

ECOLOGICAL SWARAJ • THE SEER WHO DARED • NARENDRA MODI AT 70

COLUMNS BY RAJEEV MASAND SWAPAN DASGUPTA BIBEK DEBROY RACHEL DWYER

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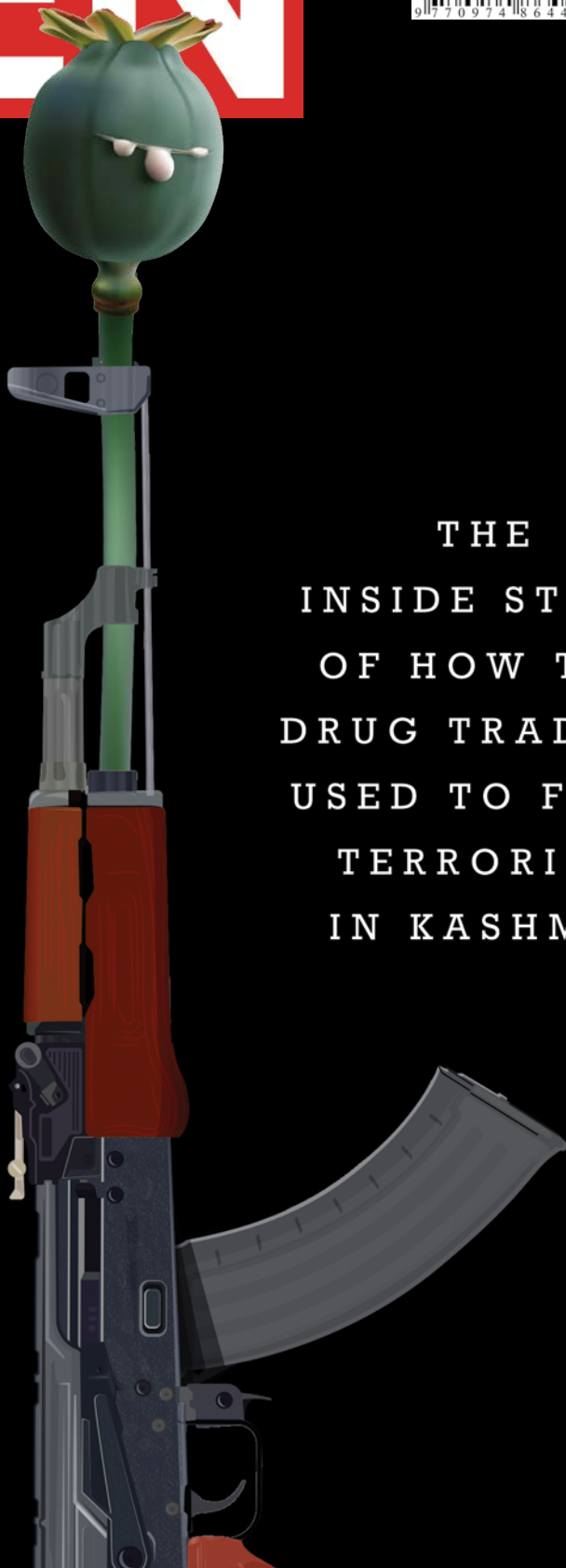
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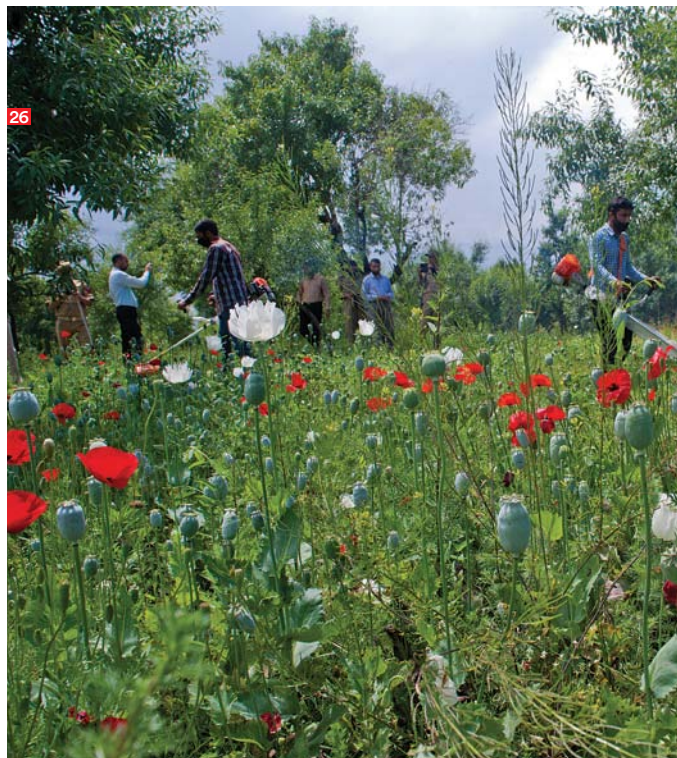
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LETTER OF THE WEEK

What sets Mukesh Ambani apart is his uncanny sense of deciding which businesses to stay out of ('Mukesh Ambani: The Power of Intuition', September 14th, 2020). Today, businessmen are hailed for spotting the right sector, product, brand, country or personality—that is, knowing where *potential* opportunities are. Ambani, in contrast, also keeps himself informed about when to pull out or ignore sectors. He has a clear vision of the changing realities and bet his money on a digitally-enabled future. His decision to slowly but steadily lower stakes in the petroleum business and staying away from automotive and aviation sectors will prove to be farsighted. Those criticising his business practices as 'obtrusive', 'abrasive', 'cannibalising' or 'predatory' do not understand what a 'dog eat dog' world international business is—especially if you are from the developing world. He has brought down the average costs of products, increasing the size of the market—which is the classic model of Adam Smith for increasing the wealth of a nation. He has shown empathy for his beleaguered brother, Anil, by bailing him out in business and keeping him out of prison without taking over and curtailing the latter's independence. His 'cool head, warm heart' approach is winning the day for him.

Ashok Goswami



life without ever giving him his due. His dedication to the party was taken as granted and no one in the family ever reciprocated for his service. He was a deserving prime ministerial candidate. The party went as far as choosing a puppet prime minister just to keep Mukherjee at bay. He was always seen as a threat to the dynasty. His conviction, resilience and resourcefulness had made him a unique threat that the party could neither fully avoid nor accept. Never a yes man, he is the kind of politician the Congress needs right now if it is even remotely interested in convincing voters that the party can survive without the family at the helm.

Chanchal Nandy

OPPORTUNITY

India's ban on Chinese apps is a godsend for developers ('The End of PUBG', September 14th, 2020). The rise of the US in the 19th-20th century was partly owing to a ban on British products on its soil. The rest, as they say, is history. Those mocking the move must remember the West has also raised security concerns about Chinese tech.

Bholey Bhardwaj

MUKHERJEE'S LONG WALK
Pranab Mukherjee, a legend of Indian politics, has left behind great leadership lessons for all of us ('In Memoriam' by MJ Akbar and Sunanda K Datta-Ray, September 14th, 2020). He entered politics at a very crucial time just after the Congress had seen the first breach of its forts in state elections when then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made him a Rajya Sabha MP. He went on to serve as Finance Minister as well as the leader of the Rajya Sabha; the latter is a period of his career less talked about but very significant in understanding his relations with politicians across party lines and generations.

After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, he saw India's economy open up in fits and starts before it finally took off. Having gone down both the wrong and right alleys of the murky maze that New Delhi politics is, Mukherjee knew where power flowed from. A less known trivia is that he loved long walks, going, reportedly, 8 km daily.

CK Subramaniam

The Congress has lost a seasoned politician such as Pranab Mukherjee at the worst period of its history. His statesmanship, troubleshooting prowess and coalition management skills are what that party is in dire need of right now. The party tapped him to the hilt in his

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By S PRASANNAARAJAN

THE SILENCE OF THE MODERATE

THE MODERATE HAS just vanished. No one has the time to mourn him. No one bothers to. It was the quietest of exits, through the backdoor of the hall of illusions. It was inevitable; in the shrunk middle of politics, his existence was getting precarious by the day, and his words, feeble and inconsequential, increasingly inaudible. It was not that he had lost the argument as, on his left and right, arsonists burned down the ancient edifices of platitudes and pieties. He just stopped arguing; he stopped noticing the calcifications of his belief system in a world where the so-called outsiders were selling national greatness at a discount. He took himself for granted, not realising that those who once stood by him had begun to see in him an easy abdicator.

How did he set in motion his own slow disintegration? Three decades ago, when the ideology fell, when the revolution's last pretence became untenable, the moderate was the natural winner. He was the liberal democrat vindicated by history's most compelling street theatre on freedom. He was the truth after the lie, the reality after the fantasy. The politics of moderation was a sigh of relief for a world crawling out of the ruins of communism. The moderate was freedom's only moralist. His politics was supposed to be the applied science of morality, never giving in to the truisms of the Left or the Right. Still, in the end, the moderate would lose.

Or, he would cede the hard-won argument to the arsonists. The moderate became the establishment man, who, by nature, resists change. For the traditional Left and Right, there was nothing more to be added to the old certainties. The moderate, the classical centrist, was busy categorising the world into blocks of grievance. The politics of moderation was fast turning into politics of identity. The balkanisation of an aggrieved society was the only achievement that the moderate—or the liberal democrat—could take credit for. Unknowingly perhaps, he didn't make dissent a counterargument for power. He left that struggle to the extremist.

The extremist came from both sides of ideology. He was the new freedom fighter harvesting resentment from constituencies abandoned by traditional parties. The sociology that made the populist possible was jointly written by the lazy trio of the Left, the Right and the liberal centrist. The populist in power re-imagined the Left and the Right in starker colours of freedom, and made it seem that

power with least accountability alone could bring change. The traditionalists surrendered; they became either cheerleaders or mute participants in the spectator politics of nationalism. No one was more torpid than the moderate liberal democrat.

He showed an absolute lack of faith in the moral system that sustained him throughout history as a stabilising force whenever ideologies veered to the extreme. We are there again. New extremists have come to monopolise the public sphere and the moderate looks threatened. The rejoinder to the populist strongman today comes from the progressive Left or the guilt-ridden Right. The progressive borrows from the old revolutionary. He has radicalised dissent by demanding the homogenisation of minds and the banishment of doubters. The progressive politics of social justice, in its visceral repudiation of reason and moderation, is not different from the populist autocracy it's fighting against. Progressives are the revolutionary guards of a civil society. The guilt-ridden Right has a problem with their manners, not their cause. The moderate is too feeble to intervene. He murmurs his assent as the new war on evil puts the entire moral burden on the most righteous progressive.

The moderate in retreat marks multiple betrayals. When the liberal became a false sociologist by reducing people to damaged identities, he ceased to be a moderate. He became a sectarian agitator. The other betrayal was from the Right, which was turning out to be a hostile home for the conservative, who, in classical terms, is a man of moderation. In the age of the strongman populist, the Right, for all ideological reasons, has become anti-conservative. The silence of the conservative added to the self-mortification of the moderate. For Burke, the social contract that consolidated the conservative was "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." For the Right now, it is all about instant change and constant upheaval for the sake of the living. Without the moderation of the conservative, the Right is shriller. And on the Left, the socialist state is the only cause worth fighting for. The centre is an absence.

Democracies are better off without revolutions, which place the absolutism of the revolutionary above the legitimacy of institutions. The new radical and his populist nemesis are two extreme ends of freedom and justice, with little regard for what lies beyond their delusions. Nothing is served in moderation any longer. ■



OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta



IT'S NEARLY SIX months since normal life was disrupted by Covid-19. Throughout this period, I have been confined to Delhi, being unexpectedly busy addressing virtual meetings organised by political associates in West Bengal. Naturally, I have worked the phones talking endlessly to political workers in the districts to get a sense of ground realities. They in turn send me umpteen links of articles and news reports and I read all of them unfailingly.

In the past, before the virus from Wuhan disrupted the planet, I used to spend nearly two hours carefully going through the morning newspapers and the previous day's Bengali newspapers that had arrived from Kolkata. In addition, there was a perfunctory glance at two newspapers published from London whose online editions I subscribed to. This drill was obligatory and a habit going back to as long as I can remember.

These days, the supply of newspapers from Kolkata is erratic—the flights have been disrupted by both national and local lockdowns. However, discounting the time I used to spend on getting the flavour of state politics in West Bengal, I find that the time spent on the six English-language papers published from Delhi has shrunk quite dramatically. Quite honestly, I am spending less and less time on them.

I am aware that these are terrible times for the print media. There are reports of mass retrenchment of journalists, pay-cuts that are bound to pinch and the number of pages have been visibly cut. Someone informed me that readership of the big titles may have fallen by as much as 50 per cent. It is said that many of those who gave up the print edition during the March-April lockdown

have not yet returned. They are being kept informed by online news.

TV, I believe, is no source of information since news channels tend to be dominated by studio discussions involving people who love a good shout. There are occasionally some good sound bites and some nice debating points are often made. But very often, a question arises: are these representative voices and who, apart from themselves, do they represent? Not that being unrepresentative or quirky is necessarily a liability. It is only that these discussions aren't what I call news.

Of late, there has been a great deal of hand-wringing in media and political circles over the shrillness of TV, mainly centred on the case of a talented young actor who committed suicide. Frankly, I have no views on the matter since I have very little interest in taking a peek inside the private lives of Bollywood stars. Subsequently, the saturation coverage of this suicide and the life of his girlfriend is another reason why an old fogey like me has given Prime Time TV a wide berth. The case may be indicative of some social currents, but I would rather my understanding of India is based on trends more representative. In any case, I can view the more interesting parts on links posted by the channels on Twitter.

At one level, I am sympathetic

to the plight of newspaper managements. These are extraordinary times and to survive, drastic economies are unavoidable. However, what is deeply worrying is that the quality and the spread of the news coverage has taken a sharp nosedive. Political reporting, for example, has become totally dependent on the Twitter feeds of parties and leaders. This isn't only because the pandemic has reduced the levels of personal contact. It is because the old-fashioned norms of political reporting based on personal relationship—built over long years—with the players has eroded. What we are getting is bite-based journalism that does not factor in the underlying trends. There is always a gap between a ringside view of politics and the view from within the ring. As someone who has been on both sides of the divide, I can say with conviction that the gap has never been greater. It is my feeling that the readers sense it too.

This may be a reason why, increasingly, there is a greater reliance on some YouTube channels for hard information and even analysis. Take West Bengal as a case study. Here, the mainstream media—both print and electronic—is anxious to not displease the state government because of its lavish patronage of the obliging media. Consequently, it has become necessary to find alternative avenues of information. By playing around with my smart phone over the lockdown period, I have, for example, honed in on a couple of YouTube channels—one of them is a one-man operation and the other a full-fledged channel that is yet to have a DTH presence—to get authentic information on the undercurrents in local politics. I get the impression this is a growing phenomenon. ■

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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Modi at 70 A Style Statement

IT'S A STORY that never gets old. When Mahatma Gandhi met the King of England during the 1931 Round-table Conference, he was asked whether he felt it was disrespectful to be so frugally dressed. No said the Mahatma, because the Emperor was wearing enough clothes for the both of us.

The same pride in swadeshi and in using clothes as a metaphor for a newly liberated country continued well into free India. Jawaharlal Nehru, whose father Motilal had a Savile Row warrant, wore khadi *kurtas* and *achkans* which would be so worn with washing that eagle-eyed assistants would have them darned by relatives—one particular story has been of diplomat TN Kaul's sister being an expert darning of his *achkans*. Sustainable, local, made in India—all the values that are so much in favour now. In many ways Nehru is the template from which Prime Minister Narendra Modi borrows most when it comes to style, whether it is the Nehru jacket, now also known as the Modi jacket, the wildlife in the country's premier home or even the daily yoga routine.

For many years, India's politicians maintained a divide in what they wore at home, among the masses and what they wore on ski slopes of Davos and the suites of Waldorf. There would be the starched *kurta-pyjamas* or *dhoti-kurtas* at home contrasted with the spiffy *bandhgallas* overseas. With Rajiv Gandhi came the accessories of incipient liberalisation—the Ray-Bans, the Lottos which he wore on his last, tragically, the leather jackets. Even his mother smartened up when she went abroad, from highlighting the imperious white streak in her elaborate bob to draping fur coats over her silk sarees.

But by and large, the mantra was dress poor at home and look chic abroad. After 10 years of bland and correct dressing from Manmohan Singh, clearly the

nation was ready for a new way of being in the public domain. As Mukulika Banerjee, anthropologist at the London School of Economics and Political Science says: "Other politicians may have been well-dressed, but Prime Minister Modi is immaculate. His clothes look perfect, every hair in his beard is in place, every fingernail is flawlessly manicured. It is as if he is the human version of the lotus, his party's symbol, that looks untouched by its surroundings." And it is this disconnect from the context, she points out, that seems to appeal to voters and resonates with the much-repeated messages of his supporters of his hard work, discipline, lack of dependents, utter uniqueness. The image reinforces the idea of him rising like an unblemished flower from the marshes to signal the dawn of a new ideological age. "The contrast with Gandhi, who dressed like the masses he served and led, is stark," she adds.

And the colours are brighter too, from saffron to pink, from lime green to canary yellow. He is no less adventurous when he travels abroad, from burgundy *bandhgallas* in the US in 2014 to the patterned grey suit in South Korea in 2015 with a pop of burnished orange colour in the pocket square. Much like the young man on the street, Prime Minister Modi at 70 knows that pink is India's black.

There was a time when such attention to palette and finer points was considered narcissism. Not too long ago, former Home Minister Shivraj Patil was pilloried for changing his clothes thrice a day and keeping a comb handy. But Modi's sartorial style exudes confidence and power. It has also been consistent. Unlike Rahul Gandhi, whose style mirrors his political mood. The changing style of politicians also indicates how India has evolved, from the Five-Year Plans and the age of austerity and denial to the era of liberalisation. The demographic has changed as well and the acquisition of goods

Modi at 70 is fighting fit. His regime of yoga and meditation helps him sleep less but sleep efficiently and his penchant for yoga nidra is now something other members of the establishment are hoping to emulate. So it was no accident that the video showcased the manicured greens in the country's most powerful home, a leader at ease in solitude, whether taking a constitutional or preparing to meditate, a man in harmony with the elements around him



is no longer seen as something unbecoming. So when the Prime Minister wears an expensive *kanishawl* or BJP President Amit Shah wears a Burberry muffler, these are seen as reflecting the aspirations of the people. Their reliability is seen as evidence of an evolved style, echoing the late J Jayalithaa's cape, Mamata Banerjee's blue-bordered cotton sari or the late Sushma Swaraj's *desi* version of the power jacket over the sari.

Clothes tell some of the story our politicians want us to hear. Modi doesn't leave it to chance. The half-sleeve *kurta*, he has said, was his way of saving space in his *jhola* in the days he washed his own clothes. His *jhola* is a recurring motif in his narrative: "*Hum to fakir aadmi hain ji, jhola lekar chal padenge ji* [I am a fakir and can walk away with my *jhola*]," he has said on several occasions. All those with criticisms of his Rs 10 lakh personalised pinstripe suit are made aware of the transience of power. Yes, when he represents India's billions, he must dress the part, but when he is himself, he will be the fakir, the *pracharak*, the *samajsevak*.

Pitted against the saris handed down over generations from Indira Gandhi to Sonia Gandhi to Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, it tells the story of a new India where power is not a family business and there are no hand-me-downs to look the part. It is something middle India relates to, just as they relate to variations of the humble *gamchha*, in all its regional variations, being used as a face cover by the Prime Minister during Covid-19. And if we had forgotten the variety of his attire because of the absence of foreign travel, Modi gave his followers a special treat: five changes during the 1.47-minute video of the Prime Minister and the peacock, ranging from the lightweight laven-

der shawl over the *kurta-pyjama* to the track pants paired with t-shirt and *gamchha*.

The message is very clear. Modi at 70 is fighting fit. His regime of yoga and meditation at 5 AM every day helps him to sleep less but sleep efficiently and his penchant for *yoga nidra* (sleep induced by guided meditation) is now something other members of the establishment are hoping to emulate.

So it was no accident that the video with the manicured greens in the country's most powerful home, a peacock dancing in attendance, showcased a leader at ease in solitude, whether he is taking a constitutional or preparing to meditate, a man in harmony with the elements around him. It is a strong message to send out to a world that is tossing and turning, looking for comfort and ease in the cocoons-turned-prisons of their own homes. It suggests that no matter what, the country is in safe hands.

And when he did appear in public in Ayodhya, he was dressed in shades of saffron, in *dhoti-kurta*, moving from one temple to another, mask in place, appropriately sanitised and a fluid *dandavat pranam* as offering. The image, reinforced again, discipline and power, but above all, it was meant to recall the way he bowed and touched his head to the steps before entering Parliament in 2014 upon becoming Prime Minister. Ram Rajya, that began in the heart of the constitutional centre, was coming to fruition at its civilisational abode. For his army of believers, the master of the gesture and the garment was the only man who could have made it happen. ■

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

PORTRAIT • NOVAK DJOKOVIC

UNHEROIC

The unravelling of a tennis superstar

FOR A MAN who ended the Roger Federer-Rafael Nadal duopoly, and made the world grudgingly concede that he was every bit as good as them, if not better, this was the moment Novak Djokovic was to come closer to settling the doubt forever in record books. With Federer undergoing a second knee surgery and Nadal, wary of the virus, staying away to focus on the French Open, Djokovic was widely tipped to lift the US Open. Just a few kids stood in his way.

