitted to use the state against their own children, through 'honour' killings and lodging rape cases to punish elopements or consensual sex. Love, the author asserts, can be both a home and an antidote to injustice.

The disenfranchisement of women, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, ghastly incidents such as how the body of a Dalit person was airdropped from a bridge to avoid the upper caste section of a crematorium, and the British legacies that still enable the displacement of forest dwellers and exploitation of natural resources, are juxtaposed alongside personal meditations. At one point, the

author recalls how an experiment of living on the urban poverty line of Rs47 a day, even as a person without dependents, made her quickly realise: '...all the things that lend me a feeling of home—language, history, memory—would dissolve into the overwhelming consideration of hunger. Food would be home.'

In prose that is admirably both poetic and compact, Zaidi creates in *Bread, Cement, Cactus* both a memoir of her own multiple belongings as well as a tract that sets out India's various modalities of displacement. 'Dislocation can be abrupt but the internal compass dissolves slowly,' she writes. This book ponders not only that slow dissolution, but a subsequent reassembling too—but always, with the sober acknowledgment of fragmentations yet to come. ■



BREAD, CEMENT, CACTUS
A MEMOIR OF BELONGING
AND DISLOCATION

Annie Zaidi

Cambridge University Press
159 Pages | Rs 237 (Kindle edition)



Annie Zaidi

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

THE CAUCASUS CHRONICLER

Russian author Alisa Ganieva writes of those alienated by urbanisation and radicalisation. Her work has now found a home in India too

By Ullekh NP

ALISA GANIEVA WAS not meant to be born in Moscow, but in her native Dagestan in southern-most Russia. Her place of birth happens to be the national capital of the erstwhile Soviet Union because she was born prematurely to her parents, both researchers at the Moscow University and hailing from the less developed Caucasus region bordering Azerbaijan and Chechnya. Her mother was planning to return to her mountainous hometown of Gunib, dominated by their Avar minority community, but her trip was cut short by Ganieva's unexpected birth. Literature aficionados and academics, her parents named her after the key character in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alisa being a variant of Alice.

Now 34, Ganieva is one of Russia's most promising young writers whose novels have been translated into many languages, including Bengali in India. Titled *Bigyapone Mele Na*, the translation of her romantic novel *Bride and Groom* has been published by Patra Bharati. She says she was thrilled about being published in an Indian language, especially because her works spotlight people in heterogeneous societies where some groups face alienation in cities and share troubled ties with various religions, especially their radicalised versions.

"As an author dealing with the topics of multi-ethnicity, religious clashes, arranged marriages and globalisation in traditional societies, I'm thrilled to be published in Indian languages—India is not just a place where it all may be relatable, but also a centuries-old treasury of culture and book lore," she says. Another book of hers is coming out in Hindi next year, a collection of stories titled in English as *Evening Transforms into Night*. The Hindi title is yet to be finalised by the publisher, Prakashan Sansthan.

The author was in Kolkata at the launch of her book in Bengali during her first-ever visit to the country just before the lockdown. She took the opportunity to visit Goa, too, for a brief stay, on the insistence of a Russian friend who spends her winters there.

Ganieva, who made a name as a writer in 2009 by winning the national Debut Prize in Russia out of over 60,000 entries, has since published two novels, won several awards, been shortlisted for many others, and has been listed by *The Guardian* as one of the most talented and influential young people living in Moscow. She is also an essayist.

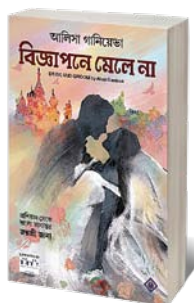
She wrote her first work of fiction, *Salam Dalgat!*, under the pseudonym Gulla Khirachev, a male name, and her identity was revealed only at the awards ceremony. The book is set in various places in the Caucasus and the author didn't want to reveal that she was a peripatetic person because it wasn't culturally acceptable in those parts where she grew up. Ganieva had lived in Gunib and then Makhachkala, capital of Dagestan, where she attended school before shifting to Moscow in 2012 to study at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute. Her works—that include *The Mountain and the Wall* and *Bride and Groom*—reflect conflicts she had faced in life as a member of a minority community amid rising sociopolitical tensions, stereotyping, religious extremism, conservatism, xenophobia, and so on, in a country that seemed to coexist both in its present and its past. For instance, as Russian

