

THE PROMISED LAND OF OBAMA • THE ROLE OF SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE
THE CROWN STARS IN CONVERSATION • QUEUE FOR THE COVID VACCINE

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WHY BJP WINS

THE SUPERGLUE OF HINDU NATIONALISM

BY VINAY SITAPATI



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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Navigating the lockdown has been no easy task for most of us. But for some, it has been traumatic. The pandemic is likely to leave its mark on all of us in just about every field—be it the way we work, trade, shop or even entertain or marry. ‘Man was made for conflict, not for rest’, wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. His words ring truer than ever today. As we come to terms with the fact that Covid-19 may not be a short-term affliction but a new state of reality, the new normal, mankind is slowly gearing up to deal with a very uncertain future. As we gasp for breath, as we tune in ourselves to the new reality, we desperately explore new possibilities, trying to go ‘beyond the utmost bound of human thought’. It is not for nothing that Shakespeare’s words ‘sweet are the uses of adversity’, have become immortal. Surely adversity, however painful and devastating, can kick-start new opportunities (‘The Uses of Adversity’, November 23rd, 2020), making us initiate new processes, getting us to somehow innovate, unveil a brand new plan. This could be because of the simple reason that when the times are good, we are almost running through our lives on autopilot. Any upheaval challenges our complacent attitudes, making us face new problems and find newer solutions. Why did it need a pandemic for us to realise that in so many jobs, work from home was a time-saving, energy-saving, pollution-preventing, economical option? Hundreds of women in a small town in Bihar have formed a cooperative to hand-stitch masks, a product high in demand these days and, in the bargain, achieved financial freedom probably for the first time in life. It is a huge ‘Yes, we can’ moment for them in the midst of this adversity because, besides making money, they have been able to upturn greatly exploitative paradigms. When we face adversity upfront, we do find a way to overcome it. As Marcus Aurelius said, ‘The impediment to action advances action..... what stands in the way, becomes the way.’

Sangeeta Kampani

CLEAN SWEEP

With almost all poll pundits predicting the NDA would lose the Bihar elections (‘It’s the Modi Surge, Still’, November 23rd, 2020), they were not only proved wrong but the BJP’s thumping victories in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and a

surprise win in the Dubbaka bypoll in Telangana in K Chandrashekar Rao’s own bastion, attest to Narendra Modi’s continued ascent. The Prime Minister’s surge has less to do with his oratorical skills than his understanding of all the opposition parties and



their weaknesses. With the main opposition parties losing their credibility, the BJP is surging ahead by the strength of its strategies. The more the opposition tries to taint Modi without logic, his persona only gets stronger. His nationalist credentials are impeccable.

Bholey Bhardwaj

The NDA succeeded in winning the Bihar Assembly elections against all odds and Narendra Modi deserves full credit for this win. On the ground, farmers and the poor seem to be happy with the schemes launched by Modi during the lockdown, including free foodgrains and cash transfer.

Akash Srivastava

COMIC RELIEF

When funny man Vir Das talks of why the pandemic has been the biggest turning point in his life (‘As an Artist I Don’t Have a Lot of Fear Anymore’, November 23rd, 2020), it is time to sit up and listen. It is a rare quality to make others laugh in such dreadful times but the actor-comedian has gone the whole hog to remove fear from his lexicon.

Somnath Das

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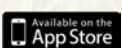
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By S PRASANNARAJAN

DREAMS FROM OBAMA

The epiphany came during that flight back home from the 2000 Democratic National Convention in L.A. Barack Obama went there with a friend who thought that the trip would cheer him up after his disastrous performance in the contest for Congress.

The accusation by the rival campaign still resonated in his head: *"Obama's an outsider; he's backed by white folks; he's a Harvard elitist. And that name—is he even Black?"* At the Convention, it was further humiliation. When he landed at the airport, he couldn't rent a car because he had crossed the credit limit of his Amex card. He was denied access to the convention floor; his friend couldn't even get him into a party that night. Next day he left for home as Al Gore was accepting the nomination. On that flight, he, almost 40 and broke and his marriage already strained, realised that perhaps the whole thing was an existential error. It just dawned on him that in running for a House seat "I had been driven not by some selfless dream of changing the world, but rather by the need to justify the choices I had already made, or to satisfy my ego, or to quell my envy of those who had achieved what I had not." He had become what he had resisted all along as a young idealist. "I had become a politician—and not a very good one at that."

What he doesn't say is that a political life born in rejection and otherness will become an American catharsis. It was always there: biography as a reminder and responsibility, and in his case the exoticism of it constantly set him apart in his journeys. The first journey was recorded 25 years ago, when he published his memoirs at the age of 34. *Dreams from My Father* was a quest, both physical and internal, for an absence that overwhelmed his life as a young man shaped by many worlds, many colours. He

was 21 and a loner by choice in New York when his aunt called from Nairobi to tell him that his father, a Kenyan, was dead. He "sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss." His father left him when he was a two-year-old in Hawaii. Father grew within him as a story, a myth, a photograph. "That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind."

It wouldn't be long before inheritance became the meaning of his journeys. There were painful revelations along the way. One such moment came in Indonesia, the country of his stepfather, when he was waiting for his mother in the library of the American embassy. In one of the most poignant passages in *Dreams*, the boy would be transfixed by a photograph in *Life* magazine of a man walking down the road. On the next page, he noticed something unusual in the close-up of the man's hands. "They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. Turning back to the first picture, I now saw that the man's crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose, all had this same uneven, ghostly hue." The accompanying article would reveal that the man, a Black who wanted

to be white, was the victim of a chemical treatment. Colour was not just identity. It was a struggle. And the man was not alone in chasing, in vain, white happiness.

Obama's life, as a boy brought up by a single mom and his grandparents, as a young man powered by idealism and ambition, as a tentative politician with a deeper sense of community, as a presidential candidate who ignited the post-racial imagination of America, and as America's first Black president who put caution over the poetic spontaneity that marked his historic campaign, too, was a struggle,

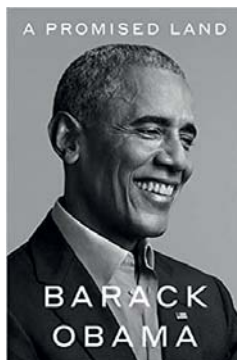




Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

The promised land of Obama is also home to subterranean suspicions, and being a serious reader of the context in which he plays out his text, he never misses the insult, the innuendo, and the demands on him to prove his patriotism, and even his citizenship

true, but it was the chemistry of empathy and intelligence that made him what he had become. History is still rereading his story that first reached us as an exclamation, and grew in the conscience of a country that dared to shed its own bad memories by electing him president. He is one of those writers who believe that their stories are better told by themselves, and *Dreams*, written with the flair of a novelist and the insight of a cultural historian, was his first attempt. It still retains its innocence, untouched by the restraints of power. *A Promised Land* (Viking, 768 pages, Rs 1,999), the first volume of his new memoir and

the publishing event of the year, is written by someone who knows that every sentence of his is first edited by history. Its controlled elegance is the result of the distance he never fails to maintain between the story and the storyteller. Obama looks back with the modulated gaze of an outsider, and I'm sure you have noticed, this is one of those memoirs named after a place, not a person. *America First*, on a very personal note.

And it's the pre-presidential passages that break the narrative barrier of distant storytelling. They are vintage Obama, written by the author of *Dreams*. Here we see the progression of a conflicted person, but mostly sure of his route in the maze of class and race, always aware of his mixed inheritance: "I was from everywhere and nowhere at once, a combination of ill-fitting parts, like a platypus or some imaginary beast, confined to a fragile habitat, unsure of where I belonged." He was "a Don Quixote with no Sancho Panza." What kept him going was a moral system, shaped by his mother, a free spirit, and the "pride in being American." One day, he would fly to New York to see his mother, now a cancer patient, and watch with a brave face her sucking on ice cubes. Later, he would cry alone in his hotel room. *Dreams* from his father kicked off his journey back to his genetic and cultural inheritance. Love from his mother fortified his sense of independence and moral correctness. The companionship of Michelle, whose name he cannot invoke without the adjective "beautiful", prepared him to build his ambition on reality. When he talked about wanting to be in politics but not part of it, she would reply: "The world as it is and the world as it should be."