The US Open would have taken him to 18 majors, just one behind Nadal, and two behind Federer. With the seasons he has had recently, who would grudge him this easy win? A few more years—and Djokovic is a year younger than Nadal and six younger than Federer—who knows where he will eventually land in career tallies?

But as it turned out, the only person who could beat Djokovic this season was Djokovic himself. And in an ill-fated match in the US Open, he let that opponent get the better of him. When he took a spare ball from his pocket and whacked it unintentionally—but in frustration—towards the line judge behind him, his whole career appeared to have unravelled. As the judge collapsed to the ground, one could see in the slow motion replay, the horror spreading over his face. He would have known, given the year that he's been having, what this would have meant to his reputation.

Back in 2016, he had been irritated when a journalist brought up the matter of him hitting a ball into the crowd during a match. "You guys are unbelievable," he had said. "...It could have been [serious], yes. It could have snowed in the O2 Arena as well, but it didn't." What were the odds that a ball hit in frustration would catch that one judge standing behind unaware right on her throat? What were the chances? It might as well have snowed that day.

But chance has a funny way of catching up on you, especially when it appears you have begun to unravel. And Djokovic has had one of the oddest off-court moments this year. His public persona has taken a beating. From someone who was admired, and who many even found endearing for his unselfconsciousness and his spot-on impressions of other players, to someone who is now looked at with disbelief at his anti-vaccination stand, his beliefs in odd ideas and providing a platform to various snake oil salesmen.

It is not as though Djokovic means badly. His disastrous Adria Tour was meant to help players from the Balkan region. But the crowds, the mask-free appearances and the parties seemed to show a man recklessly in denial of the pandemic. Even now Djokovic is involved in behind-the-scenes power struggles of tennis. Last year, he managed to get Chris Kermode out of his job as the executive chairman of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP). Some days before the US Open, he suddenly stepped down from the post of president of the ATP Player Council and announced that he was starting a new players' association. Djokovic has good intentions here too. He wants to help players outside the top few get better representation and money. But the timing of this announcement—in the middle of a pandemic, less than a year into the life of a new administration at the ATP—has put many on guard. Some have even wondered about his motives. Federer and Nadal have offered veiled criticism.

At that US Open match, it wasn't just that Djokovic had hit the line judge that caused such opprobrium. It was what followed. He folded his hands and tried to reason with the officials. When he realised his opponent was going to be awarded the match, he offered a few quick handshakes, packed his bag, and instead of attending the mandatory press conference, where he would no doubt have faced a barrage of questions but through which, by accepting his guilt, he could have nipped the bud on all talk of his mental unravelling, he just walked into his car and was driven home.

Last year in that tense and long Wimbledon final between Federer and Djokovic, Federer had failed to win his 21st Grand Slam despite appearing to be in a stronger position many times. The analysis was that it wasn't that Djokovic was the better player that day; it was that he was the better one in moments of pressure. In other words, Federer had 'choked'. It appears now that the game's best male competitor is choking under pressure. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA



ANGLE



NOTES ON A HOUNDING

The idea of good versus bad media trials and mob lynchings only perpetuates the practice

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

ANY REASONABLE DECENT human being can see what Rhea Chakraborty is going through is a travesty, a Kafkaesque black hole triggered by the opportunism of politicians out to settle scores and television channels salivating over a delicious conspiracy of their own imagination. Nothing so hypnotises the public as the tearing down of beautiful and wealthy men and women by hungry lions. So long as they think if it is deserved, their conscience allows themselves the show. Expending anger at Chakraborty's vilification seems somewhat pointless, however, when the entire justice system has collapsed in this country. Go to any court or police station and you will see innumerable people in horrible traps from all sorts of agencies, ranging from policemen to politicians. There is really no redress to a problem if only one case is looked at in isolation and this goes for all the weapons used against Chakraborty.

There is agreement among the woke left liberals of Twitter that Rhea is being subject to a media trial and online mob lynching. It is true. But the thing about online lynchings is that no one who is in the mob thinks he or she is part of one. To any member of the current mob, the vilification that is ongoing is justice. Alone and in the real world, they might be horrified at throwing calumnies on a woman, but as a faceless group, it feels right because there are so many thinking likewise. Meanwhile, those

not part of this blood lust at present find media trials and mob lynchings an affront when due process is a promise given to everyone. Except that many in the group that has now discovered this have been part of online mob lynchings in the past. Take, for example, the MeToo movement of two years ago, when all of Twitter exploded with allegations and accusations of sexual harassment, where rape was conflated with desperate WhatsApp propositions of lonely men, and groups in unison would descend and hound a man out of job, family and society. Due process was considered a needless irritant then.

Once you open the gates, all sorts of animals are going to walk in and they will be more cunning and vicious than you. Consider how easily Chakraborty's defaming was turned into a national issue dividing apolitical people into two camps—innocent and guilty, corresponding to different political ideologies. So long as the idea of a good media trial versus bad trial, a good mob lynching versus bad mob lynching exists, you can be sure that there will be no cure for the disease. For liberal wokes the bad news is that, in India unlike in countries like the US, they are being routed in the social media wars. Most media trials and mob lynchings are not going to be the ones they can relish or participate in. In strategic interest at least, they are better off questioning the foundations of these phenomena instead of using them as weapons too. But that is really not going to happen. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

PROHIBITION

There is no good reason to reconsider the ban on the consumption of marijuana, or in the least, to not club it with hard drugs like cocaine and heroin as it is done in India. A lot of research shows it is less addictive than tobacco, and even less harmful than tobacco and alcohol. Some countries even allow its recreational use. But no such thing will happen in India anytime soon. Although widely consumed recreationally, used widely in ayurveda for everything from treating indigestion to speech disorders, and there is even religious sanction during festivals like Holi, it is also vilified and legally forbidden. Even the law is perplexing. Cannabis may be a 'narcotic drug', and you can't grow it, but consuming its leaves (from which *bhang* is made) is permitted. What such duplicity allows is for the law to be misused, as it is now being alleged in the arrest of Rhea Chakraborty. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'I don't think marijuana is more dangerous than alcohol'

BARACK OBAMA
FORMER US PRESIDENT

HIGH PRIEST OF RED TAPE

DEPARTMENT OF INVESTMENT and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) Secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey seems to be an 'Act of God' all by himself. He has honed building roadblocks into an art form and several in the Narendra Modi Government are now directly blaming him for the slow progress of decisions in key departments at his door. The Government had budgeted an ambitious disinvestment target of Rs 2.1 lakh crore for FY2021, hoping to garner a substantial chunk of the non-tax revenue to partly make up for lower-than-estimated numbers in tax collection—and Pandey, as the Secretary, was expected to play a crucial role in facilitating this. But the expectations have flopped. Pandey's career track record should have provided clues as to why his department is showing such

disappointing lack of progress. There's this story from his stint as the Officer-in-Charge of the Planning Commission during Manmohan Singh's tenure. Singh was in the US, negotiating a grant with the World Bank and he wanted some key documents to be made available for the purpose. C Rangarajan was Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC) at the time, with the status of a Minister of State (MoS). Singh, therefore, urgently contacted Rangarajan. Time was of the essence. But when he did not get the required papers on that day, he contacted the PMEAC chief



the next day. Rangarajan told the Prime Minister that he had readied the papers, urgently as requested, but could not fax or email them because he had neither internet nor fax at home. A baffled, and very irritated, Manmohan Singh then directed his officers to figure out why the chairman of the PMEAC did not have either internet or fax at his residence. It turned out that Pandey had clipped on a note signed by him to the file saying that since Rangarajan had only the status of an MoS, he was ineligible for internet and fax at home. It took a mere 24 hours for Pandey—the high priest of red tape—to be shunted out of the Planning Commission.

SCRIBE IN DISTRESS

THERE'S A LOT OF 'You scratch my back, I scratch yours' going on between 'friendly' mediapersons suddenly turned entrepreneurial and the Congress leadership. One well-known journalist secured the financial backing of a senior Congress leader for a TV news channel that lasted a few months before most, except the journalist in question, were laid off, with little or no compensation. Another well-known senior newsperson got a high-profile former UPA minister to put his money into a 'left-



liberal' news website that pushes an anti-Modi agenda. Now, a former defence correspondent is reportedly trying to launch his own venture with funds from the Congress. The senior ex-staffer of a national newspaper—he wrote profusely on defence deals and kept the Congress' top leadership (read a certain family) supplied steadily with information to bank on in the 2019 General Election—was keen on launching a new online portal. No matter what the precedents, he may have found out the hard way that throwing around lakhs of crores of rupees in a news report is very different from laying hands on desperately needed

funds for a new venture. Especially in the Modi era when it has proved difficult, nay, impossible, for anyone flush with unexplained funds to escape the official scanner. Our scribe, hoping for a quid pro quo after the elections for all the help he had rendered the party leadership, recently approached the Congress' top honcho for badly needed funding—and was directed to the party's well-known 'Money Bags Central' from Modi's home state. But the leader and his family are already under the scanner for alleged financial chicanery. So now, the scribe is apparently biting his nails to the quick in distress, wondering if at all his venture could get those funds without falling foul of government agencies.

IT WAS SIBAL

IT WASN'T AT Shashi Tharoor's lunch that senior Congress leaders decided to finally poison-pen the letter attacking the Nehru-Gandhi family, its alleged arrogance and unilateral decision-making on key issues. *Au contraire*. It was at the residence of a more down-to-earth Punjabi leader and a sharp, aggressive advocate by profession—Kapil Sibal. The scion of the family, Rahul Gandhi, and his coterie were to be the prime targets of the exercise, via that now famous letter to the party's interim chief, Sonia Gandhi. The decision to spell out that dissent was made at a lunch organised by Sibal at his residence, way back on February 16th. The topic of discussion was not just the brashness of Rahul Gandhi in increasingly rare interactions with senior party leaders but also a concerted effort by the Wayanad MP to isolate and sideline practically every leader of experience in favour of his own cabal. Many at the lunch reportedly frothed at the mouth over how long they had to wait in order to just meet the Congress-President-Who-Was-Not-President, the *de facto* leader acting as *de jure*. And then suffer utter contempt at the meeting, if and when it transpired. Most were convinced that under Rahul Gandhi's baton, none of them had any political future. Rahul had already bypassed them in decision-making, refusing to even consider their inputs on core issues, faulting them for not supporting him in 2019 and later in his attacks on Modi, and leaving him in the lurch. Ghulam Nabi Azad and Anand Sharma were rarely consulted. Shiv Shankar Menon had taken Sharma's place in Rahul Gandhi's scheme of things. Kapil Sibal's brief had been reduced to that of a mere family lawyer, tasked with handling cases against the party's first family. The younger dissenters had begun to increasingly despair and chafe at the bit, given the feeling that the party was rudderless and absent on the ground on key issues, across India. Meanwhile, Rahul's own coterie was being allowed a free hand to attack the elders. It appears that Rahul Gandhi has earned his spurs only as the man who forced an implosion within the Congress through all of these months. Perhaps nobody told him that to reinforce his position as leader, he has to keep his friends close and his opponents closer.



FACEBOOK'S HIDDEN HAND

FOR EVERY ANKHI DAS, there may be a dozen Congress backers in the Facebook administration pushing the party's agenda. Last month, a big controversy broke out over Das' alleged intervention at an internal meeting to stop Facebook from blocking the BJP's sole representative in the Telangana Assembly, T Raja Singh. Das reportedly contended that blocking accounts of BJP leaders could ricochet badly on Facebook's business prospects. Led by Rahul Gandhi, the Congress promptly tore into the BJP, accusing it of arm-twisting the social media platform. Electronics and IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad retorted with a missive last month to Mark Zuckerberg calling the platform out for its double standards, accusing it of a 'concerted campaign' against accounts subscribing to his party's ideology. There were documented cases of Facebook, he said, allowing those with radical views, even repeat offenders who even called Prime Minister Modi names, to thrive on the platform, which was evidently biased against those who supported a right-of-centre ideology. Facebook even selectively blocked them, preventing a level playing field for all schools of



thought. The Congress then came out, all guns firing, against the BJP, alleging that the ruling party was ducking a parliamentary probe into the issue because it was arm-twisting Zuckerberg and Facebook. Evidence, however, points to the contrary. Here's an abridged list of Congress heavies with close pals in the Facebook administration: Ajit Mohan, Managing Director of Facebook India. Mohan is a friend of Rahul Gandhi man Kanishka Singh and studied with him at Wharton. Mohan was appointed to the Urban Governance Committee during the UPA years. Then there is Siddharth Mazumdar, Politics and Government Manager at Facebook, also former OSD to Congress President Sonia Gandhi's pointman Ahmed Patel. He joined Facebook in January 2019. Varun Reddy, Content Policy Manager at Facebook, was a member of the Congress' 2014 election committee and had worked at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. He joined Facebook in 2016-2017. Former Congress social media team member Vijaya Moorthy is now Politics and Government Manager at Facebook. His colleague Devika Malik regulates the hate speech programme for Facebook. Malik worked with Congress leader Naveen Jindal. And then there is Kavitha K, who worked for TMC leader Derek O'Brien, until she joined Facebook in 2017. All of them seem to be on Rahul Gandhi's PLU list for social media. ■



By Bibek Debroy

The Power of Pursuit

Freedom is the ultimate reward of yoga

IN EARLIER COLUMNS, I have recounted a conversation between a *siddha* Brāhmana and Kashyapa, from the Anu Gita. Let me now conclude that dialogue.

The *siddha* Brāhmana continued, 'The *atman* is independent of the five elements. It is without form and without cause. Though it enjoys the *gunas*, it is devoid of *gunas*. A person who sees it in this way is emancipated. He uses his intellect to cast aside all resolutions of the body and of the mind. Like a fire that is without kindling, such a person gradually obtains nirvana. He is freed from all *samskaras* and obtains the eternal *brahman*. He obtains the supreme, which is tranquil and stable. This is the divine Akshara.'

'Thereafter, I will tell you about the supreme and sacred texts of yoga. Knowing this, in this world, yogis become *siddhas* and see their own *atmans*. I will convey the instructions accurately, as I see them. Listen to me. By always following this conduct, one passes through those doors and sees the *paramatman* within the *jivatman*. The senses must be restrained. The mind must be fixed on the *atman*. Having first tormented oneself through terrible austerities, one must then undertake this yoga. An ascetic abandons all resolution. He is devoid of pride and *ahamkara*. A learned Brāhmana uses his mind to see the *paramatman* within his *jivatman*. Devoted to good conduct alone, he sees the *paramatman* within his *jivatman*. He is always full of restraint. He is united with his *atman*. He conquers his senses. Such a virtuous person, engaged in yoga, sees the *paramatman* within his *jivatman*. In a dream, a man may see someone and recognising him on waking up, exclaim, 'This is he.' In that way, a virtuous person engaged in yoga sees the form of the *atman*. When the outer case is extracted from *munja* grass, the strand inside can be seen. In that way, taking away the body, the yogi sees the *atman*. The outer case of the *munja* grass is like the body. The inner strand is the beautiful *atman*. Those who know about the excellent texts of yoga cite this as an example. When a person with a body is united with yoga and sees the *atman* properly, there is no one who can bring him down. He is like a lord of the three worlds. As he wishes, he moves from one body to another one.

Without any joy and without any grief, he withdraws himself from the phenomena of old age and death. Such a person, engaged in yoga, can obtain the status of a *deva* over all *devas*. Casting aside this temporary body, he obtains the undecaying *brahman*. Even if all the worlds are destroyed, no fear is generated in him. Even if all creatures are afflicted, he is not afflicted in the least bit. A person who uses yoga to unite with his *atman* is without desire and is tranquil in his mind. He is not disturbed by sorrow, misery, fear, terror or the affection that flows from attachment. Weapons do not pierce him. There is no death for him. There is no one in the world who is happier than him. Having properly engaged himself in yoga, he looks at his *atman*. Indra himself wishes to be like him. If one has engaged in yoga, one obtains a state of indifference and there is nowhere else to go to. This requires singleminded devotion to yoga alone.'

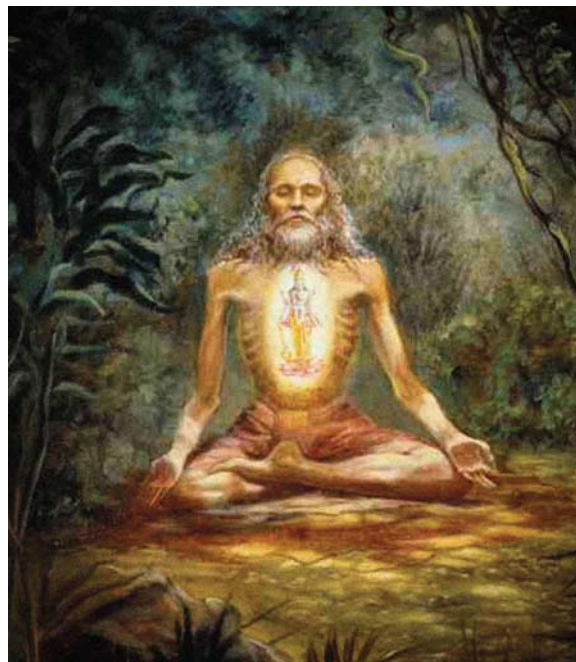
'Listen to how one must embark on yoga. Whichever city one resides in, one must first think of a direction one has seen before. [The city stands for the body. A direction probably refers to the part of the body one is focusing on, such as a *chakra* within the body.] The mind should be fixed inside the city, not outside. Whichever city he resides in, he must faithfully reside within it. In that abode, the mind must be taken away from external and internal distractions and fixed on that habitation. All the thoughts must then be withdrawn and fixed on the body one inhabits. The mind must be fixed on the body, never on anything outside it. One must singlemindedly fix all of one's thoughts inside the body. One must meditate on the teeth, the palate, the tongue, the throat, the neck, the heart and the arteries and veins inside the heart.'

'O Madhusudana! [There is abruptness in the text. This is now the Brāhmana who is speaking to Krishna and we realise that this Brāhmana and the *siddha* Brāhmana are identical, though there was nothing to suggest this earlier.] Thus addressed by me, the intelligent disciple again asked me about *moksha* dharma, which is extremely difficult to explain. 'How is the food, eaten every once in a while, digested in the stomach? How does it become juices?'

How is blood generated from that? How does this sustain flesh, marrow, sinews and bones? How do all the limbs of embodied creatures grow? As one keeps growing, how does the strength increase? How is waste that is without substance separately excreted? From where does one inhale and exhale? Within one's own self, which part of the body is inhabited by the *atman*? How does the *jivatman* exert itself and move the body around? What is the complexion of the mind and where does it dwell? O illustrious one! O unblemished one! You should describe this to me accurately.' O Madhava! I was asked this by that Brāhmana.'

'O mighty-armed one! O scorcher of enemies! Based on what I had heard, I replied. 'If one has a vessel full of riches, one places it in a room and uses one's mind to guard it. In that way, the mind unwaveringly be used to guard against the gates within one's own body. One must fix it on the path that leads to the *atman* and discard all carelessness. If one always exerts in this way, one will soon find delight in the *atman*. One will see and obtain the *brahman* and become knowledgeable about Pradhana. It cannot be grasped with the eyes, or with all the other senses. The *brahman* can be seen with the lamp of the mind. His hands and feet are in all the directions. His eyes, head and faces are in all the directions. The creature sees the *atman*, extracted from the body. Having abandoned the body, he is sustained only by the *brahman*. As if smiling in delight, he sees the *atman* with the help of his mind. O supreme among Brāhmanas! [There seems to be a minor inconsistency, because the *siddha* Brāhmana is now speaking to Krishna. However, he is also repeating what he told Kashyapa.] I have now told you about all the mysteries. O disciple! I grant you permission. Cheerfully, go wherever you wish to.' O Krishna! Having been thus addressed, my immensely ascetic disciple, the Brāhmana, went away as he desired, his doubts having been dispelled.'

All this was repeated by Krishna to Arjuna. Therefore,



ONE MUST SINGLEMINDEDLY FIX ALL
OF ONE'S THOUGHTS INSIDE THE BODY.
ONE MUST MEDITATE ON THE TEETH,
THE PALATE, THE TONGUE, THE THROAT,
THE NECK, THE HEART AND THE
ARTERIES AND VEINS INSIDE THE HEART

Krishna concluded. Vasudeva said, 'O Partha! These are the words the bull among Brāhmanas spoke to me at that time. These were appropriate words for those who wish to resort to *moksha* dharma. He then disappeared. O Partha! Have you heard this truth with singleminded attention? This is exactly what you heard when you were on your chariot. It is my view that a man who is not accomplished in consciousness, is not learned and has not cleansed his *atman* will be confused about this and will find it extremely difficult to grasp it. O bull among the Bharata lineage! This is a great secret even among the *devas*. It is rare for any other mortal to have heard it, anywhere. O unblemished one! No human

other than you deserves to hear it. A person whose *atman* is confused will not be able to comprehend it easily. O Kounteya! The world of the *devas* is full of those who observe rites. For those who have mortal forms, the *devas* disapprove of withdrawal from sacrifices. [In such an event, the *devas* will not get their shares and humans will also become like *devas*.] The eternal *brahman* is the supreme destination. One obtains immortality there, abandoning misery. One is always happy. O Partha! If they resort to this dharma, those with evil births, women, Vaishyas and Shudras, also go to the supreme destination, not to speak of extremely learned Brāhmanas and Kshatriyas, who are always devoted to their own dharma and to the object of obtaining Brahma's world. This has been indicated in the reasons and means for that pursuit. There are determinations about misery and the successful obtaining of the fruits of *moksha*. O bull

among the Bharata lineage! There is no bliss that is superior to this. O Pandava! A man who is learned, faithful and brave, one who abandons the insubstantial practices of the mortal world can use these means to quickly obtain the supreme destination. This is all that needs to be said and there is nothing more. O Partha! This becomes evident if one steadily practises yoga for six months.' ■



By Rachel Dwyer

Ageing in Life and Films

Retirement and the thrill of a new beginning

I HAVE TAKEN EARLY retirement from my job as Professor of Indian Cultures and Cinema but will continue my forty-year association with SOAS University of London as Professor Emerita and through my former students and colleagues and the global network of South Asianists. As Shailendra wrote and Lata sang, '*Ajeeb dastan hai yeh, kahan shuru kahan khatam? Yeh manzil hai kon si, na vo samajh sake na hum.*'

I can't believe how lucky I've been. I don't want to attract *nazar* so I'll just say I'm grateful to have met so many wonderful people in the academy and beyond, and spent time in India and South Asia, making lifelong friends, looking at elephants, watching films, eating, going to amazing places and learning.