nationalism gains acceptability, any criticism of its communist past, especially during the World War II period under Stalin, is not taken lightly. Under Vladimir Putin, with the rise of oligarchs who enjoy close ties with him, there isn't any role for compassion in politics and the minorities continue being targets of hate and ethnic profiling.

Ganieva says that when she shifted to Moscow, policemen would randomly stop her and take her to police stations to question her because she looked like someone from the Caucasus. Although she had a cosmopolitan upbringing, her parents

had not taught her how to handle such situations and question rampant discrimination. She had to learn it the hard way, she avers. It was around this time that she started reading works by her contemporaries at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute besides those by the masters. It helped her build her style. All along, she wanted to offer a better perspective of the Caucasus to those in the rest of Russia who grew up reading works by fellow Russians who had lived in that region as soldiers—and surprisingly that included Leo Tolstoy himself.

Certainly, it is this commitment that makes her stand out as a daughter of the soil who offers a native's take on the much-maligned region. She recalls how ignorant the rest of Russia still is about Dagestan although it has always been part of Russia. In fact, one of her classmates called her a Chechen during a furious exchange, leaving her wondering why people didn't understand how different the two ethnicities are. She, however, admits similar challenges in these neighbouring



areas despite their vastly different priorities and history—such as the use of religion by Islamists to woo youth.

She says her latest novel, *Offended Sensibilities*, will appear in English in the US next year. Ganieva, who works as a literary critic for the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* daily, has shared a chapter from the forthcoming book in a magazine that offers a glimpse into the evolving literary quality and the enthralling voices of men and women caught in certain junctures of solitude that are typical of Ganieva's prose.

“AS AN AUTHOR DEALING WITH THE TOPICS OF MULTIETHNICITY, RELIGIOUS CLASHES, ARRANGED MARRIAGES AND GLOBALISATION IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES, I'M THRILLED TO BE PUBLISHED IN INDIAN LANGUAGES”

ALISA GANIEVA novelist



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Ganieva shares a great friendship with the man who brought a tectonic shift in the lives of the people of Soviet Union and elsewhere in the former communist bloc, Mikhail Gorbachev, whom she occasionally visits in a nursing home. Gorbachev, who introduced political reforms such as glasnost and perestroika that put in motion earth-shaking changes and eventually the fall of the Soviet Union, is still a reviled figure in Russia where nationalist pride runs deep. The author from Caucasus, a rare breed even these days, regrets it. She also feels bad about Stalin's personality cult that continues to prevail after the man is long dead and gone. She believes Gorbachev was a brave man because he understood individual liberties of people, especially those on the fringes like her, were under multiple jeopardies under Soviet rule—when people committed unthinkable acts even against their near and dear to ensure their fragile safety. Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksandr Zinovyev had termed such ultimate conformists, a product of the system, Homo Sovieticus.

Ganieva, meanwhile, recalls a story Gorbachev told her some time ago. The former communist general secretary told the author that while he was in power, he had a strange memory of his days as a young boy when his grandfather was taken away for interrogation by intel operatives. He returned after many months of incarceration and the young Gorbachev remembered listening from behind closed doors to the experiences his grandfather had shared with the rest of the family: torture, questioning and so on. The memory of those days prompted Gorbachev to demand files concerning his grandfather which, when they finally arrived, shocked him: the orders to arrest his grandfather, a communist loyalist, were signed by Stalin himself. Soon, Gorbachev ordered the release of many political prisoners and then started thinking of implementing political reforms.

Ganieva, who has won the coveted Triumph Prize in Russia, and been a finalist of several other prizes, including the Russian Booker Prize, says that she has learnt over time not to be angry at what happens all around her. Although she is a pro-democracy activist who is often photographed in Moscow rallies, Ganieva asserts, “There's no point being angry all the time, especially when you realise the stark reality of life and politics for many years.”

