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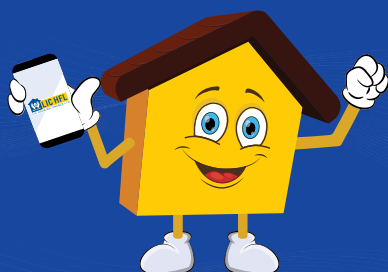


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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The alleged rape and murder of a Dalit youth in Hathras has also opened up a Pandora's box of conspiracy theories and disinformation in Uttar Pradesh ('Farce after Tragedy', 'A Whiff of Kathua', and 'The New Dalits Are a Thought Bank' by Guru Prakash, October 19th, 2020). Curiously, a sedition charge has resulted from this problem of fake news. Also, most of these cases of disinformation are from social media posts or comments on television channels which are being seen as attempts to misrepresent facts and distort the narrative about the criminal incident. Long ago, J Jayalalithaa had decided to clamp down on such social media behaviour that created confusion leading to hatred among people restricted through such an action. This is a common tactic politicians resort to. Now, putting these multiple FIRs in Uttar Pradesh in perspective, media reports have revealed that there is a concerted attempt to reinforce the belief that there is more to the crime of the fatal assault on the young woman than meets the eye. The world is trying to conspire against the Yogi government and it is not fair to raise such allegations without proper evidence. Such claims are clearly seditious and must be responded to with punitive measures. Otherwise, anyone can malign the state.

Ramani Maniam



in the Land of Goddesses', highlights the paradox of one such girl with 'unkempt hair and cracked heels' who 'Was told/ That she was dirt/ She was filth and/ In this sacred land of thousands of goddesses/ She was called a Dalit'. As Bhagat Singh said at the time of his hanging, only by upturning exploitative paradigms will we be free.

Sangeeta Kampani

RIP PASWAN

A stalwart of the socialist movement who later emerged as one of Bihar's tallest leaders with a following across the country, Ram Vilas Paswan was instrumental in the implementation of the Mandal Commission report in the 1990s. After having cleared the examination for the post of deputy superintendent of police in Bihar, he gave up a secure career and fought the Assembly polls on the Socialist Party's ticket and defeated Congress veteran Mishri Saada by 700 votes. It is sad to see him gone just when his son is rising. A friend of the toiling people, he will be missed by the common man.

OK Ramani Subramaniam

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HATHRAS HORROR

The gangrape of a Dalit woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, and her subsequent murder and forced cremation, have once again put the focus on gender violence in the state ('Farce after Tragedy', 'A Whiff of Kathua', and 'The New Dalits Are a Thought Bank' by Guru Prakash, October 19th, 2020). Politics aside, the horrendous nature of the crime is driving civil society protests across the country. She was raped, brutally beaten almost to death, allegedly had her tongue cut to prevent her from speaking and ultimately killed. Her mistake? She was a Dalit woman. The Hathras horror has brought back focus on

hooliganism in the state, which all governments so far have failed to control.

MR Jayanthi

What happened in Hathras has a whiff of Kathua as well as traces of innumerable such savage assaults on women that happen daily in India. Clearly, such incidents vary only in their gruesome detail—the script remains the same. The incident further reveals that laws have little meaning for such men, laying bare all that is rotten within us. Hathras is not about this or that person or institution but all such brutalities that occur every now and then. Telugu poet Aruna Gogulamanda, in her poem 'A Dalit Woman



By S PRASANNARAJAN

TRUMP AND WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck my eye more vividly than the equality of conditions. I discovered without difficulty the enormous influence that this primary fact exerts on the course of society; it gives a certain direction to public spirit, a certain turn to the laws, new maxims to those who govern, and particular habits to the governed.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

IF THE FRENCHMAN, the best foreign observer of America ever, were to travel across the New World today, I doubt he would have written an entirely different book. He would have, most likely, noted how the power of equality gave “new maxims to those who govern” today—and how the media alone calls their bluff as every other institution has been damaged.

The traveller just needs to browse through newspapers and magazines to find easy synonyms for the Orange Man. The experience could be dizzying. He may think that he is reading the same article under different bylines. The recurring operative words are: Conman. Liar. Jerk. Tax evader. Institution-slayer. Groper. Denier. Narcissist. Racist. Collaborator. Criminal. Super-spreader. Autocrat. Un-American. Journalism could not have been more aesthetically conscious and ideologically aggressive, all for the sake of endangered American values—a moral obligation of the responsible media. It’s a sentiment shared by radical progressives, angst-ridden liberals, lofty conservatives, and violent streets.

The Man Who Governs has earned most of the synonyms by working singularly hard against traditions, conventions and basic civilities that make democracies a fair play. By turning his tenure into a performative presidency marked by kitsch, retribution, paranoia, persecution complex, and a constant urge for validation, he has made himself a tormentor’s delight. His tweets are memoirs of power in hallucinatory isolation, an alternative history of the present. His self-portrait as American Übermensch has made science a dispute and illness a weakness in the midst of a pandemic that looks certain to end his performance prematurely.

Even as America is fatigued by the Trump vaudeville, likely to come to an end on November 3rd if we go by the audience response as reflected in opinion polls, it’s tempting to see his presidency as a wasted opportunity—and as an idea savaged by its beneficiary. The what-could-have-been Trump is the story that adds a tinge of pathos to the show. And it is a story that is being repeated in other places as well, where the revenge of the outsider has not enhanced freedom but diminished it.

Trump as an idea emerged from the Great Disillusion that envelops democracies held hostage by the tired traditions of the Left and the Right. Ideologically calcified and steeped in the cosy laziness of the Establishment, both the Republicans and the Democrats, after the high noon of Reagan and Clinton, were impervious to the erosion of the base. The White Middle America, Hillary Clinton’s “deplorables” who cling to cultural nativism in their economic remoteness, was angry. If there was an irony in 2016, it was that it took a billionaire businessman, his public persona shaped by reality television, to tap into their grievance, and, along the way, transform the GOP in his image—brash, boisterous, amoral. In power, in spite of a booming pre-pandemic economy and remarkable foreign policy achievements, he let his personal aesthetics—me-alone crudeness accentuated by social media—overpower governance. He could have been the remaker of the American Right. Trumpism became a cultural pollutant.

The media narrative may not concede that he played within the limits—or limitlessness—of presidential powers. It may also keep telling us that Trumpism will outlast Trump. The world’s most powerful political office allows its occupant to stretch definitions and conventions, and as Americans realise now, to be ingenious, even if by putting occasional half-truths and alternative reality into political service. He didn’t subvert democracy. He made use of its possibilities for inglorious ends.

Elsewhere, in Russia and some parts of Eastern Europe, the what-could-have-been story is pure anti-democracy, and the Strongman is the sole arbiter of freedom. It’s different in India. Modi, too, was a reaper of the Great Disillusion. He, too, was the outsider who tapped into the impatience of a people let down by a moribund Left and a Right wallowing in defeatism. He regained the orphaned Right space in Indian politics. More than six years in power, the Hinduisation of the Right may be complete to the disappointment of those who had hoped for an Indianised Reaganism, however implausible it was in an unequal society like India. Modi’s personal popularity validates the authenticity of the original story of 2014.

The 19th century America prompted Tocqueville to write that “It was there that civilised men were to try to build a society on new foundations, and applying for the first time theories until then unknown or reputed inapplicable, they were going to give the world a spectacle for which the history of the past had not prepared it.” The current spectacle can’t be anything more than a crazy scene in democracy’s freest show on earth. ■



INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

PRISONERS IN OUR own homes, aren't we all? It has been so long that the phrase 'once upon a time' comes to mind. Like when on a lark you would walk down the road for a chat with a neighbour or invite him over for a drink. Or get into the car and drive to the Gymkhana, IIC or India Habitat Centre, or to *hazaars* such happening places in the city for a convivial evening with old college mates and professional colleagues. To tell the truth, given the vulnerability due to a past bout of pneumonia, even when I have wanted to risk this devilish virus tormenting the entire human race—read somewhere that it does not even spare domestic animals—family and friends have put their foot down. So, I must stay cooped up within the four walls of the house. A more terrible plight could not have befallen yours truly. Honestly, at times, you feel utterly miserable. Even those digital platforms offering the world in entertainment and diversion have long ceased to hold any interest. Initially, after taking in a couple of mafia-drug lord serials on Netflix and that excellent Spanish crime series, *Money Heist*, a sense of ennui seems to grip me. Nightly news on *BBC* and *CNN* and that is more than enough of television for me.

Meanwhile, books old and new, do offer a welcome diversion. Some bought long ago but left on the shelf to be read later proved helpful. But in the past couple of weeks, a new tome on Jinnah was enough to keep you engaged. Seems there is a cottage industry of books on the founder of Pakistan. On either side of the Radcliffe Line, there have been authors galore exploring the most unlikely creator of a religion-



based nation. Reading Pakistani scholar Ishtiaq Ahmed's 800-page *Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History*, what proved more interesting, at least for me, was the plethora of source material he liberally quotes rather than his own analysis and insight. Though he had steamrolled the bloody Partition of the subcontinent, Jinnah was fully aware of the utter fragility of the new nation. The non-viability of Pakistan might be relevant even to this day but the remarkable thing is that its founder, in spite of knowing full well, had still pressed ahead with the controversial mission. Maybe, he was a victim of circumstances, a prisoner of the wealthy Muslim zamindars who generously funded his Muslim League.

But what is significant is that from the moment of its birth to the present day, successive Pakistani rulers have relied on one or the other major foreign power to ward off the threat to its existence. Jinnah was clear in his mind that the newly born Pakistan did not have the wherewithal to hold together for long as a sovereign nation. For survival, it needed to play one superpower against the other. Speaking to Margaret Bourke-White of the now defunct *LIFE* magazine,

he most candidly admitted without a hint of embarrassment: "America needs Pakistan... Pakistan is the pivot of the world... we are placed... the frontier on which the future position of the world revolves... Russia is not so very far away... If Russia walks in the whole world is menaced." That is the Quaid-i-Azam mocking the new nation in whose creation he had played a stellar role!

No trace of national pride comes through in the conversations the visiting correspondent had with a number of senior civilian and military functionaries. They had unabashedly embraced Jinnah's transactional approach. She wrote: 'Jinnah's thesis was echoed throughout Pakistan. 'Surely, America will build our army... surely, they would give us loans to keep Russia from walking in.' Yet, in a telling sentence, she noted, 'But when I asked whether there were any signs of Russian infiltration, they would reply almost sadly, as though sorry not to be able to make more of the argument. 'No, Russia has shown no signs of being interested in Pakistan.''

Of course, the Americans did pour in hundreds of billions. They were used with their eyes wide open. All those billions went down the drain. But the point in quoting at some length the prescient *LIFE* magazine reporter was twofold. That Pakistan has since replaced America with China. More importantly, unlike the benign Americans, the Chinese are all over Pakistan, extracting their pound of flesh for whatever money they bring into a nation which has never been at ease with itself. Living on alms is a blunt but apt description of our belligerent neighbour. ■



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MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker

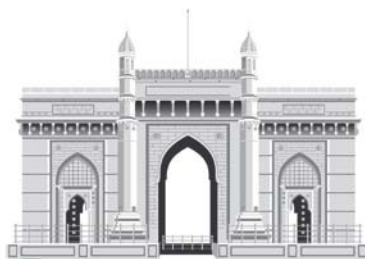
MUMBAI HAD A power blackout on Monday, October 12th. If you missed the significance of that line due to your addiction to TV news, let me rephrase that: "CITY PARALYSED! COMMUTERS STRANDED! CALLOUS GOVERNMENT WATCHES HELPLESSLY AS MUMBAI, THE FINANCIAL CAPITAL OF THE COUNTRY, HAS A COMPLETE BLACKOUT!"

'Blackout' is a strange phrase to use to describe something that started at 10 in the morning and was fixed by 12 noon.

I was invited to be on a television channel to discuss the issue. What on earth were we going to say for half-an-hour of prime time? I needn't have worried: in the panel was a government minister and a BJP spokesman, and they filled most of the 30 minutes with a political slugfest. To be fair to the official spokesman, though, he did spend half his time grumbling about the sound quality, being the first politician in history to complain of hearing an echo of his own voice.

According to the BJP spokesman, the fault lay entirely with the ruling Shiv Sena coalition, which of course the Sainik denied, blaming the past BJP government of messing with the current, which seemed like a bit of a contradiction. To a non-politician like me, the problem seemed to be technical, and according to my exhaustive research of 15 minutes, I found that Tata Power had started an 'islanding' scheme in 1981 so that Mumbai could be isolated from a failure in the Western Region power grid. During these four decades, there had been 37 major grid disturbances, 27 of which had been tackled without anyone noticing. Since 1997, the success rate had gone up to almost 100 per cent. The rational question to ask, therefore, was what technical problem had caused this particular outage.

Sometimes the cause can be re-



markably simple. The 1994 blackout in the US which affected New York, large parts of the US' northeast, and even Canada, was caused by a tree branch falling on a power line in Ohio, causing outages that cascaded across eight states and two countries and affected 60 million people. Since then utility companies have been using high-tech solutions like systematically trimming trees near power lines.

If you are old enough to remember, New York City was hit by a complete blackout in July 1977 which lasted 25 hours. That was caused by three lightning strikes on power lines and substations. Two hours in Mumbai, 25 in New York! Which is the Maximum City? Although in this case, NY wins hands down as Minimum City. Incidentally, there were interesting byproducts of the NY blackout: looters went on a rampage emptying 1,616 stores, while arsonists set off 1,037 fires. 4,500 people were arrested, 550 police officers were injured, 50 new Pontiacs were stolen from a showroom and many extra babies were born nine months later.

As for Mumbai, as someone might well have observed, politicians grumbled that there was no power for a few hours. There was also no electricity.

THERE WAS A time when Mumbai's Raj Bhavan, the sprawling, forested, right-by-the-sea residence of the governor of Maharashtra was occupied by distinguished people like PC Alexander and Air Marshal Latif. Since 2014, the Central Government

has plucked people from well-deserved obscurity to place them in the luxurious insignificance of Raj Bhavan.

The current personage, however, has electrified people (and given rise to bad puns) by writing an open letter to the Chief Minister asking why places of worship have not yet been opened to the public. 'You have a strong votary of Hindutva. You had publicly espoused your devotion for Lord Rama by visiting Ayodhya,' Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari wrote, '... I wonder if you are receiving any divine premonition to keep postponing the reopening of the places of worship time and again, or have you suddenly turned 'secular' yourself, the term you hated?' Uddhav Thackeray, upset that his Hindutva credentials were being questioned, sent a public rejoinder. 'I do not need a certificate of Hindutva from the Governor... welcoming a person in my home who has described the capital of my state as POK does not fall under my definition of Hindutva,' an obvious reference to Kangana Ranaut. Finally, the Chief Minister reminded the Governor that the oath of office that he took was on the Constitution and secularism is an important part of its preamble.

Governors having to be reminded of the Constitution? The times they are a-changin'.

THINGS BEING WHAT they are, we turn to the heavens for answers. Sushil Chaturvedi, the astrologer who generally gets things right and last year had predicted a year of chaos, might have a few answers on the US elections, I thought.

Trump will lose badly, Chaturvedi says. His downfall started from 2018 and now not only will he lose the presidency, his business empire will also collapse. He will even face multiple litigations which will go badly for him.

We shouldn't gloat about other people's misfortunes, but surely exceptions are allowed? ■



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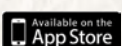
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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Bidding for the Best Outcome

THE HISTORY OF auctions goes as far back as 2,500 years and those were straightforward in character. Even when in 193CE a rebellious wing of the Roman army did a coup and auctioned off the entire empire, they didn't bother with the fine print. Make your bid and the highest one got to take it all. Even in the modern world, most auctions are likewise. But what if a government wants to sell off rights to its natural resources, like minerals or spectrum? For an individual, owning a natural resource would not lead to a dilemma about how much to profit from it. If you find an oil well in your backyard, it is quite clear what you will and should do—sell it for the maximum you can get. When it comes to governments, it can get complicated because its remit is not maximisation of revenues but the public good. Take India's telecom spectrum story. It began with spectrum auctions but then the Government gave it away at throw-away prices in 2008 on a first-come-first-served basis. It lost a lot of revenue but possibly fuelled a telecom revolution, making phone calls so cheap that even the poorest could afford mobile connections. It also led to fantastic corruption that then took the policy in the opposite direction of auctions again because one of the things that auctions ensure is transparency. What Paul Milgrom and Robert Wilson, who won the Economics Nobel this year, showed was that intelligent auction design could maximise benefits for both sellers and buyers and also, importantly, with public resources, ensure that their utility is maximised with the right bidders getting them.

The Nobel committee's press release on the two explained their individual contributions to auction theory. Wilson, it said, 'developed the theory for auctions of objects with a common value—a value which

is uncertain beforehand but, in the end, is the same for everyone. Examples include the future value of radio frequencies or the volume of minerals in a particular area. Wilson showed why rational bidders tend to place bids below their own best estimate of the common value: they are worried about the winner's curse—that is, about paying too much and losing out.' Milgrom was responsible for a theory that in addition to common values also factored in private values, where each bidder has a different value for the same item. 'He analysed the bidding strategies in a number of well-known auction formats, demonstrating that a format will give the seller higher expected revenue when bidders learn more about each other's estimated values during bidding,' said the release.

At a news conference hosted by Stanford University where both of them teach, in answer to a question on how their methods differ from traditional auctions, Wilson answered that the normal understanding of auctions is the one where items come up for bids one after the other. That, he said, was how in his childhood he saw auctions of horses or cattle

happen, with cows paraded in and sold one by one by an auctioneer with a gavel. Their work however was to do with auctions where more complexity was involved; the items being sold were often connected and complemented each other. An example he gave was of spectrum auctions. If someone is trying to get two spectrum licences that cover Northern and Southern California, bids too high and wins the first, when the other half of the state comes up, he has no money and ends up wishing he hadn't bought the first. And without both, he has a problem because he can't cover the entire state. "Northern and Southern California licences are complements in providing coverage in the state. And so

In 2010, Milgrom spoke of how he helped a client in the 3G spectrum sale auction in India by exploiting a design flaw. In a post on his website in May that year, he wrote: 'The bidder that I advised was able to take advantage of the auction's unique and flawed closing rule to end the auction before the still-remaining competitors had exhausted their demonstrated budgets'



Robert Wilson (left) and Paul Milgrom, winners of the 2020 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences

our auction was designed to enable the assembly of efficient packages. This is not the kind of problem you run into in the parade of cattle," he said.

A *Stanford News* article on the duo explained how their research revolutionised the allocations of spectrum in the US in the early 1990s and then across the world. At the time, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) used to sell radio frequencies through applications and lotteries. 'As mobile phone use expanded, the processes became unreasonably costly to the government and unsatisfactory to the mobile service providers. To address this issue, Milgrom and Wilson invented a new auction format, called Simultaneous Multiple Round Auction (SMRA). In these auctions, all biddable items are offered simultaneously and bidders can bid on any portion of the items. The bids start low, in order to avoid the winner's curse, and the auction ends when no bids are placed in a round. The first SMRA auction in 1994 sold 10 licenses over 47 rounds, fetching \$617 million. Many governments around the world adopted SMRA auctions for their own purposes and further refinements have resulted in additional new auction formats,' it said.

The great strength of American universities is how theory seamlessly overlaps with the world of business. Students and professors can use their knowledge for profit. Milgrom helped Time Warner and Comcast in a spectrum auction in 2006 and saved them more than a billion dollars. Writing about this aspect, *The Economist* said: 'Mr Milgrom and Mr Wilson became the embodiment of the economist as engineer: applying theory in order to devise functional solutions to

such problems. As a result the researchers are more enmeshed in real-world problems than the typical prizewinner.'

In 2009, Milgrom founded a company called Auctionomics which designs auctions and also actively participates in them on behalf of clients. These could be governments wanting to auction a resource or companies that need help in bidding or selling. And in 2010 Milgrom spoke of how he helped a client in the 3G spectrum sale auction in India by exploiting a design flaw. In a post on his website in May that year, he wrote: 'Two big spectrum auctions in India and Germany ended this week. The 3G auction in India yielded nearly US\$15 billion for the Indian treasury for about 40MHz of bandwidth covering the whole nation. This includes the 10MHz that had previously been allocated to the two state-owned telecoms, which now have to pay the prices set in the auction. While revenues in the Indian auction were much higher than the government had forecast, they fell far short of their potential. The bidder that I advised was able to take advantage of the auction's unique and flawed closing rule to end the auction before the still-remaining competitors had exhausted their demonstrated budgets.'

He also had tips for better auction design in the same piece. As India keeps engaging with the issue of sale of its vast natural resources as a way of gathering revenue, especially with the recession, intelligent auction design will play a big role in ensuring transparency and efficiency. The theories of the two economists will have much to do with it. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • RAFAEL NADAL

RETURN OF THE KING

His French Open win was a salve to all our wounds of a changed world

IN A WORLD that has changed so rapidly in a matter of months, if there is one major takeaway from the French Open final that took place, it is this—we can return to that older world. And for this, we have Rafael Nadal to thank. The familiar visual of Nadal taking his trademark bite off the trophy, even though masked, behind him the distinctive red clay of Roland Garros. A champion reclaiming his old kingdom. A salve to a collective wound. It is a sight we all needed more than we think.

There was quite a bit that made us doubt if Nadal could achieve this. We are all familiar with the old argument—that his game was too physical to last. Was it now, at the age of 34, the world enmeshed in a crisis, it would finally begin to show? At the Rome Masters last month, his first tournament after the pandemic, Nadal was thrashed by an unfancied Diego Schwartzman. All through that tournament, and even this, it often looked like Nadal was simply trying to establish some sort of a rhythm, some way to get his old game back. At the semi-final, he did beat Schwartzman, but he looked exhausted. At the final, across the court, was a familiar rival in the form of his life, undefeated all season (even though the strangeness of this year has taken its toll on Novak Djokovic, if not on court then at least his mental space).

History awaited Nadal at the Roland Garros. But history also has a way of waiting in the corners to spring a surprise and roll down its curtains.

Had there been a loss here at his old stomping ground, the story could so easily have been different. Instead of these paeans, we would all have been compelled to compose an epitaph to Nadal's career.

Photos AP



But Nadal didn't just win. He demolished Djokovic near-perfectly. Nadal's style is very often built on wearing his opponents out. He often engages them in long rallies, as much tiring them as preying on their psyches, before unleashing his winners. But on that day, Nadal was aggressive from the get go. Djokovic very often had the face of a man who didn't know what had hit him. When he finally gained some ground in the second set, Djokovic let a scream out in relief. It wasn't because Djokovic was bad. But because Nadal was just that good.

It was the Roland Garros of old. It was the Nadal of old. The world had changed. But the world had also remained the same.

Nadal will probably rate this as his greatest French Open win. In a season unlike any other, at a final where he was almost an underdog, he thrashed an opponent who has had the better of him in recent times with startling ease.

Nadal's achievement at the French Open is staggering. Thirteen titles in 15 years. His 100-2 win-loss record here sounds otherworldly. But there is also another twist to this tale. Nadal now ties his long-time rival Roger Federer at 20 major titles, and shares without question, the legacy of the greatest male player of all time. And Djokovic, the third spoke in this wheel, isn't far behind either. The three greatest male players to have ever lived are in a three-way shootout to determine who will eventually land more titles and perhaps own the title of GOAT (greatest of all time).

This Nadal win, this new twist in the tale, leaves this debate at a tantalising moment. Federer will no doubt be itching to reclaim his position. This current time, where he's taken a break to regain full fitness, looks eerily similar to the break he took in 2016. Many thought his career was over then. He had gone years without winning a major title. But he came back in roaring form the next year, winning the 2017 Australian Open and Wimbledon, and successfully defending the former title in 2018. Could a similar fate be awaiting the master, already pushing 40, next year? A cynic would write this off as a fantasy. But with Federer, who can say? Djokovic, the youngest and clearly the best all-around performer at the majors, will probably consider this French Open loss as a blip.