The political began to soar when he turned his moral inheritance into a theme song for change. His election strategist, David Axelrod, came up with the slogan that would outlive Obama's campaign for the Senate seat from Illinois: Yes We Can. His stardom on the stump would earn him the prime speaker's slot at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. He had come a long way from the humiliation of 2000 in L.A. His one-time spiritual guru and an angry apostle of Black Nationalism, Jeremiah Wright, would provide the catchline of his speech: The audacity of hope. He began nervously. "But there comes a point in the speech where I find my cadence. The crowd quiets rather

than roars. It's the kind of moment I'd come to recognise in subsequent years, on certain magic nights." The magic would sway the mind of America. Obama became the national sensation of Obama. Four years later, the magic would take him to the White House, with a mandate to become America's first post-racial president of reconciliation. Did he become one? Memoirs don't answer such questions. History has not made up its mind either.

The detachment of the philosopher king becomes more pronounced in the presidential passages. The prosody of Candidate Obama gives way to the cautious prose of President Obama. Occasionally the poetic steps in to lift the narrative from the solidity of statecraft. The play of the light that cameras miss in the Oval Office, for instance: "The room is awash in light. On clear days, it pours through the huge windows on its eastern and southern ends, painting every object with a golden sheen that turns fine-grained, then dappled, as the late-afternoon sun recedes." He spent most of his eight years of presidency in that room, and sometimes "I'd fantasize about walking out the east door and down the driveway, pass the guardhouse and wrought-iron gates, to lose myself in crowded streets and re-enter the life I'd once known." Otherwise, it's linear storytelling, a smooth passage through the events that defined his first term—from the crash of 2008 to the short-lived Arab Spring to the phoney war of Iraq to the just war of Afghanistan to the assassination of Osama bin Laden, the episode that brings the first volume to a resounding finale. In between, there are summitries and encounters, pen portraits and family vignettes, and the narrative tone, throughout, is that of someone who has the verbal and emotional agility to step aside from his own story for the sake of dignity and distance.

The personal sketches are sharp and brief. He is always the clever one in the room, and he makes no effort to let others notice. It's felt nevertheless, the so-called Obama cool. Here are some sketches that stand out. Biden: "Most of all, Joe had heart. He'd overcome a bad stutter as a child (which probably explained his vigorous attachment to words) and two brain aneurysms in middle age. In politics, he'd known early success and suffered embarrassing defeats." Manmohan Singh: "A gentle, soft-spoken economist in his seventies, with a white beard and a turban that were the marks of his Sikh faith but to the

Western eye lent him the air of a holy man." Merkel: Her "eyes were big and bright blue and could be touched by turns with frustration, amusement, or hints of sorrow." Sarkozy: "With his dark, expressive, vaguely Mediterranean features...and a small stature...he looked like a figure out of a Toulouse-Lautrec painting." Putin: "I noticed a casualness to his movements, a practised disinterest in his voice that indicated someone accustomed to being surrounded by subordinates and supplicants." Family dog Bo: "...what someone once described as the only reliable friend a politician can have in Washington."

Indian readers will be titillated by a set piece featuring Manmohan, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul. The occasion was the dinner hosted by Prime Minister Singh at his residence for the Obamas during their first India visit in November 2010. At the dinner table, Sonia was "a striking woman in her sixties, dressed in a traditional sari, with dark, probing eyes and a quiet, regal presence." She

"listened more than she spoke, careful to defer to Singh when policy matters came up, and often steered the conversation toward her son," who had "a nervous, unformed quality about him." The Obamas said their goodbyes when they noticed the prime minister fighting off sleep.

The promised land of Obama is also home to subterranean suspicions, and being a serious reader of the context in which he plays out his text, he never misses the insult, the innuendo, and the demands on him to prove his patriotism, and even his citizenship. The so-called birtherism, peddled by Donald Trump, was a sinister campaign against his very

being as a child and beneficiary of the promised land of America. The land is a hurt and a reward, and maybe that's how it should be for an American who carries within him the sighs and joys of other cultures. He still retains his exoticism. In his own way, he has made otherness American again and again. As a candidate, it was pure romance. As president, it was greatness half realised. As a writer, he has rebuilt the home that made him, and occasionally wounded him.

A writer-politician—a Gandhi, a Nehru, a Churchill, a Havel—changes the aesthetics of politics from the kitschy to the dignified. The cool dignity of Obama's politics pervades his words, and that's no mean achievement in an era when memoirs are tweets from hell. ■

The detachment of the philosopher king becomes more pronounced in the presidential passages. The prosody of Candidate Obama gives way to the cautious prose of President Obama. Occasionally, the poetic steps in to lift the narrative from the solidity of statecraft

OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta



THE NDA WON a very narrow victory in Bihar. Its vote difference with the Mahagathbandhan was a mere 0.03 per cent. Yet, the victory was striking because it followed a series of setbacks, particularly in Jharkhand and Delhi. The Bihar victory was also dramatic because the exit polls had more or less concluded that Tejashwi Yadav was certain to be sworn in as the next chief minister. I certainly went to the TV studio in the morning expecting an NDA disaster.

The Bihar victory came as a morale booster to the BJP and this was reflected in the celebrations in Delhi where Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a victory speech. While appreciating the good results in Bihar, the BJP made it clear their next target is West Bengal.

West Bengal has a special significance in the imagination of the BJP. It was the *karmabhoomi* of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the person they regard as the founder of the political movement which began in 1951. In the party's mind, the reconquest of the land associated with the Hindu nationalism of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda has been a cherished goal.

What lessons for Bengal can the BJP learn from Bihar? The answers are not easy since Assembly elections are governed by local specificities.

Was there anti-incumbency in Bihar and what was its quantum? The mere fact that the NDA vote was significantly lower in the Assembly polls than it was in 2019 would automatically suggest that there was greater faith in Modi's governance than Nitish Kumar's. Yet, what is curious is that the anti-incumbency against the state government hardly affected the BJP whereas it devastated

the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U). It can hardly be the case that one half of the incumbent government was spared the negative consequences of its governance record while another half was punished for it.

It would seem that voters were reasonably satisfied with the Centre's governance record. Since they associated the Centre with the BJP, it performed well. But the entire weight of local anti-incumbency was transferred to the JD(U). However, it seemed the anti-incumbency had less to do with governance than with the leadership of Nitish Kumar. It seemed that Bihar's voters were expressing their dissatisfaction with the chief minister rather than his administrative record.

This rather strange verdict may be unique to Bihar. However, in the event it is replicated in West Bengal, what would be the implications for the BJP? First, it would imply that voters are making a distinction between grievances at the local level and their attitude to the chief minister. In Bengal, the past year has witnessed a rising tide of discontent against the state administration over issues as varied as corruption, misuse of Amphan relief, localised political violence, irregularities in the health and education sectors and overall highhandedness by MLAs.

At the same time, Chief Minister

Mamata Banerjee has a larger-than-life presence. She still draws crowds and enjoys a measure of personal popularity that is unrivalled as yet. By contrast, the BJP lacks clarity over its own leadership. It prefers to project the national appeal of Modi in Bengal.

In such a situation, will the BJP be better off focusing its campaign on the governance shortcomings rather than attacking the chief minister? Even this will become blurred if there is a big exodus of Trinamool Congress (TMC) leaders to the BJP. How will the BJP reconcile its attacks on the 10 years of Mamata rule if its ranks now carry TMC defectors? This is a strategic dilemma for the BJP.

Equally, the Bihar elections have shown that many of the Centre's welfare schemes enjoy a large degree of popularity. Yet, apart from the Ujjwala scheme involving the distribution of LPG gas cylinders, many of the Central welfare schemes haven't been allowed to be implemented in Bengal by the state government. This deprivation gives the BJP an important talking point and puts the onus on the TMC to explain why the people were deprived of these benefits. This can have a very damaging effect on the TMC.

This inability to defend its political choices may explain why the TMC is anxious to promote issues such as Bengali pride and secularism.

In many elections (not Bihar), we have seen the BJP fight on emotive issues. If the Bihar election is any guide, we are likely to see the ruling TMC fight on emotional themes while the BJP will fight on more bread-and-butter issues. Bihar hasn't indicated a clear path but it has thrown up many possibilities. ■

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

The Covid Vaccines Are Coming

THE HUMAN BODY is quite marvellous in how it already has all the tools and equipment needed to defend itself. The reason it falls prey to disease is often only a question of correct identification. Should that information be clear, then it churns out more than enough soldiers to kill the opposing army. This has been the principle in use ever since vaccines were first made. Two separate developments have shown how mankind has managed to now tweak this behaviour further in finding an answer to the novel coronavirus. Such news came in rapid succession, from pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Moderna announcing how their Phase 3 vaccine trials are turning out to be resounding successes.