Even if I'm immobilised by Covid-19 and recent poor health, I look forward to returning to India soon. Retirement is a new stage of life, one which has only a fairly recent history, usually dated from the Old Age Pension Act in 1908 in the UK which first made state provision for it, but is unlikely to continue forever as life expectancy in the UK is now 81. The state pension age has risen in recent years to around 65-68 though many jobs (including most academic ones) no longer have compulsory retirement. When I began my career, I had a compulsory retirement age of 60.

In his book, *No Aging in India*, Lawrence Cohen argues that India has a different understanding of ageing from the USA and elsewhere. In the US the focus is on failing minds, in particular Alzheimer's, whereas India doesn't view ageing as a disease but rather sees its attendant problems as symptoms of the breakdown of the joint family. The idea of what age is old is also changing as India's life expectancy has leapt from 32 in 1947 to 69 today.

Perhaps rather than using somewhat meaningless numbers, the concept of the four *ashramas* or stages of life is more helpful as a way of understanding retirement, not as giving up work but as retiring from one stage of life and moving to another. While the *ashramas* were designed for upper-caste males, their use can be extended. Retirement is the third stage, after *brahmacharya* (studenthood)

and *grihastha* (householder), called *vanaprastha* (forest dwelling) before *sanyasa* (renunciation). The idea, in a nutshell, is this: of handing over to the next generation, whether one's children or one's colleagues, and taking a backseat, but still engaging with the material world.

Although many have the impression that movie stars are very young, in Hollywood and in Indian films, the male hero is usually an average age of forty, with about half the lead roles for men being taken by actors above that age. For women, this is the end of her career, thirty being the average age for a lead star.

In Hindi films, the length of the male star's career is now longer than it was. Raj Kapoor retired as a lead hero in his early 40s after *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), and Dilip Kumar had his last hits as a hero in his 40s too. Dev Anand continued having hits as a lead star longer, being 55 when *Des Pardes* released in 1978. Salman Khan at 54 is still a lead hero who romances leading heroines, though he may become the butt of jokes, as in *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), when the heroine (Katrina Kaif) says, '*Ab tumhari umar shaadi ki ho gayi hai*' [The time for your marriage has passed].

Hindi films were routinely lambasted for having overaged heroes whose wigs and paunches were unmissable, but recent decades have seen many films featuring older heroes and heroines, rather than playing parents and others. (My favourite age passing was in *Mission Kashmir*, 2000, where Sonali Kulkarni played Sanjay Dutt's mother despite being fifteen years younger than him.) While art and middle cinema across India starred older actors or actors playing older characters (including *Jalsaghar* (1958, Bengali), *36 Chowringhee Lane*, (1981, Bengali/English), *Sandhya Ragam* (1989, Tamil) and *Astu* (2015, Marathi)), Hindi films, at least until 2000, struggled to accommodate older stars, even Amitabh Bachchan, in lead roles. As mainstream 'Bollywood' cinema widened its remit to include a wider range of styles and genres, so older stars began to feature.

While it was expected that an older couple won't be romantic, let alone sexually active, films now allow this. *Uttarayan* (2004, Marathi) had a couple separated

by marrying others reunited—to the horror of their families—but *Badhai Ho* (2018) had the mother of an adult child becoming pregnant, seen as a scandal and an embarrassment rather than a joyous event.

Perhaps the most celebrated film starring an older couple (Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini) is *Baghban* (2003), where the casual thoughtlessness of adult children towards their retired parents becomes cruelty. The revulsion this creates is saved by the adopted son (Salman Khan) showing love and kindness to them and the parents' rejection of their own children after the

Nagar (1942) played Shahrukh's grandmother in *Chennai Express* (2013), and was seen looking spry at a London Indian Film Festival a few years ago.

Older women in films are perhaps more changed than the men. No longer the widowed mother in a white sari now that 'old' means Waheeda, Hema, Sharmila and even Neetu who all look fabulous without needing the qualifier 'for her age'. They simply hold the screen. Their performances, imbued with a hint of their younger glamour, have clicked with audiences of all ages, as did the 'comeback' film of superstar Sridevi in *English*

Vinglish (2012). It is counted among her best performances as she played an altogether different role from her earlier films.

Among the men, two actors in particular never retired, namely Rishi Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan who had worked together so often in the 1970 and '80s. Rishi Kapoor was making movies until his untimely death in April this year. He partnered with Neetu Kapoor in *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), *Do Dooni Char* (2010) and *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (2012) and appeared with Amitabh in *102 Not Out* (2018). He found a new generation of fans with his performances in *Agneepath* (2012), *Kapoor and Sons* (2016), and in *Mulk* (2018). These films showed he was not just a top mainstream star but capable of a wide range of performances and styles.

Amitabh Bachchan, who was also a key figure in parallel cinema in its heyday of the 1970s and 1980s, has found central roles in the new Hindi films today, with acclaimed roles in Shoojit Sircar's *Piku* (2015) and *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020), as well as *Pink* (2016) as the Angry Young Man became the Grumpy Old Man.

Rishi and Amitabh are exceptions to the rule on retirement, like Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood in Hollywood. They became models of successful ageing, manifesting no decline, mental, physical or social, showing the exceptional qualities that made them such stars.

Perhaps it is also the audience, of us oldies and retired people, who remember their superstardom but have enjoyed seeing them age and remain stars. The more fortunate among the older audience

have time on their hands and continuous access to OTT platforms, such as Amazon Prime and Netflix. The retired audience can't be dismissed and the grey rupee may be exerting significant pressure on Hindi films themselves, traditionally thought of as youth culture. ■

Rishi Kapoor (left) and Amitabh Bachchan in *102 Not Out*



HINDI FILMS WERE ROUTINELY LAMBASTED FOR HAVING OVERAGED HEROES WHOSE WIGS AND PAUNCHES WERE UNMISSABLE, BUT RECENT DECADES HAVE SEEN MANY FILMS FEATURING **OLDER HEROES AND HEROINES**, RATHER THAN PLAYING PARENTS AND OTHERS

father wins the Booker Prize writing on the theme of adult children and parents.

Most actresses retire from the mainstream when they are offered marginal roles but some older characters are still active. Kamini Kaushal, who first appeared in *Neecha*



To Denmark, with Love

Denmark's new Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen is the youngest ever in her country's history. She will turn 43 on November 19th. Prime Minister Modi is sending a special gift to her. She is doing the same on September 17th, Modi's birthday. Frederiksen is eager to come to Delhi on an official visit. If a trip is not possible, there could be a virtual summit of the leaders. For India, a good relationship with Denmark may help counter China's influence in the Nordic states and, by extension, in the European Union.

PRIME BEARD

September 17th is the birthday of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He will turn 70. Because of the pandemic, Modi has told his associates that there should be no celebration that would lead to gatherings. The party has decided to observe a week of service from September 14th to 20th, when they will distribute masks, hand sanitisers, donate blood and so on. People have also begun to notice Modi's rather long beard. He has not trimmed it for what looks like quite a few weeks. No one knows why and nobody can ask him either. A popular belief is that the untrimmed beard is because of some vow to god for something he wants, perhaps the end of the pandemic or an early vaccine. Thereafter, Modi will trim it. Others are waiting to see if he does so on his birthday.

Word Power

While the Congress is still busy probing into the letter over party leadership signed by 23 of its leaders, Shashi Tharoor, a key signatory, is having a lot of fun with his new book, *Tharoorosaurus*. It is a book on vocabulary about which there are many jokes on social media, all related to him. Tharoor himself seems to be having a good time interacting with his many followers over tongue-twisting words. The book is said to be a hit even in BJP circles.



Behind the Book

External affairs ministers don't usually write books when in office. But S Jaishankar departed from that tradition when his new book was released recently at an online event. As to the question why Jaishankar broke the convention, there may be a simple answer. It is said that he wrote the book after his retirement as foreign secretary. He did not know then that he would be made foreign minister. After his appointment, he asked the Prime Minister whether to publish or not and was given the go-ahead. But he was advised to keep in mind that whatever he wrote would have global implications. Jaishankar then 're-read' the manuscript and edited the book. He reportedly deleted 10,000 words. Rumour has it that those were words mostly about China.

Durga Puja Fake News?

Durga Puja is in October this year. But on social media, it is being said that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee may not give permission for the festival and impose a lockdown. She is furious and says that the rumour is part of the BJP's "communal" campaign because there is no such order. She had now ordered action to be taken against anyone spreading such rumours.

Too Many Cooks

Who will be the BJP's chief ministerial candidate in West Bengal? The official position is that there will be no name announced before the election. But right from its old Jana Sangh days, the tradition has been to go into an election with a candidate as its face. Dilip Ghosh, the state party president, is close to the RSS and could be a contender. There is also Babul Supriyo, who has a huge following in the state. A popular singer and a Union minister, his fan clubs are demanding that he be the BJP's candidate. Even Locket Chatterjee, actress-turned-MP, is a potential name. Mukul Roy, who jumped ship from the Trinamool Congress to the BJP, is a mass leader and expects the support of the BJP's West Bengal in-charge Kailash Vijayvargiya. Former Trinamool leader and former Kolkata Mayor Sovan Chatterjee has become a BJP state committee member and his name might also feature. Modi and Amit Shah have reportedly told party president JP Nadda to see to it that all these leaders work for the common purpose of winning the state.

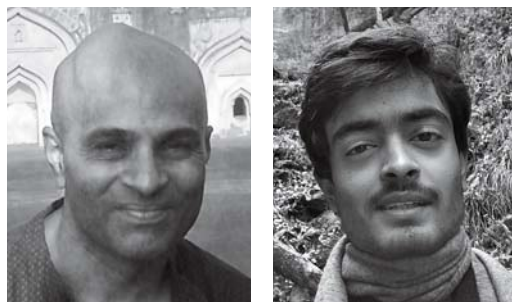


2022 ACTION

Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav has got on the bicycle, his party symbol, to start a district-wise tour of Uttar Pradesh. Priyanka Gandhi is also active in the state's politics. She has announced several names for committees in preparation for the 2022 Assembly elections. So Akhilesh, too, has to get his game going.

A Good Year

Kalraj Mishra, an old BJP hand, has completed one year as Governor of Rajasthan. When the Sachin Pilot rebellion happened in the Congress, there was a big rift between him and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot on holding an Assembly session. Both have, however, put the bad blood behind them and are behaving like friends. The Congress had also complained about the Governor getting a Mercedes car that cost Rs 1.5 crore and the use of state aircraft frequently for trips from Jaipur to Lucknow. Now the Congress has become silent on these issues. Recently, a book on Mishra's first year as Governor was released. Gehlot and the speaker of the Assembly released the book. Doesn't cross-party civility always look good for democracy?



By **ASEEM SHRIVASTAVA** and **ARYAMAN JAIN**

ECOLOGICAL SWARAJ

Restoring health and beauty to our relationship with the natural world

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC has left Indian economy and society in tatters. The recovery is a Himalayan challenge and calls for our urgent attention. The familiar, fragmented ways of economic thinking, unmindful of obvious impasses and cul-de-sacs, will not pull us out of this abyss in any permanent sense. What we need is a fresh vision with which to holistically grasp the complex, interrelated nature of our present crises in order to find pathways to harmonise human society with the terms and limits of the natural world, not to forget or ignore the callings and urgings of the spirit.

We are emerging from a period of epic suffering for our people. Suffering less on account of the pandemic itself, than of the manner in which it has been handled. In particular, the sudden fear generated by the Government, which dragged its feet for seven weeks (after the first Covid-19 case was reported from Kerala on January 30th), had catastrophic consequences for scores of crores of working people around the country. During the panicked, early months of lockdown, lakhs of starving workers, suddenly denied daily wages, abandoned the cities, families in tow. Many walked bleeding-foot, hundreds of miles, to their village homes in desperation; the most vulnerable people were left without shelter, income and work. Even now, in the seventh month of the pandemic, and the economy still in deep disrepair, over 10 crore workers remain unemployed across the country. Unemployment like this has never been seen before.

For a host of reasons, Covid-19 will not be the last of such unforeseen predicaments. Thanks to the remorseless consequences of runaway globalisation leading to increasingly disturbed ecosystems in regions remote from the metropolitan world, more microbial chaos is expected globally. Moreover, we have also already entered the era of chronic climate crises. Devastating hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, rampaging forest fires recently in the Amazon, Canada and Australia, cyclones at unexpected places, droughts and floods in so many parts of the world (including, of course, India) are all linked to the unprecedented disturbance of the earth's climate. We cannot go back to the old global normal, because that normal is what got us here.

The ecologically fragile, unjust edifice of the globalised economy stands well and truly exposed. In corona times, the world's billionaires are gathering yet bigger fortunes. The well-off still remain well. And the multitudes absorb the shock—by policies indifferent to their fate. It is significantly (though not only) the poor who have had to bear the collateral damage of the lockdowns across the world.

This is treacherous cowardice. Nobody in office seems to have thought of the poor—across the digital divide. After all, the world is not a shop whose shutters can be dropped down at the beckoning of an emperor—even in a pandemic. If there was no

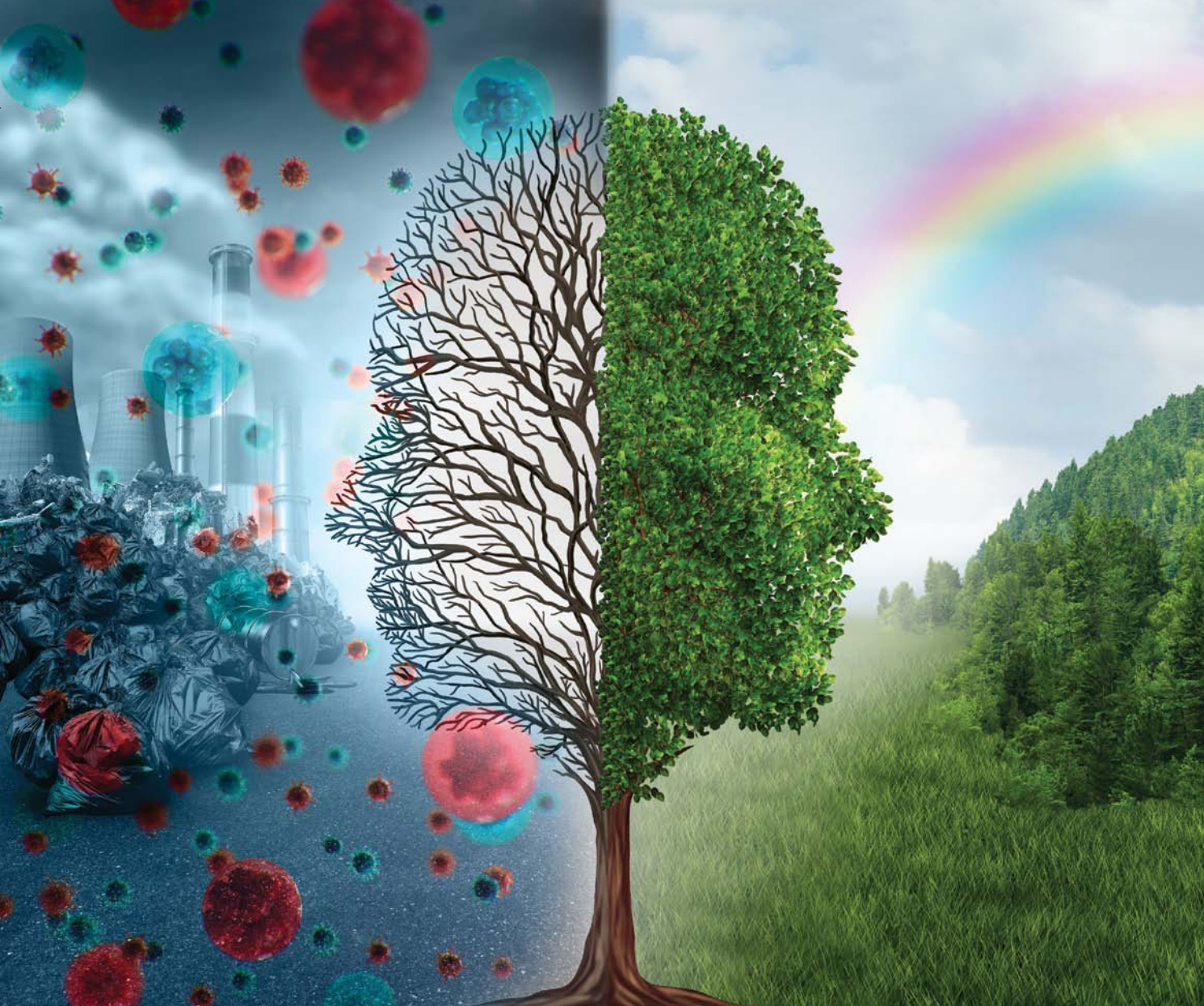


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

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digital and the wealthy could not hoard supplies, would the idea of a lockdown even occur to anyone making policies in any part of the world?

Where do we go from this precarious place we have reached? We can surely do better. But for this, we need an entirely new vision to imagine a future at all. Are we ready to do this? If not, we should prepare for ceaseless catastrophes.

In India, the Covid-19 crisis has brought out in sharp relief the unsustainability of our globalised development model. It

is a sad simulacrum of the West which we have blindly chased after since the days of Nehru. This is not just about what has been happening since 2014; nor about what has been happening since 1991 or 1975. This goes all the way back to 1947.

It is turning out that we have been on the wrong road all along. With its predatory industrialisation, routine devastation of landscapes, evisceration of communities and livelihoods, unsustainable urbanisation, forced migration and militarisation of culture, the path was always unsustainable.

In India, the Covid-19 crisis has brought out in sharp relief the unsustainability of our globalised development model. It is a sad simulacrum of the West which we have blindly chased since the days of Nehru. This is not just about what has been happening since 2014; nor about what has been happening since 1991 or 1975. This goes all the way back to 1947

GETTY IMAGES



A protest against the National Highways Authority of India in Gurugram, Haryana

But today, as rivers die and pandemics lay siege to the metros, the sword of ecological catastrophe hangs over us all. The situation we find ourselves in today is not an unexpected contingency. It is only a natural outcome of the race we have been running for the last three-quarters of a century.

We find ourselves today in a globally competitive corporate nationalism. Such is our eagerness to be counted among the superpowers that we would rather cut open our stomachs than come second. What we understand as 'development' is actually just a polished face of this ugly behemoth. Development has always been a colonial idea. Here, we disagree with liberal advocates of development such as Amartya Sen and suggest that 'Development as War' is a more accurate metaphor than 'Development as Freedom'—which is a lie. '*Vinash*', not '*vikas*', is a more truthful description of what the bulk of our people actually have to live to keep pace with the globally galloping desires and aspirations of the more fortunate among us.

Development has been a colonial idea since at least the Atlantic Charter of 1941, in which America and Britain set out their common goals, culminating in the setting up of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), today a part of what is known as the World Bank. It was decided by the new imperial powers that certain countries were 'developed', while others were 'underdeveloped'. The latter must learn from the former in order to find a respectful place in the world, never mind that the very premises of development are colonial and uneven in structure. And we in India have uncritically accepted this understanding from our imperial masters, even as, officially, we entertain

illusions of sovereignty.

It is no surprise then that from the blighted lands of Punjab, damaged as they are by chemical pesticides, to the forests of Assam, languishing under oil spills and floods, the practice of development has brought unending socioecological despair. In such a land as ours, where powerful political entrepreneurship rules, small crony elites keep emerging out of those willing to collaborate with the state and the corporate market and control resources. The others are crushed or enslaved. The earth is defaced. Life is smothered. Internationally agile corporations and the politicians are enriched. Region after region has succumbed to the same pattern, and the fate of many more regions of the country—from Kashmir to Kerala—is on the line.

As we enter Ram-Rajya, we must ask our Vikas Purush, which ancient scripture gives him licence to promote such things in the name of 'development'? How many times does the word 'development' appear in the Constitution? Just twice, and that too only when it comes to villages (Article 38) and urban municipalities (Article 243) being able to decide on matters of social justice for themselves. Otherwise, economic development is conspicuous by its absence in the founding text of our republic. As for the term 'economic growth', it is missing altogether. If these were the overarching goals of the new republic, surely the Constitution ought to have dwelt awhile on them? Have the goalposts shifted, especially after 1991? From this, we draw the following conclusion: Either our freedom fighters (who sometimes spent long years in jail, unlike today's leaders) were not patriotic enough, or we have tragically lost our way since their time.