And with this win, Nadal has just shown that for all the unpredictability of the world right now, he's far from done. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

ANGLE

A CANCEL CULTURE MUTATION



Tanishq pulling out a harmless ad is one more precedent for social media coercion

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

CANCEL CULTURE BEGAN as moral blackmail; the weight of the righteous forcing an institution to bow down to its knees and evict the sinner undergoing the public flagellation. It was not enough for him to be shamed, he must also be rendered destitute. Earlier, mobs needed organising at a physical level but social media makes it all too easy. The effort required is minimal and there is no financial cost. Now that the model had been established, is it any surprise that the phenomenon would mutate as we saw in Tanishq pulling out a perfectly decent advertisement because Hindu fundamentalists on social media found it offensive.

All that the advertisement showed was the ritual of a Hindu bride being celebrated in a Muslim family. It did no more than echo what this country has always paid lip service to, an ideal of religious harmony even if it probably never existed. It took just the scantest of trolling on Twitter for Tanishq to panic and put out this statement: 'We are deeply saddened with the inadvertent stirring of emotions and withdraw this film keeping in mind the hurt sentiments and well being of our employees, partners and store staff.'

Exactly what sentiments were hurt? The one that finds affront in a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim? The second part about the 'well being' of associates is more understandable because there is essentially no law in India when a group with political support decides to use violence. But

the chances of that happening were remote. The leap from online to offline takes organisation and resources, and such a mundane issue would not have met the political energy threshold. By caving in even before it became an issue, Tanishq turned it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. From the extreme corners of Twitter, the issue was brought mainstream. Like clockwork, there was an attack on one of its showrooms soon after the advertisement was pulled out.

You can trace Tanishq's actions to how corporates and institutions in recent times have decided that the best way to deal with online coercion is by giving in. They did so with the MeToo movement. They did so in recent times in the US when the anti-racism fervour caught on. These were thought to be virtuous movements and corporates hoped to get their image correct in going along with cancel culture.

What you see in Tanishq is the fear internalised to be issue-agnostic. They learnt to panic in the face of a compelling, if flawed, moral case. And now they can do nothing but panic whenever any mob makes any case whatsoever. As for what the present episode portends, there is the oldest rule of bullying—it never ends so long as the bully feels he can do it. In social media, every little bully also invites himself to the party once he sees a beating happening. The solution is simple: no matter who is doing the bullying, the social justice warrior or the bigot, ignore them. ■

IDEAS



DISREPUTE

The election of China to the UN Human Rights Council has brought dismay to most human rights groups. This is understandable given how much of a scandal Beijing has caused with its re-education camps in Xinjiang and harsh measures in Tibet and Inner Mongolia. But if one looks at the number of votes China received, this is its lowest ever in the council. It got just 139 votes in all, 41 fewer votes than from its previous election in 2016. It had the least votes among all the countries elected to fill vacant seats this year. Despite Beijing's assertion that the election shows the international community's support for the country, the fall in numbers indicate that for all its clout, the world increasingly looks at the country with distrust. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Today is a black day for human rights... The inmates are running the asylum'

HILLEL NEUER

CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST



By Makarand R Paranjape

An Ashram for the Swami

Vivekananda and the Himalayan connection—Part II

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA LEFT for Western shores on May 31st, 1893. Setting sail from Bombay (now Mumbai), he travelled through Colombo, Malaya, Hong Kong, Kobe, then overland through Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo, to Yokohama. There he boarded another ship, reaching Vancouver on July 25th. Finally, he rode a train that brought him to Chicago on July 30th.

After his dazzling debut at the World's Parliament of Religions on September 11th, 1893, he lectured and travelled throughout the US. He made two excursions to Britain and the Continent in 1895 and 1896. Towards the end of his latter trip, he started his journey back to India. Arriving in Colombo (Sri Lanka), he was greeted by an electric and ecstatic welcome on January 15th, 1897. Vivekananda's triumphal return to his homeland ended in Calcutta, his birth city, where he founded the Ramakrishna Mission on May 1st, 1897.

Almost immediately after, he repaired to the Himalayas to rest and regain his health. In Almora, he was received and welcomed in a moving Hindi oration offered by the prominent citizens of the region. Comparing him to Sankaracharya, the 'Welcome Address' praised his work in spreading the authentic message of Hindu dharma in North America and Europe. Hoping that Vivekananda would establish an ashram in the Himalayas, his admirers added:

"We have heard with great pleasure that you intend establishing a Math [monastery] here, and we sincerely pray that your efforts in this direction be crowned with success. The great Shankaracharya also, after his spiritual conquest, established a Math at Badarikāshrama in the Himalayas for the protection of the ancient religion. Similarly, if your desire is also fulfilled, India will be greatly benefited. By the establishment of the Math, we, Kumaonese, will derive special spiritual advantages, and we shall not see the ancient religion gradually disappearing from our midst... From time immemorial, this part of the country has been the land of asceticism. The greatest of the Indian sages passed their time in piety and asceticism in this land; but that has become a thing of the past."

Swamiji responded with equal enthusiasm and praise for

his hosts in the hills:

"This is the land of dreams of our forefathers, in which was born Pârvati, the Mother of India... On the tops of the mountains of this blessed land, in the depths of its caves, on the banks of its rushing torrents, have been thought out the most wonderful thoughts... This is the land which, since my very childhood, I have been dreaming of passing my life in, and... yet it is the hope of my life to end my days somewhere in this Father of Mountains where Rishis lived, where philosophy was born... the Himalayas always teach us, that one theme which is reverberating in the very atmosphere of the place, the one theme the murmur of which I hear even now in the rushing whirlpools of its rivers—renunciation! *sarvānvastu bhayānvitam bhuvirṇṇām vairāgyamevābhayaṁ*—'Everything in this life is fraught with fear. It is renunciation alone that makes one fearless.' Yes, this is the land of renunciation."

Immediately, he launched on his dream project, an ashram in the mountains, specially designed for advanced seekers:

"Friends, you have been very kind to allude to an idea of mine, which is to start a centre in the Himalayas... this is the spot which I want to select as one of the great centres to teach this universal religion. These mountains are associated with the best memories of our race; if these Himalayas are taken away from the history of religious India, there will be very little left behind. Here, therefore, must be one of those centres, not merely of activity, but more of calmness, of meditation, and of peace; and I hope some day to realise it" (bit.ly/2SWBy4I).

During this time in Almora, we get a glimpse of his daily routine and activities from his letters written during this period. To Doctor Shashi (Bhushan Ghosh) on May 29th, 1897 from Almora, he says:

"Here I feel that I have no disease whatsoever... I feel very, very strong now. You ought to see me, Doctor, when I sit meditating in front of the beautiful snow-peaks and repeat from the Upanishads: '*natasyarogonajarānamṛtyuḥ prāptasya yogāgnimayaṁśarīraṁ*'—He has neither disease, nor decay, nor death; for, verily, he has obtained a body full of the fire of Yoga" (bit.ly/2H7Fahg).

Swamiji stayed on in Kumaon for two and a half months, returning to the plains on August 8th, 1897.

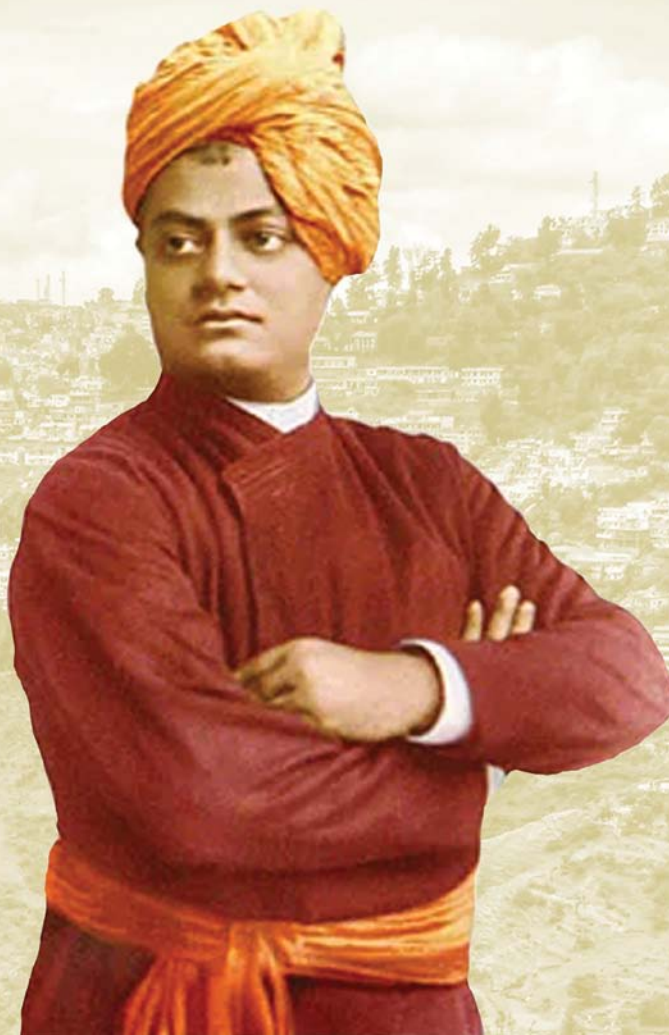


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

‘THESE MOUNTAINS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE BEST MEMORIES OF OUR RACE; IF THESE HIMALAYAS ARE TAKEN AWAY FROM THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS INDIA, THERE WILL BE VERY LITTLE LEFT BEHIND. HERE, THEREFORE, MUST BE ONE OF THOSE CENTRES, NOT MERELY OF ACTIVITY, BUT MORE OF CALMNESS, OF MEDITATION, AND OF PEACE; AND I HOPE SOME DAY TO REALISE IT’

It was his English disciples, Captain James Henry Sevier and his wife Charlotte Elizabeth Sevier, who made his dream of creating a Himalayan centre come true. When Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati was actually established, Vivekananda was then on his second trip abroad, from July 1899 to January 1901.

Sevier had served as a non-commissioned officer in the British Indian army before returning to England. He and his wife met Vivekananda in London in 1895. The following year, they accompanied him on his continental journey in 1896.

In July, recuperating in the Swiss Alps, Vivekananda expressed his wish that he wanted to set up a spiritual retreat in the Himalayas.

The Seviars travelled with him back to India on the same ship from Naples. They rented a house near Almora, where Vivekananda came to stay. Later, in 1898, they found a secluded tea estate at a height of 1,940 m, recessed in thicket of deodars, pine and oak, affording spectacular views of the snowy mountains. Nine km from Lohaghat in Champawat district, Uttarakhand, the place was known as Mayavati.

The Seviars, along with Swami Swarupananda, founded the Advaita Ashrama on March 19th, 1899. Swarupananda's premonastic name was Ajay Hari Bannerjee. Born on July 8th, 1871, he met Vivekananda in April 1897, after the latter's return to Calcutta. The following year, in March 1898, he was ordained and given his monastic name. Vivekananda assigned him the task of teaching and mentoring Nivedita. He taught the latter the Bhagavat Gita. Swarupananda also served as the founding President of Advaita Ashrama as well as the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. He died in Nainital on June 27th, 1906.

Vivekananda, who could not be present at the inauguration of Advaita Ashrama, sent a powerful message. He said that the purpose of the Himalayan ashram was to realise the 'Oneness of all beings' as a foundational truth. Its 'particularisation' being the aim of *sadhana* or spiritual practice, 'knowing Him—and therefore the Universe—as our Self, alone extinguishes all fear, brings an end to misery and leads to Infinite Freedom'.

For Vivekananda, Advaita was the only system that gave 'man complete possession of himself, takes off all dependence and its associated superstitions, thus making us brave to suffer, brave to do, and in the long run attain to Absolute Freedom'. The Swami declared, 'Dependence is misery. Independence is happiness.' The purpose of the Himalayan ashrama was to provide a place where these truths could be realised:

'To give this One Truth a freer and fuller scope in elevating the lives of individuals and leavening the mass of mankind, we start this Advaita Ashrama on the Himalayan heights, the land of its first expiration.

Here it is hoped to keep Advaita free from all superstitions and weakening contaminations. Here will be taught and practised nothing but the Doctrine of Unity, pure and simple; and though in entire sympathy with all other systems, this Ashrama is dedicated to Advaita and Advaita alone' (bit.ly/3du7CGz).

The ashram, with its own printing press, library, museum and charitable hospital, has played an important role in spreading Swamiji's teachings. It was the first to publish his complete works. It also houses a museum with objects of Vivekananda's personal use.

(To be continued) ■



By Rachel Dwyer

An Orthodox Thought

Will there be an Indian *Shtisel* one day?

LIKE MANY PEOPLE worldwide (Netflix doesn't give ratings), I've been hooked on *Shtisel*, an Israeli drama series about four generations of the Shtisel family living in contemporary Jerusalem. I've not been so drawn into a series since *The Sopranos*, fascinated by both, perhaps because they share the same hook: how do traditional values and societies, of which these give us an intimate insight, fit in with the modern world?

That's about where the similarities end, given that *The Sopranos* is full of murder and mayhem, while the Shtisels are an ordinary family. Ordinary, that is if you are an Orthodox Haredi Jew.

Haredi Jews are a common sight in major cities in Europe and in New York, the men distinguished by their long coats, hats, beards and payots (side ringlets), the (married) women by their head coverings or wigs and modest clothing. The women somehow seem more modern than the men as they wear noticeably 20th century clothes, while the men's are from an earlier era. It's a group easy to recognise but about which most of us know very little as they form a closed society, living apart from others, who are referred to in the series as secularists, Zionists and Gentiles.

Shtisel presents some of the distinguishing features of this society in an accurate manner without comment. The clear separation of men and women outside family or certain public contexts, marriage at a young age and large families, respect for elders and for tradition, touching the *mezuzah* before crossing a threshold, and keeping strict dietary rules from kosher to saying a blessing before eating or drinking anything. The Haredi famously reject modern technology so there are jokes about having a kosher phone, an old 'clam' phone rather than a smart phone, while television and even car ownership are problematic. However, it's said that many Haredim watched the series.

We are drawn in through the many engaging characters, beginning with Shulem Shtisel, a widower of 63, 'father and educator' being the description he wants on his tomb, rather than the matchmaker's summary of him as someone who 'eats and smokes'. He is always devout, a kindly patriarch with a strong sense of duty, but he sometimes pushes society's restrictions to their

limits, such as in his habit of finding widows to cook him traditional food. We meet a huge cast of characters including his mother, Malka Shtisel, who is a link with the old European world, as primarily a Yiddish speaker. Malka and her friend speak this form of German using its lovely expressive words, often amusingly abusive, which might be comparable to the legend of Punjabi in India. (No one mentions the Holocaust at any point.) She also provides much humour, such as her interpretation of game shows and soaps through her traditional values when she gets her first television and conversations with her friend, the elegant but bitchy Rabbi's widow. Akiva Shtisel is a gentle young artist, indecisive especially about marriage but who wears his heart on his sleeve, rejecting a good match for 'the widow Rothstein' who leaves for London, unable to start again. Shulem's daughter, Giti Weiss, who holds everything together when her husband abandons her and the children but who can't cope with the birth of the next child, and their whole extended family, until her good heart carries her through.

There are many moments which stick in the mind. In one, Akiva wins an art award so is invited to a ceremony where the dealer notes he doesn't have to ask him to wear a jacket as the Haredi style of clothing never changes. Akiva and Shulem are the only Orthodox people present although the art dealer, an apostate from an orthodox family, arranges kosher food and translates their Hebrew into English for an American donor. Akiva slinks off as his father joins him on stage to start talking about how the Gentiles invented art because they didn't have the Bible.

The series is notable for little touching and no kissing, let alone sex. We see inside bedrooms with their single beds, where the men wear their fringed garments under their pyjamas and both husbands and wives sleep in their head coverings. When Akiva has to share his father's bedroom due to guests staying over, his father says a son cannot sleep in his (dead) mother's bed.

It's also interesting to note that no one is torn apart by being Orthodox, although schoolboys are forbidden to watch the Israeli Air Force flypast on Independence Day, as Haredis reject Zionism and are exempt from military service. Nor does the series suggest that traditions are to

blame for anyone's problems, instead suggesting that being Orthodox is empowering though one must reconcile one's desires within the community. When Lippe Weiss, Giti's husband, runs off with a Gentile in Argentina, she pretends all is well so he can be permitted re-entry to the family and to society. When Shulem's family find him having lunch with yet another widow, he has to announce their engagement as such contact is forbidden. Akiva struggles to get the family to recognise his calling as an artist, an unusual profession for Haredim. 'Times are changing', says Akiva. 'The Jew stays the same, and so does the sun', says Shulem.

Romances form within the strict rules segregating male and female society with formal meetings in hotel lobbies set up through matchmakers after which their families decide whether to take matters forward. The series is more about love, mostly within the all-important extended family, including even the dead who reappear to the living, and the wider community.



A scene from *Shtisel*

ALTHOUGH INDIAN FILMS deal with romance in the extended family and the encounter of the modern and the traditional, it's notable that they rarely deal with orthodox sections of society.

There is always a problem showing caste and community. The depiction of Muslims in Hindi movies is complex but here I'm considering only Hindu communities in Hindi films. After 1947, films mostly avoided any mention of caste. When names were given, they were mostly upper caste, whether Brahmins or Punjabi Khatri. Today, even small-town heroes have upper caste names, and high castes continue to dominate 'Bollywood'.

Realistic cinema can't avoid mentioning caste, and non-

Hindi cinema is quite comfortable with it, so Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) shows Apu's family, the Roys, as priests, or Marwaris stereotypically, such as in *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979). A small handful of films mention caste or feature low castes, the standard rollcall including *Acchut Kannya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Bandit Queen* (1994), *Lagaan* (2001), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Fandry* (2013), *Masaan* (2015), *Sairat* (2016), and *Newton* (2017). These films, which often centre on caste issues and clashes, are set apart from mainstream cinema. The recently released *Serious Men* (2020), which features caste issues in a scientific community, has a joke about a low-caste man dying when he enters a first-class compartment as he's told it's for Brahmins.

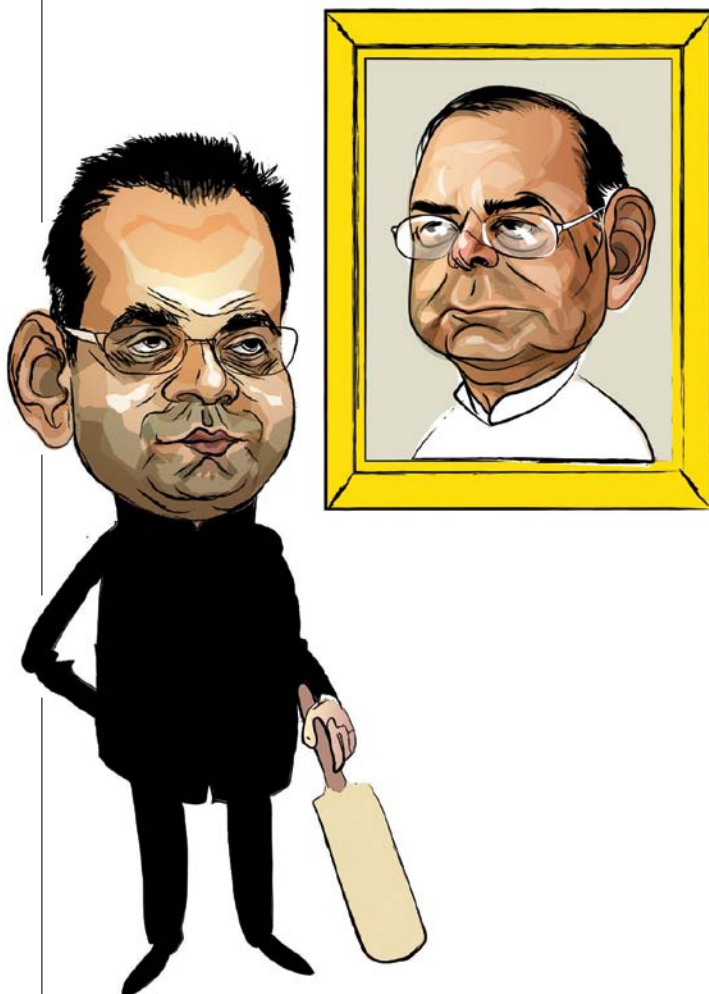
Bollywood films may raise caste issues indirectly so *Dabangg* (2010) features Chulbul Pandey (Salman Khan), whose surname marks his high caste, while Rajjo's (Sonakshi Sinha) caste is unclear. In *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011), Manu (Madhavan) and Tanu (Kangana) are Brahmins (Sharma and Trivedi) so no caste conflicts but in *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), Kusum (Kangana), the almost second wife, is a Sangwan, and portrayed as an unsophisticated hick.

Despite increasing mention of caste, how could one make a film about an orthodox community in India which wasn't concerned with conflicts between it and other communities but about people who live within it? Would it be permitted by the censors? How could Hindi films or serials deal with orthodox Brahminical culture? Could they show people observing traditions and customs, which keep them apart from other sections of society?

When orthodoxy is featured, it is usually only as a problem, whether in *Samskara* (1970) (Kannada), which Ananthamurthy wrote from his now-classic novel, or *Sadgati* (1981), adapted from Premchand, a story of caste oppression, or *Dharm* (2007), where an orthodox Brahmin finds a child they have adopted is a Muslim.

We as outsiders know very little about these self-isolating societies but films/serials and literature allow us to see into them from many perspectives. But is the depiction of the interiority and realism of these societies unacceptable today? Would it even be screened, let alone watched? Yet, so much is about the way it is done. In literature, RK Narayan quietly depicts a Brahminical Mysore while SL Bhyrappa, despite his numerous national honours, has been more controversial, entering into fierce debates with other writers, including Ananthamurthy and Girish Karnad.

In *Shtisel*, we see orthodox people who are basically decent, but the series is apolitical and avoids issues of gender identity, its focus being on an autonomous and closed world. It is also excellent television, its compelling stories skilfully intercut, its believable and complex characters performed by outstanding actors. Would a series like this be possible in India today? Should it be? ■



Like Father, Like Son

The late Arun Jaitley had been a versatile person with interests ranging from law and politics to cricket. And he was successful on every front. In cricket, he headed the Delhi & District Cricket Association (DDCA). His son Rohan Jaitley could now take on that mantle. He is not in politics but, when it comes to cricket, he has filed his nomination for the DDCA election. He is contesting to be its president. The association has a number of factions and he could emerge as a consensus candidate. A lawyer himself, Rohan used to play cricket as a student. Meanwhile, there are reports that his elder sister Sonali, also a practising lawyer, might be interested in joining politics. She is already active in social service.

MINISTERIAL BONDING

Usually, the relationship between a Cabinet minister and his minister of state (MoS) is a rough one, with the latter often ignored. But there appears to be a notable exception. Prakash Javadekar has a number of portfolios that include information and broadcasting (I&B), and environment. Babul Supriyo is MoS for environment. But in Parliament, Javadekar lets him answer questions on not just environment but I&B too. On several occasions, whenever Javadekar has held press conferences, he has invited Supriyo along. Also, Covid cases being very high in the environment ministry, with both the secretary and joint secretary having tested positive, Supriyo has become Javadekar's Man Friday in their absence.

Just One Temple

Following the Supreme Court judgment on Ayodhya, some enthusiastic Vishva Hindu Parishad leaders issued statements that re-claiming the Kashi and Mathura mosques as temples would be next on the agenda. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, however, told senior BJP leaders not to emphasise these issues. The Prime Minister's Office thinks construction of the Ayodhya temple and development of the area will take at least three years and must be accorded full priority. In Ayodhya, a separate mosque is also being built and the first donation for its construction actually came from a Hindu family who sent a cheque of Rs 21,000.



Don't Strain

There is strain in the relationship between Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar and the BJP. Though Devendra Fadnavis, former Maharashtra Chief Minister, has been made BJP's Bihar in-charge for the election, Bhupender Yadav wields enormous power. He is trying to keep the relationship with Nitish on track. He is also said to be behind the recent statement by the BJP that Nitish would continue to be Chief Minister even if the JD(U) got fewer seats than the BJP.