On November 18th, Pfizer put out a press release that said: 'The first primary objective analysis is based on 170 cases of COVID-19, as specified in the study protocol, of which 162 cases of COVID-19 were observed in the placebo group versus 8 cases in the BNT162b2 group. Efficacy was consistent across age, gender, race and ethnicity demographics. The observed efficacy in adults over 65 years of age was over 94%.' In plain-speak, it divided 43,000 people into two groups, and gave the vaccine and a placebo to each group. And then monitored them until 170 of them got Covid. Of the group that got the placebo, 162 became infected. Of that which got the actual vaccine, only eight were infected. That the vaccine works to an extraordinary degree was clear. They also found that it was safe, had negligible side-effects like fatigue or headache, and worked across all categories, from 'age, gender, race and ethnicity demographics'.

Moderna, too, announced early Phase 3 results with similar effective results. In its case, out of 30,000 volunteers who were given the vaccine and placebo, 95 contracted Covid. But of those, 90 were on

the placebo. Only five who were on the vaccine got infected. Moderna, in fact, started working on a vaccine in 2020 beginning within weeks of Covid going global became known. This was possible because both companies are using a new and revolutionary process to create the vaccines that crunched what would usually have taken years or even decades. These vaccines are made using mRNA or messenger RNA, which takes an instruction to body cells where ribosomes, protein making factories within, produce harmless bits of the spikes that define the Covid-19 virus. This, in turn, leads to the body creating antibodies. So when the actual virus strikes, the army is ready. It knows exactly who and where the enemy is.

It is an ingenious technique that also allows for large quantities to be manufactured quickly. The Pfizer press release said it expects 'to produce globally up to 50 million vaccine doses in 2020 and up to 1.3 billion doses by the end of 2021.' But India may not have much cause to celebrate from these classes of vaccines. For one, other countries already have deals that will get them first access to the manufactured doses. India will be way off in the queue. Plus, the problem with mRNA vaccines

is that they require very cold freezing temperatures to store. Developed countries that have a cold chain infrastructure can do it, but India has very little of it. So while we have enormous experience in immunisation and vaccination programmes, they are based on traditional vaccines. Fortunately, there are plenty of other suitable vaccine candidates on the horizon.

Along with Pfizer and Moderna, interim results of Phase 3 trials of another vaccine came out, the Russian-made Sputnik V. It too had an efficacy of over 90 per cent. The journal *Nature* reported: 'The Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow and the Russian Direct

Even the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines will have to be evaluated for long-term side-effects. Then there is the question of how long the immunity lasts. Because of the haste with which these vaccines will have to be okayed for use, many such questions will get answered on the go. But it is looking increasingly probable that by early 2021 vaccine rollouts will begin



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Investment Fund said that an interim analysis of 20 COVID-19 cases identified among trial participants has found that the vaccine was 92% effective.' A batch of Sputnik V has just arrived in India for Phase 2 trials involving 100 volunteers. Largescale Phase 3 will follow after that. The vaccine uses a different process using an adenovirus. Genetic material of Covid-19 is latched onto another harmless virus, a vector, and introduced into the human body, which then leads to Covid antibodies being produced.

Another adenovirus vaccine that India is banking on in a major way is being helmed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University whose website explains how it works: 'The ChAdOx1 vaccine is a chimpanzee adenovirus vaccine vector. This is a harmless, weakened adenovirus that usually causes the common cold in chimpanzees...The Oxford vaccine contains the genetic sequence of this surface spike protein (of Covid-19). When the vaccine enters cells inside the body, it uses this genetic code to produce the surface spike protein of the coronavirus. This induces an immune response, priming the immune system to attack the coronavirus if it later infects the body.' The Pune-based Serum Institute, has already started largescale production of this vaccine in anticipation of it being effective, and for India alone it might have 100 million doses by the end of December.

There are also other candidates. Speaking to the media, VK Paul, chairman, NITI Aayog, said in his weekly briefing that there are five vaccines whose trials are going on in the country and they would be better candidates for its needs

than Pfizer or Moderna. *The Indian Express* quoted him saying that these were 'easy platforms' and the 'availability of doses is also extremely high'. The report added, 'On the in-country vaccine trials, Paul said, "Currently, phase-3 of vaccine candidate tested by Serum Institute is almost complete and the follow-up is currently under way. Bharat Biotech has just begun the phase-3 trials; Zydus Cadila has completed phase-2 trials, and Russian Sputnik -V being tested in collaboration with Dr Reddy will begin phase two or three next week. Biological E is conducting an early phase 1-2 trial."'

Meanwhile, even the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines will have to be evaluated for long-term side-effects. Then there is the question of how long the immunity lasts. Because of the haste with which these vaccines will have to be okayed for use, many such questions will get answered on the go. But it is looking increasingly probable that by early 2021 vaccine rollouts will begin. Getting everyone in the world vaccinated will still be a long haul of years but, as Dr Anthony Fauci, who is leading the US efforts against Covid-19 commented recently, results have belied earlier expectations. He told *AFP* in an interview after the Moderna news: "I must admit that I would have been satisfied with 70 or at the most 75 per cent efficacy. The idea that we have a 94.5 per cent effective vaccine is stunningly impressive. It is really a spectacular result that I don't think anybody had anticipated would be this good." ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

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SUCCESS FORMULA

Championing diversity in motorsport in the age of Black Lives Matter

A FEW DAYS AGO, Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton created history. On a treacherously wet and slippery track, starting from a tough sixth place, while rival cars often spun out of control, the British champion driver finished first at the Turkish Grand Prix. The second best that day (Sergio Pérez) finished over 30 seconds behind him. Hamilton's teammate Valtteri Bottas, equipped with the same Mercedes car, finished 14th. Later, Hamilton would remark, "Today, I deserve my respect. My peers will know... it is not a car thing."

By winning the Turkish Grand Prix, Hamilton achieved what was once considered unachievable. He equalled Michael Schumacher's record of seven world championship titles. Hamilton is already the world's most successful driver, having gone past Schumacher's record of 91 wins in October. Next year, he has every chance of adding an eighth world title.

Hamilton always stood out, right from his very first season as a Formula 1 driver. Not just because he had made what is considered Formula 1's greatest debut season. But also because of how he looked. Like most sports which require large financial backing, motorsport lacks notoriously in its diversity. It is structured in such a way as to allow only a select privileged few. Hamilton may be the greatest Formula 1 driver in history, but he is still an anomaly. He remains till date the sport's only Black driver. While his achievements on the track are jaw-dropping, what is equally astounding is how he got on that track in the first place.

Reading his background, one may be forgiven for thinking he has no business being around it. He came from a humble background and was the

grandchild (from his father's side) of immigrants from the Caribbean, whose father had to mortgage his house and juggle multiple jobs to support his talented son. When a young Hamilton would participate in racing competitions, his family, often the only Black people at the races, it is said, would often be subjected to racial abuse.

It is perhaps unsurprising given Hamilton's background that when the protests around the Black Lives Matter campaign erupted this year, Hamilton would try to goad his sport towards change. Formula 1 isn't just predominantly white. It is also an incredibly stuffy and staid sport that rarely ever engages with anything outside its bubble of racing cars and engineering.

In the last few months, Hamilton has emerged as something of motorsport's conscience, as he has pushed for changes. He has called the sport out and its participants for remaining silent after the death of George Floyd; he's attended rallies; and announced plans to set up a commission to increase diversity in motorsport. He's made the sport and its participants reconsider their opinions and their unwillingness to participate in issues outside of the ambit of their sport. Under pressure, a few things have happened. Some have promised to look into ways of opening up the doors of the sport to more diverse people. Mercedes has changed its car from its customary silver to black for this season as a symbol of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter campaign. Much of this is symbolic. But by just forcing the sport to face its biases, Hamilton has already achieved something.

There has also been some hostile resistance. The motorsport legend Mario Andretti, for instance, called Hamilton 'militant'. The former Russian driver Vitaly Petrov, who claimed Hamilton was going too far, told one media outlet, "What if one of the drivers comes out as gay? Will they go out with a rainbow flag and urge everyone else to become gay or something?"

But Hamilton has been pushing on. He recently told *The New York Times*, "The time for platitudes and token gestures is over... When I look back in 20 years, I want to see the sport that gave a shy, working-class Black kid so much opportunity become as diverse as the complex and multicultural world we live in."

While Hamilton blazes through the record books, it may be with regard to privilege and race in motorsport that he could leave his most lasting contribution. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA



AP

ANGLE

UNFREE VERSE



What a \$1 million grant for social justice poetry says about the dangers to creativity today

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

IN 2002, THE US-based *Poetry* magazine got a windfall. Ruth Lilly, an American philanthropist, gifted it close to 200 million dollars. There is not much money in poetry. It is a form of literature that is in its twilight and its sustenance is not a function of market demand, just the helping hand of governments, grants and fellowships. With 200 million dollars in its pocket, the magazine established a Poetry Foundation which, because of its vast coffers, became somewhat central in popularising and promoting the form.