When we are woefully lost in a forest and are unwilling to take radically fresh bearings from reliable stars, nothing we do will come out right. Every move is a wrong move from the wrong place. We should not have been here in the first place. The call of the hour is therefore to subject our whole way of life and thought to dispassionate scrutiny—before conceiving a new path through the woods.

Being in the jungle is not such a bad thing as is made out to be today—if one still has some reverence left for the sacredness of a forest.

Rabindranath Tagore, in book after book, lecture upon lecture, always maintained that there was a fundamental cultural and ecological difference between India and the West. In 'The Message of the Forest', for instance, he says that India was always an *aranyasanskriti*, a culture of the forest. On the other hand, the West has long measured progress in terms of the distance that modern man has travelled from the jungles. In other words, more nearly the opposite of what an *aranyasanskriti* would think or do.

To Tagore, the two World Wars were ample living proof of the tragic folly of the path of blinding material prosperity that the West had already been on. By the end of his life, he was thoroughly disillusioned with modern Western civilisation. His last recording from August 1941, '*Sabhyatar Sankat*' ('Crisis in Civilisation'), is a sad acceptance of the great decline of the West, hoping that freedom might still dawn in the East.

In adopting the ways of the West (and now, just America), we have committed worse follies than those who we have tried to emulate. Today we find ourselves in a desperate chase after a gross economic metric originally developed for the purposes of measuring a country's economic power vis-à-vis an enemy when it is waging war against them.

Are we willing to listen to the quiet wisdom of our own prophets?

A hundred years ago, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj*, 'It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It is groaning under the monster's terrible weight. There is yet time to escape it, but every day makes it more and more difficult.' It is as though Gandhi knew just what was coming when he wrote in the same text: 'There are now diseases of which people never dreamt before....'

Now that the monster has provoked a tiny but invisible and globally ubiquitous enemy which has become the torment of all humanity, perhaps it is time to look at *swaraj* as a real possibility again? *Swaraj* is too important for us to allow our politicians to toss it about as a plaything. To be sure, it is not utopia. But nor is it a utopian idea.

Gandhi tells his reader, 'Do not consider this *swaraj* to be like a dream.'

Indeed, *swaraj* is here and around us in the present moment, provided we are willing to see with open eyes and listen with patient ears. In far-flung nooks and crannies of this country, where the state and the corporate market have still not completely torn to shreds the basic substance of a rooted human existence, it breathes quietly. Its silence beckons those who seek it. The people behind Vikalp Sangam have been assiduously documenting stories of such alternatives across India for years now.

This unassuming way of being that allows all people a chance at a normal life the way they wish it, despite its very real existence, seems to some of our policy elites too unrealistic for India to adopt. But this crisis will have awakened others from the impossible dream of development that has been sold in ever new packaging for many decades now.

So now, while the advance of climate change is giving us a small window of time, there is a great public choice to be made between the unrealistic and the impossible.

GIVEN THE ECOLOGICAL imperative of our global predicament, it is necessary that we must begin by addressing our long fractured relationship with Mother Earth herself. Any vision of *swaraj* would have to be ecological today. It is necessary to point this out explicitly, given how readily it is forgotten. Thus, given how soiled from repeated abuse the word has become today, we should be clear that we are thinking of *prakritik swaraj*. The qualifying adjective (meaning natural/ecological) is also essential since we are living in an over-politicised world in which nature is, at best, an afterthought in public discussions. In today's perilously artificial world we cannot persist in such a blunder.

Rightly understood, *prakritik swaraj* gives us an authentic perspective to propose the necessary alternatives to a bio-totalitarian system that the digitised corporations and the globalised policy elites want for themselves and, by implication, for 'everyone'.

If allowed to prevail, such a global bio-corpocracy will effectively destroy humanity's chances of surviving climate catastrophes and ecological disasters. Success will be the worst failure.

The founding principles of *prakritik swaraj* would address the three disturbed ecologies of existence today; they comprise the following:

1) Natural/cosmic ecology:

First and foremost, a faithful reverence for all beings alive, including not only animals, but birds and fish, rodents and reptiles, insects and micro-organisms, plants and trees, even oceans and mountains, rivers

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and rocks, the biosphere and the atmosphere, the sky and the cosmos it represents. To a true Hindu, this is the actual meaning of the Upanisadic maxim '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*'. Even ants—and yes, viruses too!—have to be fed. Such has been the message of our seers and rishis. This demands not the chasing of viruses with Covid-19 guns, but an ecological maturity, which presumes ecological balance (impossible under the dispensations of the globalised juggernaut). It demands of all humanity a renewal of a cosmology of anthropo-responsiveness, rather than anthropocentrism: humanity can truly find its freedom not by selfishly appropriating and destroying the natural world, but only by assuming its highest duty, its cosmic responsibility of sustaining the only planet in the solar system capable of hosting life in its uniquely hospitable form. This will entail respectfully turning the vast household of nature into an aesthetically beautiful, spiritually alive and abundant, healing herbarium (not a hospital!). This will happen when we find ways to participate creatively in the cycles of life that Mother Nature has nurtured for millennia on this planet. This is at the heart of *prakritik swaraj*. This is natural/cosmic ecology: It restores health and beauty to our relationship with the rest of the natural world.

2) Cultural ecology: This means respect for the conditions on which life is given to humanity. It implies the reverence referred to above. None of us, after all, asked to be here! But it also implies respect for the imperative of community living. As social animals, we cannot be forced to live atomised lives before insensate screens indefinitely. Social media can never be allowed to take the place of society itself. Digital is not the new gravity. Lockdown is not the new normal. It is, at best, a temporary evil, at worst the dream of bio-totalitarians who thrive on people's isolation from each other in the shadow of human mass paranoia. The old tactic of 'divide-and-rule'. This corona cusp between two eras of history must be negotiated—not by building more dazzling airports or ordering more fancy military hardware from wealthy countries (that too, to become 'self-reliant!') or mandatory health monitoring through the forced use of mobile apps or sending mining expeditions to the Moon (as US President Trump has recently done). Those are symptoms, not solutions. It has to be negotiated by maturely accepting the terms on which Providence has granted life to humanity. This involves not so much new 'social contracts'—which ultimately never survive anywhere except on paper. This entails an awakening and renaissance of the

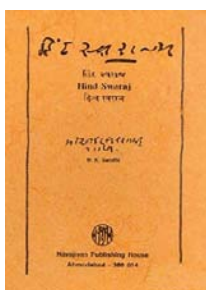
conscience of the privileged and the educated, a duty which is at once ecological, cultural and spiritual. Among other things, it implies an embrace of our responsibilities to each other as members of the same human and natural families—without making an enemy even of viruses! Migrant workers—or suicide-prone farmers—cannot be abandoned to the abject misery of their fates in such a world. This is cultural ecology: it restores health and beauty to our relationship to each other and to the wider human family and community.

3) Spiritual ecology: Finally, *prakritik swaraj* entails a personal spiritual transmutation. It demands a radical change of heart. To Gandhi, the recognition of the responsibility of duty was the very essence of freedom. It was dharma: the unity of the divine and the cosmic orders in the order of the human soul (*atman*). *Dhṛ* (the divine order) + *Rta* (the cosmic order) = Dharma (the human order). Our freedom does not lie in expanding our choices at the expense of others. That is power. Our freedom lies in expanding the choices of those beyond ourselves, those of the human community sans any exclusion. Likewise, your freedom consists in expanding the choices of those other than yourself. (Gandhi was no 'liberal!') This, to Gandhi, was *sarvodaya*, the route to *swaraj*; not the greatest good of the greatest number (as utilitarian economists think), but the shared awakening of one and all. Without this, humanity finds life endlessly meaningless, a blind pursuit of its individual or collective selfish desires—leading ultimately to a world

we are familiar with from pre-Covid-19 days, and that has left us now at the mercy of an invisible micro-organism. The way to heal the self is simple: it involves the permanent practice of love, otherwise understood as empathy or compassion. It can no longer be postponed. It only takes an *atman*, not necessarily a *mahatma*. This is personal spiritual ecology: it restores health and beauty to our inner relationship to ourselves. We are redeemed by living for many others, and ultimately for everyone. In this we realise ourselves: by realising the One.

Something immeasurably greater than *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* is *Dharti Mata Ki Jai*! It is for us to find the heart and soul for such true freedom. For the earth may have dreams for us, just like a mother has for her children. The human spirit can discover this, once free. ■

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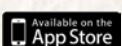
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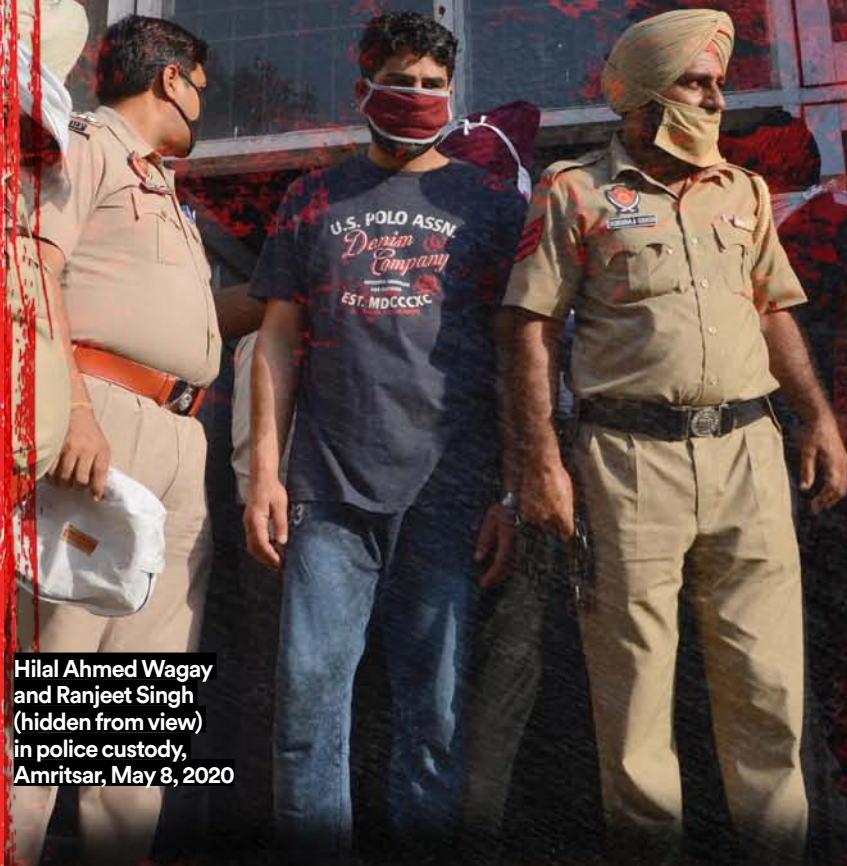


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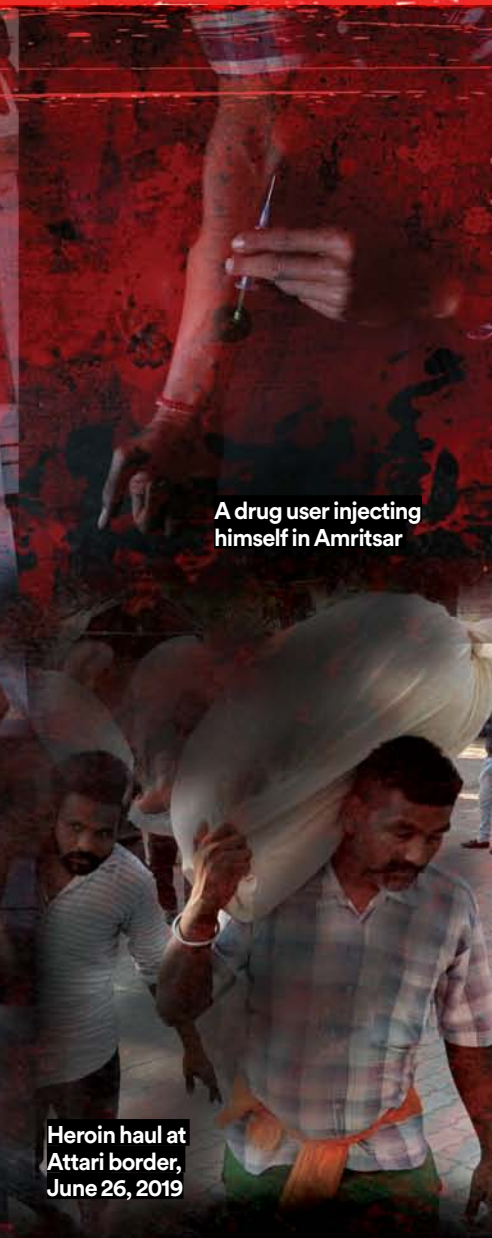


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JUDICIAL COMPLEX AMRITSAR



Hilal Ahmed Wagay and Ranjeet Singh (hidden from view) in police custody, Amritsar, May 8, 2020



A drug user injecting himself in Amritsar

Heroin haul at Attari border, June 26, 2019



Cash and drugs haul in Handwara, June 2020

GUNS AND POPPY

**The inside story of how the drug trade
is funding terrorism in Kashmir**

BY RAHUL PANDITA

On the evening of June 11th, the police in North Kashmir's Handwara town stopped a car that bore no registration plate. They had been tipped off by a source; upon checking, they found a black-coloured bag concealed under the passenger seat next to the driver, who was identified as Abdul Momin Peer. In the bag they found over six kilograms of heroin and Rs 20 lakh in cash.

In subsequent raids, Peer's father-in-law, Iftikhar Andrabi, and Peer's brother, Islam-ul-Haq, were also arrested and 21 kg heroin and cash of over Rs 1 crore recovered from various properties owned by them. The total cost of the seized drugs is believed to be over Rs 100 crore.

As the case was transferred to the National Investigation Agency (NIA), its officers found that Andrabi had several relatives across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK, not very far from Handwara). One of them, it was revealed, worked with the Pakistan-based terrorist organisation, Lashkar-e-Toiba. It is through this contact that Andrabi received consignments of high-quality narcotics, sourced from Afghanistan. From Kashmir, it would then be sent to other

parts of India, especially Rajasthan, Gujarat and Mumbai. These would be carried mostly in transport trucks, concealed among ordinary merchandise like apples, or in secret cavities in the trucks. This particular consignment is believed to be part of a larger consignment worth Rs 300 crore, meant to be delivered to Mumbai.

The massive profits from these drug sales, the NIA investigators say, are pumped back to boost terrorism in Kashmir.

Officials investigating the Handwara drug case found out that terrorists had recently been able to send narcotic consignments worth Rs 5 crore to Amritsar, Punjab, through this module. Out of this money, Rs 3.5 crore was distributed among Lashkar terrorists and over-ground workers in Kashmir.

As the intricacies of the module were being unearthed, the NIA arrested another accused, Afaq Ahmed Wani, a bank manager by profession, from a hideout in Srinagar city's Hyderpora area. Another three kilos of heroin and Rs 30 lakh in cash were recovered from him.

NIA sources say this haul is just the tip of the iceberg. According to a senior officer, drugs worth hundreds, if not thousands, of crores of rupees have already made their way from Pakistan into North Kashmir through the LoC route. The result of this financial

tourists come in large numbers. A portion of the profit, say police officials in Kashmir, goes to local terrorist commanders as well. Many such youths are arrested and end up spending years in jail in states like Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Earlier, terrorist organisations would seek money from apple growers during the harvesting season. In the apple market in South Kashmir's Shopian district alone, the apple business has an annual turnover of Rs 1,200-1,500 crore. "Out of this, it is not difficult for local terrorist commanders to take a cut which in aggregate makes for a significant amount," says a senior police officer. While that route is still taken, raising money through narcotics has taken precedent now.

In the last few years, there have been sustained efforts from Pakistan-based terrorist networks to establish an ecosystem of narco-terrorism. In the past, large quantities of drugs have been sent through the International Border, particularly the one in Punjab. The Jammu and Kashmir Director General of Police, Dilbag Singh, said last year that drug smuggling had increased manifold compared to previous years.

In September last year, the police intercepted a truck on the Jammu-Punjab border and recovered several AK-47 rifles, sent for terrorists of Jaish-e-Mohammed operating in Kashmir. These

FROM KASHMIR, THE NARCOTICS WOULD BE SENT TO OTHER PARTS OF INDIA, ESPECIALLY RAJASTHAN, GUJARAT AND MUMBAI. THESE WOULD BE CARRIED MOSTLY IN TRANSPORT TRUCKS, CONCEALED AMONG ORDINARY MERCHANDISE LIKE APPLES, OR IN SECRET CAVITIES. THE MASSIVE PROFITS FROM THE DRUG SALES, THE NIA INVESTIGATORS SAY, ARE PUMPED BACK TO BOOST TERRORISM IN KASHMIR

boost is significantly visible in North Kashmir now, where, in the last few years, terrorism was relatively in control compared to South Kashmir. But, on September 5th, a senior army commander in North Kashmir said that the terrorist group Hizbul Mujahideen was trying to re-establish its base there. A day earlier, three Hizbul terrorists were killed in Baramulla town in an encounter with the security forces.

"I will say that North Kashmir has emerged as a big corridor for narcotic smuggling," said a senior NIA officer, a part of the team investigating narco-terrorism cases.

The use of drugs has been a persistent problem in Kashmir. It is locally well known that in certain parts of the Valley, especially in the South, opium poppy is grown quite freely, often with the connivance of local officials. Much of it is consumed locally, while some of it is also sold by Kashmiri drug dealers outside, in areas like Pushkar in Rajasthan, where foreign

were sent on the directions of Jaish terrorist Ashiq Ahmed Nengroo, a close friend of Ranjit Singh Neeta, who heads the Khalistan Zindabad Force in Pakistan and is one of India's most-wanted terrorists. Intelligence sources believe that after the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir last year, Pakistan-based terrorist masters are now trying to push drugs on a much bigger scale to give a boost to terrorism in Kashmir Valley. Most of it is high-quality heroin. That is why, apart from the International Border, the LoC route along North Kashmir is also being used extensively.

In April, a former sarpanch, Tariq Ahmed Mir, 30, was arrested in South Kashmir's Shopian. According to the NIA, he had helped in the transportation of 20 kg of heroin to Punjab in return for which he received money to be offered to Hizbul terrorists in Kashmir. A few days earlier, the police in Amritsar arrested Hilal Ahmed Wagay, an associate of Kashmir's main Hizbul commander, Riyaz Naikoo. He had in his possession Rs 29 lakh meant for Naikoo.

A few days later, Naikoo was killed in an encounter with

HOW MUCH DRUGS WERE PUSHED INTO INDIA BECAME EVIDENT IN PERHAPS THE BIGGEST HAUL EVER BY CUSTOMS. ON JUNE 26TH, 2019, A PAKISTANI TRUCK DROVE TO ATTARI. THE DRIVER UNLOADED 600 BAGS OF PINK SALT. AS OFFICIALS OPENED ONE OF THE BAGS, THEY FOUND HEROIN. 15 SUCH BAGS WERE FOUND, CONTAINING 532 KG OF HEROIN WORTH RS 2,000 CRORE



Police and Customs officers with the heroin haul at Attari on June 26, 2019

Photograph by SHIVA SHARMA

security forces in Kashmir. The same day, Punjab Police arrested two of Wagay's contacts in Amritsar, Bikram Singh and Maninder Singh. It was Bikram who had handed over the money to Wagay for Naikoo. "Out of the money he received from the sale of narcotics, Naikoo would give his local commanders Rs 2.5 lakh every month to run their expenses," says a senior NIA official.

In July, the police arrested three people in Kupwara and recovered 10 kg of brown sugar along with arms and ammunition. In June, the police had arrested a smuggler, Mohammed Altaf, near the LoC in Jammu's Poonch region with 12 kg heroin. He was arrested after his name came up during the interrogation of two youths from South Kashmir, caught a few days earlier with Rs 12 lakh in cash and a packet of heroin.

But just how much of these drugs were pushed into India became evident in June last year in perhaps the biggest haul ever by the Customs Department.

On June 26th, 2019, a Pakistani truck with registration number C-1704 drove to the Attari border in Amritsar. The driver unloaded 600 bags of pink salt, which he said was meant for an Amritsar-based businessman, Gurbinder Singh.

As officials opened one of the bags for inspection, they found some suspicious substance. It turned out to be heroin. In all, 15 such bags were found, containing 532 kg of heroin worth

Rs 2,000 crore.

As the case was transferred to the NIA, its officials travelled to Amritsar, interrogating scores of people. As they put the evidence together, the NIA found the involvement of an international drug racket, based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It revealed that many such consignments were smuggled from across the border, the money from which was channelled into funding terrorist activities in Kashmir.

As officials began interrogating Gurbinder and raiding several of his premises, his links with a Kashmiri man, Tariq Lone, came to the fore. Investigators analysing his mobile phone data found that he had contacted Tariq Lone on April 4th, asking him if he had received a call from one Shoaib Noor, the proprietor of Noor and Noor Company in Pakistan. On June 17th, 2019, a few days before the drug consignment was caught at the border, Lone sent him details of a bank account in North Kashmir's Kupwara district (of which Handwara is a part), registered in the name of Shaiq Departmental Stores.