Not My Problem

Gupteshwar Pandey, former director general of police in Bihar, who took early retirement in the hope of contesting the election and joined the JD(U), found the party not giving him a ticket from Buxar, his chosen constituency. Instead, Nitish Kumar gave it to a police constable. Gossip says that Nitish never promised Pandey a ticket, and instead told the BJP to do it.

The Wildcard

In Bihar, all eyes are on Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) leader Chirag Paswan. He pulled off a surprise by giving a ticket to Rajendra Singh, who used to be with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. People are wondering how he became Chirag's candidate. Some say that after his father Ram Vilas Paswan's death, Modi himself is mentoring Chirag. The big question now is whether he will rejoin the National Democratic Alliance after the elections or the BJP will give him a Rajya Sabha seat.

Expansion Time

After the departure of the Akali Dal from the Union Cabinet and the death of LJP's Ram Vilas Paswan, the only NDA minister other than from the BJP is Ramdas Athawale. There are, therefore, rumours about a Cabinet expansion and reshuffle. With Paswan no more, there are expected to be more entrants from Bihar, especially in the light of the state elections. West Bengal BJP leaders Dilip Ghosh and Mukul Roy are also waiting for Cabinet berths.

Mission Vaccine

The man who is trying to get the Covid-19 vaccine to India as soon as possible, whenever it becomes ready, is Dr Randeep Guleria, head of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. He used to be Atal Bihari Vajpayee's personal doctor when he was Prime Minister and now monitors Narendra Modi's health. He is interacting with medical professionals at the World Health Organization, in other countries and also pharmaceutical companies to ensure India gets the vaccines on priority.

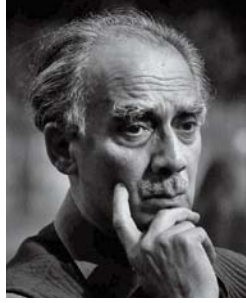


Q&A Again

Vikas Swarup, the secretary (West) in the foreign ministry, wrote a book called *Q&A* which was made into the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Unusual for a high-ranking bureaucrat, he recently made an appearance in *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, hosted by Amitabh Bachchan. He and Bachchan share something in common in having their roots in Allahabad. Apparently, it was Bachchan who invited him to the show.

FINAL EXIT

Film actress Khushbu Sundar left the Congress, whose spokesperson she was, to join the BJP in Tamil Nadu because the leadership, she claimed, had not been using her talent properly. Congress chief Sonia Gandhi has asked senior leaders why women politicians were leaving the party. Earlier, Priyanka Chaturvedi, who had been Congress spokesperson in Maharashtra, had joined the Shiv Sena. The Congress tried to retain Khushbu by telling her that the Tamil Nadu election is imminent and the DMK-Congress alliance may come to power. But Khushbu refused to stay.



By ARUN SHOURIE

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

Preparing for death

ASOURCE approaches, a whirlwind will sweep everything away, including us. We may be in the grip of severe physical pain. Our breathing will become difficult, we may literally feel our extremities begin to get cold, the cold advance towards our torso, and then our heart. There will be an emotional whirlwind too. If we are at all conscious, we will realize that the break with everyone whom we have loved, with everything we have valued doing is going to be total, it is going to be absolutely final. Howsoever many dying relatives we may have attended on, when it is our turn the event is going to be totally unprecedented. There is no time now for doing the things that we should have done and haven't. There is no time now to undo the things that we have done which we shouldn't have. In any case, wasn't the whole damned thing worthless? What was the purpose of it all? And even though we may have read and heard a thousand times that we are not being singled out by Yama's emissaries, that 150,000 to 200,000 others will die on the day we do—assuming there is no catastrophe that day—we may be assailed by the unfairness of it all. 'Why *me*? Why *today*?' After all, there will be so many things that have yet to be done, so many projects that are almost complete, but without us will now go to wrack and ruin. And, of course, there will be the dread of what lies ahead. Will I survive in some form? Will I see those who used to love and take care of me, and have gone earlier? Will I ever be joined again with the ones whom I love here?

By definition, at that time we will lose control over our body. It may also be that we will not be in a position to control our mind: if we die of an accident; if our mind has wasted away because of dementia or Alzheimer's; if we have slipped into a coma; if to keep us from pain, for instance, the doctors have drugged us into unawareness. But barring these special circumstances, the only way to lessen the turbulence will be to control the mind. And here too, the objective for us need not be as lofty as it is in, say, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—for instance, that we will be controlling our mind so as to attain a particular type of reincarnation, that at the final moment we will have such complete control over our mind that we will be able to cast ourselves as a sort of dart into the womb in which we have decided to get reincarnated. For the overwhelming majority of us the objective will be infinitely more modest—to ensure a peaceful dissolution of the mind at death.

For a peaceful dissolution of our minds, the first requisite clearly is that we should have completed the mundane things that dying requires today.

Some of us will have assets at the time we die. So that they do not spark any trouble, we should have written and registered a will. There are two or three things that I learnt from writing the joint will that Anita and I have registered.

First, everything in it is in accordance with Anita's wishes. Second, we have ensured that all beneficiaries and the relatives closest to Anita have copies of the will and have read them—our hope is that if anyone is going to contest any part of it, s/he will do so while we are



There is no time now for doing the things that we should have done and haven't. There is no time now to undo the things that we have done which we shouldn't have. **In any case, wasn't the whole damned thing worthless? What was the purpose of it all?** And even though we may have read and heard a thousand times that we are not being singled out, we may be assailed by the unfairness of it all

alive so that those left after us are not inconvenienced in any way.

As I feel that death has been medicalized and that so many of us are subjected to absolutely useless procedures, and that rituals have become routinized, I have added that (i) if I am braindead, or there is no hope of my returning to a useful, independent existence, I should not be put on life-support systems; (ii) that such organs as can be of help to anyone should be harvested; (iii) and that my body should be cremated without any ritual. Finally, so that neither Anita nor anyone else should be inconvenienced in any way, I have specified that there must be none of those gather-

ings that have become de rigueur—no prayer meeting, for instance, no memorial meeting.

I learnt one thing from a dear friend and a doctor, and that led me to alter one clause. In the original draft, I had written that after such organs as could be of use to others had been harvested, my body should be handed over to some medical college that needs corpses for education of prospective doctors and surgeons. But the doctor informed me that in India, medical colleges, etc., are not short of corpses. And the dear friend told me about what had happened in the case of a friend who had passed away having left similar

instructions. The family had to suffer great trauma in the ensuing months—haunted by the thought that now his heart would have been carved out, now the brain would have been scooped out, now the legs would have been sawed off. So, I altered the paragraph in our will to a cremation with no religious ceremony. In a word, we should write out what is known as a living will. A will that deals with these problems—whether we are to be put on life-support systems, when these are to be switched off, how our body is to be disposed of, etc. This is essential to spare our dear ones from traumatic decisions, and possible feelings of intense guilt.

There are three further bits of information that may be of use. The first concerns assets. A lawyer friend told me that he had seen many a bequeath become a real burden for the person to whom it was assigned: a relative had left a house for them; but they did not have the funds to pay the taxes that fell to their lot along with the house; as a result, they had to sell the house to pay the taxes. This becomes that much more of a problem because when one has to sell property in such compelling circumstances, one has to reconcile oneself to selling it at a disadvantageous price. So, be careful in what you wish upon another!

The second lesson concerns parents like us who have handicapped children. We are continually plagued by the worry: 'Who will look after our Adit? How will he be looked after?' Anita had a wonderful idea—'compatible needs'. A cousin, say, may be in need of a house and funds, which our estate could provide and, once we were gone, she or he would stay with and look after Adit. This has not worked out: Adit's cousins love him dearly, but they are all busy with their lives, some of them have settled far away, none of them needs a house or funds. So, we had to think of an alternative. With the help of a lawyer friend, we have set up a family trust, and transferred a substantial part of our savings into that—I had thought of transferring all our savings to the trust, but my lawyer friend counselled me not to do so: you never know what contingency may arise which may not be covered under the objectives of the trust, he said, so keep a part of your savings in your own names. Anita's sisters, her brother and his wife, and one of her dearest friends are to manage the trust. Three things have to be kept in mind while making such an arrangement. Laws differ about the formation of trusts—because persons have done all sorts of things in the name of trusts, there are many complex provisions regarding the setting up and operation of such trusts, even when the need they are to fulfil is manifest. So, one must seek

the advice of a good and trustworthy lawyer friend for this purpose. Second, none of the trustees should have anything to gain from the death of the poor child. Third, in the normal course, our circle will consist of persons of our own age, and it is this circle from which trustees will normally be selected. As a result, the trustees will be dying close to one another. So, there must be an orderly plan for inducting new members, and, if possible, it should be included in the original trust deed. A plan in accordance with which, when a trustee dies or is incapacitated, the other trustees are to induct a successor—in our case, they have to be chosen from among cousins of Adit: a cousin who knows law, another who knows finance, but ones who will devote the time which may be required; and who, above all, have a compassionate heart. It is also useful that they should be made familiar with the trust and its working well before the need arises to induct them—that will enable them to help the trust when their turn comes, and it will also give the existing trustees the opportunity to assess their willingness to devote time to the handicapped child.

Parents like us who have handicapped children are continually plagued by the worry: **'Who will look after our Adit? How will he be looked after?'** Anita had a wonderful idea—'compatible needs'. A cousin, say, may be in need of a house and funds, which our estate could provide and, once we were gone, she or he would stay with and look after Adit. This has not worked out

WRITING A WILL IS liberating. Since we came back to Delhi in the mid-1970s, we have always lived in our parents' house—with them when they were alive, and in it since they have gone. Writing and registering our will proved a liberating experience of sorts. We have always looked upon the house as our parents' house. Now that we have assigned it to a nephew, and the house that we have built in Lavasa to a niece, we feel all the more like transitory tenants—and lucky tenants at that, ones whom the owners have exempted from paying rent!

Having written a will, there is a caution: do not keep revising it, unless, of course, there are unavoidable developments—say, someone to whom you assigned something predeceases you, or proves himself to be an unimaginable scoundrel. I know of a person who wrote a will but kept a hawk's eye on the conduct of those he had named as inheritors, especially their attitude towards him, and kept changing the bequeaths as they behaved the way he



GURINDER OSAN/HT PHOTO

expected them towards him or not. Instead of the will being a liberating instrument, this can make it yet another chain of bondage. First, in going on revising the bequeath, we will be perpetually watching and judging others: does 'X' deserve what I am leaving for him? Will he put it to good use? This will only reinforce a trait we have to erase, the habit of being judgemental. Second, by revising the bequeath in accordance with our latest whim, we will be asserting that the possessions are ours: i.e., we will be deepening possessiveness; having assigned them away, we will be clinging to them. Third, by giving something to someone on paper, taking it back, and assigning it to someone else, we will be assuring ourselves that we are still in control, that we can change the fortunes of others, we will be assuring ourselves that we can still help and hurt others—all this will only bolster the one thing that we have to attenuate, our ego.

A will, a living will, a trust to look after a handicapped child—these are mundane concerns. Yet, they can make all

the difference between being anxious and unsettled in the final weeks or being at peace. But there is more. Thinking up what we need to do even in regard to mundane matters to be at peace in the end is not like making up another 'to-do' list. If an item gets left out from the 'to-do' list for today, it can always be written into the list tomorrow. But for that ultimate list, an item left out is left out forever—there will be no time to add to the list and do it. Therefore, this final list, and doing those things, has to be preceded by an act of imagination. One really has to imagine oneself lying on a bed, dying, and then think back to the things that one should have done. The list will be only as good as our imagination. And acting on that list will be only as good as our love for the ones dear to us is deep.

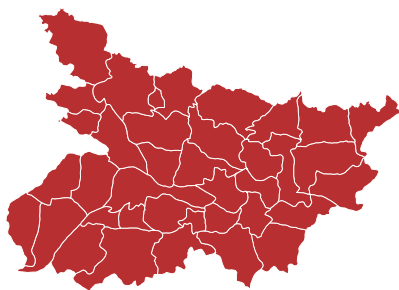
This is an edited excerpt from Preparing for Death (Viking; 528 pages; Rs 799) by Arun Shourie to be released on October 26th. A Magsaysay Award winner in journalism, Shourie is a prolific author and a former Union minister

B I H A R



Nitish Kumar
at a virtual rally
in Patna,
September 7





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Nitish Kumar has his image to flaunt and political momentum on his side, thanks to a formidable partnership with the BJP which wants to leave nothing to chance

By PR RAMESH AND ULLEKH NP

In the long years of what they call ‘jungle raj’ in Bihar when Lalu Prasad held the reins of India’s third-most populous state, first as Chief Minister from 1990 to 1997, and later when he remote-controlled the government through his wife Rabri Devi who stayed in power until early 2005, almost every official order had a note on it: ‘cabinet *ke anumodan ke pratyasha mein*’ (in anticipation of the cabinet’s nod). Decisions were taken on a whim by Lalu, if he ever took any that mattered. Cabinet meetings were seldom held because there was no need for consensus in a one-man reign. The famed story of Nitish Kumar discovering that the Chief Minister’s office in Patna’s Old Secretariat had just one Remington typewriter and broken furniture was just one of the symptoms of the governmental fatigue linked to the malaise that marked the Lalu era, which, ironically, started with great hope—of the marginalised getting their due and breaking the

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ceiling of upper-caste privilege of centuries.

Out of that lofty dream came nightmare and widespread disaffection with the regime, until Nitish struggled against the odds for years with the help of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and finally dislodged the Lalu Prasad clan in the second of the two elections held in 2005. The first one of February threw up no clear winner who could form the government. The next one, held in October-November, ended Nitish's long wait to displace Lalu and his Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) with the promise of riding out the bad times for the state known for its policy paralysis and acute backwardness.

Fifteen years later, as Nitish, now 69, braces for another round of elections in the state, which is home to the highest number of young people in all of India, the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), heavyweight banks on his image as 'Sushasan Babu' against Lalu's unenviable record of leading the eastern state, and quite symbolically so, with his RJD's lantern, into the dark alleys of systemic corruption and lawlessness. The streets of state capital Patna are now well-lit and Nitish, thanks to his rigour and perseverance as a governance-oriented ruler, has rebuilt and recast infrastructure and institutions, an incontestable feat that world-renowned economists and policy wonks often bring up at high-profile seminars. If not anything else, he is credited with ushering in the idea of cohesion in the running of a state that had almost slipped into administrative abyss and disrepair. He certainly must be glad that at the present conjuncture, he faces only feeble resistance from the man whose supremacy he had emphatically crushed. Although Nitish and Lalu had joined hands briefly in the last Assembly elections to trounce the BJP, the bonhomie between strange bedfellows RJD and JD(U) did not last long and Nitish finally retained power with the BJP's backing in a major realignment of forces, snapping ties with the RJD that bore the distinctive stamp of decadence. Lalu, 72, is not campaigning in the elections this time round due to ill health.

The missing challenger narrative isn't merely a cosmetic exemplum, but a stark tale of outliving an arch-rival now on the wane in a political landscape where new caste equations have emerged, only to stay. The peculiarity of these Assembly polls is that the absentee opposition is still remote-controlled by Lalu Prasad, considering the lack of experience of his two sons—including his chosen successor Tejashwi Yadav and his brother Tej Pratap Yadav—in ensuring unity within the party fold and in handling the allotment of seats. On the other hand, Nitish certainly has acquired a halo in comparison with the contenders

The BJP has always had a high strike rate in Bihar. The party is pursuing a strategy aimed at the 2025 Assembly elections. At the micro-level, it has rolled out a 'scientific', booth-oriented plan, with seven people put in charge of each booth



to his throne. The BJP-JD(U) combine had firmed up the whole poll strategy two months earlier that included outlining tactics in a state known for extremely caste-obsessed voting patterns, according to people close to the matter. After having taken such crucial decisions with great ease, Nitish's relaxed composure contrasts with the last-minute chaos in the opponents' camp and their timorous voices. The return of the migrants following the Covid-19 lockdown did create mayhem across the country and Bihar was no exception, but the state government took adequate steps to take things in their stride, even though bureaucrats hastened to add that such measures have to be viewed in a relative, not absolute, sense. "They talk of Covid-19 and today it's

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Nitish Kumar
and Narendra
Modi in Patna



(L-R) Devendra Fadnavis, Sushil Modi, Mukesh Sahani and state president Sanjay Jaiswal after announcing the BJP's alliance with the Vikasheel Insaan Party in Patna, October 7

completely controlled in Bihar. Only 961 people have died while Congress-ruled Maharashtra has 41,000 deaths,” said Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi. An unblemished public life and administrative prowess are clearly Nitish’s biggest assets at the hustings. That the BJP has thrown its weight behind him with gusto, notwithstanding minor discordant noises within the coalition with ally Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) deciding to go it alone, has only vitalised the campaign as he hit the ground running, confident and cheerful, in the run-up to the three-phased election to be held October-end and in early November.

The expectation in the Nitish camp is that the ‘Djinn’ that Lalu had said would come out of the ballot box—in the 1995 election that brought him the political apotheosis—will come out this time to script an ideological exit, in full measure, of the RJD leader’s policies and politics.

Lalu Prasad was an unlikely Chief Minister in 1990. A student leader who had cut his teeth in the JP movement of the 1970s, Lalu had won elections on his long journey to becoming the leader of the opposition in Bihar in 1989. But when the Janata Dal, to which he belonged in 1990, came to power in the state, his name came up as a consensus candidate for chief minister and was suggested by then Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal. It was after the arrest in September of LK Advani in Samastipur during the latter’s Rath Yatra that Lalu earned fame as the darling of the secular forces in the country. He also had the numerically dominant Yadav votes in his favour. Besides, lower castes and Muslims who had until then backed the Congress saw in him a saviour. That was the cocktail of Lalu’s success and long reign. Although he was ambivalent about secularism earlier, he stole the limelight by projecting himself as a crusader against the BJP. The broader coalition that

came into being was resentful of the exploitative caste system; his rhetoric drew Muslims to him in large numbers. For someone from the Yadav clan, he even went to the extent of poking fun at Lord Ram and his followers. His political calculations worked magic, catapulting him to the stature of a national politician with enormous public support. A witty and irresistible orator, he pulled in votes like a magnet and in 1995, notwithstanding his government’s poor record, staged the biggest electoral triumph of his career in Bihar. It was the fear of the old system returning that forced the backward castes and others to choose him over the others. Although a section of pundits had written him off, he won by a clear margin in the polls. Lalu had also relaxed taxes on toddy and fishing, endearing himself to poor folk and ensuring a consolidation of the backward-class votes. The fear that the gains they had acquired would disappear if Lalu was gone did the trick. A large number of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBC) had also tagged along under the banner of social justice when Lalu came out with his “*Bhura baal saafkaro*” slogan (exhorting his followers to finish off upper castes politically).

By 1997, Lalu had got embroiled in the fodder scam and had to spend time in prison and in detention, but continued to cling to power through Rabri Devi until 2005. By then, Bihar had slid into a kind of ‘Yadavraj’, with Yadavs gaining disproportionate prominence compared with other backward groups. The extremely backward classes, who account for close to 30 per cent of Bihar, felt betrayed. Similarly, Mahadalits, the poorest and the most marginalised among the Dalits, also felt stifled under his watch. Nitish, whose Kurmi community accounts for a minuscule of Bihar’s population, began to sense an opportunity in those communities that felt outraged by the rejection of the Lalu-steered regime that they had backed wholeheartedly early on.

LJP leader Ram Vilas Paswan, who died on October 8th and whose son Chirag has decided to go solo in the state polls this

time, was senior to both Lalu and Nitish in politics. He was elected an MLA as early as 1969 in Bihar as a Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) candidate. Close to Janata Party leader Raj Narain, he had a smooth sailing in politics in his early years. Later, although he did not grow into a Dalit leader with a pan-India image, he served as Union minister under various Prime Ministers, including VP Singh, HD Deve Gowda, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi. His biggest hurdle, despite being from the assertive community of Paswans, was that he did not belong to a community that had national spread unlike the Jats in Uttar Pradesh.

Paswan did rise beyond caste and class preoccupations and was instrumental in encouraging VP Singh to table the Mandal Commission report in Parliament with the aim of checkmating the BJP, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s was soaring in popularity with political momentum on its side.

Despite his ambitions to become a Dalit icon with a mass appeal, Paswan was overshadowed by the rise of Kanshi Ram's brand of assertive politics focused mainly on Uttar Pradesh. As Paswan lay dying, his party was already reduced to a family enterprise comprising merely his son Chirag. Although the LJP was offered 25 seats in the 243-member Bihar Assembly and a few MLC seats, he chose to dissociate himself from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the state, claiming that the LJP deserved more. For all his ambitions, not many people want to wager a bet on Chirag Paswan, now 37, making it big in politics—but yes, often leaders break free of the factors that restrict their growth and go on to leave an unexpected footprint.

Apart from Lalu, the leader among the socialists of their generation who has made it big in Bihar as the leader of a larger composition of voters is Nitish. Unlike Paswan, he broke free of

the limitations of his community's spread. And thanks to the BJP, grassroots activities are in full swing to consolidate the vote banks that have typically backed the BJP-JD(U) combine.

The BJP, for its part, has always had a very high strike rate in Bihar. In 2010, the election that established Nitish as a clear winner in the Bihar scheme of things and pitch-forked him as a national leader, the BJP won close to 90 per cent of the seats it had contested. This time round, mindful of the need for a resounding triumph, the two parties are contesting from an almost equal numbers of seats, unlike earlier when the JD(U) contested a larger number.

The BJP apparently is pursuing a strategy aimed at the 2025 Assembly elections with a long-term perspective. As of now, it has already secured assistance from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) at the grassroots level to carry out intense micro campaigns to woo more voters to the party's fold. According to a senior leader involved in formalising the campaign strategy in the state, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi will tirelessly campaign for the victory of the alliance besides other senior leaders, at the micro-level, the party has rolled out a 'scientific', booth-oriented plan, with seven people put in charge of each booth. BJP chief JP Nadda is monitoring all the outreach programmes of the party that involves women and farmers. The party's general secretary, BL Santosh, is interacting closely with party workers who are given various segments of the campaign to handle. The BJP had already done close surveys of constituencies and had taken extreme caution in allotting seats. Party leaders told *Open* that they expect to canvass votes aggressively through various means, including virtual rallies of the Prime Minister that tend to attract large crowds. One of them said the BJP is not averse to holding parleys to arrive at an understanding with parties that have broken out of the RJD-led alliance, hinting at the recent pact with Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) led by Bollywood set designer Mukesh Sahani.

The party, which has grown nationally from being a Brahmin-Bhumihar-upper caste party to a Hindu nationalist entity with greater acceptability across the caste spectrum, wants to retain its traditional vote base, too. Former Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis is the BJP in-charge for polls in the state where upper castes account for 15 per cent of the population, of which Brahmins are nearly 5 per cent. The three-phase elections will begin on October 28th and the second and the third phases will be held on November 3rd and 7th respectively. The results will be declared on



A Covid patient being taken to hospital in Bhagalpur, Bihar

REUTERS



Lalu Prasad
in Patna,
May 1997

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The peculiarity of these Assembly polls is that the **absentee opposition is still remote-controlled by Lalu Prasad, considering the lack of experience of his two sons—including his chosen successor Tejashwi—in ensuring unity within the party**

November 10th. In Bihar, Muslims account for 16 per cent of the population, Yadavs 12 per cent, Kurmis 4 per cent and Dalits 18 per cent. With close to 130 different caste groupings, the Economically Backward Classes (EBC) vote bank has by and large been a disparate, non-cohesive one until the BJP factored them into its electoral strategy. Lately, it has been making an all-out effort to woo the Mallah/Nishad communities in the riverine areas of Bihar. The BJP has also successfully managed to win over Mahadalits in the previous elections. They include Musahars in places in and around Gaya, Purnia, Katihar and so on.

The party banks on Kushwahas and non-Yadav OBCs to vote for its alliance in the polls in many parts of Bihar, a senior party functionary said, adding that the BJP has succeeded in wooing caste groups felt left out of social engineering exercises so far. *Open* had written in the past—and so have many political analysts—about Ram Manohar Lohia's warning that a neo-elite among backwards could turn out to be more feudal than the upper castes they supplanted in the power matrix. He had said that the cartelisation of the upper OBC leadership would get deeply entrenched, making it that much more difficult for the lower classes to oust them in the power struggle.