And now we hear that the Foundation will reward poetry not on merits (whatever that nebulous term means) but political appropriateness. This comes in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement that led to the liberal world drowning itself in a sea of racist guilt even if they were not racist.

Poetry Foundation's response to this is in a letter last week, first stated as intent some time back and now in concrete measures it seeks to take. This included: 'The Poetry Foundation made a commitment to distribute \$1 million over the next two years to support individual poets and writers, and to organizations fighting for social justice, and working to advance racial equity in poetry and affiliated art.'

In short, money it got for the service of poetry is now being used for a political project. Why should anyone have a quibble with it? Between a poet who is fighting for social justice and one who is not, isn't it self-evident who

is more deserving? Change the terms of the comparison a little. Why not, for example, give the support to poets who were born blind or abused as children? Pit one bleeding heart against another, it becomes somewhat more complicated.

Also consider the second order effect of promoting a political project. What would be the chance for any poet, who is not remotely of the same view, getting any grant whatsoever from the Foundation? And if money is on offer for a certain type of poetry, then why would that not be the first port of call for any aspiring poet.

The creative world has refused to acknowledge what it is facing ever since social media unleashed the era of social justice through tweets, and then followed it up with carrots and sticks offline to enforce it.

Can you imagine a manuscript of *Lolita* going to a publishing house today and having any chance of being published before Woke employees saw in it a justification of child sexual abuse and threw it into the dustbin?

The enforcement of virtue, and the posturing that goes along with it, can't but straitjacket the imagination. Unless the mind is free to go wherever it chooses to, it will find nothing new.

The Poetry Foundation is in the US but what it is doing is a phenomenon that touches the cultural sphere all over—the dictatorship of the middle-men, the one-mind arbiters of the creative world. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

FATHERHOOD

Virat Kohli's decision to take paternity leave for three of the Test matches against Australia, has opened up a conversation on the idea of paternity leaves for men in India. Some have commended him, while a few have shown surprise at him missing such a marquee series. India is said to be among 90 of 187 countries that do not have national policies allowing new fathers to take time off. A Paternity Benefit Bill, which allows new fathers to take a leave of 15 days, was introduced in 2017 in the Lok Sabha, but is yet to be passed. Kohli's decision comes at a time when the idea of fatherhood is evolving in India, from a distant approach to one where the father is more involved and hands-on. Several private companies have begun to allow their employees paternity leave, although this is still rare. Even in Indian cricket, the concept of paternity leave has been uncommon. Sunil Gavaskar was famously denied permission to fly back from New Zealand after he heard his son was born. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'My father had a profound influence on me. He was a lunatic'

SPIKE MILLIGAN BRITISH COMEDIAN

CONGRESS CULPRITS

Any political party should beware hubris. But the Congress leadership doesn't seem to heed that warning after so many decades of ruling at the Centre. Allies in the Mahagathbandhan managed a far better strike rate in the recent Assembly elections in Bihar. Even the Janata Dal-United, or JD(U), had a 37 per cent success for the 115 seats it contested. The Congress, despite its bravado, secured only 19 seats of the 70 it fought in. The party's dismal performance brought the knives out, with senior leaders attacking the high command even as the courtiers scrambled to throw a protective shield around 10 Janpath. Shivanand Tiwari of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) set the ball rolling by saying

Rahul Gandhi chose to go on a "picnic" in Shimla with his sister Priyanka instead of throwing his weight behind Congress candidates sweating it out on the ground. The more scathing criticism, however, came from within the party itself—from senior leaders like Kapil Sibal and even some leaders in Tamil Nadu. Anger was seething within the Congress against the central handlers who had landed in Patna to oversee the party's candidate selection and campaign strategy. The leaders dispatched to Bihar by the party's top leadership made overblown claims about its prospects in the run-up to the polls. They had little knowledge of the heartland state—something that is becoming a hallmark of the



Congress high command—and did not consult their seniors. One election manager, when grilled by a senior party leader, was unable to satisfactorily answer how he went about staking claim to a particular seat while ceding another to allies.

CAPTAIN CORNERED



Angry at the Government's farm laws passed in the last Parliament session, the opposition might have threatened a countrywide farmers' agitation. But the protests have remained largely restricted to Punjab. What's more—and irksome for the Punjab government—the leadership of this agitation is not in the hands of the Congress or the Akali Dal any longer but a few representatives of the state's rich farmers. The railway blockade by the protestors has ended up stalling the movement of almost three million tonnes of foodgrains from the storehouses of Punjab. The Centre was forced to meet the shortfall for its public distribution needs with grains procured from

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The protesting farmers' refusal to lift the blockade has begun to worry Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, given the implications for the state's finances. Besides, the grain storehouses, already bursting, will not have space to stock incoming loads. The chief minister has now got the taste of an agitation that had earlier been backed by the state government before it was grabbed by the rich farmers. Back then, a meet at Delhi's Jantar Mantar saw more news television camera crew and media publicity than all the farmer agitations in the state put together. The good Captain is now desperate to persuade the farmers to call off the protests.

PARTY BREAKS

Former US President Barack Obama's description of Rahul Gandhi in his memoir, *A Promised Land*, may have made many Congress leaders quietly gleeful. But behind the smirk, they are genuinely worried about a growing trend of party MLAs in key states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat jumping ship under the overarching leadership of Rahul Gandhi, the moment they get elected to a state Assembly. In 2017, the Congress managed to restrict the BJP's tally in Gujarat to 99 seats in the 182-member Assembly, but over the last three years it has lost 11 of its MLAs to the BJP. After the recent by-elections, the BJP has increased its tally to 111, with the Congress coming down to only 65. The story in Madhya Pradesh

is no different. Not only has the BJP engineered defections from the Congress but has also been successful in getting them elected with record margins. The biggest worry for the Congress is the fate of its Bihar state unit, where Nitish Kumar can be expected to increase his tally by breaking the party. Those in the know say that the task can be accomplished easily since most of the elected MLAs do not see a bright future for themselves under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and her legatees. The JD(U)'s working president, Ashok Choudhary, is himself a former chief of the state Congress. His rapport with the Congress MLAs will come in handy for Nitish Kumar, who is desperate to shore up his numbers.

DIRECT MESSAGE

That the message is more important than the hi-tech medium became clear in the Bihar Assembly elections and the bypolls in other states. One may put out all the memes, jokes, digs and hastags on social media but entertainment cannot substitute for hard campaigning on the ground. Not if one is looking to win people's trust. Parties that invested heavily in social media—as a preferred shortcut to popularity—failed to rake in the rich dividends they had expected from the results. The Congress is the perfect case in point in both Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The results made it evident that, social media notwithstanding, there is no alternative to political leaders and the associates of a party's top leadership taking the message directly to the people. That must be terrible news for parties like the Congress which have a weak leadership on the ground and a poor grasp of voters' preferences. It's also bad news for those who have opened one-stop 'strategy shops' in recent years and pitched themselves as ace political strategists in the run-up to elections, only to make a killing by billing desperate parties and their leaders for hefty amounts of money. It looks as if their bluff has been called. ■

EXTENDED DIRECTOR

Sanjay Kumar Mishra, chief of the Enforcement Directorate (ED), will remain in the saddle despite the best efforts of his detractors—many of whom had had a free run in his predecessor's tenure—to put the word out that his head was on the chopping block and that he would not get an extended stint. Mishra succeeded Karnal Singh, the first holder of the post to be given two years as ED chief. But defying all predictions, the Modi Government recently gave Mishra a year's extension beyond the fixed two-year

tenure he has already served. Mishra, shunted out of Delhi by former Finance Minister P Chidambaram, is handling several cases that involve high-profile politicians and businessmen under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act and the Foreign Exchange Management Act, both of which are enforced by the ED. Many of these are bank frauds as well as money-laundering cases against opposition leaders. The announcement of his extension had been delayed on account of procedural reasons. Despite the shrillness of the campaign against Mishra, the Government has firmly put an end to all speculation about his stint.