After putting the whole story together, here is what the NIA investigators found: Lone would first receive a call from Afghanistan from a man called Sahil, who has been identified as one Sahil Khan. Sahil, according to sources, enjoys political patronage in Pakistan. The call would be made to tell Lone about the incoming consignment. Gurbinder Singh was found to be in touch with another Pakistani conduit, Amir Bhai, who would send him

details of the consignment movement. Sahil then sent money to Lone through hawala channels. Once he received the money, Lone made payments to Gurbinder Singh who used it to make legal payments for customs duties, among other charges. Then he would also make payments into the account of Pakistani exporters from whom he claimed to be receiving items like pink salt. In this case, Singh made a payment through formal banking into the account of Msrs (sic) Global Vision Impex, the purported exporter of pink salt.

The consignment in question was part of a chain of six assignments, say NIA sources. Records showed that prior to this, Gurbinder Singh had got several consignments of pink salt cleared from the customs. Investigators now believe that these also carried consignments of heroin.

The NIA unearthed an elaborate network of hawala operators helping the drug cartel. One of them turned out to be another Amritsar-based businessman, Amit Gambhir. According to the NIA, it was Gambhir who arranged the transfer of money, which he did through a SIM card acquired under one of his employees' name.

Gambhir, alias Bobby, who ran a shoe store, was arrested in January this year. He was on a vacation in Thailand with his family when the police arrived at his door in Amritsar, after his name surfaced during interrogation. Fearing arrest, he sent his family back and remained in a hotel in Bangkok. After a week or so, he rented an apartment in Pattaya and stayed there from mid-July to mid-October last year.

As he needed a long-time visa, Gambhir spoke to a travel agent in Amritsar who told him that he could arrange a sticker visa through one of his contacts in Kolkata. From Pattaya, Thailand, Gambhir went to Nepal where he stayed in a hotel near Kathmandu's Pashupatinath temple. His father met him there, collected his passport, went to Kolkata to get the visa and then returned to Kathmandu to hand it over to his son.

As the police pressure back home was increasing, Gambhir became very restless. He made another trip to Nepal and then returned to Thailand. In September 2019, finally, he applied for anticipatory bail which was granted by a local court. Gambhir reached IGI airport in New Delhi on the night of October 12th last year and was detained by the authorities.

Gurbinder Singh died under mysterious circumstances in Amritsar jail in July last year. Tariq Lone was arrested from Kashmir in August last year.

It was revealed that the network was run at the behest of Ranjeet

INTELLIGENCE SOURCES BELIEVE THAT AFTER DRUGS ON A MUCH BIGGER SCALE TO GIVE A APART FROM THE INTERNATIONAL BORDER,

Photograph by ASHISH SHARMA



An army bunker along the LoC in Uri, North Kashmir

Singh, alias Cheeta, a resident of Taran Taran in Punjab, and his associate Iqbal Singh. Ranjeet was arrested along with his father Harbhajan Singh and brother Gagandeep from a hideout in Haryana's Sirsa in May this year. Ranjeet had been in touch with Tariq Lone's uncle, Farooq Lone, who had crossed over to Pakistan in the 1990s to become a militant and was now settled in Pakistan.

As Gambhir's questioning began, he admitted that on Iqbal's instructions he had sent money to Alfa Exchange in Dubai through various money changers; it was meant for his Pakistani masters, say NIA sources.

Gambhir was formally arrested on January 3rd. There is a huge trail of the hawala network, which is still being analysed. It has its

NIA SOURCES SAY THE HANDWARA HAUL IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG. DRUGS WORTH HUNDREDS OF CRORES OF RUPEES HAVE ALREADY MADE THEIR WAY FROM PAKISTAN INTO NORTH KASHMIR. THE RESULT IS SIGNIFICANTLY VISIBLE IN NORTH KASHMIR NOW, WHERE, IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, TERRORISM WAS RELATIVELY IN CONTROL COMPARED TO SOUTH KASHMIR

THE ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370 LAST YEAR, PAKISTAN-BASED TERRORISTS ARE NOW TRYING TO PUSH BOOST TO TERRORISM IN KASHMIR VALLEY. MOST OF IT IS HIGH-QUALITY HEROIN. THAT IS WHY, THE LOC ROUTE ALONG NORTH KASHMIR IS ALSO BEING USED EXTENSIVELY



Destruction of illegally cultivated poppy in Krale Chak near Srinagar, August 2014

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tentacles spreading out from Punjab through Delhi and Gujarat to Mumbai, Kashmir and Dubai.

Before cross-border trade across the LoC was suspended by the Union Government last year, a lot of drug trade also used to happen by means of this. In 2017, the police apprehended a truck in Uri in Kashmir along the LoC that was carrying Pakistani dress material. “We got suspicious upon inspection because the material was of poor quality whereas the material from Pakistan is usually of high quality,” says a senior police officer in Kashmir. As they checked thoroughly, they found 25 kg of heroin concealed inside the boxes. The officials found that the drugs were carried like this several times. Once, says a senior Kashmir police officer, they learnt it was carried in a consignment of *hawai chappals*. After the drugs reached the handler, the entire consignment of *chappals* was dumped in Srinagar city’s Lal Chowk area.

Apart from this, drugs are also known to be pushed into Kashmir through Gujarat. In September 2018, the Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad arrested a Kashmiri drug dealer, Abdul Nazar Thakar, from Srinagar city. It turned out that Thakar was funded by Jaish and was responsible for the transport of drugs

from Pakistan to Gujarat through the sea route. These drugs were then sent for sale to drug dealers in Punjab. One of the kingpins of this module was a smuggler called Simranjeet Singh Sandhu, who was detailed in Italy in January this year after a lookout notice was issued for him by Interpol. Sandhu, according to sources, ran a drug syndicate with the help of drug peddlers from Punjab and Kashmir. Police sources say that he carried on this business under the garb of sending cumin seeds from Gujarat to Kashmir. He would also carry drugs from Kashmir to Gujarat, hidden in trucks carrying apples among other local produce.

This year, local terrorist recruitment in Kashmir has come down, except in two districts in the South. “But there is no let-up. Attempts are on by Pakistan to escalate it,” says a senior police officer. The Hizbul is facing a shortage of weapons, while the Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK) outfit has been eliminated. “But we have other challenges in the form of the new group TRF, which is nothing but a shadow of Lashkar,” he says.

As the focus of the drug trade shifts to North Kashmir, senior police officials say that the influx of money by means of these drugs needs to be curbed. “Since the narco network is spread across several states in India, it requires a sustained coordination among police across these target states,” says an NIA official. ■

THE SEER WHO DARED

Kesavananda Bharati, who died on September 6th, did not win in court, but his 1973 case limited Parliament's power to amend the Constitution. Indian democracy is indebted to him

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

Kesavananda Bharati at the Edneer Mutt in Kasaragod, Kerala, January 2019 »





PARASHURAM BHAT

K

esavananda Bharati of Edneer Mutt will always be remembered as the seer who threw a legal challenge to limit the power of Parliament to amend the Constitution. But for the people who knew him before the legal challenge catapulted him to fame say he was a man of surpassing intellect, talent and influence. Decades after the event, the seer recalled that he was in his twenties or thirties when the land reform law in Kerala led to the expropriation of the mutt's property.

Karthyani Nambiar, a former Kerala government official, remembers watching him with great admiration when she was a Class 10 student. He had come on his annual visit to the Trichambaram Sree Krishna Temple in Taliparamba region of Kannur district. Nambiar is a member of the Vengapurathu family which has a home next to the iconic temple and the Swami had come from neighbouring Kasaragod, the seat of the monastic order of which he was the head since 1961. He was just 21 when he

assumed the position. Having become a monk at 19, he was known as Edneer Swamiji and belonged to the *parampara* (lineage) of Thotakacharya, one of Adi Shankara's four disciples. This is the reason why he was bestowed with an honorific title and name, a rather long one: Srimad Jagadguru Sri Sri Sankaracharya Thotakacharya Sri Keshavananda Bharathi Sripadangalavaru.

Nambiar, who looks up to him as a god-like figure, recalls Bharati's rendition of classical music, Carnatic as well as Hindustani, on his customary visits to the Trichambaram temple. He spoke multiple languages, including Malayalam and Kannada, and often spoke about *manushwathwam* (humanity) in his brief speeches to devotees. It was only over the last few years that he stopped visiting the temple during the annual festival, Nambiar says, adding that it was due to poor health. "In his prime and even as he aged, his spiritual composure and benign presence was what everyone looked forward to on the 22nd day of every *kumbham* [Malayalam month], which usually fell in March of the year," she says, adding that she feels a void now that he "has attained *Samadhi*".

Regular visitors to the mutt state that Bharati was a man of music who tirelessly promoted culture and the arts besides education. He was a versatile vocalist in his own right and on many auspicious occasions, he would sing at the mutt and also at the Trichambaram Sree Krishna Temple. Krishnan Nair, a Kannur-resident and a regular at the Taliparamba

Regular visitors to the mutt state that Bharati was a man of music who tirelessly promoted culture and the arts besides education. He was a versatile vocalist in his own right and on many auspicious occasions, he would sing at the mutt and also at the Trichambaram Sree Krishna Temple

temple, says the last time he heard the guru sing was in 2016 when he rendered a song in the Nattai raga. “I still remember it. He sang Mahaganapathim... on March 16th, 2016. It was a cleansing experience all the time I have watched him sing,” he notes, emphasising that he was very much involved in *Yakshagana*, a traditional Indian theatre form that is popular in southern Karnataka. “My favourite among the songs he used to sing in the concerts he organised was the one in Malayalam, ‘*Kayambu varna thamarakanna*’. There are recorded versions, but we will never get to see him sing again,” Nair says.

People close to the mutt—which runs colleges, schools and agricultural farms—tell *Open* that Swamiji used to write, compose music and sing devotional songs in

appointed as pontiff of the Edneer Mutt. In 1957, a communist government had assumed power in Kerala. On top of its list of priorities was the issue of land reform. Through a turbulent decade, during which legislation was framed, passed, weakened and governments and President’s rule alternated with regular frequency, the mutt remained a serene place of learning and contemplation. That was until 1969 when redistributive politics caught up with it.

In an interview to the legal website *Bar & Bench* in 2012, the seer recalled: “We lost all our property. Prior to the enactment of the law, we had enough revenue from the property and could run the mutt without any difficulty and also do various charitable activities. How-

lastly, acquire and redistribute ‘surplus’ land. The mutt’s landholdings fell afoul of the third aspect of the law.

The culmination of the seer’s efforts to prevent the alienation of the Edneer Mutt’s land led to a very different result. He lost his fight to save his mutt’s property as the Supreme Court upheld the validity of the 29th Amendment to the Constitution that expressly protected the land reform laws passed by the Kerala Legislative Assembly. In the same interview to *Bar & Bench*, the pontiff said: “I didn’t feel much, because I am not an emotional person. I believe that it was

In the 1970s and 1980s—and perhaps even sometime later—the court appeared to be the saviour of democracy in India. But after three decades of fractured parliamentary mandates, unwieldy coalitions and weak governments, 1970s-style rewriting of the Constitution via blockbuster amendments was merely a bad memory

several languages, including Kannada, Tulu, Malayalam, Hindi, Marathi and Sanskrit. Devotional songs by him are especially popular in the northern part of Kerala and southern Karnataka. He was also fond of drama and used to write and direct plays and skits. “He was a musician, peacenik, philanthropist, all rolled into one,” a government officer posted in Kasaragod tells *Open*. “Of course, he is famous for the case, but most people, even most of his critics, unfortunately, don’t know that he was also a person with immense talent and kindness,” he avers.

Trained to lead a spiritual life, the seer found himself in a very different world barely nine years after he was

ever, now, we don’t have enough money to run the institution and have to depend upon donations. Our income has [been] reduced considerably and our expenses have increased very much.”

The law that he referred to was the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969, a piece of legislation the communist government considered essential to give teeth to a ‘watered-down’ law that had been passed by the state Assembly earlier. But opinion on the matter differed and one observer called it “perhaps the most drastic of any [land reform legislation] passed by any state legislature in India”.

The legislation was designed to provide security of tenure to tenants of lands held by landlords; to give an option to homestead tenants (known as *kudikidappukar*) to own small patches of land and,

all God’s decision. After all, the property is not mine, it all belongs to the mutt and I am only someone who is managing it. So the loss or the gain is actually the mutt’s. I am a neutral person, only a servant of God.”

While he did not get the relief that he sought, his litigation bequeathed something far more precious to the country: limiting the power of Parliament to amend the Constitution. What was happening in Kerala in those years was being replicated across different states of the country. In the garb of implementing measures for social justice, including land reforms, freedoms promised in the original—1949—Constitution were being whittled down. The process started in the Jawaharlal Nehru years but acquired an ominous dimension during the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi. In a series

It was only a matter of time before someone challenged the erosion of the original Constitution. Bharati's lawyer, Nani Palkhivala, saw a chance in his travails to try and stop what was happening. What was admirable was Bharati's equanimity. Unlike the godmen of today who hanker after property more than they care about spiritual salvation, the seer of Edneer Mutt bore everything peacefully



Nani Palkhivala

of constitutional amendments—24th (1971), 25th (1971), 26th (1971) and 29th (1972)—the Indira Gandhi Government acquired the means to override Supreme Court judgments in certain cases, along with doing away with promises made to former rulers (in the matter of privy purses) and keeping ironclad land reform laws from any judicial scrutiny. There was a very strong element of economic populism in these changes. But beyond that, tilting the balance in favour of the Directive Principles—which are important constitutional promises—against Fundamental Rights had begun to threaten democracy itself.

Beginning with a case from Punjab

in 1967 (*Golak Nath*) and culminating in *Kesavananda* (1973), the Supreme Court began to arrest the erosion of Part III of the Constitution. In *Kesavananda*, the dial went much further and the court enunciated the theory of implied limitations to the power of Parliament to amend the Constitution. This was the famous 'Basic Features' doctrine. Pulled out like a rabbit from a hat, it had multiple effects. For one, the court became the last word on virtually any and every amendment to the Constitution, something that was never envisaged by the framers of the document. For another, it opened the door for judicial activism in domains that were, until then, closed to the court. The full effect of this momentous decision was to be felt two decades later when the court acquired quasi-political power and began intervention in matters that were originally the executive's concern. One can safely say it was the most important judgment in India in the second half of the 20th century.

The concerns highlighted in the judgment—overweening power of an elected government and the use of Parliament to override 'inconvenient' parts of the Constitution—were peculiar to that decade. This was due to a complicated set of circumstances but also, in no small part, the ambitions of a government that wanted to short-circuit its way to political goals. Bank nationalisation, land reforms, ending of privy purses and other steps went far beyond mere social justice, as it is understood these days.

In the 1970s and 1980s—and perhaps even sometime later—the court ap-

peared to be the saviour of democracy in India. But after three decades of fractured parliamentary mandates, unwieldy coalitions and weak governments, 1970s-style rewriting of the Constitution via blockbuster amendments was merely a bad memory.



he seer is no longer around and his mellifluous voice is gone forever. Three years later, it will be five decades

since the judgment that bears his name was delivered. In these years, much like a full revolution of the *dharmachakra*, India, too, has moved away from a threat of constitutional degradation, the acquisition of great powers by the judiciary and its realisation of their excessive use. India is now reverting to a normal institutional balance among the different pillars of the state. It is hard to deny that the role played by the seer in India's constitutional history was a quirk of fate. One could say that it was only a matter of time before someone challenged the erosion of the original Constitution. In fact, Bharati's lawyer, Nani Palkhivala, saw a chance in his travails to try and stop what was happening. What was admirable was his quality of equanimity after his mutt lost its property. Unlike the godmen of today who hanker after property much more than they care about spiritual salvation, the seer of Edneer Mutt bore everything peacefully. There are few who can match his accomplishments in these shallower times. ■

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VIRAL ISLANDS

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

Earlier this year, when linguist Anvita Abbi began to write an obituary on Licho, the last speaker of an ancient language belonging to the vulnerable Great Andamanese community for the science magazine *Scientific American*, she was filled not just with grief but anxiety.

Licho was the last speaker of the Sare language. Several languages once spoken by various tribes within the Great Andamanese had already become extinct. Bo, another language, disappeared when its last speaker Boa Senior died a few years before Licho. Just one more language, Jeru, with its three speakers remains now. But even amidst them—all living in a small and remote island out of bounds for visitors—they often speak in Hindi among themselves. With Licho's death, from tuberculosis and a heart condition, the Great Andamanese community now shrank to just 58 individuals.

Abbi had got close to Licho when she began to seek her help in studying the languages spoken on the Andaman islands, resulting eventually in the first-ever dictionary of languages spoken by the Great Andamanese. She had watched with admiration as Licho would break into, without seeking an appointment, the chief secretary's office to raise issues that affected her community. When Abbi had a book launch on her work on the creation myths within the community, Licho came wearing a bright yellow sari. "She was very bold and forthright," Abbi says. "She was like an activist in many ways."

But at the news of her death, it wasn't just the grief of losing someone she had worked with so closely that plagued her. Covid-19 had just hit the Andaman and Nicobar islands. What if the virus hit someone from this small and ancient tribe in the Andamans? What havoc would it wreak on this community, which had once numbered around 8,000 individuals (in the 1850s, when the British first colonised these parts) before diseases, such as syphilis, brought by settlers against which they had no immunity almost entirely wiped them out? What if worse was to follow and it spread even further, to the other equally vulnerable and ancient tribes of the Jarawas and Onges?

Last month, her fears came true. Eleven members of the Great Andamanese tested positive for Covid-19.

The indigenous communities on the Andaman islands (the



A Jarawa man with his bow

As Covid-19 threatens ancient Andaman tribes, the choice is between protecting their health and their way of life



Photos GETTY IMAGES

government classifies them as PVTGs or Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) belong to a very special group of people. They are genetically closer than any other modern human to the group of *Homo sapiens* who first moved out of Africa some 60,000 years ago. While that pioneering batch began their trek across the world, a smaller group trekked along the southern coastal route in India to finally settle on the Andaman islands. When the ocean ran over whatever bridge connected these islands to the rest of the world, their link, too, disappeared. Whatever was happening in the rest of the world—the genetic mixing that took place among our ancestors, the technological leaps made, the diseases that ravaged us and against which we built immunities—the tribes in the Andamans remained untouched by them.

They lived in seclusion. They fired arrows at sailors who tried to land on their shores. Their world changed in the late-1850s when the British colonised the islands to set up a penal colony. Some tribes, like those belonging to the Great Andamanese, were forced to turn friendly. Unequipped with immunity to diseases these new settlers carried, their numbers were also the first to dwindle, from an estimated 8,000 or so when the British arrived to just 58 now. Others, like the Jarawas, turned deeper into the forest, continuing to remain hostile right up to the late-1990s. The North Sentinelese, who gained infamy two years ago for killing a US national, have continued to remain somewhat untouched on their island.

Indigenous communities across the world, already vulnerable because of the expansion of the rest of the world into their territories, are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. Several members of indigenous communities in Brazil have already perished. There have been infections even in tribes like the Nahuas in the Peruvian Amazon who have only recently come into contact with the world.

As India now becomes the country with the second highest number of infections and as the virus spreads through the Andamanese capital of Port Blair, these few ancient Tribals living on the peripheries, already greatly diminished because of the diseases we have carried to them in the past, are now particularly at risk.

For most of the early months when the Covid-19 outbreak occurred in mainland India, there had been little to worry about the safety of these vulnerable tribes. Every one of the 58 Great Andamanese Tribals, even those who work and study in Port Blair, were shifted to the government settlement structure built for them in the 1960s on Strait Island. The North Sentinelese remained as aloof as ever. The Onges were confined to a reserve on Dugong Creek. And the Jarawas—who have not assimilated with the rest of society and officially at least no contact is permitted with them, although there have been increasing incidents of tourists and

poachers reaching out to them—were restricted to the west coast of the island. The Andaman Trunk Road, which cuts through the Jarawa reserve, also became quiet with only a few vehicles carrying essential supplies permitted to ply on them. With the announcement of the lockdown, and the closure of the airways and the sea lanes, most of the islands appeared to have become cut off from the rest of the world.

But the trouble started when the lockdown was lifted. Many from the Great Andamanese community who live in Port Blair wanted to return to the city. “We have to remember they are not specimens or anthropological objects. They are humans like you and me,” Abbi says.

Unlike the remote settlement which the government set up for them at Strait Island, Port Blair with its modern amenities is more attractive, and convenient, to live in. “If one person [from the Great Andamanese] gets a job in Port Blair, half of the family [from Strait Island] moves in with them. You can’t avoid it. And why should you? They are like any other citizen.”

Among them was Riya. “I have two children who study in Port Blair. We wanted to come to the city because we thought the schools and markets were going to open,” she says in Hindi. Riya, who works as a compounder at the small dispensary set up for their community on Strait Island, is the daughter of the island’s queen. This is a notional title, a practice first started during the British Raj whereby they nominated one individual to represent the community, and which continues post-Independence. Invariably, the government chooses the meek-

est and most docile among them—for instance, Riya’s mother Surmai—Abbi points out, as the king or queen, so they can have their way.