She is also piqued that more people these days are busy looking for a recipe to be happy about things to do with the past, rather than the present. For her part, she talks about her familial background to highlight the importance of knowing about marginalised people whom she is giving a new life through her works. An interesting thing about one of her ancestors was that he was masterful in hand-to-hand combat and had, along with others, repelled attacks from Iranians led by Nader Shah, who had wreaked havoc in Delhi in the early part of the 18th century.

Fond of martial arts, Ganieva says that such skills are not necessary anymore. The skills of the kind she possesses as an artist with words are handier for her: they make her a profound conjurer of characters and plots. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

Action Replay

Madhuri Dixit reminisced about her biggest blockbuster earlier this week, marking the film's 26th anniversary. The actress posted a thank-you note to the fans of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994) "for watching and enjoying the film even today".

The film had made Madhuri the highest paid leading lady in Bollywood then, earning a reported Rs 1 crore fee, which was said to be considerably more than what her co-star **Salman Khan** was paid for the film. The actress was at the peak of her career at the time, coming off a string of hits and emerging as the biggest competition to **Sridevi**.

Famously, she became the muse of **MF Husain** who fell in love with the movie, showing up frequently at Mumbai's Liberty Cinema to catch it during its years-long run. Husain dedicated many canvases to *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, and specifically to Madhuri, after the film's release.

Now Streaming

It's happening. With Covid-19 showing few signs of slowing down, even big-ticket tentpole films are slowly being sent straight to streaming. Disney's live-action version of *Mulan*, tipped to be a big draw given the popularity of the original animation film, will debut on the company's streaming platform in September, it was learnt this week. Disney already dialled back on theatrical releases for *Artemis Fowl*, *The One and Only Ivan* and a forthcoming **Kate Winslet**-starring *Black Beauty* film, sending all to its Disney+ service.

It is unlikely that Warner Bros will send **Christopher Nolan's** *Tenet* straight to streaming, given the filmmaker's commitment to the theatrical experience, but despite a recent announcement that the film's release would be staggered in different markets, there is no clarity yet on its rollout schedule.

The same is true of the situation in Bollywood. The makers of **Varun Dhawan** and **Sara Ali Khan's** *Coolie No. 1* were reportedly eyeing an October theatrical window before *Sooryavanshi* (expected to

troop along over the Diwali weekend) takes over the screens. But now one is hearing murmurs that the local streamers are aggressively trying to seduce the big players for a star-driven tentpole, hoping that once they land one big fish, others may take the bait too.

Ranveer Singh has two completed projects in **Kabir Khan's** '83 and the YRF-produced *Jayeshbhai Jordaar*. Which means that the makers of both projects would hope to have a gap of at least a few weeks between them. With '83 looking to open around Christmas, this would mean the other film would need to explore a release in the first quarter of the new year. But rapidly escalating interest on finished films could make studios consider the streaming option favourably if the bucks being offered are big.

Hot Right Now

Instead of spending lockdown making cute Instagram videos with her grandchildren, 87-year-old legend **Asha Bhosle** has announced a talent contest through which she hopes to discover fresh new voices for Bollywood. The celebrated singer is inviting aspiring crooners to record and upload a two-minute video to her website, volunteering a cash prize to the most talented artist who emerges from it and offering to recommend a clutch of other promising singers for music gigs. The legend believes the film and music industries desperately need new, original voices ("It can't possibly be that there are only 10-12 good singers in the country, can it?"), and the idea came to her years ago when she

was frequently approached by aspiring artists for advice on how to get their foot in the door. "There was a time a composer would pick you on the spot if he recognised your talent—it happened with me. But it's much harder now, and these music reality shows aren't helping," she tells me, pointing out that the pressure on candidates to look and dress and dance in a certain way takes away from the very core of singing. "You can't sing in *sur* if you're expected to be dancing at the same time." ■



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