By Bibek Debroy

The Force of Destiny

When Yudhishtira enlightened his brothers on duty and action

SINCE I HAVE SPOKEN about Apad Dharma (the dharma allowed in time of calamities) in the past, let me now mention Shadaja Gita. This is the only Gita in the Apad Dharma sub-*parva* of 'Shanti Parva'. It consists of a single chapter and occurs towards the end of 'Apad Dharma Parva'. Bhishma has just finished telling the Pandavas, and Nakula in particular, about the evolution of the sword as a weapon. The word *shadaja* means originating from six. The Shadaja Gita has individual views about dharma, emanating from the five Pandavas and Vidura. That explains the number six. Naturally, their perceptions about dharma differ.

Vaishampayana said, 'When Bhishma said this and became silent, Yudhishtira left his presence and asked his brothers and Vidura.'

Yudhishtira asked, 'The conduct of people is based on an aggregate of dharma, *artha* and *kama*. Which of these is the most important? Which is medium and which is the least important? If one wishes to conquer all three categories together, which of these must one control? O accomplished and satisfied ones! You should speak accurately.'

Vidura responded first and said, 'A great deal of learning, austerities, renunciation, faith, the performance of sacrifices, forgiveness, the purification of sentiments, compassion, truthfulness, restraint and richness of the soul—these must be cultivated and the mind must not waver. These are the foundations of dharma and *artha* and can be subsumed in the single word of 'welfare'. The *rishis* crossed over through dharma. The worlds are established in dharma. *Devas* obtained heaven through dharma. *Artha* is submerged in dharma. O king! Dharma is supreme in qualities. *Artha* is said to be medium. The learned ones say that *kama* is least important. Therefore, a person must control his *atman* and make dharma the most important.'

When Vidura had completed, it was Arjuna's turn. 'O king! This world is an arena for karma and such conduct is praised—agriculture, trade, animal husbandry and many kinds of artisanship. Among all these tasks, there is nothing that transcends the need for *artha*. The *shruti* texts have said that without *artha*, dharma and *kama* cannot occur. A

victorious person obtains *artha* and can pursue supreme dharma. He is capable of following *kama*, which is difficult for those with unclean *atmans* to obtain. The *shruti* texts say that dharma and *kama* take the form of *artha*. These two can be attained through the successful acquisition of *artha*. Those who have been born in superior lineages surround the man who possesses *artha*, just as the beings always worship Brahma. Those who have matted hair, are clad in deer skin, are controlled and have smeared themselves with mud, those who have conquered their senses, have shaved their heads, have no offspring and dwell separately—even they hanker after *artha*. There are others who are bearded and are attired in ochre garments, covering themselves well with humility. They are learned and tranquil. They are free and have given up all their possessions. Even among them, some desire heaven and some others strive for *artha*. Some give up the practices of their lineages and are established in their own individual paths. There are believers and non-believers, completely engaged in supreme restraint. Lack of *jnana* is submerged in darkness and *jnana* provides the radiance. [Only some have truly renounced and have seen the light. Others are still ignorant.] A person who possesses *artha* can maintain his servants in pleasure and exert the rod against his enemies. O best among intelligent ones! That is the reason my view is accurate. Now listen to the words of these two [Nakula and Sahadeva]. Their throats are choking with words.'

Madri's sons, Nakula and Sahadeva, usually spoke in one voice. It was no different with this question. 'Whether one is seated, lying down, roaming around or standing, through the pursuit of superior and inferior means, one must always attempt to firmly pursue the acquisition of *artha*. This is hidden well, extremely difficult to obtain and is supremely loved. In this world, once one has obtained this, there is no doubt that one can directly obtain *kama*. *Artha* is united with dharma and dharma is united with *artha*. This is the way *amrita* is united with honey. Therefore, our view is the following. There can be no *kama* without *artha*. How can there be dharma without *artha*? Thus, people are scared of those who are outside the pale of dharma and

artha. Therefore, even if a person thinks that dharma is the most important, he must control his *atman* and seek to accomplish *artha*. If beings trust a person, then he can accomplish everything. One must first pursue dharma, and then *artha* that is in conformity with dharma. *Kama* should be pursued after that. These are the fruits of the successful pursuit of *artha*.'

Bhima would naturally have a different view. Bhima said, 'A person without *kama* does not desire *artha*. A person without *kama* does not desire dharma. A person without *kama* cannot follow the path of desire. Therefore, *kama* is superior. It is because they are united with *kama* that the *rishis* are controlled in their

austerities. They eat leaves, fruits and roots. They subsist on air and are greatly restrained. There are others who are engaged in chanting the Vedas and are devoted to studying. They perform *shraddha* rites and sacrifices and receive donations. Merchants, farmers, herdsmen, craftsmen and artisans are engaged in the tasks of *devas*. But it is *kama* that drives the action. Driven by *kama*, men enter the ocean. *Kama* has many different forms. Everything is driven by *kama*. There is nothing, there was nothing and there will be nothing that is beyond the simple fact of *kama*. O great king! This is the essence and dharma and *artha* are dependent on it. *Kama* is to dharma and *artha* what butter is to curd. Oil is better than what is left of oilseeds after the extraction of oil. *Ghee* is better than what is left of milk after churning. Good fruits are better than wood. *Kama* is superior to dharma and *artha*. Just as honey comes from the juice of flowers,

like that, happiness is generated from *kama*. O king! Serve *kama*. Pleasure yourself with women who are attired in extremely beautiful garments and are ornamented, mad with intoxication and pleasant in speech. *Kama* will come to you swiftly. In this group, this is my view. O Dharma's son! You should not reflect about this for a long time. If virtuous people paid heed to these beneficial words, which are not shallow in import, there would be the greatest lack of cruelty. One must serve dharma, *artha* and *kama* in equal measure. If a man serves only one of these, he is the worst. A person who is accomplished in two is said to be medium.

The superior person is engaged in all three categories. He is wise. His well-wishers smear him with sandalwood paste. He is adorned in colourful garlands and ornaments.'

Yudhishtira thought for a while and did a summing up, articulating his own views. 'There is no doubt that all your determinations are based on the sacred texts of dharma and that you are acquainted with the proof. You have carefully spoken these words to me and I have heard and got to know about *kama*. You have said that it is essential in this world. However, single-mindedly, listen to the sentiments in my words. A man who is engaged in neither good deeds nor evil ones, and not engaged in *artha*, dharma or *kama*, is

freed from all taints and looks on gold and stones in the same way. He is successful in freeing himself from unhappiness and happiness. Beings are born and they die. They face old age and decay. There have been repeated instructions on *moksha* and it has been praised. But we do not realise this. The illustrious Brahma has said that one not bound down by affection does not suffer these [birth, death, old age and decay]. The learned ones have said that nirvana is supreme. Therefore, one should not act in accordance with what is pleasant and what is unpleasant. However, a person who follows *kama* does not attach importance to this. I act wherever I have been engaged. All the beings have been appointed by destiny. Know that destiny is powerful in everything. One cannot attain the objective by undertaking karma. Know that whatever is going to happen, will happen. Even if a person is devoid of the three modes, he can attain this

objective. [The objective being *moksha*. The three modes are dharma, *artha* and *kama*.] Thus, this is the secret for the welfare of the worlds.'

Vaishampayana concluded, 'These foremost words were pleasant to the mind and full of reason. They heard them and were delighted. They joined their hands in salutation to the foremost one among the Kuru lineage. Those words were extremely beautiful and adorned with letters, syllables and words. They were pleasing to the mind and devoid of thorns. On hearing the words spoken by Yudhishtira, all of them applauded those words.' ■



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By Rachel Dwyer

The Sacred Feminine

Tantric approaches to a misinterpreted goddess

A FEW YEARS AGO, an invitation to IIT Guwahati allowed me to fulfil two long held ambitions. One was to go to Kaziranga (which was even more magical than I had hoped), and the other was to visit the Kamakhya temple. The underground part of this *Shaktipeeth* has an uncanny atmosphere, what could be called an energy, something I've experienced rarely, most strongly at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Although I had earlier read about the legends associated with the temple and the Mother Goddess Kamakhya, I realised that my elementary knowledge of tantra and its history was hampering a fuller appreciation of both.

Tantra is not widely understood, partly because of its esoteric nature but mainly because its 'left-handed' features include forms that are now considered taboo — from animal sacrifice to rituals performed in cemeteries. It is rarely discussed openly in India, probably also because of the centuries of Western misinterpretations, from 'Thuggee' to 'tantric sex'. The current exhibition at the British Museum (open before lockdown in London kicked in) seemed a great chance to explore the wealth of tantric culture.

'Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution' is a superb show, curated by Imma Ramos, who also wrote the lavishly illustrated catalogue. The exhibition is organised chronologically, making the growth, spread, and subsequent developments and (mis)interpretations of tantra clear.