The prolonged socio-political debility of these lower classes, especially after being denigrated during the RJD rule, has made them veer towards the BJP. Internal diversity also ended up being a politically disadvantageous proposition for them.

The ruling coalition leader at the Centre also expects to make gains in the Seemanchal region comprising Araria, Katihar, Kishanganj and Purnia in the anticipation that an alliance cobbled up by All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) leader and Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi and former Union minister Upendra Kushwaha will divide the opposition's votes. Its

leaders dismissed the claim that the tie-up would prove to be detrimental to Nitish in the region.

With the Congress and other small parties expected to play only a marginal role in the upcoming elections, and with Lalu Prasad admitted to the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ranchi even as he serves a long sentence in multiple fodder scam cases, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is unfazed by the calculations and forecasts being churned out by pundits and others. In a virtual rally on October 15th, Nitish reminded his viewers again of the track record of the Lalu era. He said that after he took over as Chief Minister in 2005-end, he ordered a survey that revealed that only 39 people visited a primary health centre in the state in a month. He said that the figure is now 10,000 per month.

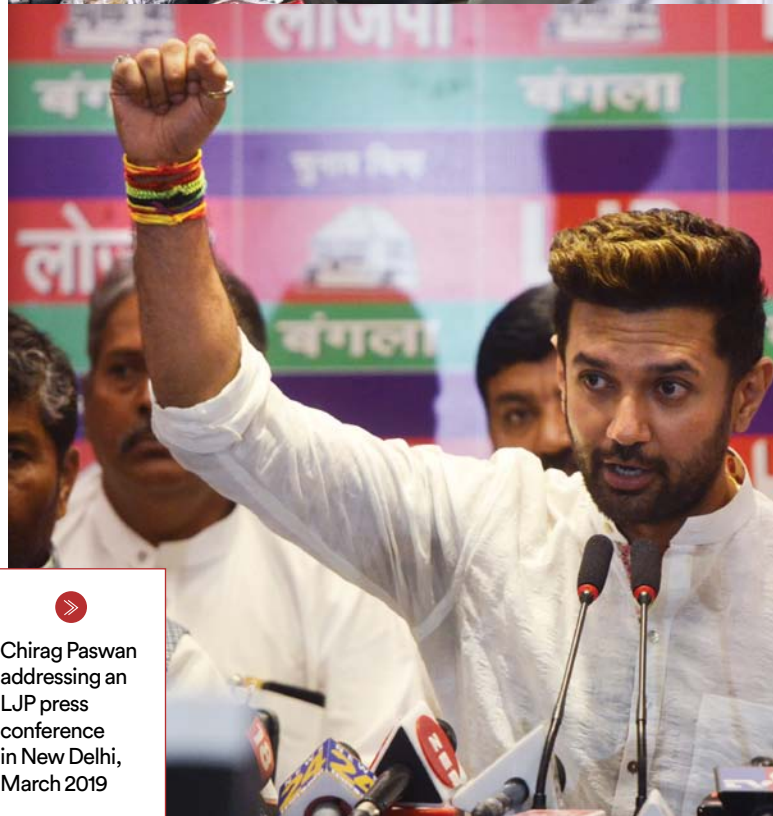
By reeling out statistics comparing his achievements with the stagnant state of affairs in Bihar under Lalu, Nitish will be sticking to his tried and tested strategy in a region which, for all its backwardness, is renowned for the earthy yet incisive political commentaries of its voters. In addition, the organisational power and the meticulous campaign skills of BJP heavyweights are sure to offer him an edge in the rough and tumble of Bihar's caste-ridden politics.

As he endures the dirt, dust and grime of Bihar on yet another occasion in an unprecedented campaign marred by social distancing protocols and fears of the spread of Covid-19, Nitish Kumar perhaps knows it only too well that, in his state, the discerning voter is king. ■

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Two sons and the
burden of inheritance

BY AMITA SHAH



Chirag Paswan
addressing an
LJP press
conference
in New Delhi,
March 2019



Tejashwi Yadav addressing an RJD press conference in Patna, June 15



PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

In 2010, AS helicopters flew in and out of Patna airport at the peak of electioneering, two men in their twenties waited at the VIP lounge. A senior journalist travelling with Sushil Modi, Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader, recalls that the two youngsters—Rashtriya Janata Dal's (RJD) Tejashwi Yadav and Lok Janshakti Party's (LJP) Chirag Paswan—came up to the senior politician and touched his feet. Modi blessed them and asked where they were headed for campaigning.

At that time, Lalu Prasad's RJD and Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP were fighting in alliance against the Nitish Kumar-led JD(U)-BJP combine. Their sons were just learning the tricks of the trade. The JD(U)-BJP alliance swept the election, winning 206 of the 243 seats. A decade later, with Lalu Prasad in jail and Ram Vilas Paswan no more—having died at a Delhi hospital on October 8th while recuperating from heart surgery—Tejashwi and Chirag, greenhorns in politics, are faced with a common adversary in the veteran Nitish Kumar, but from different sides of the political aisle.

By the 2015 Assembly elections, Lalu and Paswan had parted ways, with the LJP joining the BJP-led NDA in 2014 and the RJD aligning with the JD(U). Tejashwi fought from Raghapur Assembly seat, in an election micromanaged by Lalu. At 8AM, in the fall of 2015, when a group of journalists from Delhi landed at former Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi's house in Patna to meet her husband Lalu Prasad, a security guard asked them to wait outside. Some RJD supporters had also come to visit him from Raghapur. "*Jayin* (you may enter)," the guard said, in Bhojpuri. He repeated it to a group of people from Mahua, the Assembly seat from where Lalu's elder son Tej Pratap Yadav was fighting. After over an hour, two of the journalists were asked to go in. Lalu sat in the courtyard, under a shed where he usually met people, typically wearing a *dhoti* and a vest. He gave hurried, short interviews, his mind focused on what the visitors from Raghapur and Mahua had to say.

Lalu Prasad was holding forth, his shadow looming over the campaigning. It was said then that it was Lalu who was fighting in every Assembly seat. Five years later, he celebrated his 73rd birthday at the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) hospital in Ranchi, 354 km from Patna, being treated for various ailments. Back home, Tejashwi, his younger son whom Lalu chose to pass on the mantle to, is not as indulgent as his father when it comes to connecting with people. In his own words, politics is "not a career option, but a responsibility" he has bestowed upon himself.

Leader of the Opposition in the Bihar Assembly, Tejashwi has sought forgiveness multiple times for "some mistakes" during the RJD's 15-year rule shared by his parents. "There might have been certain shortcomings in our rule, even though I wasn't around then, I do not hesitate to accept them," says Tejashwi, but quickly adds that RJD rule ensured social justice. Caught between the past and the future, the old Yadav-Muslim affinity and going beyond the arithmetic of identity politics, his father's rustic connect and his own social media campaign, Tejashwi is doing a tightrope walk. He may want to move out of his father's shadow, dusting himself free of his taints and carve out a niche for himself, like Akhilesh Yadav, the son of Mulayam Singh in Uttar Pradesh. But at the end of the day, Tejashwi's political survival is hinged on being Lalu's son. And that, without his father's

countrified appeal and legacy of building a formidable social alliance.

According to a veteran politician who has closely watched Lalu and Tejashwi, unlike the father who would take everyone's opinion even if in the end he took his own call, the son rarely sought advice of the party's senior leaders. Politicians in Bihar, across party lines, agree he lacks his father's "charisma". Whether one likes or dislikes the blunt, shrewd and sometimes comic Lalu, whose party's 15-year rule has been dubbed "jungle raj", his ability to connect with the masses remains uncontested. One senior RJD leader says Lalu remembers every Assembly member by name. None of Lalu's children, including Tejashwi—catapulted to being RJD's chief ministerial candidate by virtue of being his son—has anything close to the acceptance the father had, despite allegations of corruption and the fodder scam that cut short his tenure as chief minister, landing him in jail.

"Tejashwi has been away whenever the state has gone through some major crisis like floods and *chamki* fever. This new generation tweets two lines and thinks this is politics," says Sushil Kumar Modi, who is Deputy Chief Minister again in Nitish Kumar's government. In 2010, when the JD(U) and the BJP fought the Assembly polls together, the RJD was reduced to 22 seats. Defining the JD(U) and the BJP as natural allies, he says good governance clubbed with a strong social combination gave it an edge over the RJD which was

dependent solely on the Yadav and Muslim votes.

Tejashwi, 30, who was Deputy Chief Minister in the JD(U)-RJD regime, has not proved yet that he has it in him to be a challenger in the battle with the 69-year-old Chief Minister, a leader with a legacy and leadership experience. Dubbed a part-time politician by his critics, Tejashwi is banking on anti-incumbency against Nitish, who has been in power for 15 years, shuttling between aligning with the BJP and the RJD.

In what would be the first election in the country amid the coronavirus pandemic, Tejashwi launched an offensive against the JD(U)-BJP government over its handling of the crisis, even as the ruling alliance accuses him of being absent from the state during the pandemic. Tejashwi alleged low testing and said the state government machinery was more focused on elections. Chirag Paswan, then an NDA ally, echoed Tejashwi in expressing reservations about elections being held at this time, saying it would add to the financial burden on the state and might witness a low polling percentage. "Leave aside playing a constructive opposition, the RJD has been absent as an opposition in the state, from their duty towards the people and otherwise too," says Bihar water resources minister and JD(U) leader Sanjay Jha.

Tejashwi, meanwhile, has faced disquiet in his own backyard, raising questions about his ability to keep the RJD flock together. Former Union minister and Lalu aide Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, who resigned from the party days before he died, had been miffed over bringing on board Rama Kishore Singh, who had defeated him from Vaishali in 2014 as a candidate of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Raghuvansh Prasad, who had held the seat since 1996, had told *Open* that Lalu's appeal was still there, but in his absence, the party workers get disillusioned. Like Raghuvansh, Rama Kishore is a Rajput, an upper caste, which the RJD is trying to reach out to, in an attempt to cast its net beyond its Yadav (constituting 14 per cent of the 51 per cent OBCs in the state) and Muslim support base. However, Raghuvansh Prasad had been of the view that bringing in people like Rama Kishore, who had a criminal background, would hurt the party's image. Tejashwi has brought in Lovely Anand and Chetan, wife and son of Anand Mohan Singh, a former MP who is in jail on murder charges. Another don, Anant Singh, a Bhumihar, was also inducted into the party. The RJD lost five of its eight MLCs, who joined the JD(U).

The LJP's graph has been falling with every Assembly election since 2005, having been reduced to just two seats in 2015. Senior politicians say Ram Vilas Paswan had remained politically relevant till the end. Chirag has a long way to go



Chirag Paswan and Ram Vilas Paswan in New Delhi, August 2019

Tejashwi, Deputy Chief Minister in the JD(U)-RJD regime, has not proved that he has it in him to challenge the 69-year-old Chief Minister. Dubbed a part-time politician, Tejashwi is banking on anti-incumbency against Nitish Kumar



Tejashwi Yadav and Nitish Kumar in Patna, July 2017

Photos GETTY IMAGES

The resignations indicated a discontent brewing within sections of Tejashwi's own party.

The RJD-JD(U) alliance in 2015 had brought the Yadavs, Kurmi-Koeris, Economically Backward Classes (EBCs), Dalits and Muslims under one umbrella, securing 80 seats for the RJD and 71 for the JD(U). This time, Tejashwi does not have the JD(U) by his side. The challenge before him will be to reach out beyond the RJD's traditional Yadav-Muslim vote bank, in a state where social engineering holds sway over elections. His opponents say he will find it difficult to retain even the Yadav-Muslim votes, which his father had nurtured. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, two years after Nitish had snapped ties with the RJD as corruption charges mounted against Lalu, and realigned with the BJP, the NDA won 39 of the 40 seats with about 30 per cent of EBCs backing it.

Tejashwi is not the only legatee fighting in his father's shadow in Bihar's electoral arena. Chirag Paswan, seven years older than him, is hoping to cash in on Ram Vilas Paswan's legacy. Now the chief of the LJP founded by his father in 2000, Chirag has altered his party's equations with the NDA, refusing to be part of the Nitish Kumar-led alliance, despite being offered 25 Assembly seats by the BJP. The LJP's graph has been falling with every Assembly election since 2005, the party having been reduced to just two seats in 2015. Senior politicians in the state say Ram Vilas Paswan had remained politically relevant till the end, was affable and had kept in touch with the common people. Chirag, they say, has a long way to go.

While Tejashwi, a school dropout, tried his hand at cricket, Chirag, who did his schooling in Delhi, acted in a Bollywood film. Paswan had announced his son's entry into films at a gala event in Mumbai and even accompanied him on his promotional tours. With the film flopping, Chirag joined politics sooner than he had planned. Both Tejashwi and Chirag have their eyes set on 2025, when the older generation vacates the political stage. Both are

banking on Nitish's supposed disadvantages as the incumbent.

For both, the test will be to go beyond the caste arithmetic. If Lalu Prasad had limited his outreach to Yadavs and Muslims, comprising about 30 per cent of the vote bank, Paswan's was further narrowed to 6 per cent (Paswan) of the 16 per cent Dalits in Bihar. Chirag, in an attempt to widen the LJP's outreach, came up with the "Bihar First, Bihari First" slogan in February. Paswan, who switched parties to remain relevant at the Centre, never became chief minister. Chirag, with age on his side, is strategising to cash in when the time is ripe to take centre stage in state politics. In 2005, Paswan had played spoiler for the Rabri Devi regime, making way for Nitish to become Chief Minister. His son has now revolted against Nitish.

"He can take bold decisions, has a charismatic personality and connects with the youth. His father was like a banyan tree. Chirag will take time, but given his energy and vision, he will do well," says Abdul Khaliq, LJP General Secretary, who was a confidant of Paswan.

Although the LJP has walked out of the NDA, it has said it would not field any candidate against the BJP. It gave tickets to nine BJP rebels, who were later expelled by the national party, as it was causing unease with ally JD(U). Chirag's decision has cast a shadow on the LJP's relations with the BJP at the Centre, where the late Paswan was Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

Unlike their fathers, who emerged from political agitations and humble backgrounds, the sons—reluctant politicians—have led comfortable lifestyles, lived in cities and inherited their legacies. A senior journalist in Patna describes Chirag as a fly-by-night politician who has not been able to establish a rapport with party workers the way his father did. Paswan's death may have triggered a sympathy factor, but political pundits doubt if that will translate into votes for the LJP.

When Tejashwi and Chirag campaign in Bihar, their fathers' images will loom large. But the blame, or the credit, will all be the sons' this time. ■



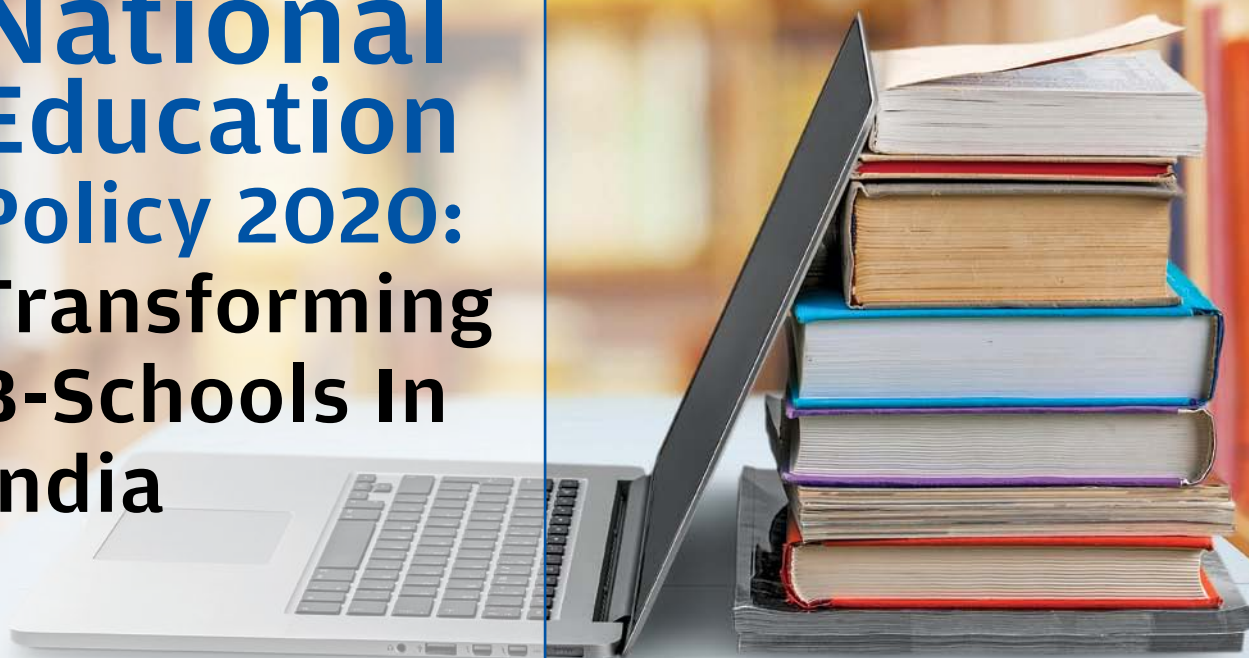
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National Education Policy 2020: Transforming B-Schools In India



P rime Minister Narendra Modi's vision to transform the Indian education landscape, by helping students studying under a new curriculum drawn from the National Education Policy (NEP) will come to pass in the year 2022. The NEP replaces the 34-year old policy of 1986 and aims to pave way for transformational reforms in the country. For those wondering the meaning of NEP; It's a policy that proposes sweeping changes including opening up of Indian higher education to foreign universities, dismantling of the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the introduction of a four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programme with multiple exit

options, and discontinuation of the M Phil programme. In a video conference asserting that the new curriculum will be forward-looking, future ready and scientific, the PM said, "NEP will give a new direction to the country in the 21st century, sowing the seeds for a new era." In a few years from now, we will witness parents of children who will be in the first batch of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) and the new assessment pattern under the 5+3+3+4 system, which replaces the 10+2 system.

Academic experts and researchers believe the government's intention to deepen the capital pool for the education sector by promoting foreign direct investments (FDI) and opening up the ECB (external commercial

borrowing) route may go a long way to improving the quality of education in the country. As we know, the entire curriculum for B-schools will be re-worked and is certainly going to be more rigorous and skill-oriented than before. Most importantly, practical knowledge, applications and blended learning will be the main focus in NEP 2020. Also, there isn't going to be UGC, AICTE, NCTE with the NEP in action. We will just have one single overarching umbrella body for entire higher education, which is the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) where both public and private higher education institutions will be governed by the same set of norms for regulation, accreditation and academic standards. The



Government will make it mandatory to discontinue the affiliation of colleges in 15 years alongside a stage by stage mechanism that would be established for graded autonomy to colleges.

Well, to continue to be successful, B-schools across the country will not only have to map the curriculum and pedagogy but be equipped with human competencies to run the programmes as well. So, how are the Indian B Schools gearing up for this huge transformation? Are there any strategies they're coming up with? We spoke to a few leading private universities in India and they shared with us details about how they're future ready for the same.

T. A. Pai Management Institute (TAPMI), one of India's premier B-schools with the prestigious double crown accreditation (AACSB, AMBA) commenced the academic year for the batch of 2020-22 in August 2020. Prof. Aditya Jadhav of TAPMI believes continuous improvement and experiential learning would be the key factors to ensure success with the proposed NEP, in the coming years. He says, "TAPMI has already invested heavily in digital education and has procured Coursera licenses

for all the students." The institute aims to allow students to access courses offered across the world in addition to the knowledge imparted at TAPMI. By giving such additional courses for free, the students are further equipped to face the outside world like the foreign universities. "TAPMI also encourages its students to take up more multidisciplinary courses and courses in Liberal Arts to develop their social understanding. We've also introduced live projects and flexible internships as part of our curriculum," he added.

Currently, India has very few foreign students when compared to its counterparts such as the UK, USA, France, Australia, etc. According to the recent statistics, India is now home to nearly 48,000 international students, which it aims to grow to 200,000 over a period of time. Nepal contributed the most foreign students, followed by Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sudan, Bhutan, Nigeria and the US. The government believes that a joint effort by universities and changes suggested in the NEP will help change this situation. Thus, one of the most important goals of NEP is to set up campuses of foreign

universities in the country so our future youth could benefit and receive global exposure. NEP 2020 document states that it opens doors to the top 100 Global Universities of the World to set up campuses in India. There is no doubt that the B-school students will benefit tremendously from the NEP 2020 as they will get the necessary exposure and experience of the real business world but how are the existing B-schools going to tackle this new challenge from its counterparts?

Some say promoting research collaborations and student exchange between Indian and foreign universities in B-schools will make Indian Universities a global leader in the education sector. Dr. Naveen Das, Dean Academics, Adamas University, Kolkata is of the same opinion. He affirms, "The future belongs to those who can create value for the nation by being productive in terms of application of knowledge. The curricular integration of subjects and relevant skills right from early schooling will ensure bridging of the knowing-doing gap among students and future citizens. So, in my opinion, the new curriculum is not only imperative but given its

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practicality, it will work well as a right step towards nation-building and our dream to be a developed economy in the near future.”

Adamas University, one of the most responsive private universities in the Eastern part of India, has also introduced the concept of minor areas along with the major domains of education. Essentially, it allows students to choose one area, apart from his/her domain while studying with the University. It not only makes students multi-dimensional in thinking and action but also enhances perspectives and ability to

discovery-oriented, learner-centered, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable.”

ICFAI (IBS) is one of the best B-Schools in the country, providing excellent academic delivery and infrastructure to its students. They're already offering innovative and globally accepted programs and great opportunities for all-round development. Their 100% case-based learning is unique and are already in the business of transforming its students into leaders of the future. Would they need any special strategy? Dr.

integrating contemporary topics such as AI, ML, big data, etc., but also to bring into the classroom problems that are critical to today's world – such as corruption, inequality, climate change, sustainability, etc., which increases their students' social and moral awareness and preparedness to tackle these issues. They completely believe ICFAI's approach is in line with NEP as it enables the development of vital skills through a focus on critical and interdisciplinary thinking, analysis, discussion, debate, with plenty of scope for individual creativity and collaboration.

“Our approach help create leaders who are not only industry-ready but also future-ready; both in terms of the training they need in order to thrive in the fast-changing digital/technological landscape, and also in terms of their capability to understand and consider the social/environmental/ethical dimensions of their decisions/actions. These skill sets and values would be crucial in a post-pandemic world, where sustainability is likely to be prioritized. Moreover, since our cases and pedagogical research outputs are used in nearly a thousand of the world's best institutions across nearly 100 countries each year, it reinforces India's position as a creator of educational impact for the world. And since our students are also taught with the same cases, it contributes towards NEP's goal of 'internationalization at home',” he further said.

The impact of NEP 2020 is going to be tremendous on both students and universities across India. Only time will tell if it would further boost the education sector or not but until then, let us positively step towards a great future, knowing the future of education in India is bright, and these new laws are going to be the lifelines of the Indian Education Sector. ■



accept uncertainty and ambiguity in the environment.

With a vision of reforming the education sector and its pedagogy, NEP 2020 notes, “Education thus, must move towards less content, and more towards learning about how to think critically and solve problems, how to be creative and multidisciplinary, and how to innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in the novel and changing fields. Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven,

Debapratim Purkayastha of ICFAI says, “We are entrenching the case method of teaching deeper into our curriculum to provide engaging, holistic, and impactful education. Developing and using real-world cases on contemporary and critical issues facing the world helps adopt a multidisciplinary approach to teaching, resulting in holistic education.”