Around this time, the number of coronavirus cases had begun to shoot up in Port Blair (so far, nearly 3,500 have tested positive) and authorities decided to test those from the community who were now living in the city. About seven of them were found to be positive, including two spouses who were not from the community. Alarmed at this finding, when authorities decided to check those residing at the settlement on Strait Island, another four who had not visited Port Blair tested positive. There is some confusion about the likely source of in-

fection for those who lived on Strait Island. Although in early interviews, authorities have claimed that those who had contracted the infection in Port Blair might have passed it on to those who lived on Strait Island when they visited it. But Riya, along with Port Blair-based journalist-cum-activist Denis Giles, claims none of the Tribals had returned to the island. “There are a few other government staffers [from the mainland] on the island too. It could

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ARE NOW PARTICULARLY AT RISK**



Jarawa tribals gather around a transistor set in the Andaman islands

have come from them,” Riya says. Senior health official Dr Avijit Roy and authorities at the Tribal Welfare Department declined requests to be interviewed for this article.

Nilanjan Khatua, an anthropologist based in Port Blair, who was part of a team that checked the health of the Great Andamanese Tribals last year, claims the members have several comorbidities. “Most of them are obese, at least 55 per cent were anaemic. And even among those between 25 and 35, many of them had issues like hypertension,” he says. He believes a sedentary lifestyle, being restricted to one small island, and a sudden change in food habits—from being hunters and gatherers just a few generations ago to a modern food habit replete in carbohydrates and sugar—is to blame.

Licho, who died earlier this year, would tell Abbi that she was opposed to the building of the Andaman Trunk Road. This road, which was built in the 1970s and which is crucial because it connects Port Blair to all major towns on the island, also happens to cut right through the forest reserve meant for the Jarawas, who until recently had remained hostile to outsiders. She would say: “The Jarawa people will be decimated just like us.”

A lot of the concern now is about whether other PVTGs, like the Jarawas and the Onges, have got the infection. According to the authorities, the Jarawas, who number about 500, have been informed of the pandemic. They have been asked to stay in smaller groups and remain somewhat socially distant to avoid any possible spread in the event of the Covid-19 outbreak, and even told to contain themselves to the western coast of their reserve. “We have even provided them with tools and iron to make arrows and spears for which they salvaged ships in the past or came to depend on outsiders,” says an anthropologist connected to the Anthropological Survey of India. “We have told field functionaries to stay away or interact only at a distance with face masks and gloves. We

are also intensely patrolling the west coast to ensure that poachers don’t interact with them.”

The Jarawas remain vulnerable to outsiders. Poachers from nearby countries like Myanmar often land on their shores and barter goods with them to procure items like honey, which the Jarawas collect, or the edible nests of Swiftlet birds which are considered an aphrodisiac and fetch high prices. There have even been instances of sexual exploitation and getting them hooked on to tobacco and alcohol. Just a few weeks ago, eight poachers were arrested for fishing in an area considered part of Jarawa territory.

Abbi worries that recent efforts by the authorities to send health workers and government staffers to check upon the health of the Jarawas and to test them could lead to unintended consequences. “I have been telling them to stop doing this. Don’t send anybody to them. The intention is good. But the methodology is unsound. In trying to do good, you can cause more harm...You can’t treat hunter-gatherers the same way you treat city dwellers,” she says.

Several workers connected to the welfare of PVTGs have been turning positive of late. According to Giles, a worker belonging to the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS), which is an autonomous body that helps and advises the administration in the protection of aboriginal tribes, who had accompanied a medical team that had visited the Jarawa reserve to test the Tribals, was found positive later in the evening. “His sample had been taken a few days before. But the positive result only came later that evening. Look, we get it. It’s a tough situation. It’s a pandemic after all. But one really has to be more vigilant,” he says. “The other problem is how long can we expect the Jarawas to contain themselves to the west coast,” Khatua says. “They are hunter-gatherers. They have to move about to hunt.”

A few days ago, the results of the tests conducted showed that neither the Jarawas nor the Onges had contracted the virus. Some more good news was to follow when the last two, among the 11 of the Great Andamanese who had got Covid-19, also recovered.

All of them have now been asked to return to Strait Island. Those who have jobs in Port Blair have been told a way for transferring their jobs to the island will be found. Riya is not particularly enthused. Government authorities have had a heavy-handed approach towards them in the past. Some years ago, when Riya’s elder sister Rengi fell in love with an outsider and wished to marry him, the government briefly did not allow it. This is quite common now given the tribe’s small numbers. Rengi, however, was told that the government was following an isolation policy in the context of the Andaman’s aboriginal tribes and hence a marriage between a Tribal and an outsider could not be allowed. She, however, had her way.

“They are saying we will be safer [on Strait Island]. That’s true,” Riya says. “But we can’t always be there.” ■

BAN AND BOON

Domestic developers find an opportunity in the government's ban on Chinese apps

By **AMITA SHAH**

WHEN RAMESH CHAUDHURY was a high school student in Bikaner, Rajasthan, he was a regular at a cybercafé. He observed customers at the café chatting online, coughing up Rs 15 an hour. But chatting did not interest him, programming did. Fifteen years later, at a challenge launched by the Modi Government, Chaudhury stood before a panel of experts, making a presentation in Hindi on his homegrown videoconferencing app as an alternative to the ever popular Zoom.

The son of a farmer in Goluwala village of Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan, Chaudhury had always dreamt of starting his own company, which he decided to call Sarv, meaning 'whole' in Sanskrit. "I never wanted to do a regular job," says the 32-year-old Chaudhury, who took a loan to buy a computer when he joined college. While he was doing his engineering in Jaipur, pressed by the need to support his family financially, he started designing websites for individuals. During his third semester, along with a friend, he registered a company in 2011. But the domain name 'Sarv' was unavailable as a Netherlands company already owned that name. So the duo purchased the domain name for €23,000.

Communication was key to their venture. Sarv's first customer paid Rs 5,000 for its services for an internal chartered accountant election process. This gave the company an insight into how mass communication can be used in an election. In 2014, it got involved in the election campaign, adding media like SMS and voice, and earning substantial revenue. That was the turning point. They started cloud telephony, a cost-effective, internet-based voice and data communication where telecommunications applications, switching and storage are hosted by a third party. It became popular. The company, which now has 110 employees, recorded a turnover of over Rs 50 crore in financial year 2019. Three months ago, they launched the Sarv Wave

app, which allows chat and videoconferencing with 50 people, offering end-to-end encryption of European Union standards. In a month, it had 14,000 users connecting with 5 lakh people. "It's an indigenous alternative to Zoom, consuming less data, is user-friendly and addresses privacy concerns. No data will travel out of the country," says Chaudhury.

Zoom, a videoconferencing platform, witnessed a surge in users this year as people, confined to their homes owing to the outbreak of the coronavirus, flocked to it to connect with friends, colleagues and family. But just as ministers and bureaucrats started holding meetings over Zoom, the Government in April issued an advisory cautioning against using third-party software and apps, following instances of security breaches on apps like Zoom.

While Chaudhury is opening up Sarv Wave to people, including virtual classes for educational institutions, as an Indian alternative to Zoom, nearly 2,500km south, in his office at Infopark, Cherthala, in Kerala's Alappuzha district, Joe Sebastian, along with his business partner Tony Thomas, is all set to offer his company Techgentsia's videoconferencing solutions to the Government. "It's an honour that our Government will be our client now. We see more potential in the exponentially growing videoconferencing enterprise market and will be primarily looking at the [business-to-business] space. Ours is a superior technology and, hence, more expensive compared to the other videoconferencing solutions. So offering it at a very low price to the general public may not be possible at present," says Sebastian. However, the company does have plans of providing Vconsole to the general public in future for which talks are on with various partners.

His life has changed since August 20th when the Government announced Techgentsia's Vconsole as winner of the innovation challenge for the development of videoconferencing solutions under the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative. Sebastian, whose work involved research, says he has never got so much attention. "I have



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

been flooded with phone calls. I have never spoken this much.” The startup will be given a financial support of Rs 1 crore with an additional Rs 10 lakh towards operations and maintenance for the next three years. Vconsol, customised for India, supporting eight Indian languages besides English, can support up to 80 active participants and 300 passive ones.

Both Sarv Wave and Techgentsia’s Vconsol are among the five apps shortlisted in the innovation challenge from among 1,983 applications. Unlike Chaudhury, Sebastian had never imagined running his own enterprise. Born to a fisherman in coastal Pathi-

rappally village of Alappuzha, he lived in a two-room apartment given by the government to the poor and landless. As a Class 10 student in a government-aided school, he went to work in coir factories to make ends meet. His parents, however, ensured that he got a good education and sent him to pursue Masters in computer application at Kollam. All Sebastian aspired for back then was a good job. He found one in 2000, but the company shut down in 2006 following the dotcom bust. The company’s counterpart in the US, dealing with audioconferencing, offered him a consultant’s job as a researcher. Three years later, along with Thomas,



“India has been one of the biggest in app downloading. It is high time that apps were uploaded from India. Indians can make apps”

RAVISHANKAR PRASAD
union minister of electronics
and information technology

“

We found that a minuscule percentage of daily tweets were in Indian languages in a country of a billion non-English speakers

MAYANK BIDAWATKA

co-founder, Koo



Mayank Bidawatka (left) and
Aprameya Radhakrishna co-founders, Koo

While I worked with Amazon, I realised how many people were using the mobile as a source of entertainment

KEERTI SINGH

co-founder, Hitwicket Superstars

he founded Techgentsia Software Technologies with a sharp eye on videoconferencing. The company offered videoconferencing solutions to clients in the US and Europe. Last year, Techgentsia Software Technologies made a million dollars in revenue. “With coronavirus changing lifestyles and the Government announcing the challenge in April, we found an opportunity to cash in on our experience,” says Sebastian. For four months, his team worked on fine-tuning the app, beating the 11 others who made it to the final stage. Besides Sarv Web and Vconsol, the videoconferencing challenge was won by Peoplink from Hyderabad and Hydrameet from Chennai.

Within days of the Government banning 59 Chinese apps, including TikTok, amidst an India-China faceoff at the border, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on July 4th launched the Atmanirbhar Bharat innovation challenge to encourage Indian apps which can not only address the needs of the domestic market but go beyond it. The winners were announced in August.

ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad describes it as a defining moment in “atmanirbharata” (self-reliance). “India has been one of the biggest in app downloading. It is high time that apps were uploaded from India. Indians can make apps,” Prasad tells *Open*.

At the helm of the Digital India programme launched five years ago, Prasad is of the view that it will succeed only if it becomes a mass movement enabling digital inclusion. With the Government looking to fund startups till they are able to take off, the minister recently launched Chunauti, a challenge to boost such startups, particularly in Tier-II towns. “India has proven itself in software services. It should now endeavour to become a hub for software products,” says Prasad.

The app challenge, launched by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in partnership with the Atal Innovation Mission and Niti Aayog to identify Indian apps that have potential to compete with the global ones, received 6,940 entries from tech entrepreneurs and startups across the country. The challenge was open to nine categories—Business, e-

Learning, Entertainment, Games, Health, News, Office and Work from Home, Social Media, and Others. A panel of experts from industry and startups, academia and the Government selected 24 apps and awarded Rs 20 lakh for the first position, Rs 15 lakh for the second and Rs 10 lakh for the third. Another 20 apps were identified for Special Mention.

“The challenge threw up interesting facets. Of the 24 awardees in nine categories, 13 were not investor-backed, five were women and 70 per cent were startups,” says Abhishek Singh, CEO, National e-Governance Division, MeitY. From the 6,940 applications, 100 were shortlisted in each category. The list was further pruned to 50 and then 10, who made presentations before the jury. While Bengaluru had the maximum winners at seven of 24 in total, followed by Chennai and Mumbai, five were from Tier-II and III towns.

Women won all the awards in the Games category. Among the gaming favourites in the challenge was Hitwicket Superstars, co-founded by Keerti Singh and Kashyap Reddy. Jaipur-born Singh became interested in mobile gaming during her MBA in Hyderabad, playing during short breaks. “While I worked with Amazon, I realised how many people were using the mobile as a source of entertainment,” she says.

When Reddy returned from Sweden, they teamed up to begin a startup, Hitwicket, seeking to capture the zeal of cricket fans, tapping the mass appeal of the game, which cuts across geographical, social, economic and age barriers. In the game, the user owns a team that is assigned fictitious players. “There’s fantasy, magical elements. On the phone, one is looking for more than cricket,” says 32-year-old Singh. With women comprising 19 per cent of its nearly 30 lakh gamers, Hitwicket Superstars includes women players. The startup, where 25 per cent of the employees are women, made a revenue of \$200,000 in 2019. Hitwicket Superstars itself has 900,000 downloads with 30 per cent of its users from abroad.

Singh, who quit her job at Amazon to get into the then nascent mobile gaming business, says the company’s grand vision is to host Hitwicket World Cup 2023, the grandest e-sport event for cricket, describing it as the next evolution in e-cricket.



Keerti Singh and Kashyap Reddy
co-founders, Hitwicket Superstars

It's an honour that our government will be our client now. We see more potential in the exponentially growing videoconferencing enterprise market

JOE SEBASTIAN
co-founder, Vconsol



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The Prime Minister in his *Mann Ki Baat* on August 30th praised the awardees of the challenge saying indigenous apps were gaining popularity. Soon afterwards, several indigenous apps reportedly raced to the top 10 in the App Store in their categories.

MODI'S PRAISE OF the Koo app, among others, took its founder Mayank Bidawatka by surprise. Amid calls congratulating him, he goes down memory lane to narrate how Koo, a microblogging platform, came into being. Koo is the sound of the koel, a messenger bird. The name is short and Indian. Born in Mumbai, he did his graduation from the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), Manila, after which for around a year he worked in the ICICI Bank. He quit the banking job to join his friends at redBus, an online bus-ticketing service, after which he co-founded The Media Ant, a discovery engine for all media options in India. He was also co-founder of Goodbox, a platform to bring thousands of businesses to create a mini app. "Appu [his Koo co-founder Aprameya Radhakrishna] and I decided on a consumer product that could cater to a billion users," says Bidawatka, 39. They came to the conclusion that this could not be done without breaking the language barrier and launched multiple products. The microblogging app was launched five months ago.

"We found that a minuscule percentage of daily tweets were in Indian languages, in a country of a billion non-English speakers. So the question before us was how to get those who don't speak English on a microblogging platform," says Bidawatka. Filling the vacuum in use of native languages, they introduced Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi, drawing lakhs of users, from renowned personalities to common people. Bidawatka says besides "Indi-anising" the product, they have added the ability to "Koo" using audio and video as well.

Another awardee in the social media category, Aditya Kothari, co-founder of Chingari, an Indian version of TikTok, agrees that to cater to Indians, native languages need to be factored in. On Chingari, a short-video platform which was launched much before the ban of TikTok, there are 10 Indian languages. "We noticed that people were shifting to shorter and shorter media engagements.

TikTok proved short media format works," says Kothari, one of the four co-founders, all in their thirties—Biswatma Nayak, a native of Adaspur in Odisha's Cuttack district, Sumit Ghosh from Bhilai in Chhattisgarh and Deepak Salvi of Mumbai. Kothari is travelling across villages and towns to study what platforms people are using. The 18-month-old app has over 2.8 crore users and over 2 crore viewers from the remotest village to big cities.

Rohan Verma, whose MapmyIndia Move, emerged winner in the Others category in the challenge for its hyperlocal discovery, says it offers more than Google Maps. "It's more than GPS. You can type out an address, you can track your vehicle and you can see how far you are from containment zones," says 34-year-old Verma, whose parents Rakesh and Rashmi founded MapmyIndia in 1995. Delhi-based Verma says maps can change people's lives and was a crucial component of e-commerce, claiming that 80 per cent of cars in India with navigation systems use it. MapmyIndia's technologies and maps are used by 5,000 enterprise customers.

Within days of the app awards being announced, the Government banned another set of Chinese Apps, 118 this time, including the popular PUBG, citing security reasons. Anurag Kumar, the winner in the Entertainment section for his app Caption Plus, says the silver lining about the ban was that it gave an opportunity for indigenous apps to showcase themselves. For Kumar, of Adharpur village of Bihar's Begusarai district, app-making started as a hobby. It was on evenings after work that Kumar, the chief technology officer for a Delhi-based furniture rental company Fabrento, and his two friends, Rahul and Jitendra, conceptualised Caption Plus in 2018. "We didn't have funds to promote it. We didn't spend anything on advertising," says Kumar, an analytics MBA graduate from IIT Delhi. The adage goes that a picture is worth a thousand words but for their utility app with 22 lakh downloads, a picture is incomplete without a good caption describing it "in its own lyrics" and suitable tags to go with it. From a serene village on Kerala's coast to a bustling metro, these app developers have crossed geographical barriers, given an Indian twist to their products and are competing with international applications. This may just be the beginning of a new chapter. ■

SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

The homegrown craft gin movement is only getting bigger as more players jump into the fray

By NIKITA DOVAL



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

ANAND VIRMANI KNEW that Indians weren't particularly fond of gin but even then, the reaction he sometimes experienced was surprising. It was the year 2010 and Virmani was then a brand manager with William Grant & Sons, owners of brands such as Glenfiddich whisky and Hendricks Gin. "Even at promotional events for gin, people didn't want to be seen with it. It was just not a cool drink," he recalls. For far too long gin had been dismissed as a fuddy-duddy spirit. At around the same time, Sakshi Saigal, studying for her MBA in Barcelona, then in the middle of what is commonly referred to as a 'ginaissance', found herself asking: Why aren't Indians drinking more of it?

Europe and the UK had been experiencing the ginaissance, or the renaissance of gin, since 2013-2014, the spirit itself riding on the back of the return of the cocktail. Independent distilleries, gin bars, niche craft labels—it was a very different world from the one of English painter and engraver William Hogarth whose famous Gin Lane print of 1751 depicts the spirit as a one-way street to ruin, with the poor drinking themselves to death. It was only a matter of time before the craze would hit India and both Virmani and Saigal would have the first-mover advantage.

Virmani, a copartner at Perch, a wine and coffee bar in Delhi and Mumbai, noticed a definite uptick in people asking for gin-based cocktails and that too with specifications, while Saigal brainstormed with her husband Rahul Mehra and cousin Vidur Gupta. All of them came to the same conclusion, though separately. India was ready for its own craft gins. Virmani and his partner Vaibhav Singh launched 'Greater Than' in 2017, while Saigal along with Mehra and Gupta launched Stranger & Sons in 2018. The latter was recently awarded the highest honour at the International Wine and Spirits Competition—the Gold Outstanding. The ginaissance has officially arrived in India.

It was a homecoming of sorts which had been in the works for almost two centuries now. Gin, a neutral spirit flavoured with juniper berries, has been around since the early 16th century. However, it is an association forged in the late 1800s that has defined the spirit over time. British soldiers in India would mix quinine, derived from the bark of the cinchona tree, with their gin, in an attempt to fight off malaria. Thus was born the earliest rendition of one of the most classic cocktails in the world—gin



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Even at promotional events for gin, people didn't want to be seen with it. It was just not a cool drink"
ANAND VIRMANI
 cofounder, Nao Spirits & Beverages



and tonic (G&T). So strong is the association that even today there are iconic gin brands out there such as Bombay Sapphire, Jodhpur gin, Star of India and Sikkim gin which have absolutely nothing to do with India, but their names are a homage to the home of the G&T. However, over the years, gin fell from favour, eclipsed by other spirits, particularly vodka.

"Historically, too, bartenders have always been inclined towards gin, a classic vintage spirit which lends itself to many variations," says Vaibhav Singh, a bartender in his previous avatar and Virmani's co-partner at Nao Spirits & Beverages, the team behind Greater Than. Infused with botanicals, a mouthful of a premium gin is like an explosion of different flavours on your palette—ranging from spicy to floral, but still mild enough to serve as a base for classic cocktails like the Negroni.

"Two things bring India together—cricket and the humble spice box. We are blessed with an agricultural bounty when it comes to herbs, spices, botanicals, and we wanted a gin that would tell the story of India but without falling into clichés," says Vidur Gupta, one of the cofounders of Third Eye Distillery, the makers of Stranger & Sons. They were aiming for a "three-dimensional" gin and thus was born their spirit with its infusion of black pepper, coriander, nutmeg, mace and Indian citrus elements such as the Nagpur orange.

Historically, a fine gin is one which is infused with at least six to nine botanicals, though over the years brands like Monkey 47 have upped the game by infusing their spirit with 47 of them. Craft distilleries take pride in creating complex brews with varied flavours that carry more than just a whiff of local pride. "We have 11 botanicals and seven of these are sourced from the four corners of India giving the spirit a very unique flavour," says Amar Sinha, Chief Operating Officer, Radico Khaitan. He is talking about Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, produced by

Radico Khaitan, formerly the Rampur Distillery, one of India's oldest distilleries. Launched internationally in 2018, Jaisalmer is now making its way to Indian liquor stores. "Gin is making its way back into our drinking habits rather aggressively and the emerging trend is of craft gins where you brew small batches so you have control over the recipe."

India is one of the world's largest alcohol markets owing to the sheer size of its population though most of it is geared towards whisky. In fact, Indians are the biggest consumers of whisky in the world. With a young population, rising disposable income and change in societal norms making it acceptable for women to drink in public, the market is only going to grow and diversify. There has also been a distinct shift in the drinking culture with the emphasis on savouring a drink as opposed to just getting high.