The exhibition does not shy away from elements of tantra which may be shocking, such as the ritual use of human bones, but it shows clearly that tantra is a deep and sophisticated tradition with an astoundingly rich visual culture. We also learn how tantra has moved from the fringes of society to pervade Indian religion today, particularly in the rise of Shakti (female power) and the Devi.

Tantra begins with texts from around 500 CE, which set it apart from the orthodox *shruti* (Vedas) and *smriti* (*shastras*, etcetera), detailing new rituals, duties and beliefs, to give the practitioner more powers (*siddhis*), to take pleasure in the world (*bhoga*), to achieve liberation. The deity is mostly Shaiva, though there are others, including Vaishnava tantrics (the Pancaratras), while Buddhist tantrism, namely

the Vajrayana, developed from the 7th century.

These esoteric texts, mantras and mandalas, were used by Shaiva ascetics who worshipped Bhairava, a tantric form of Shiva, whose image sculpted in stone is among the oldest exhibits, many from what is now Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, where his temples spread under the Cholas. An image of Karaikal Ammaiyar from the 13th century, one of the three female Nayanars, Tamil poet saints who combine bhakti and tantra, looks to the untrained eye like a piece of modern art.

A major feature of tantra is the rise of fierce female goddesses. The *Devi Mahatmya* (400-600 CE) narrates the deeds of Durga, including her most famous battle as Mahishasuramardini, the killer of the Buffalo Demon. She is closely associated with kings across India, including those of Kashmir and Odisha, who built temples to her and other goddesses as a means of acquiring *shakti* (power) for themselves.

Other fierce goddesses include the Matrikas, who are the *shaktis* of the gods, apart from Chamunda, who burst from Durga's forehead. The cult of the *yoginis* was seen in open circular temples and the exhibition has a partial reconstruction of the temple of the 64 *yoginis* in Hirapur (900 CE), where we can hear prayers and (almost) see flying *yoginis*.

Tantra has its own theories of the human body, seeing the subtle body with its *chakras* (wheels), and *nadis* (channels) through which energies (such as *kundalini*) flow, that can be mastered through forms of bodily discipline, notably Hatha Yoga. Some of the most striking paintings are diagrams of the body on loan from the National Museum of India (Delhi), including a series of seven ascending *chakras* (Rajasthan, early 19th century). Mughal paintings show tantric Nath *yogis*, interacting with Sufis (bringing to mind images of Nath *yogis* at the Museum's 'Garden and Cosmos' exhibition in 2009), while alongside works from Bijapur (16th century) of *yoginis/ruhanis*, there are stunning colourful paintings of Bhairava with animals from Kangra (18th century).

We are then introduced to the spread of Buddhist tantra, Vajrayana, from Tibet in the 8th century, to the Ming Court (14th century China) and on to Japan. While

aesthetically beautiful, these artefacts include human remains made into *rus gyan* or bone aprons in 19th century Tibet, worn by monks and lamas in *Cham* (masked dance) and other ceremonies.

One of my favourite sections is the room on colonial India, where we meet again the fierce goddesses Chamunda and Kali as Shaktism takes hold in 18th century Bengal.

While Charles 'Hindoo' Stewart and his friend Major Edward Moor collected images in the early 19th century, which they gave to the British Museum, there were many misinterpretations of Kali as a 'demoness', in particular, linked to the cult of the Thuggee.

However, the gaze was reversed as her power was celebrated, her favourite sacrificial offering said to be white goats.

Here again, the great religious movement, bhakti or loving devotion, meets with tantra in a devotional approach to Kali. Ramprasad Sen (circa 1718-1775), a wandering bard who became court poet of Krishnachandra Ray (1728-82), composed verses to Maa Kali, which form the core of the *Shyama Sangeet* of Bengali Shaktism.

The richness of images from this time is wonderful. A temple sword, a statue of Kali and the popular prints show a change from terrifying images where she is black to those where she is depicted as gentle and sweet in blue. As with other more abstract depictions, notably of Kali at Kalighat, where she has three red eyes and a gold tongue, these images can be read as tantric or non-tantric as can texts of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), the priest of the great Dakshineswar Temple, who is best known through his non-tantric disciple Swami Vivekananda.

More misinterpretations follow as tantra was appropriated by Western counterculture, which is all rather gruesomely embarrassing although I didn't know that the Rolling Stones' logo of lips and tongue is meant to represent Kali rather than Jagger. The sexual sculptures seen earlier in the exhibition were long kept in the British Museum's 'Secret Museum' until the 1960s, viewed only by appointment—by men.

There are a few film posters, but we happily gloss over the Thuggees in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), though I missed a loop of the superhit song 'Jai Maa Kali' from the Hindi film, *Karan Arjun* (1995) with a 'Bollywood' dance by the superstars Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan in this tale of revenge and rebirth. My other favourite is the hit film, *Ammoru* (1995, Telugu), where an evil tantric tries to sacrifice the devotee of the Mother in a most gory manner. Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (1960) is a challenging look at the patriarch's belief his



Sharmila Tagore in *Devi* (1960)

daughter-in-law is the Devi incarnate and the clash of religious and 'modern' ideas leads to tragedy.

Tantra in contemporary India is seen in photographs of ascetics, Aghoris, and paintings, as well as the singing of Parvati Baul.

Among this wealth of visual culture, there were two images at the end that stuck with me. These are not devotional images but works of modern art, clearly apart from the religious tradition on which they draw, making us question the contexts and meaning of the religious versus the artistic, the iconic image versus the aesthetic one. Aesthetics and devotion play such a key role in the way we see these images. These are a painting and a sculpture by two British female artists of Indian heritage. One is Sutapa Biswas' extraordinary painting and collage of Kali, *Housewife with Steak Knives* (1985), which may or may not be a self-portrait, though the 'housewife' has four arms, the left two holding a sword (rather than a steak knife), a severed head (as Kali does), the right has one blessing the other holding a flower and a flag showing Artemisia Gentileschi's, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, a tribute to one of the few great female artists we know from the 17th century, the raped artist portraying a beheading. She is brown, not black, her tongue protruding but wearing a Bandini shirt, with unshaven underarms, and a garland of white male heads, including that of Hitler.

Bharati Kher's sculpture, *And All the While the Benevolent Slept* (2008), reworks one of my favourite images, namely Chinnamasta, the goddess of the severed head. There's an old print in an earlier room where we see the goddess as she's often portrayed, having beheaded herself, blood flowing into the mouths of two devotees and her own decapitated mouth, as she stands on a couple (Rati and Kama) engaged in tantric (*viparita*, woman on top) sex. The image shows tantra's engagement with the simultaneity of sex, life and death.

Kher's statue is of a squatting headless woman with copper wires coming out of her neck, as she clutches a wooden skull in one hand and a porcelain cup (of tea?) in the other.

I wrote this on Kali Pujo, recalling my visit on that day a couple of years ago to Kalighat, another *Shaktipeeth*, in Kolkata. It didn't have the mysterious power of the Kamakhya temple; instead it was joyous, the multitudes of merry devotees creating an atmosphere that was more one of bhakti than tantra. Now after the exhibition—and after Covid—I am yearning to see more of the *Shaktipeeths*, to learn more about tantric approaches to this much misinterpreted goddess, but will have to start by reading some of the *Shyama Sangeet*. ■

Centre Stage

The evolution of a Prime Minister

By Minhaz Merchant

DELHI HAS SHIFTED Narendra Modi, imperceptibly, to the centre. Over the past six-and-a-half years, Modi has recognised that you can run a state (Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, for example) from the right but you must run a country from the centre, or at most from the centre-right.

What does this presage for the remaining three-and-a-half years of Modi's second term?

Modi's economic and foreign policy doctrine is an odd amalgam of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Indira Gandhi. Consider Vajpayee first. Modi's shift to the centre-right from a hard Hindutva position resembles Vajpayee's embrace of a more inclusive agenda. Vajpayee in 1992 spoke out strongly against the Babri Masjid.

A decade later in 2002, having been in power at the Centre for four years, Vajpayee publicly cautioned Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi after the Gujarat riots to follow "Raj Dharma". LK Advani took up the mantle of Hindutva. Vajpayee meanwhile made peace overtures to Pakistan's dictator Pervez Musharraf. He got the Parliament attack in return.

Another decade later, Modi emulated Vajpayee by inviting Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014. He got Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Uri and Pulwama in return.

On foreign policy, too, Modi has followed Vajpayee's formulation: closer ties with Washington. These are now, given the Chinese threat, irreversible. On economic policy, Modi has taken a leaf out of both Vajpayee's and Indira Gandhi's book. He is a micro-manager and protectionist like Gandhi. But his agriculture and labour reforms are as groundbreaking as, for instance, Vajpayee's power reforms following legislation of the Electricity Act, 2003.