He further shared that their focus has not only been on preparing their students for the rapid changes on the digital or technology front by

#Attitude

Transforming B-Schools: The Need of the Hour

Of the 13000+ B-Schools in the world, India hosts 3000 odd B-Schools i.e. almost 25% of the B-Schools in the world. On the contrary we do not find more than 3 to 4 Indian B-Schools ranked amongst the top-100 B-Schools of the world. This contradiction starts with the fact that majority of MBA aspirants across the world have a prior work experience of 5 years or more and join the MBA program to upgrade their management skillsets. In India, more than 80% of candidates aspiring for MBA are freshers. The average work experience for the remaining 20% is around 2 years. Prior work experience plays a vital role in understanding the complex management concepts and hence the value proposition of an MBA is higher worldwide vis-à-vis India.

Why does India have so many B-Schools? B-Schools in India represented employment certainty prior to 2008. This resulted in the increasing demand for management education which spurred the establishment of large number of university affiliated B-schools across the country. Today the employability of management graduates is at all-time low. If we exclude the top-100 B-schools in the country, then the on-campus placements at the remaining B-schools is less than 50% and placements at more than 2000 B-schools is less than 10%.

Most of the B-schools have been reduced to finishing schools where they polish communication, introduce jargons and grant a degree. The key reasons for such dismal state are lack of industry interface, outdated curriculum, very low understanding of the skillsets demanded by the industry, absence of hands-on learning,

absence of critical thinking, absence of ability to appreciate multiple perspectives and most importantly ill-equipped teachers. Exorbitant fees have further compounded the situation and reduced the value proposition of an MBA in this country. Demand for restructuring the B-School landscape has come to the forefront in the last few years and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has forced this change.

The focus of NEP is about scale without compromising on quality. It aims at removing hurdles to access higher education, increase autonomy and design a learning outcome-based education system which focuses on development of cognitive skills and better employability. The biggest change brought by NEP is the definition of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). "HEI will mean a multi-disciplinary institution of higher learning that offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs with high quality teaching, research and community engagement (NEP 2020)". HEIs have to necessarily be multi-disciplinary in nature and award undergraduate degrees. Single stream HEI have to become multi-disciplinary. University-Affiliated Colleges will either evolve into an HEI or phase out.

NEP also provides autonomy in various aspects of academic delivery. Multi-disciplinary HEIs will establish a Choice Based Credit System where in students can study courses across different streams. The degree-structure has also been modified. HEIs can award certificate/degree based on the duration of the student engagement bringing in flexibility for students as well as the institution. This autonomy will HEIs adapt to the

changing circumstances at a faster pace.

Most of the B-Schools in the country are either stand-alone B-Schools or university affiliated B-Schools. Multi-disciplinary and choice-based credit system will help develop critical thinking and cognitive skills amongst the students. The increased autonomy will help design programs and curriculum suited to the nature of student engagement. Autonomy will facilitate incorporation of industry-engagement in the curriculum. NEP envisages government investment in faculty development via the Teacher Education Institutions and also aims at providing faculty complete freedom in designing the courses. All such initiatives will ensure that relevant skillsets are imparted, and student employability is increased.

Although NEP brings a lot of autonomy, it also brings a lot of responsibility and competition. B-Schools have to evolve into a multi-disciplinary HEI or perish. Students' choice will not be restricted by geography, financial resources or constraints on school intake. Students may prefer a six-month program by IIM-A rather than pursue a full-time MBA at a local B-School. NEP has increased choices amongst the students, and this will result in closure of large number of B-Schools which do not have a strong value proposition in terms of employability. B-Schools need to reinvent themselves to face the changing times heralded by NEP 2020. ■

Prof. Aditya Mohan Jadhav

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GETTING IT RIGHT

Why BJP is upbeat in Tamil Nadu about next year's Assembly elections

By MAALAN NARAYANAN

PONDY BAZAAR, THE ever-bustling main marketplace in the heart of Chennai, was relatively quiet on September 17th. A horsedrawn carriage was parked in the street. Flashily dressed men and women, sequins glistening on their clothes, were waiting to break into dance. Suddenly, crackers boomed. The beats of the *parai*, a drum once associated with Dalits and now a symbol of rebellion, filled the air. This was no wedding procession—it was a welcome for L Murugan, the president of the BJP's Tamil Nadu unit. Despite the ban on political events to curb the spread of Covid-19 in the state, Murugan was being taken around in the carriage to his office two blocks away, where a 70ft-long cake was waiting to be cut to commemorate the 70th birthday of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Such ostentatious displays by Dravidian parties are not uncommon, but for the BJP in Tamil Nadu, it was a first.

Murugan, 43, a Dalit lawyer with a master's in international law, was a surprise pick by the BJP high command, which had been dithering for over seven months to fill the vacancy left by Tamilisai Soundararajan upon her appointment as Governor of Telangana. The choice of Murugan, a political novice, was surprising, and not only because he had pipped former Union minister Pon Radhakrishnan and senior leaders H Raja and Vaanathi Srinivasan to the post. With the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections not far away, it was not without a mission that Murugan was chosen. It was the first of many steps to recast the image of the BJP—perceived by many in Tamil Nadu as an upper-caste, urban, north Indian party—vis-à-vis Dravidian parties. Murugan, sources say, was asked to build a base

Courtesy AVNI CINEMAX

KHUSHBU SUNDAR



GLAMOROUS FACES FROM TINSEL TOWN HAVE ALSO FOUND THEIR WAY INTO THE BJP. ACTOR-TURNED-POLITICIAN **KHUSHBU SUNDAR**, WHO WAS A PROMINENT CONGRESS FACE IN TAMIL NADU AND IS A SELF-PROFESSED PERIYARIST, IS THE LATEST

GETTY IMAGES



WALL PAINTINGS OF AMBEDKAR AND PERIYAR (LEFT); L MURUGAN

WITH THE TAMIL NADU ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS NOT FAR AWAY, IT WAS NOT WITHOUT A MISSION THAT THE BJP CHOSE **L MURUGAN**, A DALIT LAWYER, FOR STATE PRESIDENT. IT WAS THE FIRST OF MANY STEPS TO RECAST THE IMAGE OF THE BJP VIS-À-VIS DRAVIDIAN PARTIES

for the BJP among Dalits, who have cast their lot with splinter groups. It is to be noted that neither of the Dravidian majors has a Dalit at the helm of affairs.

Murugan has begun his mission with the bang of the *parai*. Soon after his induction in March, he was able to rope in VP Duraisamy, former Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). He has been accommodated as a vice president of the state BJP unit. And when he reconstituted his team of state office bearers, Murugan picked candidates from Other Backward Classes (OBCs), sidelining Brahmins. There is not a single Brahmin among the 11 state vice presidents or the four state general secretaries. But for KT Raghavan, all are OBCs. This is not unusual. In fact, the last Brahmin president of the state BJP was L. Ganesan, who held the party reins over 15 years ago.

But it is to be seen whether the Uttar Pradesh model of social engineering will yield results in a land that values Tamil and Dravidian identities over caste pride. It is perhaps with this in mind that the BJP's Tamil Nadu unit has drawn heavyweights

from the Dravidian parties to its fold in recent years. VP Duraisamy, a former Deputy Speaker; Nainar Nagendran, a former All India Anna DMK (AIADMK) minister; A. Bhaskar, a former Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) MLA; and P. Karthiyayini, former Mayor of Vellore from the AIADMK have all been accommodated in plum posts in the state BJP. K. Annamalai, an IPS officer perceived to be actor Rajinikanth's close associate, was catapulted to the position of state vice president within three days of his joining the party.

R. Srinivasan, another state vice president of the BJP, defends these appointments as "lateral insertions". He tells *Open*: "Earlier, senior leaders from other parties were reluctant to cross over to the BJP. The hopping was taking place between the DMK and the AIADMK. Rangarajan Kumaramangalam and Su. Thirunavukkarasar were exceptions. Rangarajan joined us from the Congress and Thirunavukkarasar merged his party with us. Both of them were given ministerial berths in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Government. Now, because of the BJP's growing presence, senior leaders from other parties are join-

ing the BJP. Considering their political work for decades at the ground level, the BJP would not find it proper to ask them to start from scratch. These lateral insertions are natural and inevitable for any party that is gaining ground."

Glamorous faces from tinsel town, too, have found their way into the party. Actor Namitha Vankawala, who joined the BJP in 2019, was made a member of the state executive. Another starlet, Gayathri Raghuram, who made ripples in the *Bigg Boss* series, who had been expelled from the party by Tamilisai Soundararajan, has been appointed secretary of the cultural wing of the party. Infamous for his alleged misogyny, actor Radha Ravi, too, is a party member, even if he does not hold a position. His father, actor MR Radha, was a staunch loyalist of Periyar EV Ramasami. Another new face in the BJP, actor-turned-politician Khushbu Sundar, who was a prominent Congress face in Tamil Nadu, is a self-professed Periyarist (she played the role of Maniammai in the 2017 biographical film *Periyar*).

Periyar, the rationalist founder of

Dravidian ideology, remains a challenge for pro-Hindutva BJP. It is neither able to dismiss him outright nor accommodate him. It is an interesting irony in history that Periyar and Narendra Modi share their date of birth. During the birthday celebrations of Modi, television mics popped up before Murugan and he was asked why he has not extended greetings on the birth anniversary of Periyar. Without hesitation, Murugan responded, "There is no second opinion that Periyar worked for social justice. We have no hesi-

S Gurumurthy, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideologue and editor of the weekly *Thuglak*, has reminded the party of the damage that associating with Periyar caused the Congress in the 1967 elections. In 1967, Periyar had publicly backed the Congress and Kamaraj's leadership, going to the extent of dubbing the anti-Hindi agitation led by the DMK as "riots by anti-social elements". Gurumurthy points out that the nationalist votes which traditionally went to the Congress migrated to the DMK alliance. Periyar was perceived

Periyar. Let us support the death penalty for people who sexually assault children and take the pledge that we will create a society without any Posco accused," the BJP had tweeted, before quickly deleting it in response to severe criticism from alliance parties including the AIADMK and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). The incident, seen alongside Murugan's instantaneous response on Periyar, suggests the Tamil Nadu BJP is in a dilemma over the question of acknowledging him.

Aside from the bind over ideology, the BJP's alliance with the AIADMK, too, is not in the pink of health. With AIADMK ministers and BJP functionaries trading potshots, VP Duraisamy declared on August 30: "We are growing fast in Tamil Nadu. Likeminded parties would be part of the alliance. We will lead them because we are a national party." The next day, Murugan said the BJP has "chances of victory in at least 60 constituencies even if it contests alone". But with Modi praising the AIADMK's governance and announcing they would be talking about powersharing after the elections, the state BJP chief had to tone down. It is no secret, however, that the party is hoping for Rajinikanth's arrival in the electoral arena.

AIADMK'S O PANNEERSELVAM (LEFT) AND EDAPPADI K PALANISWAMI IN CHENNAI



OPS WAS HANDPICKED BY JAYALALITHAA THRICE WHENEVER SHE COULD NOT BE CHIEF MINISTER. EPS WAS SASIKALA'S CHOICE WHEN OPS REBELLED AGAINST HER AFTER JAYALALITHAA'S DEATH. BUT THE REAL TUSSLE NOW IS NOT FOR THE CHIEF MINISTER'S CHAIR BUT FOR THE REINS OF THE PARTY

tation in extending our greetings to him." Later in the evening Vaanathi Srinivasan, a vice president, toed a similar line in a TV debate. Murugan's remark is significant because it is for the first time that a state BJP president has spoken positively about Periyar.

BJP seniors don't approve of what appears to be a strategy to use fresh thinking on Periyar to woo the Dravidian votebank.

to be against nationalism. The Congress lost power in that election and has never won again so far.

It was not long ago—on December 25th, 2019, the anniversary of Periyar's death—that the BJP's IT wing had stoked controversy with a tweet on his personal life. At the age of 69, Periyar had married 31-year-old Maniammai. "Today is the death anniversary of Maniammai's father

SINCE AUGUST 15th, the AIADMK had been in the midst of a fratricidal cold war over the chief ministerial candidate for the upcoming Assembly elections. Secret parleys for and against the key aspirants, incumbent Edappadi K Palaniswami (EPS) and former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam (OPS), take place every day. The factionalism came out in the open with the recently held party executive meeting, which turned into a slugfest between EPS and OPS loyalists. OPS was handpicked by Jayalalithaa thrice whenever she could not remain in the seat due to imprisonment on corruption charges or health reasons. EPS was Sasikala's choice when OPS rebelled against her after Jayalalithaa's death.

But the real tussle now is not for the chief minister's chair but for the reins of the party. The AIADMK faces an uphill battle in the Assembly elections, with sev-



WITH **SASIKALA** LIKELY TO BE RELEASED FROM PRISON IN JANUARY, THERE COULD BE FURTHER SPLITS IN THE AIADMK, SINCE NEITHER EPS NOR OPS IS WILLING TO ACCEPT SASIKALA OR HER NEPHEW DINAKARAN BACK INTO THE PARTY

eral factors including anti-incumbency, internal instability and the absence of Jayalalithaa spelling trouble. The DMK has been painting the post-Jayalalithaa AIADMK as Modi's pawn. Some of the Centre's decisions such as going ahead with the national medical exams, attempts at making Hindi compulsory and the National Education Policy 2020 have been projected by a section of the media as anti-Tamil and the AIADMK government being inept at handling the issue. In this context, power in the party rather than in government becomes crucial. The stalemate came to an end after over 50 days, with the constitution of an 11-member Steering Committee to guide the party and nominating EPS as the chief ministerial candidate for the Assembly elections.

Infighting is not uncommon in the AIADMK. Even while MG Ramachandran was alive, Jayalalithaa faced opposi-

tion from the RM Veerapan faction. This ultimately led to the fall of the government after MGR's death. The party split and both factions contested the 1989 Assembly elections without MGR's two-leaf symbol. After elections, the factions merged and Jayalalitha became the supremo. Even so, unable to stomach her style of functioning, splinter groups such as the one led by Thirunavukkarasar left the party to form their own outfits. After Jayalalitha's demise, the party broke again, with TTV Dinakaran, Sasikala's nephew, launching a party. These splits were not owing to ideological differences; they were outcomes of power struggles between leaders. Now, with Sasikala likely to be released from prison in January, there could be further splits in the AIADMK, since neither EPS nor OPS is willing to accept Sasikala or Dinakaran back into the party.

The DMK, meanwhile, is brimming

with confidence. Party units at the grassroots are already in campaign mode. Thanks to Prashant Kishor's Indian Political Action Committee, the party has improved upon its optics. The DMK also claims that its recent online membership campaign has evoked an overwhelming response. More importantly, the DMK alliance, which swept 38 of 39 Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 elections, appears to be intact. The allies are already putting pressure on the DMK to share more seats with them. Tamil Nadu Congress Committee President KS Alagiri's remarks have indicated that the Congress might push for a larger share in power; the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) may follow suit.

In January, the Congress and the DMK were at odds with each other, with Alagiri alleging that his party was not allotted a fair number of posts in local bodies, to which elections had just been held. The DMK had gone against "coalition dharma", he said. In response, the DMK boycotted the all-party meeting convened by the Congress on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. DMK General Secretary Duraimurugan did not mince words when he said, "We are not bothered. If the Congress leaves the alliance, we are not the losers. The Congress has no vote bank in the state." But with the Assembly elections approaching, the parties appear to have patched up.

Strategies and campaigns aside, history shows that electoral arithmetic is an important factor for political parties in Tamil Nadu—and more so for the DMK. In the 2016 Assembly polls, the DMK alliance missed power by a whisker. The difference in the votes polled by the AIADMK and the DMK alliance was just 1.03 per cent, with the AIADMK bagging 1,76,17,060 votes and the DMK alliance polling 1,71,75,374. It is widely believed that the spoiler was the Third Front, a coalition of the DMDK, the Marumalarchi DMK, the VCK and the Communists.

Elections, like the cricket premier leagues, have become a game of glorious uncertainties. Tamil Nadu is no exception. ■



Maalan Narayanan is a Chennai-based journalist

SCREEN TEST

THE RATINGS SYSTEM IS BROKEN AND THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY KNOWS IT

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

CONSIDER THIS: EACH of the 44,000 Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) meters determines about Rs 75 lakh of advertising spend a year. And it is open to manipulation for a few hundred rupees a day.

And then this: News channels that are making the most noise about television ratings points (TRPs) are watched by a minority of the TV-viewing universe: exactly 7 per cent at the start of 2020, which went up to 21 per cent at the height of the Covid-19-induced lockdown in March-end, continuing to boom till June-end, before dropping back to 9 per cent of the total (with general entertainment channel viewership at a peak of 52 per cent and movies at 24 per cent).

And finally this: India has 20 crore (200 million) TV sets, over 700 TV channels in 15 languages and a TV ad spend of Rs 35,000 crore. It samples 44,000 households. The US, with 120 million TV sets, 1,000 channels mostly in two languages (English and Spanish) and a TV ad spend of \$70 billion, samples 46,000 households. It delivers ratings only for national channels, considering niche channels too statistically insignificant.

News networks in India have been accusing each other of manipulating ratings after Mumbai Police Commissioner Param Bir Singh held a press conference to announce an investigation into the involvement of three TV news channels—*Republic TV*, *Fakt Marathi* and *Box Cinema*—in a TRP controversy. Don't be fooled by the shock and horror: the Indian television industry has been here before. In 2012, NDTV sued Television Audience Measurement (TAM), a joint venture between Nielsen and Kantar Media, which had been measuring TRPs since 1998. It was enough for the Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF) to take over the ratings

mechanism, forming BARC with a 60 per cent stake to measure audience ratings, in conjunction with the Advertising Agencies Association of India and the Indian Society of Advertisers.

So given the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) is a member of the IBF, why can't it make the measurement foolproof? Especially since such complaints have been made before in Madhya Pradesh and the south. NBA President and India TV Chairman Rajat Sharma admits that recent events have demonstrated, once again, that there are "weaknesses in the rating system, and BARC itself has acknowledged in its police complaints that metered homes are being manipulated". The investigation has exposed that panel homes were being compromised by certain channels. It has been done with the help of ex-employees who are familiar with the system and aware which households are metered, he adds. The corrupted data is creating a false narrative on what India watches and is putting pressure on newsrooms, says Sharma, to make distorted editorial decisions. "The current atmosphere of toxicity, abuse and fake news is no longer tenable and is not in the spirit of journalism we have encoded in the NBA." He says the NBA is working with the IBF to involve international experts to make the system robust.

Not a moment too soon. As veteran investor and marketer Mahesh Murthy points out, comparing TAM's ratings to BARC's is a little like competition between Haji Mastan and Dawood Ibrahim. "Both are fraudsters, but one wears suits and boots and pretends to be up to some international standard. There's no difference really," he says. TAM was owned by WPP, the same people who own media agencies Mindshare and GroupM. It was no surprise that it helped WPP's media agencies make more money. For over 20 years TAM had less than 2,000 meters covering all of



News networks have been accusing each other of manipulating ratings after Mumbai Police announced a probe into three TV news channels for a TRP controversy. Don't be fooled by the shock and horror: Indian TV industry has been here before

India. Which meant controlling a mere 100 households across India could get consistent TRPs of five.

It was convenient for everybody, points out Murthy. Here's how: It was a time of 500 channels, 15 crore TV sets and TV ad spend of Rs 20,000 crore. No media agency wanted to deal with 500 channels with average TRPs of 0.2 each. It was too much hard work. It was so much easier with two or three channels with TRPs between five and 15. "So rather than writing 500 insertion orders for airtime at rates of Rs 1,000 per 10 seconds, the bigger agencies much prefer to write three orders for airtime at the rate of Rs 1 lakh for 10 seconds. They make more money from their fees, their media commissions and their undeclared kickbacks from TV channels—and all for less work. And those five channels make more money too. Win-win for everyone, except clients," adds Murthy.

But when the rest of the media discovered this and created BARC, the ostensible goal was to generate more accurate ratings for television. In effect though, the result was only marginally better. We're now in a universe with 20 crore TV sets, over 700 TV channels and a TV ad spend of Rs 35,000 crore. It's easy to see that BARC's 44,000 households are not any great statistical improvement. Especially when everyone on the ground knows where the 44,000 households are.

Such a sample size and that too compromised is woefully inadequate to help determine where Rs 35,000 crore of ad spend should go. Especially in this age of digital options. A better solution has to involve more sampling and not be fixable. It's not difficult. One can put in two-way set-top boxes in lakhs of households. Meters can cost less than Rs 5,000 at scale and be deployed in lakhs and hence be resistant to all but brute-force fixing. Everyone watches TV with their phones near them. One can build an app that 'listens' to what's on TV and sends data on an anonymous basis to a central server with the user's permission. And this app can be downloaded in the crores. All of these can easily improve TV ratings. Provided TV ratings want to be improved.

THE TECHNOLOGY EXISTS. Solutions are affordable too. And these have been presented multiple times to the agencies, the TV channels and BARC. But no one is listening. It will mean a complete overhaul of how money is allocated. For instance, the cost of a 10-second spot on the Indian Premier League

In a television market as segmented by language and genre as in India, the current TRP model is just not good enough to give you an accurate reflection. For that to change, it will require much less hectoring of others and much more introspection

The technology exists. Solutions are affordable too. And these have been presented multiple times to the agencies, the TV channels and BARC. But no one is listening. It will mean a complete overhaul of how money is allocated

(IPL) was Rs 10-15 lakh last year. This was 50-100 times more than the cost of spots on a typical lowbrow channel. Agencies would earn more selling one ad spot on the IPL than selling 100 elsewhere. For less effort. Because it was assumed that the IPL had 50-100 times the TRP of those other channels.

What if, hypothetically, asks Murthy, you did authentic ratings and found that the IPL had 'only' 10 times the ratings of say *ETV Marathi*? Would you pay more for *ETV* or less for IPL? "I believe you'd do the latter. In that case Star would not end up paying Rs 17,000 crore for five years of IPL rights, so teams would not cost so much and maybe football or *kabaddi* could make its way more into our consciousness," he says.

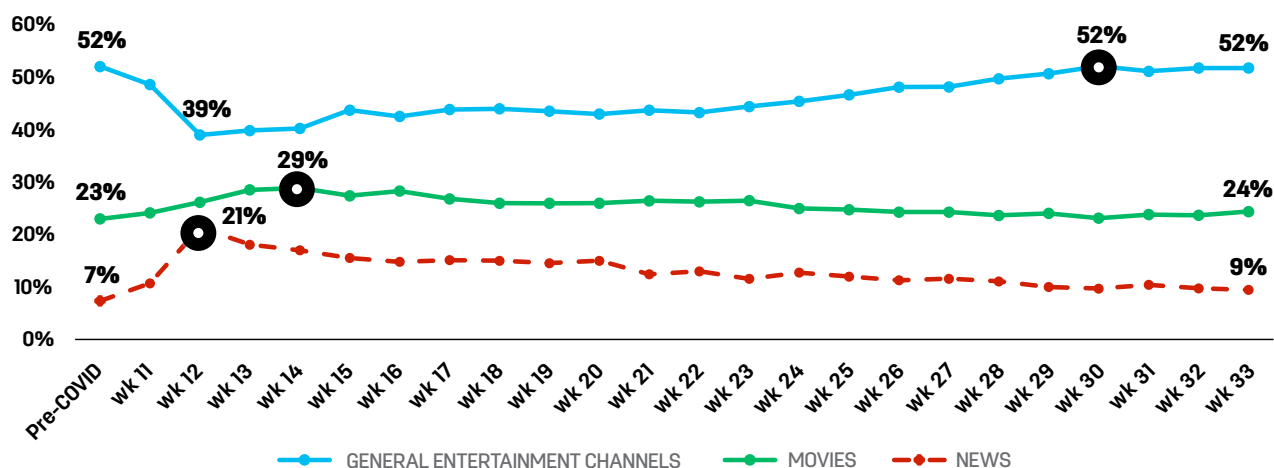
It will also show us exactly how much should be spent on TV and digital advertising. India has 60 crore internet users, who spend more time on their phones than on the TV sets in their homes. But the country spends almost half on internet advertising than it does on 20 crore TV sets. In the US, meanwhile, internet ad spend has eclipsed TV ad spend. It's tougher to control access on Facebook and Google than it is to master TV ratings

in India, so the cycle continues.