"I think India is currently the most exciting market for any brand to push out a spirit," says Shreya Soni, founder and CEO of Delhi Secret Supper Club, a lifestyle platform that curates events, brand launches, etcetera. Till even a few years ago, Soni says, the brief for premium spirits entering the market was to target the rich, evolved drinker who was inevitably male. "But there has been a change in attitudes. Marketing has become gender agnostic while there is a subtle but distinct shift from higher calories, brown spirit to whites, tying up with the increasing awareness about a healthier, active lifestyle. Gin ticks all these boxes, apart from being versatile enough to transition from an AM to a PM drink."

For quite some time vodka had cornered this market, positioning itself as the drink for the young and upwardly mobile. Its market share is miniscule compared to whisky, but it is still ahead of gin in the race. Gin currently accounts for only about 1 per cent of the spirits market in India but even that amounts to around



(L-R) Vidur Gupta, Sakshi Saigal and Rahul Mehra, cofounders of Third Eye Distillery

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People pick up a bottle because they identify with the brand philosophy. We are all about the idea of a new contemporary India"

RAHUL MEHRA
cofounder, Third Eye Distillery



20 lakh cases (a case is 12 bottles of 750 ml). But the bulk of these is made up of mass-produced cold compound products, which are just infused with botanicals. However, according to the Dublin-based Research and Markets, the Indian gin market is expected to grow at a rate of 9 per cent between 2017 and 2023 with a final tally of over 30 lakh cases. Given that there were only three homegrown craft gin brands in India in 2018 and now the market is looking at 10 (some yet to be launched), the predictions are on track.

ONE OF THESE NEW kids on the block is India Craft Spirit Company's Terai, an 'India dry gin'. The company is a part of Globus Spirits, a leading player in the alcohol industry. "Our one line brief when we set up Craft Spirit was to create international quality craft spirits in India," says founder Shekhar Swarup. For two years, Swarup and his team have been researching flavours and traditional methods of distillation in pursuit of the right profile. "Our experience at Globus has taught us the importance of the cleanliness of a base spirit. I tasted over 100 gins in the space of a few weeks, even devising my own scale of flavours," says Swarup. With herby notes of basil and coriander coupled with the nuttiness of almonds, Swarup is hoping Terai lives up to the lush, green region it derives its name from. The gin was to be launched in Delhi in July but the pandemic has pushed plans back though the company is still hoping to be in stores by September and in other big cities by the end of the year.

Building a legend is an important pillar of marketing when it comes to spirits. A good story often helps build a fan base and brand salience, like in the case of single malts bobbing out of fabled distilleries where even the water is part of marketing folk-

lore. For the team at Stranger & Sons, their gin was always going to be "about the story of our lives", the "our" here representing an entire generation that has come of age in a post-liberalised India. "What was our story? What do we pride ourselves on? People pick up a bottle because they identify with the brand philosophy. We are all about the idea of a new contemporary India," says Rahul Mehra, one of the three cofounders of the brand. Their bottle label, for instance, relies heavily on magic realism and the lush wonders of the Western Ghats to create a narrative.

Terai, on the other hand, has grooves on its bottle which are inspired by the pillars of temple architecture while the stopper is actually made by the craftsmen of Channarayana in Karnataka, famous for its wooden lacquered toys. "On the surface, it is yet another impressively designed bottle bound to appeal to the aesthetics of the young and the old but for those who want to go deep, there is a story right there," says Swarup. There is a clear attempt to break off the colonial connection while championing the indigenous nature of the spirit.

There is no one-size-fits-all marketing strategy when it comes to the Indian consumer. What the millennial wants is very different from what a well-heeled middle-age consumer desires, but there can be a meeting point. It is the sweet spot, the mastery of which requires brands to understand the mindset of their consumers and tailor a strategy that appeals to all. "You do see a distinct transition happening with the consumer in terms of patronising Indian brands, be it coffee, chocolate, or even wellness. There is curiosity about homegrown brands but what influences consumption is a variety of factors ranging from quality to pricing and, of course, how Instagrammable it is, at least for a certain section," says Soni.

Premium international gin brands in India such as Bombay



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I tasted over 100 gins in the space of a few weeks, even devising my own scale of flavours”

SHEKHAR SWARUP
founder, India Craft
Spirits Company



Sapphire, Hendricks, Monkey 47 are priced upwards of Rs 3,000, limiting their clientele. The homegrown brands knew that if they wanted to make space for themselves in the market and the customers’ consciousness, it had to be done through an accessible entry point. Greater Than, for instance, is priced at Rs 980 in Delhi while Stranger & Sons retails in the Rs 1,500 category. “We wanted pricing that was accessible but not at the cost of running a loss to us. And we were very sure that we didn’t want to compromise on our quality, we wanted to put the best possible product out there,” says Virmani.

Pricing also speaks volumes on consumer profile. Jaisalmer gin, for instance, is priced at Rs 3,500 because the brand is looking at the globetrotting, well-heeled Indian consumer. They are also positioning themselves as an international quality Indian brand, which is why they chose to launch in the international market in the first place. “There was a time when we believed that the best wine came only from France and Italy but the new world wines changed that perception. The same happened with Scotch. Today, there are single malts from India, including our brand, Rampur Single Malt, which are held in great esteem internationally. Now, it is not about the provenance but actually the spirit inside the bottle. We are mastering the art of capturing India’s rich ecological diversity in our spirits and Indians take pride in picking up products that come from here,” says Sanjeev Banga, President, International Business, Radico Khaitan.

In the spirit-making business, marketing has to keep step with often nebulous regulatory minefields. The law, feels Virmani, is written to help the larger players, or at least ones with deep enough pockets to navigate the bureaucratic red tape. Each

state has its own laws with regard to registration, licensing and even label details, which requires a level of investment, not always possible for a newbie. That explains why a lot of homegrown craft gins are currently available only in a few states. Whatever plans may have been in the works are also stalled due to Covid-19 though the makers don’t see the pandemic impacting sales; rather, it may have a boosting effect. Interestingly, legacy brands such as Bombay Sapphire and Tanqueray have a major social media campaign ongoing with celebrities.

Gin and vodka are low-investment spirits for anyone looking to enter the market as they don’t require time and space for ageing. The craft label also allows the makers to keep their batch size small. Most of them seemed to have learnt a lesson from B9 Beverages, the makers Bira, an extremely popular craft beer in Tier-1 cities. There are reports of the company looking to sell a stake because in spite of growing popularity, it is believed that they expanded too quickly and too fast. The company reported losses of Rs 200 crore in financial year 2019, double the loss of Rs 100 crore in financial year 2018.

As more homegrown craft gin brands gear up to hit the market, it is an exciting time for the consumer. “In order to build a community, you need 15 to 30 good brands so that consumers can have a conversation, so that a category can emerge,” says Virmani. With all of the labels looking at prices between Rs 1,000 and Rs 3,000 and different flavours, it is a wide enough field for everyone to find their niche. “As long as it doesn’t become lazy and everyone has something to add,” says Rahul Mehra. ■



THE AURA OF ABS

A photographer captures the sorrows and stillness of a city under lockdown

By Kaveri Bamzai

SALON



ENCE



Delhi's historic Cinema House, Regal, built in 1932 (left);
Khan Market—where's the gang?

E mpty streets and hollow hearts. Looming pillars and dark, shadowed souls. Vacant spaces and abandoned people. An extraordinary pathogen in the air unleashed a shameful illness—of wilful ignorance and careful incomprehension. As those who could hunkered down in their homes during the sudden and unprecedented lockdown necessitated by Covid-19, the men and women who build our houses, serve us daily and keep our cities aloft came out of the crevices and hideaways that are airbrushed in usual picturesque urban portraits. Some marched home, their belongings and memories carried on and in their heads, their children barefoot, hungry and uncomprehending.

Others were worse off. With no villages to go back to, they remained in their makeshift homes, under flyovers, near railway tracks and sometimes, and most poignantly, like a six-month-old baby, wrapped in a sheet, abandoned in graveyards.

But there were some who were turning their gaze towards them, talking to them, photographing them, chronicling them, often at great personal risk. Such as fine arts photographer Parul Sharma. Armed with courage, empathy and an iPhone 11 Pro and a Huawei P30 Pro, she cut through the deserted roads of Delhi, at once familiar and strange, bereft of traffic, of officegoers, of citizens. Through the urban wasteland, she photographed Delhi's





Patients recuperating at a Covid-19 Care Centre, Commonwealth Games Village

PARUL SHARMA TALKS OF LIVES PAUSED, LIVES LOST AND LIVES REGAINED, AND WHAT SHE DOES WELL IS ALSO TO PLACE THE CITY IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT, WHICH AS JAWAHARLAL NEHRU HAD SAID HAS BEEN THE GRAVE OF MANY EMPIRES AND THE NURSERY OF A REPUBLIC



stately buildings, its forgotten homeless and its helpless animals. What has emerged in *Dialects of Silence: Delhi under Lockdown* (Roli Books; 156 pages; Rs 2,995) is a book that forces us to examine our own souls. Where were we when devastation was sweeping our beloved city? Where were we when fearless doctors were powered by their Hippocrates oath and Talat Mahmood songs to serve 18-hour shifts seven days a week? Where were we when bodies were being despatched to electric crematoriums and burial grounds?

We were elsewhere but Sharma was reclaiming the city space, one frame at a time. The relationship women have with cities is a curious mix of wonder and terror. Devoid of the anonymity of crowds, the city can be a threatening expanse. But for Sharma it was a mission she had set out on. The images drew her in, and her eye could not unsee. And we cannot unsee the young woman in a burkha reading the *Al-Fātiḥah* for her dead husband in the middle of the burial ground. We cannot see the befuddle-





The administration fed the homeless with social-distancing norms (left); A migrant worker struggling to reach her village; (below) a stranded guard trunk at the New Delhi railway station

ment in the arch of the homeless man's body as he talks to himself in a deserted Connaught Place. We cannot see the agony in the mother's face as her baby clings to her breast and she dreams of her home in Unnao.

There is no languor here, only despair and urgency. In Mirza Ghalib's deserted camp and Mir Taqi Mir's *ujada dayaar* (place laid completely to waste), there is movement—that of armies of migrant labourers moving inexorably home, ambulance vans rushing towards hospitals, bodies transiting towards another world. Sharma talks of lives paused, lives lost and lives regained, and what she does well is also to place the city in its historical context, which as Jawaharlal Nehru had said has been the grave of many empires and the nursery of a republic. Here the crows look like vultures, circling Janpath, and the kneeling monkeys like tiny, meditating men. The resilience of the city ravaged so many times by so many rulers, surprised Sharma, as did the spirit of its people.

"Whether it was the gurudwaras that

served food or the people who came forward to do the last rites for strangers, it was so inspiring to see people overcome the stigma of the virus. In spite of the odds, humanity won," she says.

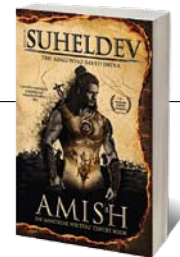
Sharma grew up in what was called Baird Road, near Gole Market, and knows the city intimately. She captures its staples: Partap Florist in Janpath; Loke Nath, the city's oldest drapery store; Indraprastha College, her mother's alma mater and Delhi's oldest women's college.

Like the best work, *Dialects of Silence* is a personal history and a public document, of what the human spirit could achieve when the world came unstuck. And how one brave act can inspire so many others—from the police officials who waived her through barriers, to doctors who shared their new sanitised workspaces, to migrants who told their stories. Sharma did fear contracting the virus, but an even bigger fear was this: that she would miss the perfect frame. After all, she drove over 6,000km for four months in search of it. ■

The Essential Hero

Amish's dance with valour, religion and patriotism

By Gautam Chikermane



LEGEND OF SUHELDEV
THE KING WHO SAVED INDIA
Amish

Westland
352 Pages | Rs 399

LEGEND OF SUHELDEV: *The King Who Saved India* is Amish's best book yet. I say this after having read his entire Shiva trilogy and the ongoing Ram Chandra series. It is gripping from the first chapter and leaves you with a fulfilling climax as well as gasping for more at the last. I had to try hard to read it slowly, enjoy the atmosphere, the characters, the situations, the issues. But I failed: the pace Amish has set in his seventh novel is faster than the horses his heroes ride on.

As in all his books, the theme Amish deals with moves in parallel to the plots he devises. This time it is the challenge of harmonising Islam with India, differentiating the barbaric Turkic conquerors from Indian Muslims. This, Amish contends, is important for the unity of India. Nobody could defeat this diverse subcontinent when it was united. What Amish is talking about is the division between patriotism and religion and presenting an argument through the medium of fiction to remove the discords between choosing the Muslim or the Indian identities. Suheldev's valour is not merely in fighting Mahmud of Ghazni and his general Maqsur; his bravery is equally in the psychological domains as he attempts to unite India, using politics and patriotism as his left and right arms. In this book, Amish dances with valour, religion and patriotism.

Right from the first chapter that sets the foundations of the plot—the conquest of India, the barbarity against Hindu religion, the sacrifice as an offering to Shiva—to the last, there is not a single wasted word, sentence or paragraph. No character is

redundant: Toshani or Govardhan, Abdul or Aslan, Vrishabh or Ajitpal. Each of them is unique. So well sketched are they that I find it difficult to pull out one over another. Diversified across caste, religion and gender, all are united by Suheldev as leader and a greater objective of love for India, humanity and the eternal. They sing in union, yet stand out with their individual notes.

But it's not as if it is all a harmonious journey. Despite the loot and rape, killing and plunder that the Turkic hordes unleash time and again, Amish also showcases an India fragmented by petty interests, cheated by its own, enfeebled by the unfit. Divided by fear, conjoined by greed, kings become ceremonial, effectively enslaving their own kingdoms, their people and above all, relinquishing their dharma for survival. Nobody typifies this better than Ajitpal. He invites contempt like

no other character: small, greedy, fearful, disgusting—he is the epitome of an undeserving inheritor. It is this consolidation of *tamas* that Suheldev, the ruler of Shrasvati (Bahraich) attempts to end with a *rajasik* spirit. We see several Ajitpals in modern India too.

Busy with the Ram Chandra series, Amish is seeing his literary aspirations soar higher than his capacity to write. This book, therefore, comes from Amish's 'Writer Centre', where he gives the broad story and research materials to a team of writers with whom he works. They write the first draft, which Amish completes. We don't know who the writers of Suheldev are—they choose to remain anonymous—but a word of appreciation is due to them. As with all his books, Amish gives a hint of the next, the 'long story' of how Emperor Chola engineered the death of Mahmud.

All through Amish delivers a visual imagery that's clear, consistent and cogent. *Suheldev* is a book ready to be filmed or serialised. Without doubt, the adventure, the history and the treatment will cart this book to the top of the charts. But it is really Amish's exposition into the age and the time of this forgotten hero that makes for essential reading. I didn't know about *Suheldev* until I read this book. This is a sad and criminal comment on the way heroes from India's history have been erased by vested interests within—the Ajitpals of modern India. School and college syllabi must include *Suheldev*. For the sake of India that he loves and writes about, that chapter must be written by Amish. ■

Amish

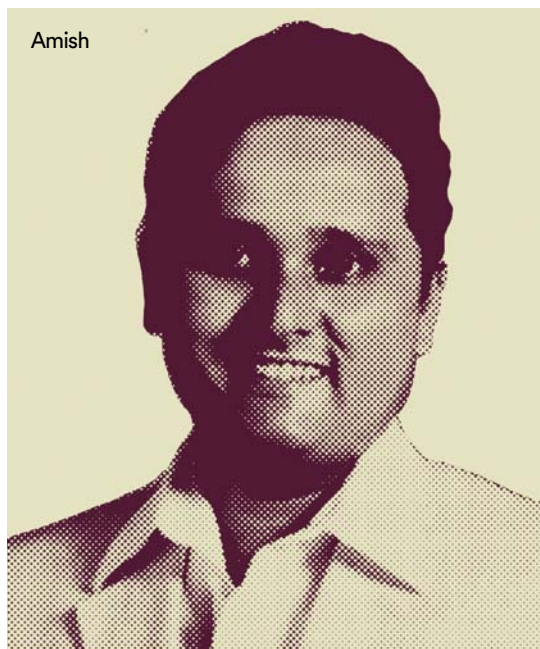


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



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Palace Intrigue

A bird's eye view of the march of Rajputana from feudalism to independence to controversies

By Reshmi Dasgupta



Gayatri Devi and Sawai Man Singh II of Jaipur

WHEN THE UMPTEENTH book on Indian royalty, particularly on the House of Jaipur (Kachhwaha would be more correct if less elegant) is published, the question to ask is 'Why another one?' Well, if the eponymous book promises 'The Inside Story of India's Most Glamorous Royal Family', a grand romp through the palaces, forts and *shikaar* lodges of Rajputana is the least readers expect. As John Zubrzycki is no Jilly Cooper, the book provides a bird's eye view of the march of Rajputana from feudalism to India's independence even as it chronicles the life of the person who actually brought 'glamour' into that royal family and is the fulcrum of the story: Gayatri Devi or Ayesha, the beautiful princess of Cooch Behar who married the dashing Maharaja Sawai Sir Man Singh II.

Before the champagne and *shikaar*-laden romance of 'Jai and Ayesha' became the stuff of international headlines and elevated Jaipur to a plane beyond their 17-gun-salute status, it was not very different from the other princely states that settled down to life under the British Raj much as they had under the Mughals. Gayatri Devi arrived in Jaipur as 'Third Her Highness' in 1939 and proceeded to impact royal Rajput life within and without.

Jaipur had been on the right side of the rulers in Delhi ever since the Mughal era. The fabled Kachhwaha wealth can be traced to the original Raja Man Singh who, as Akbar's most trusted general, had brought back camels laden with loot

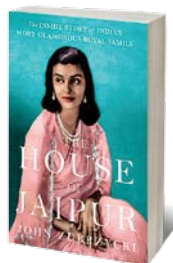
from campaigns. British rule also saw Jaipur hobnobbing with the powerful, as the book recounts, but independence presented a quandary. That is when its maverick Maharani deviated from that Jaipur policy, joined C Rajagopalachari's Swatantra Party and triumphantly entered the Lok Sabha with a record-breaking victory margin, thereby showing India's defenestrated rulers a way to regain (or retain) relevance in a new India.

However, from Gayatri Devi's stepson 'Bubbles' Bhawani Singh's disastrous foray into politics as a Congress candidate during Rajiv Gandhi's years to his daughter Diya Kumari's victories on a BJP ticket, the return of the old Jaipur policy is also manifest. But Zubrzycki's prediction that she is chief ministerial material may be premature, as also his assessment of her polo-playing fashion model son Padmanabh, the current 'maharaja'

whose adoption by his grandfather and subsequent 'coronation' divided Rajput society. Yet Gayatri Devi's legacy endures. Even what played out in Rajasthan recently with rebel Congress MLAs being whisked away to prevent 'poaching' can be traced to a precedent set by her: in 1967 she had corralled the opposition first at the City Palace in Jaipur and then at Kanota Fort in an unsuccessful effort to prevent the Congress from luring them.

Though the Maharani—later Rajmata—was frank about her feud with Indira Gandhi and even recounted having caviar in her grotty Tihar Jail cell during Emergency in her memoir *A Princess Remembers*, she had been frustratingly laconic about the premature deaths of her husband and son as well as her contradictory actions in the protracted legal battles with her family. Through meticulous research and interviews of friends and fellow royals, Zubrzycki fills in that gap in his book—though the paucity of photographs is a major disappointment. He could have also devoted more attention to her co-maharanis: Marudhar Kanwar and Kishore Kanwar, the latter reputedly as beautiful as Gayatri Devi and with a magnetic personality too.

To answer the question 'Why another one?' Well, because it engagingly elucidates how after the sudden death of Man Singh II at a polo match in England in 1970, for the late Gayatri Devi and her progeny, it has been a not-so-glamorous progression from champagne cases to court cases. ■



THE HOUSE OF JAIPUR
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● WASWO X WASWO
AT HIS HOME IN UDAIPUR

The Observationist

The whimsical brilliance and self-deprecatory humour of Waswo X Waswo



By Rosalyn D'Mello

We Are Always Working is a celebration of the deeply collaborative nature of Milwaukee-born artist Waswo X Waswo's creative pursuits in Udaipur. Over 15 years, not only did he make the lake city his home, he also built a close-knit community of co-workers whose practices had been otherwise straightjacketed within the territory of craft and confined to the tourist market. The ongoing solo at Latitude 28, New Delhi has bodies of painted photographs conceived by Waswo and handpainted by Rajesh Soni, alongside terracotta works by Shyam Lal Kumhar. The show makes visible the gleefully interactive aspects encompassed in the act of looking and being looked at, by and between the inhabitants of the village of Varda, home to his studio. Going beyond the theatre of villagers playing dress-up, the images synthesise the tropes of the Indian studio photography tradition with a critique of Orientalist and colonial visual discourses, most notably through the careful staging of the photographic representation of Waswo's miniaturist avatar—the Evil Orientalist.

Curator of the show, gallerist Bhavna Khakar, says, "The title of Waswo's exhibition '*We Are Always Working*' aptly describes our attitude at Latitude 28 and our commitment to furthering the cause of contemporary art through myriad ventures and projects over the years. Waswo X Waswo's exhibition has been our first step into the world of exhibitions both physical and online, post-lockdown and the first effort by an art organisation to host an online vernissage, and the feedback we received has been phenomenal."