Vajpayee was keen on privatisation and appointed Arun Shourie to divest public sector companies across domains. Modi is not an enthusiastic advocate of privatisation. During his tenure, very little of India's lumbering public sector has been privatised.

To Modi state controls matter. He is by instinct a leader who relies on bureaucrats to get things done. In that sense he is more like Indira Gandhi than Vajpayee. Bureaucrats led by PN Haksar ran Gandhi's 'kitchen cabinet'. Key IAS officers today run the bureaucrat-heavy Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the principal engine of the Government.

Like Indira Gandhi's Union Cabinet, Modi's ministers—with a few exceptions—are seen but not encouraged to be heard. Significantly, one of Modi's first steps on taking office

was to disband the various Groups of Ministers (GoMs) that had proliferated under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. They were replaced by Groups of Secretaries (GoSs).

Some GoMs have made a hesitant comeback in recent months, but it's the bureaucracy that still wields power. The pandemic lockdown has only enhanced their omnipresence. The implementation of Modi's welfare schemes is closely monitored by the PMO and the GoSs.

Modi, like Indira Gandhi, is a hard taskmaster. Vajpayee ran a more relaxed administration. But there is a key difference between the approaches of Gandhi and Modi to the opposition. Indira Gandhi was merciless towards her opponents. The

Emergency, during which she locked up without trial over 100,000 journalists, activists and opposition leaders, suspended the Constitution and subverted the Supreme Court, was just one example of her ruthlessness. In Parliament, she treated the opposition with scant respect.

Modi, in contrast, has taken in his stride the most venomous campaign unleashed against an Indian political leader by the opposition over a period of nearly two decades. Modi routinely condemns dynastic politics during his election campaign rallies. But under his prime ministership almost no opposition leader accused of corruption has gone to jail. P Chidambaram is an exception. His three-month incarceration was an aberration. Like all others, the case against him has been put in cold storage.

So where does that leave Modi? A protectionist like Indira Gandhi but not as ruthless on the opposition as she was. An economic liberaliser like Vajpayee but not a keen privatiser.

On Hindutva, Modi has moved in Vajpayee's centric direction. With the Ram Mandir, Citizenship Amendment Act and Jammu & Kashmir issues under his belt, he believes he has enough electoral ballast to move away from hardline Hindutva to a more inclusive version of Vajpayee's Bharatiyata.

How much towards the centre will Modi move in the second half of his current prime ministerial term? That's difficult to say simply because events may overtake him and change his ideological trajectory. China looms. Post-Covid economic recovery will be a challenge.

I wrote in 2015, at the end of Modi's first year as prime minister: 'Lutyens' Delhi is an idiom. Modi has tried to change that idiom of corrupt power brokers, complicit media and the beady-eyed politicians who preside over this toxic consensus. He hasn't succeeded—yet.' ■

Minhaz Merchant is an author, editor and publisher





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OUT OF FAVOUR?

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has seen two major political casualties in recent times. One is

Sushil Modi, who has not been made Bihar deputy chief minister. The second is Ram Madhav, who is no longer at the top echelons of the party organisation. Nor was he inducted into the Government. For Sushil Modi, the reason is said to be his inability or unwillingness to assert his identity over that of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Also, state leaders were said not to be backing him

and he had to make room for a younger generation. Modi may be accommodated in Delhi but not Madhav. He is being blamed for political failures in the Northeast and even in Kashmir. It is

learnt that Amit Shah is not in his favour. While a section of the media still projects him as a future Rajya Sabha member, a BJP source says even that may not happen.

TIMING THE GREETING

After Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election, India, or rather Prime Minister Narendra Modi, took some time to congratulate him. Ministry of External Affairs sources say it was because they were waiting for the reactions of other major countries, especially the UN Security Council permanent members, given that Donald Trump had still not conceded. Once the UK, France and Germany congratulated Biden, India followed. The first country to congratulate Biden is said to be Fiji, but why that should be so is not clear yet.

Eyeing God's Wealth?

The Andhra Pradesh government could be turning to some divine financial help. Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), the trust that manages the famous Tirupati temple, had been putting its enormous funds in bank deposits. But recently, it considered investing in Central Government securities, which would yield better returns. But then, it suddenly added the option of also putting these with the state government. This modification is said to be because of Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy. He might be keen on tapping the money to tide over the economic crisis in the state. But some trustees are not in favour of this because the state government, under which the trust falls, could refuse to pay any interest at all should it decide so. They want Delhi to intervene in the matter but the Prime Minister's Office apparently does not want to get involved.



His Perpetual Question

Recently, a senior BJP leader met Tamil cinema's superstar Rajinikanth, once again fuelling rumours about his political ambitions. The state's Assembly elections are going to take place around mid-2021. And if Rajinikanth puts up his party's candidates, it could play a part in the eventual results. He is planning to hold a virtual meeting with his party leaders to get their opinion. He has also had a major health issue related to his kidneys which could influence his decision. Besides the BJP, even the DMK is said to be in touch with him.

Bengal Calling

For the West Bengal elections, the BJP central leadership has chosen five special observers. One of them is Sunil Deodhar, in-charge of the last Tripura elections in which the party pulled a surprise and won a huge majority. He is also a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *pracharak* very close to the Nagpur headquarters. During an RSS conference in Tripura, Deodhar had rice and fish curry. He apparently has told Delhi that vegetarianism would not go down well in the region. The question now is what will be his approach to West Bengal? Rice and fish curry happen to be popular in Kolkata too.

Man of the Moment

Bhupender Yadav, the BJP's election in-charge for Bihar who got them to power again, is becoming the person to be watched in party circles. He is now Man Friday to both Amit Shah and party president JP Nadda. They have sent him to Hyderabad to oversee the civic body elections there. Then he will return to Bihar for the panchayat polls.

No Profit from Bonding

Veteran socialist leader Sharad Yadav, who fought the Congress his whole life, made his daughter contest on the same party's ticket in the Bihar elections this time. Unfortunately, she lost even though Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, a former political co-worker-turned-foe of Yadav, did her the courtesy of not going to her constituency. Rahul Gandhi addressed a rally for her and said Yadav was his political guru. It surprised everyone given that they were not known to be close. Their longest meeting must have been when the two travelled in a car to a programme in Andhra Pradesh.



INSTABILITY LOOMING

In Haryana, the relationship between Dushyant Singh Chautala, who has six MLAs with him, and the BJP, which rules the state with his support, has deteriorated. He could make a deal with the Congress but the party may still not have it easy. That is because their former chief minister, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, remains upset. Even if there are elections, the Congress is not likely to project him as chief minister. The BJP is in touch with Hooda, since elections would loom if Chautala withdrew his support and the state government fell.

WATER WATCH

When Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, one of his favourite bureaucrats, Bharat Lal, moved to the PMO. He then went to Rashtrapati Bhavan as joint secretary. When he became additional secretary, he was sent to the Ministry of Jal Shakti in which Modi takes a keen interest in order to ensure potable water for the whole country, especially poor rural areas. The ministry monitors state government performance on this front since water is a state subject. Recently, four months after an expression of interest and subsequent allotment of work orders under the Jal Jeevan Mission, to the tune of Rs 10,000 crore, the Chhattisgarh government suddenly cancelled it. Rumour has it Lal was the reason. He had got wind of a siphoning off of funds earmarked for the mission. The Union Minister of Jal Shakti, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, alerted the state government about the cancellation.



By **SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY**

DISHY RISHI MAKES A POINT

Why Britain is the world's most relaxed multiracial democracy

ANYWHERE ELSE IT would be a ripple—not even a storm—in a teacup. But given the placid backwaters of British politics, the abrupt dismissal of two high-profile prime ministerial aides becomes a matter of great moment. If it hasn't rocked the world, that is because the world is too unimportant to appreciate the majesty of Pax Britannica.

A hint of the Foreign Hand slithering surreptitiously from Punjab via East Africa to England and into the hordes of actors and understudies, prompters and pranksters that throng No 10 these tantalising days suggests the excitement of the empire striking back. As the outcome unfolds, people are bound to look closely at the cross-cultural connections of the principal players, in particular of Allegra Stratton, the prime minister's press secretary and clear beneficiary of the coup.

Not since Indira Gandhi threw Maneka out of the house has a political departure been as dramatic as that of Dominic Cummings and his henchman, Lee Cain. Various called “de facto prime minister” and “Svengali”, Cummings was the all-powerful chief adviser to Boris Johnson whose avowed aspiration to be “world king” prompted David Cameron to dismiss him as a “career psychopath”. Cain was communications chief. Knapsack on back, Cummings walked out of No 10 carrying a cardboard box of papers and a see-through bag of bottles and canisters. Did he also walk out of history? That remains to be seen.