Arvind Rajagopal, a media studies professor at New York University, gives a historical perspective to the whole debate, pointing out that Indian TV was not organised around viewer feedback when it was established. Doordarshan was a monopoly after all. Viewers began to be counted by private agencies when sponsored programmes began to earn significant revenue. They were called "national readership surveys", suggesting that the mindset of survey research was not fully abreast with the new technology.

It was common knowledge, he says, that households with meters were paid to tune into one or other channel. "In the states, the most politically powerful channels always got the highest ratings even when this was far from the truth. Money and muscle power were always used to silence any critics. The tilt away from public to private became clear when TAM surveys omitted any mention of Doordarshan even though it was the most watched channel. There was no protest from the Government until SY Quraishi, then Director General of Doordarshan, initiated inquiries that led to the formation of BARC. But BARC too, instead of acting as a public service, allowed media companies to skew the

WHAT ARE INDIANS WATCHING?



Indicates peak share% for that genre

All India, 2+ week 33 (week starting 15 August) data as compared to pre-Covid-19, that is, week 2-4 (11-31 January)

Source: Nielsen and BARC

numbers,” he says. Quraishi even wrote about this recently in a national newspaper. He tells *Open*: “Even now there is no change in either the basic system or the technology. Only the controlling organisation has changed, from TAM, which was controlled by Nielsen, to BARC.”

It is something the Government itself has allowed, with private channels eroding its public service. How and why this happened deserves investigation, points out Rajagopal. We are often taught to denounce the era of government monopoly media and to celebrate liberalisation of the airwaves. But giving broadcasters freedom on the airwaves has not necessarily led to better news and entertainment for the public as a whole. ‘Free flow of information’ was a Cold War-era American idea, designed to promote commercial entertainment throughout the world, in the name of democracy. In the US this has led to a situation reminiscent of the Civil War, where no common ground exists between warring sides.

The civil war in the Indian case is staged between political parties, fought through proxy TV channels and friendly anchors. ‘Fake news’ has extended deeper and wider in India and affected even the information that industry insiders rely on. Ratings

corruption is part and parcel of this privatisation, with the general public also among the losers in the bargain. But what about businesses: should they not demand that they get their money’s worth when they spend on advertising? Or are they too nervous to challenge the powers that be?

In a television market as segmented by language and genre as in India, the current TRP model is just not good enough to give you an accurate reflection. For that to change, it will require much less hectoring of others and much more introspection. Longtime observer of TV and founder of *Indiantelevision.com*, Anil Wanvari, feels leakages on account of human intervention due to greed can happen in perfect systems too, but that does not mean the system is bad, it’s the humans who are. He believes news channels need to be subscription-driven, rather than purely dependent on advertising. Additionally, advertisers and agencies need to understand that news brings with it quality audiences, not the masses that general entertainment shows bring. “The barometer of investing for advertising needs to be the quality of editorial, its voice and quality of production as well and the internal numbers the channel’s team provides,” he adds. If that happens, it would really be breaking news. ■

Cruelty of the Mysterious Man

Cyberbullying saw a dramatic spike in India during the lockdown

By ULLEKH NP

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



RATAN TATA, CHAIRMAN, Tata Trusts, and chairman emeritus, Tata Sons, is on Instagram, the Facebook-owned social networking service where 'stories' are essentially photos and videos. With three million followers, the former business tycoon has till October 14th shared only as low as 32 'stories' and that includes photos of him as a schoolkid in America in 1955 and one with his late dog Tito, among others. By his own admission, his familiarity with the social networking space isn't deep, yet he sensed that people were pulling down each other online, which is also known as bullying. That prompted him to appeal to bullies sometime in June: 'This year has been full of challenges for everyone, on some level or the other. I see the online community being hurtful to each other, bringing each other down, harshly and with quick judgments.' Tata has been sharp at diagnosing the malaise called bullying although he said his presence online was 'limited'.

Mumbai-based researchers who have been analysing cyberbullying before and during Covid-19 find their results confirming Tata's worst fears: that it is in the most challenging times in recent history—lockdown—that bullies have unleashed their fury over others on social networking sites and messaging platforms.

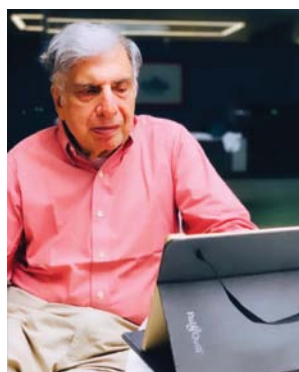
Actor and filmmaker Pooja Bhatt even received death threats on Instagram, forcing her to make her account private and come out with tweets about her ordeal. 'People threatening violence/hurling abuse, suggesting you die seems to have become a norm on @instagram when reported, #Instagram mostly responds saying that the conduct does not go against their guidelines & suggests you block them. #Twitter has far better standards/guidelines,' Bhatt wrote. 'What's even worse is that most of the abuse and messages screaming 'Godie' or 'why don't you kill yourself' come from women or at least people pretending to be women—one can't really tell with @instagram anymore. Get your act together @instagram cyberbullying is a crime,' she wrote from her verified Twitter handle.

If you thought such attacks had only to do with the furore and anger, manufactured or otherwise, over the death of young actor Sushant Singh Rajput whose case undoubtedly acquired political and provincial colours, the study, mentioned earlier and conducted by a team of enthusiastic researchers at the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies (NMIMS), which was published in the *Elsevier* peer-reviewed publication in late September, busts

all such myths. *Open* has followed this trauma-inducing trend of cyberbullying that involves hacking, verbal abuse and nuanced body shaming, besides others, for long (<https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/cyber-bullies/>). But the situation, as studies and numbers from agencies suggest, is hurtling out of control with more people entering the online space to entertain themselves and to seek the pleasures of offline platforms online thanks to the lockdown.

'Owing to the Covid-19-induced lockdown in India, most people's internet activity surged, leading to an expected increase in the rate of cybercrimes. This research focuses on analysing whether the factors significant in cyber-bullying susceptibility changed with the lockdown,' announces the *Elsevier* paper titled 'Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the susceptibility to cyberbullying in India?' The study, which surveyed 256 students before the pandemic in October 2019 and 118 students during the lockdown in June 2020, is authored by Ojasvi Jain, Muskan Gupta, Sidh Satam and Siba Panda.

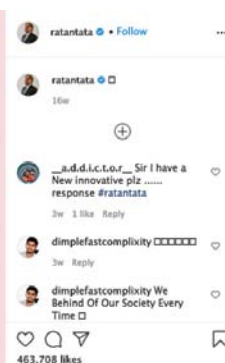
Jain, who is a BTech student of data science at the institute, told *Open* that the team had collected data on cyberbullying ahead of the pandemic and after Covid struck, decided to do another survey to make a comparative analysis. The results were shocking in that it showed a rapid rise in bullying on a range of factors, including age and other demographic variables.



This year has been full of challenges for everyone, on some level or the other. I see the online community being hurtful to each other, bringing each other down, harshly and with quick judgments.

I believe this year especially calls for us to be unified and helpful and is not the time to pull each other down. More of sensitivity towards each other, more of kindness and more of understanding and patience than what one sees today.

My presence online is limited, but I truly hope it will evolve into a place of empathy and support for everyone, no matter what your cause, rather than hate and bullying.



BY HIS OWN ADMISSION, **RATAN TATA'S** FAMILIARITY WITH THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SPACE ISN'T DEEP, YET HE SENSED THAT PEOPLE WERE PULLING DOWN EACH OTHER ONLINE, WHICH IS ALSO KNOWN AS BULLYING

This paper argues why the number of cases of cyberbullying has grown faster than usual during the lockdown. It says, 'New factors emerged such as Instagram as a preferred social media platform along with the number of games and gaming chat platforms preferred by respondents. Apart from these, even demographics of the respondents such as their age and sexual orientation were found significant during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were not significant before. The emergence of these new factors and their degree of significance, depicts a

change in cyberbullying susceptibility and can provide for the basis of study for future researchers.'

According to the NMIMS study, the most prominent form of cyberbullying is stalking (71.21 per cent) followed by posting derogatory comments (64.39 per cent), leaking pictures/videos online (41.67 per cent) and harassing (21.97 per cent). All this also signifies that most individuals have faced more than one type of cyberbullying, the authors reason.

The majority of the victims surveyed for this study said that they were not negatively impacted by the act (37.88 per cent) whereas 30.30 per cent said they were negatively impacted. Unfortunately, although the Government has advertised it many times that complaints should be promptly made on www.cybercrime.gov.in, the study found that the severest reaction by the victims was only reporting and blocking perpetrators on social media platforms. In fact, one should not run into a conclusion that such online platforms are any less concerned about such bullying. They have also advertised aggressively, asking the victims to report bullies. But cyber analysts contend that they could do more than asking them to report. "In fact, they just ask you to block the malefactor," a Delhi-based senior government official said.

The Mumbai study concludes that the victims mostly blocked their bullies on social media platforms (39.39 per cent of the respondents did so), many others ignored them (29.55 per cent). 'Merely 4.55 per cent of the victims took legal action against the bully by reporting them to the concerned government authorities,' the report says. As in the case of sexual assault offline, a majority of the attackers were known to the victims here too. In 68.18 per cent of the cases, the perpetrator was known to the victim, and the authors contend that familiarity could be behind the gross underreporting of cases.

In some cases, victims treat the bitter experience as par for the course. "We grin and bear it because it is seen as an unpardonable offence if we complain even to school authorities about someone hacking into our social media sites, especially Instagram," says a former female student of Delhi Public School, RK Puram. In fact, in her book, *Stoned, Shamed, Depressed: An Explosive Account of the Secret Lives of India's Teens*, author Jyotsna Mohan Bhargava writes about how teens take pride in hacking somebody else's account to fit in while the victim seems to derive a certain pleasure in the fact that her account was hacked into. She describes it as a badge of honour for some people. Bhargava writes, 'Many hacking victims dismiss it as a rite of passage in school—you aren't relevant if your account hasn't been hacked at least once.'

Even those who make such posturing and many others go through unexplainable trauma and long-term psychological consequences. The Omerta-kind of code that insists only the



ACTOR AND FILMMAKER **POOJA BHATT** EVEN RECEIVED DEATH THREATS ON INSTAGRAM, FORCING HER TO MAKE HER ACCOUNT PRIVATE AND COME OUT WITH TWEETS ABOUT HER ORDEAL

faint-hearted approach authorities, drive many of them to psychiatrists and counsellors. "I have seen many teens under counselling commit suicide and many others coming back from suicide attempts struggle to get back to being normal. It is a constant struggle and the stories are mostly untold and suppressed in the name of everything from family honour to ensure that these experiences don't impinge on their lives in the future, since India is a country where there are stigmas attached to everything from mental illness to meeting shrinks," says a reputed psychologist who spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to embarrass her patients.

THE NMIMS STUDY, unsurprisingly, throws up an interesting result as regards the action against the perpetrator. There is not much change in pre and post-Covid periods despite the rise in cases in the latter period. The study makes some recommendations: 'Various stakeholders such as students, parents, government authorities, psychology experts, and researchers can leverage these findings to spread more awareness about the impacts of cyberbullying to curtail the number of cases and encourage the victims to report these cases to proper authorities. Further studies from the bully's perspective can also be conducted to get more information on the various reasons behind cyberbullying.' The paper adds, 'Apart from this, studies can focus on the causal relations between the various significant factors. Statistical *post-hoc* tests can be conducted to delve deeper into these causal relations. Various interaction effects can also be considered to get a better understanding of the matter and create a profile for an individual who is more susceptible to

cyberbullying and understand its impact on different demographic groups.'

In some cases of cyberbullying, as police confirm, victims find out about being trashed online only after months or, maybe, years. For instance, Kriti, who doesn't want to use her surname and lives in Gurugram, noticed that she couldn't log on to her Facebook account for two days, but she saw nothing wrong with it: she thought it was some technical glitch. In reality, what happened was that her Facebook (FB) account was hacked and private and dirty messages were sent to one of her FB friends whom she was not in touch with for long.

Two days later, she used her mobile phone number and other 'clues' to create a new password and joined FB. Life was normal until she was contacted by her FB friend much later with the screenshots of the raunchy texts he had received from her detailing some fictitious sexual exploits of hers in crass language. Her messages were immediately deleted by the person who hacked into her FB account, so she herself could not view them. "Since my old friend understood that it could not be me, he warned me to be careful about hacking, but I never complained to anyone after that," says this young lady who is a fresh graduate. "Such attitude is wrong," says a Delhi Police officer who has probed many cybercrime cases involving young people. "These days, thanks to Covid, even older people end up as victims of cyberbullying because they are also online," he points out. Various police officers *Open* spoke to across states and Union Territories also shared the view that the "Covid season" saw a sharp increase in cyberattacks, including stalking and abusive comments online.

Mumbai-based Nirali Bhatia, a cyber psychologist and psychotherapist, who is also the founder of Cyber BAAP, which helps victims of cyberbullying, explains to *Open* why bullies who have recently surfaced online are unlikely to disappear once the Covid-19 blues end.

"During lockdown, cyberspace has been our only getaway. Be it for communication, socialising, work, education or entertainment. So, certainly during this period, there has been a huge hike in the number of people going online across all age groups," she affirms and goes on to add that the tricky thing about cyberspace is that it is designed to be addictive. "Nonstop, unlimited information is pushed to us. It is available 24x7 and offers instant gratification and wide popularity." That is why she says most often new entrants

into online platforms are hooked forever.

Bhatia concedes that in the past five months she has received more than 2,500 cases of cyberbullying and harassment on her anti-cyberbullying portal www.cyberbaap.org, which is much higher than before. "Maximum bullying cases amongst the youth are on Instagram, while for those over 25 years of age, it is either dating sites, WhatsApp or Facebook. Victims under the age of 13 have reported bullying on gaming chat rooms and portals like Discord," she states.

Bullies thrive on anonymity offered by certain platforms and hence some spaces are hubs of bullying, she confirms, emphasising that such social media and online gaming platforms have no methods to validate users. "Another big reason is these platforms have no regulations for Indian regional languages and bullies

are taking advantage of it. These days, we have maximum cases where hurtful comments or threats are made in regional languages, which when reported, do not meet guidelines of bullying on these social media platforms," adds Bhatia. Twitter abounds in such complaints, most recently by the co-founder of Alt News, a fact-checking website, who put up a screenshot this week of Twitter's response to a malicious Hindi tweet he had reported, saying it did not violate Twitter norms, though Hindi speakers would understand the threat behind it.

As an expert who meets or e-meets a large number of victims of cyberbullying, Bhatia says such experiences can lead to severe psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies. "We want no victim to ever feel there is no hope or no help available. On our portal, we have made a provision for the victims to report to us so that we can counsel and guide them to deal with the incident, hand-hold them in reporting this to the police, offer investigations service and, lastly, we also conduct cyber safety awareness workshops," Bhatia tells *Open*. She encourages victims to report cyberbullying on www.cybercrime.gov.in before they approach her.

Even the most reticent person offline can turn a potential bully online. Further, anonymity allows them to unleash the monster in them towards strangers and friends alike. The lockdown has seen more people becoming bullies online. They have tasted blood and the only way to stop them is extensive reporting of all kinds of cyberattacks to instil in them the fear of punishment. After all, bullies mostly thrive when they feel their victims are weak. ■



**"MANY HACKING VICTIMS
DISMISS IT AS A RITE OF
PASSAGE IN SCHOOL—YOU
AREN'T RELEVANT IF YOUR
ACCOUNT HASN'T BEEN
HACKED AT LEAST ONCE"**

Jyotsna Mohan Bhargava
author



**"ON OUR PORTAL, WE HAVE
MADE A PROVISION FOR THE
VICTIMS TO REPORT TO US
SO THAT WE CAN COUNSEL
AND GUIDE THEM TO DEAL
WITH THE INCIDENT"**

Nirali Bhatia
cyber psychologist



THE CHALLENGE OF RESTARTING THE WORLD'S

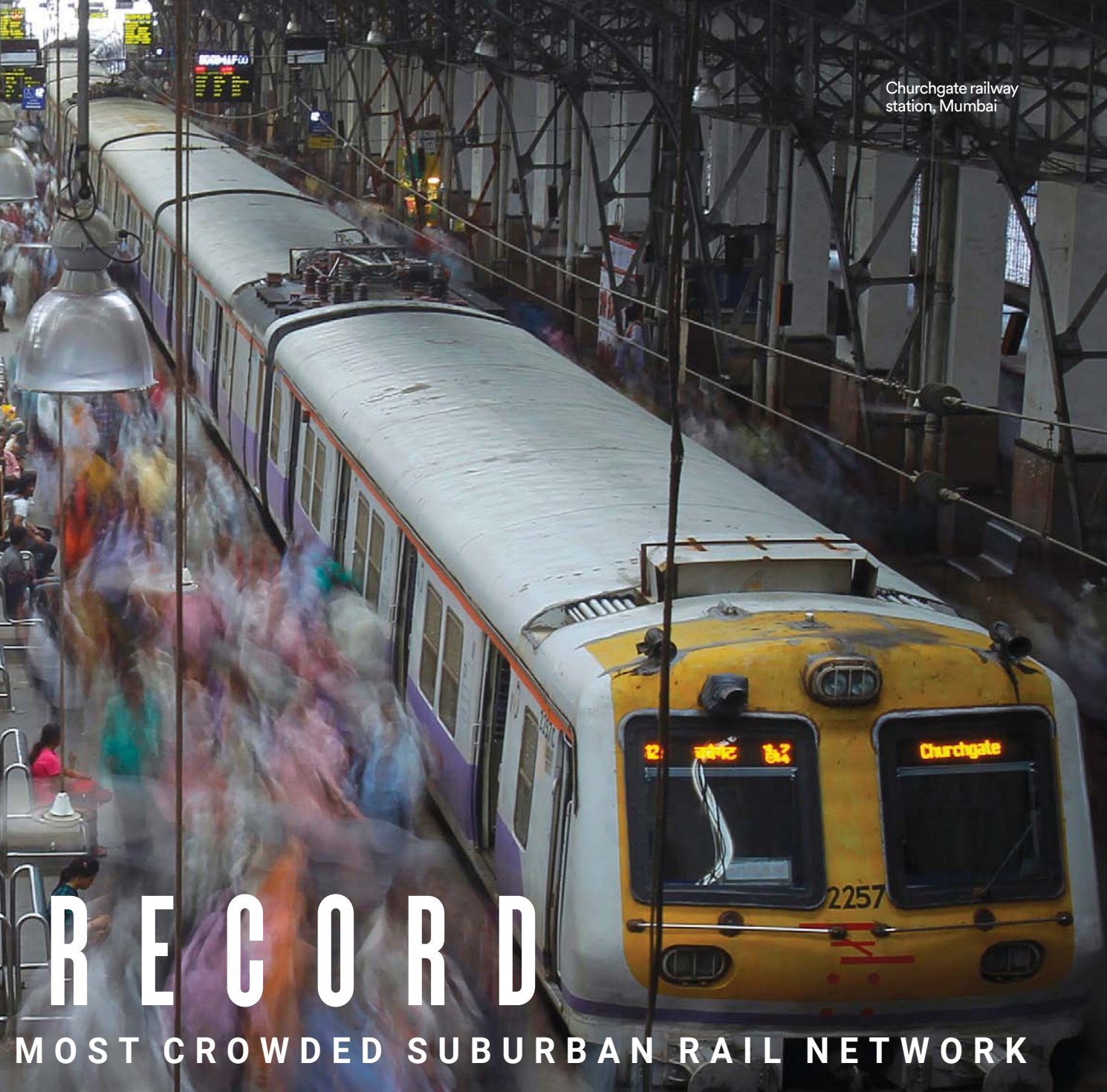
By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

ON A RECENT weekday, what appeared to be part of a domestic squabble spilled on to Mumbai's suburban train network. A group of Government Railway Police (GRP) pulled a woman aside at the Andheri station to examine her forged identity card. Although Laxmi Batra's identity card claimed she worked as a nurse, the GRP knew that she worked at one of the film production offices in the locality, and that she had forged the card to board the train.

Batra had been ratted out by her son-in-law. Later that even-

ing, amused GRP officials revealed to reporters how Batra had forged the identity card of her son-in-law's mother who worked as a nurse, and how the enraged son-in-law called the GRP control room for four straight days, not just tipping them off with the timing of the trains she boarded but also supplying them with her photograph.

The episode appears funny but it is one becoming increasingly common. As Mumbai unlocks itself while its local trains, its soi-disant lifeline, remain restricted to individuals in essential services, more people are being caught travelling using fraudulent means. They are forging identity cards and slipping through, sometimes by climbing over fences and crossing the tracks to



REUTERS

reach the platform. “We have begun to notice many individuals travelling on forged IDs. So we are increasing vigil. Putting up even more people for random checks,” says Anil Kumar Jain, the spokesperson of Central Railway that manages the city’s two railway networks of the Central and Harbour lines.

While these individuals boarding the trains do so illegally, many have begun to ask what other choice they have. How can a city be opened for business, yet its most essential form of public transport remain barred to most individuals? If the local trains are the city’s lifeline carrying blood throughout the body, how long can the city survive with blocked arteries and veins?

There is currently a lot of demand for the trains to be reopened.

There have been protests by passengers outside railway stations. A PIL asking for lawyers and their staff to be allowed is now being heard at the Bombay High Court. And a few weeks ago, some leaders from Raj Thackeray’s Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, forever on the lookout for an issue, forcefully boarded the trains in protest. There have been some hints by ministers, including Shiv Sena leader Aaditya Thackeray, that the reopening could happen soon. According to reports, the state is currently considering allowing 30 per cent of workers employed in the private sector to board them.

But there are concerns. “It’s not so easy to restart the trains for everybody. How do we monitor a crowd this large? How do we

ensure everyone is masked, or overcrowding doesn't happen inside a train coach? If the virus were to spread, all the efforts we have so far taken in the city [to stop the outbreak] can go to waste with a single false step," says an official from Western Railway, which runs the Western line in the city's rail network.

The city's trains are arguably the most crowded suburban rail network in the world. According to *IndiaSpend*, an estimated 80 lakh passengers travel on the city's 2,800 daily services, in comparative terms, larger than the entire population of Hyderabad put together. Although a nine-coach train is meant to carry 1,700 passengers, each train carries nearly three times that capacity. Between 14 to 16 people stand together per square metre inside a moving train. And every year, over 2,500 people die taking these trains, simply falling off because of overcrowding or while crossing the tracks (last year, the figure was 2,691 deaths), not to mention many more who get injured.

How does one reopen this essential service while also avoiding a Covid-19 calamity?

So far, the city's authorities have responded by increasing the number of bus services. But because of the manner in which the city has grown, where most people live very far from their workplaces, this option has become a nightmare. Many people living in the outer limits currently spend over eight hours in a day travelling to and fro.

A senior official in an insurance firm who used to drive to her office in Kurla began to take the trains because her commute took over two-and-a-half hours in just one direction. "The trains were okay earlier. But right now even with limited passengers, the trains have become crowded," the official says. "It's almost back to the old days."

According to Paresh Rawal, a city-based urban transport specialist, it is unfair to expect people to take buses instead of trains. "You cannot have buses trying to replicate the trains. A particular service, be it trains, buses or autorickshaws, does not work in competition with but as a complement to the others," he says. "Right now, what has happened," he adds, "is that the government has declared the city is open for business, but it has abdicated responsibility for providing any means for the people to go from their house to their work. That's just really unethical."



"NOT JUST THE TRAINS, BUT EVERYTHING FROM STATIONS AND BRIDGES WILL IDEALLY HAVE TO BE REDESIGNED"

Madhav Pai
executive director,
WRI India Ross Center
for Sustainable Cities



"THE GOVERNMENT HAS DECLARED THE CITY IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS BUT ABDICATED RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROVIDING ANY MEANS FOR THE PEOPLE TO GO FROM THEIR HOUSE TO THEIR WORK"

Paresh Rawal
urban transport expert

Various experts have offered different solutions. They have suggested offices allow for staggered work timings, where the concept of peak-hour travelling disappears and train services have a uniform number throughout the day. Rawal calculates that a 12-coach train on the Western line can be made to carry just 950 commuters, with a restriction on seats and standing. He suggests ticketing be moved entirely online, where people don't just book their tickets but also the train which they intend to catch. Suggesting that making the entire ticketing process online is possible, Madhav Pai, the executive director at the World Resources Institute India Ross Center for Sustainable Cities, says, "It's just bullshit if you say not everyone will be able to book tickets online."