My own acquaintance with the cartoonish figure of the 'gora sahib' was in 2011, at the solo *Confessions of an Evil Orientalist* at New Delhi's Gallery Espace. Besides the humorous contemporary miniatures, executed in collaboration with R Vijay, whom Waswo credits with co-imagining the

figure, what beguiled me was the eponymous text-based work that read like a confessional poem with 101 declarations of privilege-based sins. I was attracted to its whimsical brilliance and how sparingly it managed to communicate the inevitable dilemmas of a white body transplanted from its Western context within a postcolonial context, most notably, how it is fated to predictably fall into and for the same traps and tropes as its predecessors, despite its best intentions.

The list-based text had the authority of a manifesto coupled with the bravado of a sinner who refuses to be shamed by his voluntary admissions of guilt. The vulnerable intonation that marked each confessional sentence gave the reader the illusion of transparency. Waswo X Waswo was not asking for forgiveness for the errors constituted by his white gaze. He was humanising his consciousness, offering it to us as spectacle, while offering an easy template by which to recognise the continuing existence of the Orientalist gaze. Take point 18—‘I have told all my friends how cheap this place is’; or 23—‘I have made long lists of petty annoyances, because you do not do things as we do them.’

There is immense art historical value embodied within Waswo’s Evil Orientalist. In appropriating the figure of the white male Orientalist, isolating it from its theoretical habitat and placing it, unsanctimoniously, within the familiarity of the mundane, Waswo displaces the white body from being perceived as the event or the spectacle, transforming it into the observer as well as the observed. The medium of satire mitigates and even invalidates the weight of the Orientalist’s observations while the diminutive manner in which he is rendered by R Vijay in his miniaturist avatar, in suit-tie-solapuri-like hat, makes him a Quixote-like figure who activates the imagery around him by virtue of his presence and his exoticising gaze. Through this appropriative gesture, Waswo finds a way ‘in’. The empathy-fuelled ridiculing of the white Orientalist figure is his way of participating in the black humour of living in a postcolonial reality. Through measured self-deprecation, he gets to share in the joke of the gora sahib to whom, despite the application of an intuitive enlightenment methodology and a rational-minded ethnographic approach, India will remain elusive. It’s a convincing punchline in a city like Udaipur that so brazenly caters to the white tourist gaze, where the Orientalist body is welcomed for its economic currency.

In the film, *A Studio in Rajasthan* (2017), which offers a generous glimpse into the universe within which Waswo’s studio in Varda is embedded, there’s a poignant moment when Rajesh Soni recalls a not-so-fond early memory with Waswo, whom he, like most friends and collaborators in Udaipur, refers to endearingly as ‘*chaacha*’ (uncle). Soni, a third-generation hand-colourist (his grandfather, Prabhu Lal Verma, was the court photographer to Mahrana Bhopal Singh of Mewar), found his way into Waswo’s studio through R Vijay, who, at the time, spoke no English. Soni was his translator. He recalls

(LEFT) WE ARE ALWAYS WORKING, 2014; SHE WAS UNHAPPY WITH HER PORTRAIT, 2017

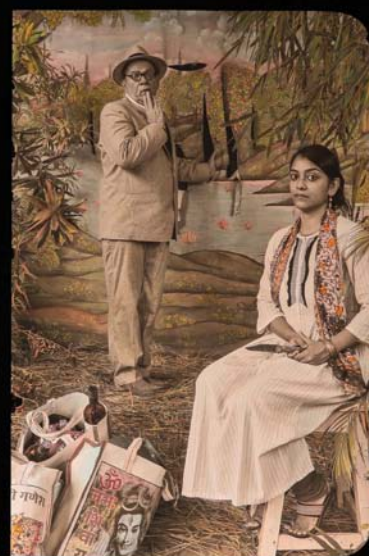


“ I WANTED THE EVIL ORIENTALIST THINGS APART, SCIENTIFI

an incident around 14 years ago, when Waswo got into a fit of rage, exhausted at being perceived as ‘Lakshmi’, constantly being made to shell out money. In this ensuing *jugalbandi* of confessions between the two, one gleams some of the pathos of an alien white body desperate to ‘belong’ through a strategy of espousing belonging, a sentiment Waswo had encapsulated movingly in his 53rd confession—‘I have longed to be embraced by you.’

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO, when Soni had visited Waswo in his first studio in Udaipur at Ambhavgarh Hill, which he had rented from the wife of an Indian colonel, he had been making sketches of old havelis on the verge of being destroyed to construct tourist guest houses. He noticed the Epson black-and-white printer in Waswo’s possession. At the time Waswo was conceiving and executing his *Studio in Rajasthan* series. “I was very much a black-and-white purist,” he told me a week before the opening of the show. Soni saw some of Waswo’s prints and suggested he could colour them. Waswo gave him a couple to attempt. “The first few were too heavily painted and were rather garish,” Waswo said. But Soni was young, barely 18 at the time, and was responsive to suggestions. “Very quickly I could get him to understand that what I was looking for was a soft tinting. I wanted his painting to be more translucent, using watercolour instead of oil-based paints. We’re still working together 14 years later,” he said.

Meanwhile, when the colonel retired from the army, Waswo had to move out of the lower ground floor of their house. He asked his assistant, Ganpat Mali, to keep an eye out for possible studio alternatives while he settled into an apartment in Moti Magri, a hill overlooking the Fateh Sagar lake. Mali found what he believed fitted the brief and was, as



TALIST TO SHED SOME OF THAT CLOAK OF BEING THE PERSON WHO IS TRYING TO PICK
CALLY OR ACADEMICALLY, AND WANTED HIM TO BE AN OBSERVER” **WASWO X WASWO** artist

Waswo had specified, ensconced in a bucolic setting. Except, the property would have to be shared with the Indian family that owned it. This didn't please Waswo, who was wary of his past experience with co-habiting in Ambhavgarh Hill. "There were some tensions with what the colonel's wife perceived as me bringing lower-class people to the studio to photograph them—farmers, tradesmen, small shopkeepers. She was conscious of her *aukaat*, and I didn't want to run into a situation like that."

Waswo refused to see the property Mali had found, until one day, Mali staged a friendly kidnapping on his motorcycle. Waswo eventually caught on, but Mali urged him to simply look at the property before rejecting it. They arrived in Varda and met the brothers, Manohar and Ram Singh, who lived there with their wives and kids, all of whom were surprisingly warm and welcoming.

"The entire village is Rajput, and what they offered me was the shell of the concrete house they had begun to build until they ran out of money. It didn't have a proper roof over the staircase, none of the rooms were finished in any way, nor was the kitchen. Ganpat told them that there's this crazy artist who will have it just the way it is, he doesn't need it finished." Waswo saw the potential of storage space, a beautiful roof with a panoramic view and a landscape with wildlife amid fields. He negotiated with the Singh family and leased part of their property just before he had to leave for Thailand, for visa-related reasons and to visit his Bangkok-based partner. He had been offered also the patch of land at the entrance, where the family normally grew *bindi*. He took a photograph of it and drew six beams on the photo, asking Mali to sink six metal poles in those spots and have a sloping tin roof installed and a brick wall that didn't come all the way up, thus allowing natural light to enter. Three months later Waswo returned to

a readymade studio.

In *We Are Always Working*, Waswo has repurposed the figure of the Evil Orientalist, entrusting him with a less satirical moniker—the Observationist. In the series, *The Observationist in a Stolen Garden*, a conscious reference is made to the backdrops used by Waswo painted by local artists from Udaipur, with imagery lovingly appropriated from a range of existing miniatures, a subversive remembering of the botanical violence performed by early British colonialists through the Company School style of painting by which local Indian artists were commissioned to paint botanical specimens for an English market and the consumption of the scientific community that was interested in claiming them as their 'discoveries'. "I wanted the Evil Orientalist to shed some of that cloak of being the person who is trying to pick things apart, scientifically or academically, and wanted him to be an observer, someone who enjoys the process of being in a new land or reality, which he experiences as magical, or delightful, maybe out of naivete," said Waswo.

All the classic symbols of the Orientalist gaze are present in the form of the subjugating measuring instruments, the fixation with looking at the natives, with 'master'-ing discourse around their culture. Yet the playful, participative nature of the staging undercuts the severity of the damage perpetrated by Orientalism practised as part of the colonising mission. The studio, too, gets figured, as a proposed site for the enactment of transitional fantasies and the reimagining of proto-utopic, non-hierarchical configurations. ■

We Are Always Working by
Waswo X Waswo, in collaboration with Rajesh Soni and
Shyam Lal Kumhar, curated by Bhavna Kakar, runs till
September 28th at Gallery Latitude 28 in Delhi and online

A Cut Above

Indian films—about a classical musician, an old truck driver and a young woman—make their mark at the Venice International Film Festival

By Divya Unny



A SCENE FROM ANITA ▼



A YOUNG CLASSICAL musician struggling to find meaning in his art amidst the pressures and provocations of urban life; a veteran truck driver who is at a crossroads in life searching for a personal milestone; and a woman who is trying to hold onto a sense of self among her many roles as a wife, a daughter, a sister—these are the protagonists of three Indian films that are winning accolades at the ongoing Venice International Film Festival (September 2nd–12th).

Writer-director Chaitanya Tamhane's Marathi film *The Disciple* is the first Indian movie in two decades to be chosen for the main competition after Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001). Ivan Ayr's *Meel Pathhar* (Milestone) and Sushma Khadepaun's *Anita* are competing in the Orizzonti (Horizons) section, which show-

cases films that 'represent the latest aesthetic and expressive trends in international cinema'.

These films break the norms of commercial moviemaking, they speak of distinctive and personal challenges in a social context. They are true to their worlds and immerse the viewer in their conflicts. They connect with the viewer at a larger, more universal level, and they start feeling like your own stories.

"For us, India and the ethos of the country is an entire genre in itself. The culture of India, the social pressures, the economic imbalances combined with existential questions posed by the films make it so real and so unique from the rest of the world. Our picks this year really reflect a growing, complex yet very intrinsically political world that the films are set in. It's hugely challenging to replicate



A SCENE FROM *THE DISCIPLE* ▲



the cast, communal and individual differences within one world and all the films achieve that so well," says Alberto Barbera, Artistic Director at the Venice Film Festival.

It's taken India almost two decades to return to the prestigious Competition section of the Venice Festival. In 2001, *Monsoon Wedding* picked up the Golden Lion award at Venice, and before that it was Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* (1956) that picked up the same title. *Paar* (1984) earned Naseeruddin Shah the Best Actor award at the Venice Film Festival, and filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta won Best Director for *Uttara* in 2000. And now 33-year-old Tamhane's *The Disciple* joins that fray. The film is one among 18 other features from across the world. "It's unbelievable that we can stand on the same platform as some very renowned and senior filmmakers, and at this point I feel immense gratitude more than anything else," says Tamhane whose debut film *Court* in 2014 stood out at international festivals, won countless awards and was India's Oscar entry as well.

The Disciple, which follows the quiet and arduous life of a young Hindustani classical musician, is Tamhane's comeback to direction after five years, which included a life-changing mentorship with master filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (director of masterpieces such as *Gravity* in 2013 and *Roma* in 2018). *The Disciple* covers a subject with an 800-year history, one that Tamhane knew nothing about when he embarked upon the project. It was, however, his experience filming for a year in Mexico with Cuarón that expanded his horizons and allowed him to delve into new worlds.

Meenakshi Shedde, film critic (and India and South Asia delegate to Berlinale) says, "To think of making a film on Indian classical music is almost like trying to achieve the impossible. The vastness and the depth of it can be all-consuming and someone like Tamhane dedicated two whole years of his life simply travelling across the country, reading, attending concerts, living with musicians. The beauty of Chaitanya's work comes from the fact that he's very drawn to integrity as a subject. Even in *Court* through the role of the poet he spoke of an artist who is standing up for the labour class, against injustice, against exploitation and staying true to his art. Even in *The Disciple* he reminds us of the importance of being true to the art. For someone as young as him to have that awareness and that sense of conscience is incredible, and it shows in his cinema."

S HARING THE VIRTUAL Venice red carpet with Tamhane this year is Ivan Ayr who debuted at Venice with his first film *Soni* (2018). The film about two policewomen in Delhi struggling with everyday misogyny at work, home and in the streets was hailed as among the best films to come out of India in the last decade. The quiet, unobtrusive and sensitive nature of *Soni* made it a testament to gender balance, and yet it highlighted the need to recognise any individual beyond their gender. Ayr's *Meel Patthar* is a shift from the world of *Soni*. His protagonist Ghalib is a veteran truck driver who is forced to face his insecurities after the death of his wife and the end of his profession that has defined his identity.

Ayr misses the experience of being

“STORIES COME FROM QUESTIONS THAT OVERWHELM ME OVER TIME. I BELIEVE THAT UNIVERSALITY COMES, IRONICALLY, FROM SPECIFICITY. SO THAT'S WHAT I WAS GOING FOR. TO TELL THE STORY OF A WORLD THAT I KNOW, WITH AUTHENTICITY” SUSHMA KHADEPAUN director



A SCENE FROM *MEEL PATTHAR* ▼

physically present at the festival, but he's thrilled to be in the spotlight once again. "*Meel Patthar* is set in the world of truck drivers and the highways they inhabit. It's a very lonely, ubiquitous space like truck drivers are in real life. Nobody really takes note of them or thinks of their lives, but when I delved into it I saw some very challenging spaces in it: the constant battle of being away from loved ones, the physical demand of the job, the stigma of the work, not having enough dignity within a social context in India and the overall struggles of relationships when one does this for so many years. This is just a gist of a very personal story."

Ayar, who had originally written the film about an Indian truck driver in America, moved the plot to the highways of Delhi and Punjab and discovered a world that he had only heard of. "I cannot imagine my stories without the element of an individual. It's the individual that exposes you to the fundamental truths of life. Filmmaking is that truth and a way to express that. I spent days with some truck drivers and saw the psychological baggage that came with a job like that. Then there's the battle with ideologies, growing older, gender, caste that's so intertwined in our everyday living. *Meel Patthar* talks about all of this and more," he adds.

Similarly, *Anita*, a 17-minute short, also speaks of a person trying to find

“
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INTERTWINED IN OUR
EVERYDAY”

IVAN AYAR director

her strength and her voice. The only difference is that she lives within a gendered space. Anita is a young woman who has returned to her hometown in Gujarat two years after moving to the US for her marriage. She's back to attend her younger sister's wedding, but finds herself strangely trapped within the chains of ever-existent patriarchy, that stem from her own family but seeps into her partner as well. The film is set against the backdrop of a colourful musical ceremonial space, but visually it shows a block that Anita's family is

confined to, one that she is trying hard to break out from. For filmmaker Sushma Khadepaun though the film is set in India, it speaks of a universal quest for freedom, "For me, stories come from questions that overwhelm me over a period of time. Those that I'm afraid to explore because I may not have answers to them or perhaps because I'm afraid of the answer itself. *Anita* came as an offshoot from a feature-length story I was already developing. I was personally in a place where I realised I was constantly outside my comfort zone. I was away from family, had just moved to a new city [New York] and barely spoke to anyone in Gujarati or even Hindi. I was away from everything that was familiar to me and I had chosen to do so. I began to question whether all this discomfort was worth it and more importantly, why I was willing—or choosing—to live in such isolation. Is isolation the price one pays for independence? Does moving away to another country mean we leave behind our conditioning? I believe that universality comes, ironically, from specificity. So that's what I was going for. To tell the story of a world that I know with authenticity," she says.

A line from *The Disciple* aptly sums up the art and craft of these directors: "To walk this path, learn to stay lonely and hungry." ■

'As a Mother You'd Take a Bullet for Your Kid'

THE NETFLIX SERIES *Ratched* is a prequel to the 1975 movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It takes us through the murderous journey of Nurse Mildred Ratched as she navigates the mental healthcare system. The Emmy-winning and Oscar-nominated Sharon Stone plays Lenore Osgood, an eccentric heiress.

Your character in *Ratched* is a mother who is separated from her children. Being a mother, how do you identify with that?

When I had a stroke and a brain-bleed my ex-husband took primary custody of our children. That was horrific for a mother. When her child isn't with her 24/7, it's a heartbreak. And so, any mother will fight tooth and nail for their child, there's nothing that you wouldn't do to for your kid, you love your kid, you love your kid so much you'd take a bullet for your kid. I remember in that great film *Three Kings* the director had a scene where you see the bullet coming slow-motion and you see the mother in her full Bedouin veil and you see the bullet coming from the soldier's gun, and you see her without a thought step in front of the child and take the bullet to save her child. That's a mother for you, that is what you do, that defines a mother for me, it's that unthinking moment where you would just graciously do that, that's a mother's love for me. That's just what you do good or bad.

We are all going through a period right now that can hurt our mental



Sharon Stone

wellbeing. What are you doing about your mental health?

It is extraordinarily important that we look after our mental health. I've been putting up online places that you can call, suicide hotlines, there's finally a transgender suicide hotline that's manned by transgender people. I think this time has been very difficult for people because people are losing all things that they identify themselves by. They're losing opportunities to go out, they're losing opportunities to go to their workplace, they're losing opportunities to see the people that they love, that give them their validation, who give them their hugs, so they lose the sense of self, and I think that becomes a very dangerous thing. So, I think the most important thing that we can do is to stay in touch,

and I think these Zoom calls are a real godsend. I think that one of the most important things that we can do is self-care, we have to take a good shower, a good bath, do yoga, draw and paint, get those colouring books.

What do you think is going to happen once Covid-19 has left us? Will we go back to normal?

I know that everybody thinks that we are going to have a vaccine and we will be right back. 1918 was the last pandemic. I've spent my entire life working on HIV/AIDS where 44 million people have died. There is no vaccine, there is no cure, we have many lifesaving and life-extending drugs that bring the viral load down. People are still dying from AIDS every single day. The same doctors who are working on Covid-19 are working on AIDS. We are going to have to think, not what are we going to do when we get a vaccine but how are we going to live and function in society while we have this disease. We have many other terrible diseases and we know what to do. We do know what to do with Covid-19. Wear a mask, wash your hands and practise social distancing, but people do not want to do that. It is not about civil liberty, it's just like if you don't wear a condom when there is AIDS and you have a new lover, the chances are that you will get a sexually transmitted disease. We have to function within this reality. If we keep waiting for things to go back to the way it was, that's not reality. Things never go backwards. Life doesn't go backwards—it's not going to. There is no going back to normal. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

Hot Star on Hotstar

Something big may be on the horizon. There are reports that **Hrithik Roshan** is 'on board' to star in a *desi* remake of the hit *BBC One* mini-series *The Night Manager*. Word is that Hrithik has 'agreed in principle' but is awaiting the final script, which, reportedly, is being hammered out even as you read this by *Khakee* and *Warscribe* **Shridhar Raghavan**.

The project is being developed for Hotstar and a search is believed to be on for the right director.

The Night Manager is a slick six-part globetrotting espionage series based on a book of the same name by **John le Carré** that premiered in 2016. It stars English actor **Tom Hiddleston** (best known as Loki from the Marvel films) in the lead and his suave performance as an undercover spy with a weakness for damsels in distress temporarily made the actor a major contender in the hunt for the next James Bond.

According to well-placed sources, Hrithik's mandate when he expressed interest in the project was that the remake *had* to be as stylish as the original. Also, it is learnt that the streamer is expected to shell out a never-before fee to snag the superstar for what could be his debut on a digital platform.

A Committed Actor

If **Aamir Khan** had his way, *Rangeela* might have ended differently. The **Ram Gopal Varma**-directed musical, which clocked 25 years earlier this week, climaxed with **Urmila Matondkar's** freshly minted star Mili choosing Aamir's character Munna, her *tapori* friend, leaving **Jackie Shroff's** superstar Kamal heartbroken.

But midway through the film's making, Varma remembers that Aamir had doubts whether the simplistic, passive ending would work. "Aamir thought there should be a fight between Munna and Kamal. He felt the stakes needed to be raised." Varma says the very reason he wanted to make the film in the first place was because he was drawn to the idea of doing a love triangle without an

antagonist. "I told Aamir I didn't want to change the script, and Aamir didn't fight me." Varma says Aamir made it clear he didn't agree with my idea, but he was most professional. "He just said in that case, he would follow my directions to the last detail."

When the film was declared a superhit, Varma remembers Aamir coming up to him and acknowledging that the director was right. "But I told him there was no way to know. Had we gone with his suggestion, perhaps the film would have been an even bigger hit. So there was no point in considering these hypothetical scenarios."

Varma says Aamir does ask a lot of questions "but he's committed to making the best possible film we can together".

Hot Right Now

Six years after his debut feature (the brilliant and thought-provoking satire *Court*) premiered at the Venice Film Festival, **Chaitanya Tamhane** returned to the Lido last week with

his new film *The Disciple*, which screened in official competition. It is worth noting that *The Disciple* is the first Indian film to play in Venice competition since **Mira Nair's** *Monsoon Wedding* won the Golden Lion, the festival's top prize, in 2001.

Described as an existential drama about a Hindustani classical vocalist who questions whether he will ever achieve greatness, *The*

Disciple got mixed reviews after its premiere last week but all critics seem to agree that it's a solid job.

Tamhane, who says he was "wary" of classical music growing up, became fascinated by a story he heard, then became obsessed with fleshing out his script, putting aside the other project he was working on at the time. From Oscar-winning filmmaker **Alfonso Cuarón**,

whom he closely observed during the making of *Roma* (2018) and who went on to become an executive producer on *The Disciple*, Tamhane says he has learnt a lot, more than anything else, the importance of letting go. ■



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