Rawal has another suggestion for making trains serve a 'home' and 'service' sector, where they are made to travel between a few such designated sectors, and coaches are allotted in such a manner (for instance, those alighting at Virar and Vasai stations board different designated coaches) to avoid the chaos and crowding that invariably occur on Mumbai's local trains. "If you know the city's trains, these ideas can sound unworldly, I know," says Rawal. "But this [the pandemic] is a very unusual situation and we are all going to have to think out of the box to make travel safe and possible again."

A LOT OF THE current discussion on how trains can be resumed has mostly focused on the train itself. But the train is really just one aspect of the challenge. Mumbai's rail network isn't only a means of travelling, it is also a place for enterprise and economic activities. There are hawkers and beggars on the trains, those that carry goods to godowns and marketplaces

through the city, vendors on platforms, more hawkers and establishments and autorickshaws outside the exits and entrances of stations waiting to service this huge volume of commuters. There are narrow platforms and crumbling foot overbridges where crowding, equal to that on the trains, often occurs. Three years ago, 23 people died in a stampede as they tried to get off one such foot overbridge.

"Not just the trains, but everything from stations and bridges will ideally have to be redesigned," says Pai.

A few years ago, Pai began to analyse crowding patterns across Mumbai's station areas like platforms, staircases, entrances and

Central Railway workers disinfecting a local train at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai



WHILE MANY INDIVIDUALS BOARDING TRAINS DO SO ILLEGALLY, MANY ASK WHAT CHOICE THEY HAVE. HOW CAN A CITY BE OPENED FOR BUSINESS, YET ITS MOST ESSENTIAL FORM OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT REMAIN BARRED TO MOST INDIVIDUALS?

exits, and foot overbridges. 'WRI India is investigating ways to adopt a 'level' of service approach in combination with crowd management science to develop a framework to measure comfort and safety on public transit in new ways. The idea is to consider the rail system from the user's perspective and to consider qualitative measures, rather than focusing solely on quantitative measures of success,' he has written recently.

They began to collect and analyse photographs across the suburban network, scaling the images based on measurements collected onsite and basic assumptions. Although they had been working on the project for some time, it picked up pace rapidly after the 2017 stampede.

Their analysis reveals just how severe it is to commute on the city's locals. Pointing to the stampede that occurred on the foot overbridge in 2017 between Parel and Prabhadevi stations, he argues that it is not just the structure which is a problem, even the space to access them is underdesigned. One narrow access road was found to be serving around 38,600 people per hour on just one evening. At Kurla station, one of the busiest in the network, he points out that crowds alight from trains onto a wide platform

(7.9 metres) only to be shoved onto a 3.5 metre-wide staircase, a density he estimates to range between 10 to 12 people per square metre.

"It is possible to work around these. We will have to redesign and reimagine these spaces, but it will have to be done to make travelling safe," says Pai. He suggests, for instance, using spaces like the ticketing area as a holding area for people before they can enter the stations and move to the platforms.

Pai—who is currently in dialogue with the authorities to see how crowd control measures can be introduced on the network—says there has been considerable advancement in artificial intelligence technology and the way data is captured and analysed on public transit systems to enable railway authorities to monitor and control crowds.

"The railway authorities are very keen. But they have their own limitations... Plus all this requires bureaucratic consultations between the railways, the municipal council and the state government, and that comes with its own challenges," he says. "But right now, the public transport system is a mess. And if we are to live with the virus, something needs to be done." ■



OPEN **AVENUES** **HAPPY** **Homes**

Home is one of the sweetest word for any individual. It is a place of comfort where you can be yourself and spend quality time with your family members. The current scenario has shown us the importance of having a home to call our own.

However, buying a home with our hard-earned money is a distant dream for many of us. This is where home loans come into the picture to fill the gap.

The major benefit of getting a home loan is that you need not wait for several years to accumulate the required funds and purchase your dream house. By taking a home loan, you can become a homeowner today.

Depending on your loan eligibility, you can take a home loan as per your requirements. If you want a lower EMI amount, you can opt for a longer tenure loan.

Why it is the right time to avail home loan?

The present economic scenario is ideal for home seekers. Here are the two key benefits of becoming a homeowner now.

1. Attractive interest rates: The pandemic and overall financial health of the country has resulted in lowering of the interest rates by the RBI. Banks have followed the RBI's footsteps and have reduced their interest rates on loan. This has made home loan affordable today. A lower interest rate translates into lower EMI. It means that in the current scenario, you may have to pay less interest for the equal amount of loan disbursed earlier. So more savings.

2. Reduction in GST rates: Home purchases are subjected to GST (Goods and Services Tax) rates. The rates have come down. The GST rate on residential property is 5% and 1% for

affordable homes without the benefit of input tax credit (ITC). Prior to March 2019, the GST rate on non-affordable housing and affordable housing were 12% and 8% respectively.

Hence, we can see that the twin effect of attractive interest rate and low GST rates can help you buy a home.

Things to consider before opting for a home loan

Now that you know about the benefit of taking a home loan in the present circumstances, it is important to understand the various nuances associated with home loan to have seamless loan processing and disbursal.

Check your loan to income ratio

Before you take on a loan, it is essential to check your loan to income ratio. To put it simply, it is the percentage of your monthly loan outflow with respect to your net monthly income.



Loan to income ratio: Total monthly EMIs/Net monthly income*100

If your loan to income ratio is over 40%, you may look into your finances and figure out a plan to help you navigate through other existing loans.

Check your home loan eligibility

To take a home loan, you need to check whether you are eligible to take home loans. It is essential to check your eligibility, as failing to meet the eligibility criteria may have a negative impact on your credit report.

The eligibility requirement will differ among different financial institutions. To test your eligibility, you can use the home loan eligibility calculator available on different websites before applying for a home loan. To check your home loan eligibility through the calculator, you need to add different details such as your date of birth, city, net monthly salary, other monthly income and existing EMIs.

Here are a few criteria required to avail home loan*:

Nationality	Indian Residents, NRIs and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)
Credit Score	550 – 900
Age Limit	Minimum – 18 years Maximum – 70 years
Required Work Experience	Minimum 2 years of work experience
Minimum Required Salary	Minimum of Rs.25,000 per month. However, it may vary across financial institutions and regions.
For Business People	Minimum 3 years of business continuity is required
Loan-to-Value (LTV) Ratio	Up to 90% of property value

** Conditions apply*

Find out the right home loan amount

There is no universal answer to this question. The right amount of loan amount will depend on your financial health. The home loan amount is one of the three pillars of the home loan.

Monthly EMI and Home Loan Tenure are the other two pillars.

The right amount of home loan will depend on various features such as your financial stability, source of income, other liabilities, your personal contribution and the type of property.

If you are in a steady job, you can look at a higher home loan amount. For instance, you can take a loan amount of up to 60% of the property value, including other costs.

However, if you work in a risky sector, try to accumulate as much as possible and take a modest loan amount.

Compare different home loan offers

What do we do when we want to buy a high-ticket item? We compare the price listed of the item on various online stores. Comparison of different home loan offering is a must before opting for a home loan as it can help you save your hard-earned money. As the maximum tenure of the home loan can stretch up to 30 years, every small saving counts and can result in significant savings in the long term.

Here are some of the factors on which you can compare home loans:

Interest Rate: The interest on home loan is attractive when compared with other categories of loans. However, the interest rate on home loan varies between different lenders. A low

interest rate will mean lower EMIs. Even a 0.25% or 0.50% difference in the interest rate will mean a lot.

Processing Fee: The minimum and maximum processing fee of different institutions varies. While few may calculate a percentage of your loan amount as a processing fee, others may have a flat processing fee.

Maximum loan amount: Maximum loan amount is the amount of a home loan that the lender lends to their customers. So, if the maximum loan amount of a bank is Rs. 7 crores, then you won't be able to avail a loan of, say, Rs.8 crores. Hence, it is important to check the maximum loan amount of the lender.

Maximum tenure: A longer loan term may mean affordable EMIs. But it can also mean higher EMI outflows. If you are looking for a home loan with EMIs that are easy on the pocket, check the maximum loan tenure offered by the lender.

Transform your house into your home
 After the lender has disbursed your loan

and you have paid few instalments on time, most lenders may consider you eligible for a top-up home loan. You can use this loan to transform your house into your home by decorating your house as per your and your family's taste.

A good repayment track record and high credit score are necessary to avail the top-up loan. The top-up loan can be 10-15% of your original loan amount with a maximum tenure up to 10 years.

Conclusion

The present scenario has shown us the importance of having a home. A home is now a necessity. With work from home, online classes, online workouts becoming the 'new normal', we may have to spend more time at our home than anywhere else. Hence, having a home where we can be ourselves and that takes care of the different aspects of our life is the need of the hour.

If you are looking to buy a home, this might be the best season to get a home loan at an affordable cost. This festive season double your and your family's happiness by buying a home and live rent-free. ■

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WHY LOVE WHAT YOU WILL LOSE?

The new Nobel laureate Louise Glück's poetry is infused with desire and trauma, the processes of ordeal and healing

By Ranjit Hoskote

I REMEMBER, AS IF it was yesterday, the electric experience of hearing Louise Glück read from her poetry, exactly 25 years ago this month, at the University of Iowa's Shambaugh Auditorium. I recall her voice, dwelling on the moments of exhilaration and self-doubt that recur in her 1992 collection, *The Wild Iris*, with its lavish evocations of the natural world and the hesitations of the human individual at large in that world, shuttling between intimacy and grandeur of scale. As in 'Lullaby':

*Listen to my breathing, your own breathing
like the fireflies, each small breath
a flare in which the world appears.*

I recall her voice, invoking the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice, the life-changing descent into dark valleys and reading in plangent cadences some of the poems that would appear in *Meadowlands* (1996) and *Vita Nova* (1999). Consider these resonant lines from 'Lute Song':

*I made a harp of disaster
to perpetuate the beauty of my last love.
Yet my anguish, such as it is,
remains the struggle for form...*

The four poets to whose work I found myself most drawn, and which I found profoundly important, as a poet in my twenties, were all American women poets:

Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, Jorie Graham, and Louise Glück. What attracted me to their work was precisely that 'struggle for form', that hard-won yet magical convergence of the vicissitudes of personal, often disorienting experience and the coherence-giving structures of poetic utterance. Their political situations were not my political situation, their locations were not my location, their gender positions were not my gender position. And yet, they spoke to me with intensity through their commitment to crafting a subjectivity from diverse materials, cutting against the grain of prevailing social, cultural, and literary ascendancies. They offered vivid examples of poetic practice through their experimental poetics, each of them revolutionising the lyric poem, opening up its horizons, expanding its affective potentialities beyond the narrow confessional 'I', nourishing it with nutrients drawn from other languages and literatures, improvising and drawing it beyond the personal, to embrace larger psychic and social predicaments.

BORN IN NEW YORK City in 1943, while World War II raged on and the US had mobilised itself on multiple fronts, Glück grew up in an era of dramatic changes, through the 1950s and 1960s. Her family origins lie in the early 20th-century Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora from Eastern Europe. Her mother, Beatrice Grosby, was of Russian Jewish heritage; her father, Daniel Glück, was the son of Hungarian





Louise Glück

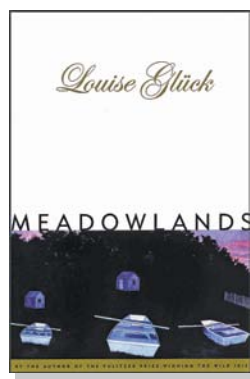
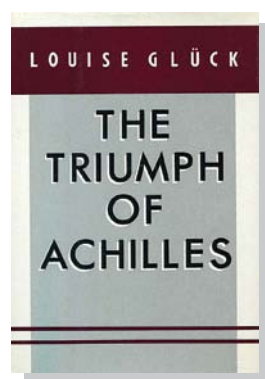
Jewish immigrants who joined his brother-in-law Sundel Doniger in a business enterprise. Among other products, they invented the high-precision X-Acto knife. This has struck many critics as a significant metaphor for Glück's poetry: she takes a resolute and sometimes relentless scalpel to the complexities of the emotional life. In a stoic elegy for Dido, who is abandoned by her lover, the Trojan hero Aeneas, as he moves on to meet his historic destiny in Italy, Glück writes ('The Queen of Carthage'):

*Brutal to love,
more brutal to die.
And brutal beyond the reaches of justice
to die of love.*

At the core of Glück's poetry are the claims of desire and trauma, the processes of ordeal and healing, the imminent loss and redemptive transfiguration of the self. Revisiting the scenes

*Meaning, it will feed you, it will ravish you,
it will not keep you alive.*

Glück's poetry is the ampersand between memoir and myth, dream and archetype, the self that negotiates street traffic and the self that makes the perilous journey into the netherworld in quest of illumination. In a 1999 essay, 'The Culture of Healing', collected into her volume of essays on poetry, *American Originality* (2017), she writes, 'The poem is a revenge on loss, which has been forced to yield to a new form, a thing that hadn't existed in the world before. The loss itself becomes, then, both addition and subtraction: without it, there would not have been this poem, this novel, this work in stone.' She underwent psychoanalysis for a considerable period, in her youth, and regards it as a formative phase of individuation. From this apprenticeship to exploratory narrative-making, with its confusions and clarities, detours



of childhood and the simultaneously nurturing and constraining framework of the family, activating memories of love and sex, confronting the bleak reality of death, placing the drama of human life against the cycles of the seasons and plant life, Glück drafts and refashions a self that balances always between passion and regret. Across the arc of her published work, from *Firstborn* (1968) to *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014), she has sought to stabilise—or, at any rate, to bear witness to—the shifting relationship between the intelligence, oriented towards reflection and order, and the sensuous appetites, marked by their headlong, instinctual, self-annihilating revelry of pleasure and pain. In 'The Sensual World', she cautions her interlocutor, who might well be a younger self:

*Your body will age, you will continue to need.
You will want the earth, then more of the earth—
Sublime, indifferent, it is present, it will not respond.
It is encompassing, it will not minister.*

and epiphanies, she distils a strong awareness of our relationship to the pivotal, patterning stories of our lives. In a 1990 essay, 'Fear of Happiness', she identifies two features of such stories: first, that they possess a 'durability', which 'distinguishes the archetypal from the anecdotal', and second, that such stories 'will offer a variety of possible centres of focus', because they 'possess a certain interior spaciousness within clear outlines, so that they seem, on reflection, at once copious and eternally unresolved'.

From this conviction flows the poet's favoured strategy of translating and even transfiguring everyday, visceral experience into mythic templates. It is a strategy that has attracted a consistent measure of criticism, which has gathered force in a time and place, the early 21st-century US, where great store is set by the political particularity of identity as articulated through the prisms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, or through diasporic or immigrant legacies of hyphenation.

In defence of Glück's approach, the distinguished literary critic Helen Vendler has written of how, in her poetry, 'the lean shape of myth is the nakedness guaranteeing all stories', and of how, through the cultivation of an aphoristic sensibility, she enunciates, without falling into a banal universalism, the primal destinies to which all humankind is heir. We hear this aphoristic voice, dwelling on the ephemerality of all that is precious, in such deeply moving lines as these, which occur in the poem, 'From the Japanese', in Glück's 1985 collection, *The Triumph of Achilles*:

*Why love what you will lose?
There is nothing else to love.*

The Nobel Prize is the most recent in a stream of prestigious awards and accolades that Glück has received. She has received the National Endowment for the Arts

AMONG OTHER PRODUCTS, LOUISE GLÜCK'S FAMILY INVENTED THE HIGH-PRECISION X-ACTO KNIFE. THIS HAS STRUCK MANY CRITICS AS A SIGNIFICANT METAPHOR FOR HER POETRY: SHE TAKES A RELENTLESS SCALPEL TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE EMOTIONAL LIFE

Fellowship and the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, the National Humanities Medal, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has been honoured with the Bollingen Prize, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the Wallace Stevens Award of the Academy of American Poets, and the Tranströmer Prize. During 2003-2004, she held the position of the United States Poet Laureate; or, to put it officially, the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

Through it all, Glück has retained a vulnerability, a lingering sense of being poised at the edge of failure, and the need to armour herself against the world's onslaughts. In the title essay of *American Originality*, she offers a striking critique of white America's self-image as a pioneer culture shaping itself in *terra nullius*, inscribing its works on a *tabula rasa*. Emphasising how such a laudatory account leaves out Native Americans and African Americans, and their histories of oppression and suffering, she goes on to

puncture its central assumption of bravado, its fundamental fiction of self-fashioning: 'Under the brazen 'I made up a self' of the American myth, the sinister sotto voce, 'I am a lie.' And the liar wishes to elude: to elude judgement and censure, to avoid being caught. The literary art of our time mirrors the invented man's anxiety; it also affirms it. You are a fraud, it seems to say. You don't even know how to read. And for writers, this curious incomprehension, this being ahead of the time, linked as it is to affirmation, seems superficially engaging, as though 'to understand' meant 'to exhaust'.' This fear of having taken the wrong path, of having substituted accomplishment with a potentially lethal imposture, haunts poems like 'The Reproach':

*All my life
I have worshipped the wrong gods.
When I watch the trees
on the other side,
the arrow in my heart
is like one of them,
swaying and quivering.*

Glück opens a 2013 essay titled, strikingly, 'On Revenge', with a searingly candid self-disclosure, 'When I was a child, I was enormously sensitive to slights; my definition of slights was as broad as my sensitivity was deep. I trust my memory on this point because the child I describe corresponds so exactly to the evolved adult. I was also, then as now, rigidly proud, unwilling to show hurt or admit need.'

With the passage of the decades, she reflects on how her childhood fantasies of triumph and the annihilation of enemies have given way to a more mellow acceptance that 'my rivals and judges... have all been chastened and battered by time. Pity and fellow feeling have weakened vengefulness, or replaced it with a sense of collective, as opposed to hierarchical, experience, substituting an unexpected mildness and generosity for my earlier sternness and violence.' She closes the essay with an unsettling problem, familiar to many poets who have spent the earlier phase of their careers battling real and imagined adversaries, corrosive critics and treacherous colleagues: 'How to supply those energies that were, all my life, fed by the passion for revenge.'

In 'A Village Life', from the 2009 collection of the same name, she writes, in this autumnal spirit of retrospection, reconciling aspiration and circumstance in a loop of events:

*When I was a bird, I believed I would be a man.
That's the flute. And the horn answers,
when I was a man, I cried out to be a bird.*

*Then the music vanishes. And the secret it confides in me
vanishes also. ■*



Ranjit Hoskote is a curator and author. His most recent book of poems is *The Atlas of Lost Beliefs*

The Reluctant Power

How India frittered away gains and opportunities

By Karthik Nachiappan

ONE OF THE enduring legacies of Donald Trump's ascendance is the pervasive use of the term 'great' and 'greatness' to describe the unfulfilled desires of a country. The sentiments behind that slogan suffuse US-based think-tank expert Aparna Pande's new book *Making India Great: The Promise of a Reluctant Global Power* that provides a detailed exegesis of the economic, social, political and security factors that ostensibly hinder India's path towards becoming a great power. Pande claims that intellectually and cognitively Indians, broadly speaking, believe they are a great power by right, dint of culture, democratic traditions and civilisational importance but this exceptionalist attitude blinds India from adopting the necessary actions to become one. This ostensible myopia or 'reluctance' now collides with dreary economic conditions, deep political tensions and discord, social strife, blustering foreign policy and thorny military threats which will likely delay India's great power push. Pande goes on to list a litany of gaps on the economic, political and military fronts that require urgent and sustained policy attention that could 'make India great'. Opportunities exist, in abundance, but India, according to Pande, is frittering away gains made since the 1980s at the expense of a nativist politics that corrodes India's body politic.

Through the book, Pande catalogues some of the economic, political, social and strategic challenges constraining India's rise while dispensing ideas to address these seemingly obdurate constraints. Foreign policy experts

seldom delve and excavate some of these domestic quandaries and the book deserves some credit for shedding light on factors that could be considered foreign to foreign policy. Yet, while addressing these domestic issues may be necessary to accelerate India's rise, they are not sufficient. In other words, does India's rise hinge on setting the domestic house in order alone or focusing on domestic political and social fault lines, economic reforms, institutional deficits, political

Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

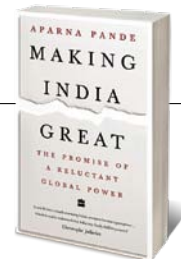


atavism and strategic indifference? Probably not. The book's focus, argument and relevance is blunted by focusing wholly on India's internal predicament and contradictions which matter but not enough to shape how it rises in a chaotic international order that is, of late, beset by uncertainty and crises. India could seemingly address all its problems yet find itself struggling to cope with a vitiated international politics.

International conditions matter. India's rise depends on the distribution of

power and how major powers choose to align or misalign given strategic priorities, nature of international regimes and forms of rules they adopt to structure patterns of commerce and trade, defence and technological interactions and channels of financial and technological power; these conditions compel rising powers such as India to make hard choices which has implications for domestic politics and foreign policy. Worse, latent interdependence gives countries such as the US the power to leverage trade patterns to demand policy changes or lose access to the US market. India's market size has and will draw attention from major powers as they look for diplomatic partners to invest in. But India does not have the necessary market power, in most areas, to dictate outcomes that determine its rise, at least not yet. India appears to have growing clout on technology driven by revolutionary mobile and digital transformations distilled through sheer amounts of data generated within its borders. But even India's 'data-rich'

economy will suffer should technonationalist trends accelerate in an international system where rules and norms governing technologies have scarce value. We are right to question whether India turns illiberal but equally important for India is a splintered international order torn by ideology and power. A 'shift in attitudes' alone will not make India 'great' or steer India on the path to greatness as long as this international context remains. India's rise does not hinge on just what India does. ■



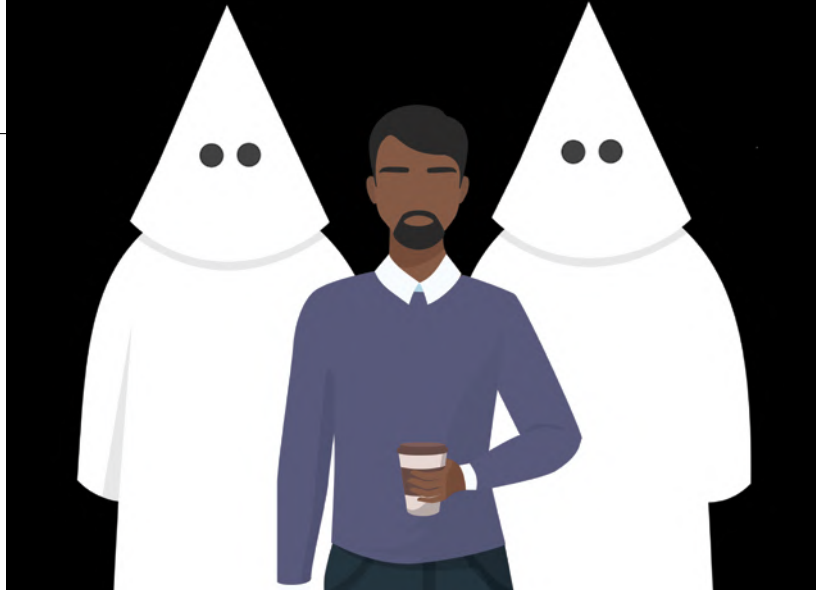
MAKING INDIA GREAT
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Aparna Pande

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The Bloodlust

Short stories on
the violence of big
and small kinds

By Sukhada Tatke



IN 2014, JENNY BHATT moved back to India from the US after more than two decades of corporate work. She was ready to reinvent herself as a writer.

In *Each of Us Killers*, Bhatt's debut collection of short stories, characters stand at the precipice of similar life-altering moments. Driven by power, lust, love, recognition or simply a desire to make their lives bearable, people arrive at epiphanies that change the course of their lives.

One comes to a collection titled *Each of Us Killers* expecting to find violence, and one does. The violence, though, is not always physical. It predates on everyday attacks on the mind and soul in our deeply inequitable and capitalist society. Built on a variety of literary techniques of plot, style and voice—including the refreshing second-person singular and first-person plural—Bhatt's stories effortlessly straddle class, caste, gender and race divides spanning the US, England and India. Bhatt herself has lived in these countries and brings her familiarity in the form of journalistic attention to detail.

The opening story 'Return to India' is based on the murder of Indian techie Srinivas Kuchibhotla in Kansas in 2017. Like Kuchibhotla, Dhanesh Patel or Dan is the victim of a hate crime in Texas. Using persuasive conversational style, Bhatt pieces together his portrait from the point of view of his white American colleagues. In these testimonies, one recognises the casual racism faced by Indian immigrants in the US in their daily lives. 'I invited them to my church for New Year's Day service, you

know, but I guess they had their own religion,' says one of Dan's colleagues. 'Probably wasn't easy for Dan to start taking orders from a woman, given the part of the world he's from,' says another.

If Dan is confused for a Middle Eastern man, in 'Disappointment', an Indian woman bartender in the Midwest is called a 'Black bitch': 'How can you take someone seriously if they cannot even get your ethnicity right?'

Bhatt's stories, even those that are constructed as dream-like sequences, are part of a larger sociopolitical framework, whether in India or abroad. Individuals navigate the liberating and stifling spaces of work and employment against forces that are often beyond their control.

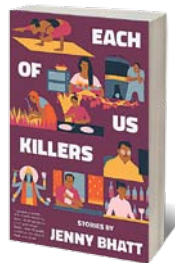
'Neeru's New World' is about a maid whose employer is not much older than her 'but her status as the mistress of the house made the distance between them such that anything Bhabhi said to her

sounded like an elder talking to a child or a dimwit'. In 'Mango Season', a saree-seller who has been 'invisible to the world' makes the mistake of fantasising about a 'certain class of customer' whose grateful and loving look had 'sent a sudden, ridiculous frisson of anger' through him.

In the world of Bhatt's stories, women come of their own, often after experiencing the cruel blows of a misogynistic society. In two separate stories, a yoga teacher and a baker, both living somewhat on the margins, arrive at realisations after passionate sex with men who pay them attention. In 'Journey to a Stepwell', a moving folktale narrated by a woman gives her daughter the push to call off her engagement with a man who fills her body with pleasure.

Bhatt's series floats from memories to moods, thoughts to utterances, confidences to betrayals. She alternates seamlessly between the prosaic and poetic, employing by turns, a feather-light touch of humour and a profound, pensive wisdom. Bhatt's deft use of language can be summarised by her own words about a character: 'With the power of her language, she will be able to say anything. Yet, most superbly, she will be able to say nothing.'

Bhatt examines the human condition complete with regrets and 'the exquisite hopes of youth and how, in time, life eats into them'. There is promise and there is loss. Ultimately, the book is about being 'unable to speak of [the] corrosion burning away within each of us killers'. ■



EACH OF US KILLERS
Jenny Bhatt

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THE UNSUITABLE



ARJUN MATHUR

EMMANUEL YOGINI

BOY

Arjun Mathur tells **Divya Unny** about battling his inner demons and being nominated for the Best Performance by an Actor at the International Emmy Awards

AT THE AGE OF 10 when he visited a film set in Mumbai for the first time, Arjun Mathur knew it was to be his second home. The cameras, the clap board, the call to action, the song and dance—it all made him feel like he belonged there. Here was the classic outsider with no connections to the film industry; just a wide-eyed kid spellbound by the magic of the movie world. “I always knew this was what I wanted,” says Mathur who as a teenager wrote an email to his dad explaining why he didn’t see the point in going to college, when all he wanted was to be an actor. It’s been almost three decades since that dream took birth, and 13 years since Mathur began his career in Hindi cinema, and today he is one of the rare Indian actors nominated at the International Emmy Awards. In a simple, quiet, well-decorated apartment that he shares with his partner Tiya Tejpal, Mathur seems unaffected by his recent success.

“It is a big deal, right?” he asks almost as though the information is still sinking in. “Honestly, in my head I don’t know how big it is. These 13 years have also jaded me a little bit, so I’ve just learnt to temper my excitement, expectation, emotion, everything. What makes it so real is my family, my friends and how big it is for India apparently. That’s how I am coming to accept that this is quite an achievement. Maybe I also have a difficult time patting my own back too much,” he says trying to embrace the overwhelming amount of media attention he’s received in the last few weeks.

As the wedding planner and gay activist Karan Mehra in the web series *Made in Heaven*, Mathur delivered a mature, sincere and, some would say, even pathbreaking performance. It was a show that broke many boundaries, called out double standards and deep-

rooted patriarchy within Indian society and stood up for the rights of the gay community. As the protagonist, Mathur portrayed a troubled gay man who on the one hand is developing his career and, on the other, he’s embittered with his family about his sexual identity. He not just normalised his identity, but did so with immense grace. He translated the pain of an individual who for years has had to live a dual life and hide his identity. Mathur never played the victim. After watching the show, you almost wonder why we haven’t seen more of Mathur.

“*Made in Heaven* is almost like coming full circle for me. I started my career playing a boy who was also gay in Mira Nair’s short film *Migration* (2008) where I played Irrfan Khan’s lover. And now 12 years since that film I found *Made in Heaven*. When I read the show I knew it was pathbreaking in its own right. How many times do we think of the social implications of our films anyway, despite the fact that cinema has so much power to change mindsets? I was getting to be part of a show that had a real voice. The stance it took against misogyny and discrimination towards individuals and gender resonated with me strongly. Karan, his complexities, his warmth, his

awkwardness around his father, these were all very real aspects of an individual’s mind which I have been through myself and hence found it very cathartic to perform,” says Mathur for whom the show was the ideal opportunity to prove himself as an actor.

Despite the fact that Mathur has over 33 films to his credit, his career trajectory is anything but that of a conventional Hindi film hero. We knew who he was, we remembered his performances, but he never became a household name. He worked with everyone from Mira Nair and Zoya Akhtar to Karan Johar in the first few years of his career, but despite doing heartfelt work film after film, the big break evaded him. As an assistant director on big-budget films such as *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) and *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005), Mathur had learnt the ropes of running a set and the gruelling work that goes behind creating cinema at the start of his career. His perspective towards filmmaking, his love for the medium and the various aspects of it were sharpened by the dust on a film set. However, when he started gunning for roles, he saw that not everyone wanted to cast a new face as a protagonist. No matter how good he was. “I still remember how Mira Nair tapped on my shoulder when I was buying popcorn at a movie hall during the interval of her film *The Namesake*. I’d auditioned for her short film just a couple of days before that and she said to me, ‘You’re Arjun Mathur, right? I loved your audition but you’re too young to play Irrfan’s lover.’ I was shaking in my boots then. Mira Nair had loved my performance! I didn’t even care if I didn’t get the part. But a few days later they called me and offered me the role anyway.”

It was a part where Mathur stood alongside Irrfan Khan, one of India’s finest actors. “But even after doing

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I WAS NAÏVE ABOUT HOW THE INDUSTRY FUNCTIONS, AND JUST BEING A GOOD ACTOR WASN’T ENOUGH. THERE ARE SO MANY FACTORS AT PLAY WHEN IT COMES TO GETTING PICKED FOR A PART. AND IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO REALISE THAT”

Arjun Mathur actor

some very good roles, nobody wanted to cast me as the lead. I once auditioned with another actor who was from a star family and the producer called and said he couldn't cast me because I was way better," he says. When *Luckby Chance* (2009) was in production for years together and no leading man wanted to play a protagonist with grey shades, Mathur sat down for an informal reading of the part with Zoya Akhtar. Eventually Farhan Akhtar went on to do it. But it was Mathur's Abhimanyu Singh, Farhan's often bitter, heartbroken friend who stood out in the talented ensemble. He took all of that insecurity he felt about not playing the leading man and used it in his performance. "When I read that script, I felt like it was my life story playing out. It was almost like you wanted something so badly, but you get offered the smaller part. Not that I regret playing the friend and I will always be thankful to Zoya for being by my side always. After that film was out Zoya would always tell me that she owed me. But the fact is that I was naïve about how the industry functions, and just being a good actor wasn't enough. There are so many factors at play when it comes to getting picked for a part, and it took me a while to realise that."

HE SMIRKS AND throws his head back when I talk about the nepotism debate today. Almost like he's seen it all. "It's all true, but it's every individual's battle and all battles are different," he says, adding, "After doing *My Name is Khan* when I met Karan [Johar] he said I had everything to be a lead actor. But the market wouldn't allow him to cast me as one." Mathur has done films such as *Coffee Bloom* (2015), *Ankur Arora Murder Case* (2013) and *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), but few scripts stood up to the kind of versatility he was capable of. "There was a time I used to stick my finger up at Bollywood a lot, back when being offensive on social media was not a big deal. But now I feel differently. I was desperately trying to fit myself in then, but today I'm content with who I am, no matter what the norm says. My journey has been full

ARJUN MATHUR AND SOBHITA DHULIPALA IN *MADE IN HEAVEN*

“

TODAY I'M CONTENT WITH WHO I AM, NO MATTER WHAT THE NORM SAYS. MY JOURNEY HAS BEEN FULL OF HEARTBREAKS AND SOME SURPRISES AND SOME PROJECTS FILLED WITH PURE JOY, AND I FEEL ELATED WITH THESE EXPERIENCES”

of heartbreaks and some surprises and some projects filled with pure joy, and I feel elated with these experiences. But now I also know that any fame that I conquer, it'll eventually change," he says.

Among all of this what remained constant was how honestly he performed his roles. The pain and the anger, the passion and the love—all of which he credits to his mother whom he lost when he was 13. An experience that defined him and his family. "My mother suddenly passed away in a car accident in Mumbai. When you're that young, and you lose your rooting, it's very, very difficult. That feeling of being safe and secure in this universe, your connection to all things in life, all just vanished in a span of minutes." The experience made many things out of him, and the following teenage years were understandably hard. "My dad was left with three teenage kids and that of course led to a lot of friction in those years. I started feeling fearful of my dad. Fear as an emotion, if it's so prevalent in your formative years it affects your worldview and how you are in your adult life. Overall, by the time I came out of it, I came out pretty angry, rebellious. Confident yet underconfident. Confident about my craft but not too confident about being good enough in life." He channelled his angst into drama during his schooling years in Delhi. "I was about a 100 kg then because with everything I was dealing, I developed an eating disorder. I was a smart kid but I had a problem with authority and I

couldn't wait to get out of school!"

It was much later during his training at The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York where he got a chance to release his pent-up childhood trauma. "The beauty of acting is that I try to find the pain again and again in my performances, but once I've dealt with it, drawing from those memories isn't so painful now. Today, my mom is who I have been thinking about the most and whatever is happening is no more than her looking out for me. Also, the other day, my dad, who'd always wonder why I wasn't doing commercial cinema, came on a Zoom call and said he loved me and he was proud of me. For the first time in his life," says Mathur.

The advent of OTT has been a boon for actors such as him who are finally receiving stories and characters that are worth their while. The International Emmy awards will be held on November 23rd and though Mathur may not make it to the ceremony physically, he's happy to stand tall with fine co-nominees. "The Zen space is the only place I really want to be right now. This is not the first or last time there's going to be an ebb and flow in life. It's fleeting. The joy and excitement will last and then pass. I don't know if there is a big film or show or another award tomorrow, and that's OK. If anything, what these experiences have done for me is made me even more secure, comfortable with the pace of my journey, and I want to stay balanced in it." ■

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In Search of Gallic Taste

The adventures of an apprentice chef in France



By Shylashri Shankar

HOW DO YOU figure out the secret of a country's cooking especially if you are a foreigner? You move with family and children to the city which chefs say is the gastronomic capital of the world. You knock on many doors and fail to convince anyone to give you a start. Then one man takes a chance on you. You learn and then become a *stagiaire*

(a chef in training) at an iconic Michelin-starred restaurant (La Mère Brazier) after doing a cooking course at the premier culinary institute in that country. But that is not enough. You have to struggle on different levels—learning to cook in a brutal workplace, learning about the ingredient and its history from your own experience and reading about local lore and other discoveries from old cookbooks, and somehow bring it all into a coherent answer to the question you began with. The answer, dirt translated as soil rather than filth, is both physical and metaphorical. That's what Bill Buford did in Lyon for five years. He dived into the soil of culinary Lyon. His mission was to discover the essence of French cooking, while also juggling his new parent status as the father of twin boys. Hence the title: *Dirt: Adventures in Lyon as a Chef in Training, Father, and Sleuth Looking for the Secret of French Cooking* (Alfred A Knopf; 432 pages; Rs 2,229).

Buford is given a start by Bob, a neighbourhood baker who makes delicious breads. Bob's friendship and generosity in introducing Buford to his customers and friends gives him a glimpse into the insular Lyon world and brings a poignant undercurrent in the book. Buford dives in deep and meets other chefs including Paul Bocuse, the Pope of French cuisine.

As Buford digs into the origins of dishes we consider quintessentially French, he finds that the Italians had a large influence on these dishes. A statement that is anathema to French ears. The french ravioles is the Italian ravioli. Who invented it? A Michelin chef tells Buford that, of course, it was the French. The idea of Italy as a source of French culinary repertoires puts the French on the defensive, says Buford.

As I read the book and about Buford's discoveries about the essence of French cooking, I was reminded of south Indian cooking. One of the reasons I turned to eating meat was

ratatouille. My college buttry in England used to serve this dish a few times a week as the vegetarian option. Insipid boiled vegetables in a runny tomato sauce. On reading Buford's book, I realised the original ratatouille had much more in common with what my palate was accustomed to in south Indian cooking. I was reminded of recipes in Meenakshi Ammal's cookbook *Cook and See* (a South Indian Tamil Brahmin cookbook). In his investigations of old French cookbooks, Buford discovered that the secret of an exquisite ratatouille is cooking each vegetable separately. It is said to produce a more animated jumble of flavours than if everything had been plopped in at the same time. Drawing out the intensity of flavours governs this cooking style. It is no different from Meenakshi Ammal's recipes, which advocate combining the separately cooked vegetables only at the end. You taste the pure flavour of the vegetables in the dish, raising the question whether flavour principles are autonomous of the cultural context.

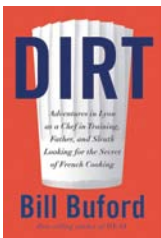
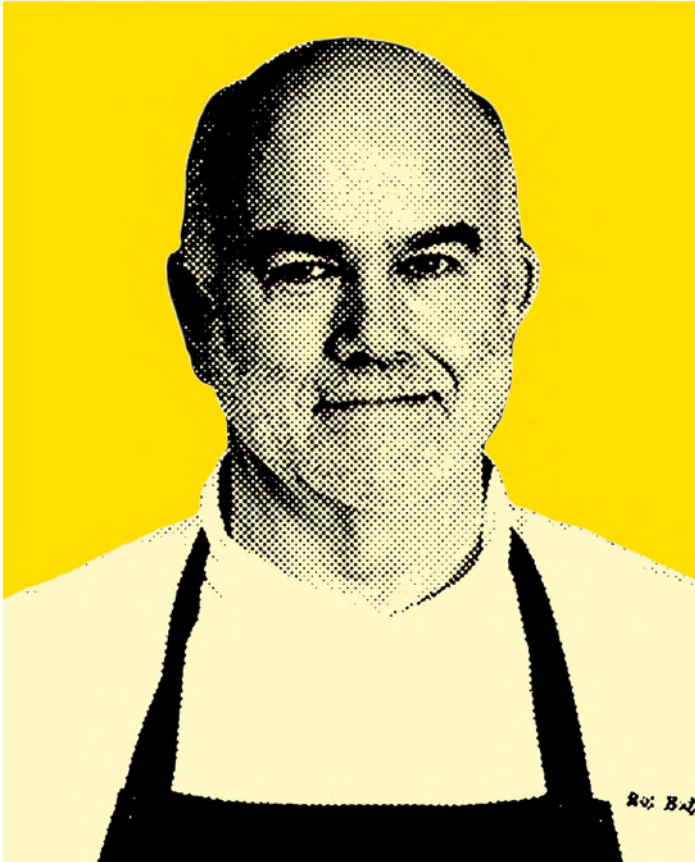
Buford has many adventures. One of the more unusual ones involves making *boudin noir*, blood in a piece of pig's intestine, a preparation that dates back to the earliest days of animal domestication (10000 BCE). It would be 'steamingly fresh... said to be nothing like the commercial stuff'. After they had drawn out all the blood into a bucket and seasoned it with salt and pepper, Buford dipped the ladle and tasted. 'It was warm. Rich. It was thick and weighty on my palate. It was intensifying... I dipped the ladle back into the blood. I was flying... It was invigorating in every sense.'

In his search for the essence of French cooking, Buford poses several interesting questions. Is creativity more easily expressed in rigorous structures? Do you have to be trained in the classical style before you can improvise exquisitely? He draws this nugget from the experience of one of his co-students who has plated a starter (an Italian one) that fails on three principles of a French plate—colour, volume and texture. The teacher-chefs have an hour to improvise and Frenchify it, which involves cooked tomatoes and sauteed meat with carrots and zucchini. The end result was French.

This is a country that accords a lofty status (of a Grand Chef) to the person making your dinner. It is, whatever the reason, at the very heart of Frenchness, discovers Buford. At the same time, the process of becoming a Grand Chef involves being subjected to bullying and humiliation. Buford's experience in the French kitchen reveals the sheer extent of such degradation. Yet, at the end he says, 'I had to concede that I had never learned so much. It made me into a cook.'

It makes one wonder how such torture in the French

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



IN HIS SEARCH FOR THE ESSENCE OF FRENCH COOKING, **BILL BUFORD** POSES SEVERAL INTERESTING QUESTIONS. IS CREATIVITY MORE EASILY EXPRESSED IN RIGOROUS

STRUCTURES? DO YOU HAVE TO BE TRAINED IN THE CLASSICAL STYLE BEFORE YOU CAN IMPROVISE EXQUISITELY?

kitchens doesn't seem to impact on the taste of the dish. Does the adage that one must be calm and serene while cooking not apply to French restaurants? Or is it that by the time one is allowed to become a line cook (actually make the dishes rather than simply chopping and peeling vegetables) the psyche has been imprinted with the lessons?

Buford unearths several nuggets—Leonardo Da Vinci came to Amboise, the royal home, at the invitation of King Francois Premier, along with two just-completed paintings:

the Mona Lisa and Saint John the Baptist. Da Vinci died in France. Francois Premier spoke Italian and admired the Italian Renaissance so much that he got his son married to Catherine di Medici (of the Medici family in Florence). She brought Italian cooks with her and has been credited (not by the French, though) with introducing an Italian influence into French cooking. But Buford finds out that it was her father-in-law (Francois Premier) who was the main spearhead of bringing in the Italian influence.

We learn the secret of keeping a sauce from breaking—take your time cooking it. Treat it like a custard, raising the temperature for 10 minutes or whatever time it takes, whisking the whole time, 'not in a frenzy, but with a measured steadiness, like a Frenchman'.

What then is the essence of French food? One can point to the cooking style and the marriage of opposites—butter sauces (suspending fat and liquid together in a Bearnaise sauce), or foams like sabayon (fat and acid) or the magic of puff pastry. And the rigorous training of chefs in the repertoire of making dishes in the traditional way first, and only then making them better in subtle ways. The only principle being that you can change anything in a dish as long as the result is better than the original. Only the Grand Chefs are able to make the repertoire a little bit new. But Buford goes further than that in his search. He realises that cooking is much more than recipes. A dish, he says, is arrived at not by following a set of instructions but by discovering everything about it, the behaviour of its ingredients, its history and a quality that some chefs think of as its soul. It reminded me of writing or music or any other craft where to become a virtuoso one had to accomplish such a discovery.

Some wonderful nuggets in the book come from old cookbooks, which Buford collects. For instance, the 1899 book entitled *Art of Using Leftovers* tells us the rules: never store a leftover in a serving dish or a cooking vessel; never store a warm liquid in a closed container without cooling it; never reuse a preparation made with raw egg; never keep anything for more than three days; and never ever use a leftover twice. A leftover has one chance to be made even better than the original.

A cookbook by an anonymous author written when Europe seemed to be succumbing to the Nazis evokes in Buford the realisation that we are born needing to eat but not knowing how to make food. That the recipe book by the anonymous author shared a quality with the one by Brillat-Savarin—both struggled to articulate how food in France 'has come to be so much more than food: It has become, on many levels, who you are'. Through his odyssey, Buford accomplishes the difficult task of articulating who, not just what, French cuisine is. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

Stream of Consciousness

If **Akshay Kumar** had his way, he'd make sure every one of his films held out for theatrical release instead of sending them to streaming platforms. But that's what happens when you're Bollywood's most prolific movie star who makes as many as five films a year. Akshay's horror comedy *Laxmmi Bomb* will drop on a streaming platform in November, but he doesn't intend to make a habit of it.

His **Rohit Shetty**-directed cop drama *Sooryavanshi*, which was less than a week from release in March when cinemas shuttered on account of the pandemic, will hold out for a big-screen release. Akshay is reportedly eying a January release for the film assuming that some semblance of 'normalcy' will have returned by then. He's been telling friends that he'll be comfortable putting the film on screens as soon as it appears that cinemas across the country are running at 50 per cent capacity. With no competition from other 'big' films, *Sooryavanshi* could play on "every screen in the country" when it opens, plus there is no fear of being cleared out of cinemas to make way for new releases in the weeks immediately after.

Akshay is currently wrapping up **Chandraprakash Dwivedi's** Prithviraj Chauhan film; he recently returned from Glasgow and London where he completed the shoot of *Bell Bottom* in a start-to-finish schedule. Next, he'll complete **Aanand L Rai's** *Atrangi Re* with **Sara Ali Khan** and **Dhanush**. With five films ready or nearing completion, one can see why the actor had to settle for a streaming release for one of them; deferring a finished film's release leads to mounting costs and not every film can withstand an inflating budget in the way that *Sooryavanshi* can.

Movie Magnet

The buzz in film circles is that **Kabir Khan's** World Cup film '83 could be the first 'big' Hindi film to open in cinemas in a post-Covid world. According to well-placed sources, Reliance Entertainment, the studio that has bankrolled the movie, is currently in the final stages of negotiations with cinema

chains to lock a December 25th worldwide release. The film will document the Indian cricket team's journey from underdogs to champions in the 1983 World Cup tournament under the stewardship of **Kapil Dev**.

Ranveer Singh in the role of the Indian skipper leads an impressive ensemble that includes **Tahir Bhasin** as **Sunil Gavaskar**, **Saqib Saleem** as **Mohinder Amarnath**, Punjabi actor **Ammy Virk** as **Balwinder Sandhu**, *Sacred Games* breakout **Jatin Sarna** as **Yashpal Sharma**, **Pankaj Tripathi** as team manager **PR Man Singh** and **Deepika Padukone** as **Romi Bhatia Dev**, Kapil's wife.

Industry insiders believe that this film, with its themes of national pride and underdog victory, might be the right one to lure movie buffs back into cinemas. The excitement of watching the big final between India and the West Indies recreated at Lord's could be the high that fans need to return to the cinemas.

Hot Right Now

Currently shooting *Laal Singh Chaddha* in the national capital, **Aamir Khan's** production company has reportedly recruited the services of a private taxi enterprise that only employs women drivers. The actor had featured the taxi company on his talk show *Satya* some years ago and celebrated their work. According to sources, when the unit was heading to Delhi for the latest schedule of the shoot, Aamir's team decided to give their local transport contract exclusively to this company.

Some reports say the unit has also set up boarding facilities for the lady drivers for the entire duration of the schedule so as to minimise the health risk. Many of the lady drivers are believed to be survivors of domestic abuse; women who are rebuilding their lives through professional employment.

The decision to use this taxi service has gone down especially well with the actors and the crew, who appear happy about the small bit they're doing towards making a better world. ■



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