The ignominious ouster was Stratton's handiwork. But she would not have pulled it off without the formidable backing of Carrie Symonds. Newspapers call Carrie Boris's fiancée. She is his live-in girlfriend, mother of his youngest child, Britain's latter-day male MO Mathai. She has unkindly been compared to Lady Macbeth. The nearest historical parallel I can think of is France's Madame de Maintenon, mistress and later wife of Louis XIV, the Sun King. As the Conservative Party's one-time head of communications, she has been there, done it, seen it all.

The four have been engaged for weeks, perhaps months, in toxic turmoil, intrigue and back-stabbing through leaks that recalled Washington during the frenzy of Watergate.

Boris, who is now forced to self-isolate after being in contact with colleagues who tested positive, was reportedly incensed to hear that the two men had been telling tales against him and his sleeping partner. He was probably gulping oxygen in the intensive care unit of London's St Thomas' hospital when the conspiracy in the Conservative ranks gathered momentum.

Most of the time, however, he seems to have blustered and blundered, giving the impression of heading a dysfunctional government. That image may be deceptive. A vein of shrewdness runs through his bombast. What helps him most is the fall-back asset of a mature and caring administration that is not distracted by politicians' tantrums. All through the Covid-19 crisis it has continued to provide free treatment, free school meals, streamlined governance and stabilising incentives without any hint of the neglect, bullying and exploitation that Indians associate with crisis management.



Chancellor of the Exchequer
Rishi Sunak and British Prime
Minister Boris Johnson outside
10 Downing Street, London

GETTY IMAGES

THE BETTING SEEMS TO BE THAT BORIS JOHNSON WILL SOONER OR LATER HAND OVER TO AN INTERIM PRIME MINISTER (MICHAEL GOVE, THE CABINET OFFICE MINISTER, PERHAPS?) WHO WILL YIELD TO RISHI SUNAK. IN ANY CASE, ‘DISHY RISHI’ WILL PRESENT THE BUDGET IN MARCH. BRITAIN’S MEDIA IS ALREADY SALIVATING OVER THE EXPECTED BONANZA OF ‘RISHINOMICS’

But there is no obscuring the creeping feeling that the prime minister’s exuberance is probably better suited to campaigning than governing. Nor the fear that the grim tasks at home and abroad during a recession call for much more serious and sustained treatment. The immediate challenges are a surge in Covid-19 infections, Brexit, and building bridges with Joe Biden whom Boris hasn’t ever met and who once called him Donald Trump’s “visible and emotional clone”. Given still smouldering Democratic resentment at the prime minister’s criticism of Barack Obama and what an Obama aide calls his “slavish devotion to Trump”, he may not find it easy to persuade the Biden administration to agree to the economic treaty the UK so desperately needs.

Now that the tail that wagged his government has gone, Allegra will be the new public face of Boris’s government. She will take the proposed new daily televised press briefings from

January. Cummings and Cain were ousted because they stood between her and the prime minister. Stratton demanded unfettered access even though some feel that the prime minister thereby runs the danger of being distanced from his media supporters.

Understandably, the innovation has received a mixed reception. Unlike some other Commonwealth prime ministers, Boris has never fought shy of the media. But many feel that a daily TV show smacks too much of the US where politics is PR and PR is politics. Remote as it may seem, Boris must also be aware that it’s not unknown for prime ministerial press secretaries to succumb to megalomaniacal hallucinations about their role.

Cummings was the Vote Leave leader who delivered Brexit in the 2016 referendum with his Little Englander “Take Back Control” slogan. Although he boasts of never having been a member of any political party, Cummings also ensured the

Johnson-led Conservative Party's 80-seat majority last year. As the prime minister's grey eminence, he was said to ride roughshod over even cabinet ministers.

"So many of you guys were too busy shooting or skiing or chasing girls to do any actual work" was his contemptuous dismissal of parliamentarians on the same side of the fence. "You should be treated like a tumour and excised from the UK body politic." Some of them, in turn, denounced his elevation as "shameful" and demanded he should be refused a pass to the House of Commons because he was found in contempt of parliament over an inquiry into 'foreign influence and voter manipulation' in the Brexit vote.

There were whispers then of the Russian hand. Not this time round. Our Allegra was head of communications to Rishi Sunak, 'Dishy' Rishi as the tabloids have dubbed him, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'finance minister in Indian English', as his mother-in-law, wife of NR Narayana Murthy of Infosys, would say. Allegra's husband, James Forsyth, political editor of *The Spectator* (which Johnson once edited and where Cummings's wife is commissioning editor), went to school with Sunak at the exclusive Winchester College. Sunak was

THE CHANCELLOR IS GOOD WITH MONEY. BRITS EXPECT THE COUNTRY TO BENEFIT FROM HIS HORSE SENSE. IT'S BEEN A LONG ROAD SINCE LORD SALISBURY SAID THAT BRITISH VOTERS WOULD NEVER AGREE TO BEING REPRESENTED BY A 'BLACK MAN'

best man at the Forsyth-Stratton wedding. The two husband-and-wife teams are close friends. For all that Dishy Rishi remains a teetotal Hindu and takes his oath at the House of Commons on the Bhagavad Gita, they are godparents to each other's children.

The betting seems to be that Boris will sooner or later hand over to an interim prime minister (Michael Gove, the Cabinet Office minister, perhaps?) who will yield to Sunak. In any case, Dishy Rishi will present the Budget in March. Britain's media is already salivating over the expected bonanza of 'Rishinomics'.

With the economy still nearly 10 per cent smaller than last December and 8.2 per cent below February's level, it needs the magic touch of the whiz kid whose 'Eat Out to Help Out' discount meals plan in August is credited with the fastest quarterly growth since quarterly records were started in 1955. He will have to find £200 billion to deal with the pandemic.

If Sunak is the Foreign Hand, there are glimpses of Foreign Fingers wiggling here and there. Home Secretary Priti Patel is one trusted Asian. Alok Sharma is another. Sajid Javid, son of a Pakistan-born bus driver, who was Sunak's predecessor as chancellor, remains a third. Twisting the knife in Cummings's

wound, the government agreed last week to a 'very, very last minute' five-figure settlement for Sonia Khan, the former Treasury aide whom Cummings sacked last August before having her marched out of No 10 by armed police. Cummings accused Khan, Javid's former special adviser, of leaking Brexit secrets. Ironically, he and Cain were themselves more recent targets of similar accusations which prompted the appointment of an inquiry committee.

The rest, as they say, is history.

AS DECEMBER 31ST, the deadline for Britain's formal and final divorce from the European Union draws near with little sign as yet of an agreement, no one should be surprised if Boris himself invokes the blessings of a benevolent Foreign Hand by claiming kinship with the US vice president-elect. Those who wonder how an 'Ottoman grandson' (as Turkish papers call the prime minister because his great grandfather, Ali Kemal, was a Turk) can even pretend to be related to a 'Tam-Bram' or a Jamaican (Kamala Harris' two race identities), don't know the Johnson ingenuity.

Calling himself "India's son-in-law", because his divorced second wife's mother was born a Sikh (but married an Englishman), he turned up at the Vaisakhi celebrations in Trafalgar Square as his first official engagement as London's mayor. He also wound a saffron turban round his head to canvass for votes in a Bristol gurdwara during last year's parliamentary election, and promised a trade pact with India. Easy Scotch exports would save him having to take 'clinkie' (meaning bottles of Johnnie Walker) in his baggage for his 'Indian relatives' whenever he visited India.

The pact didn't happen. Always with an eye on quitting India, Indians wanted visas more than whisky. Now, Carrie Symonds, undoubtedly the most powerful woman in the kingdom, might not let him brag any longer about his 'Indian relatives'. That boast can be left to Allegra Stratton. Hers is the real Indian connection.

Her contact says his wife doesn't care for the 'Dishy' moniker. So, it's hands off. She is after all the billionaire Infosys heiress. I said the chancellor is good with money. Brits expect the country to benefit from his horse sense.

It's been a long road since Lord Salisbury, the 19th century Conservative prime minister, said that British voters would never agree to being represented by a "black man". Voters proved him wrong by electing Dadabhai Naoroji as the first Asian member of the Commons. Whether or not Dishy Rishi fulfils his destiny, Boris Johnson's government confirms that despite the recent hiccup, Britain is the world's most relaxed multiracial democracy. ■

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



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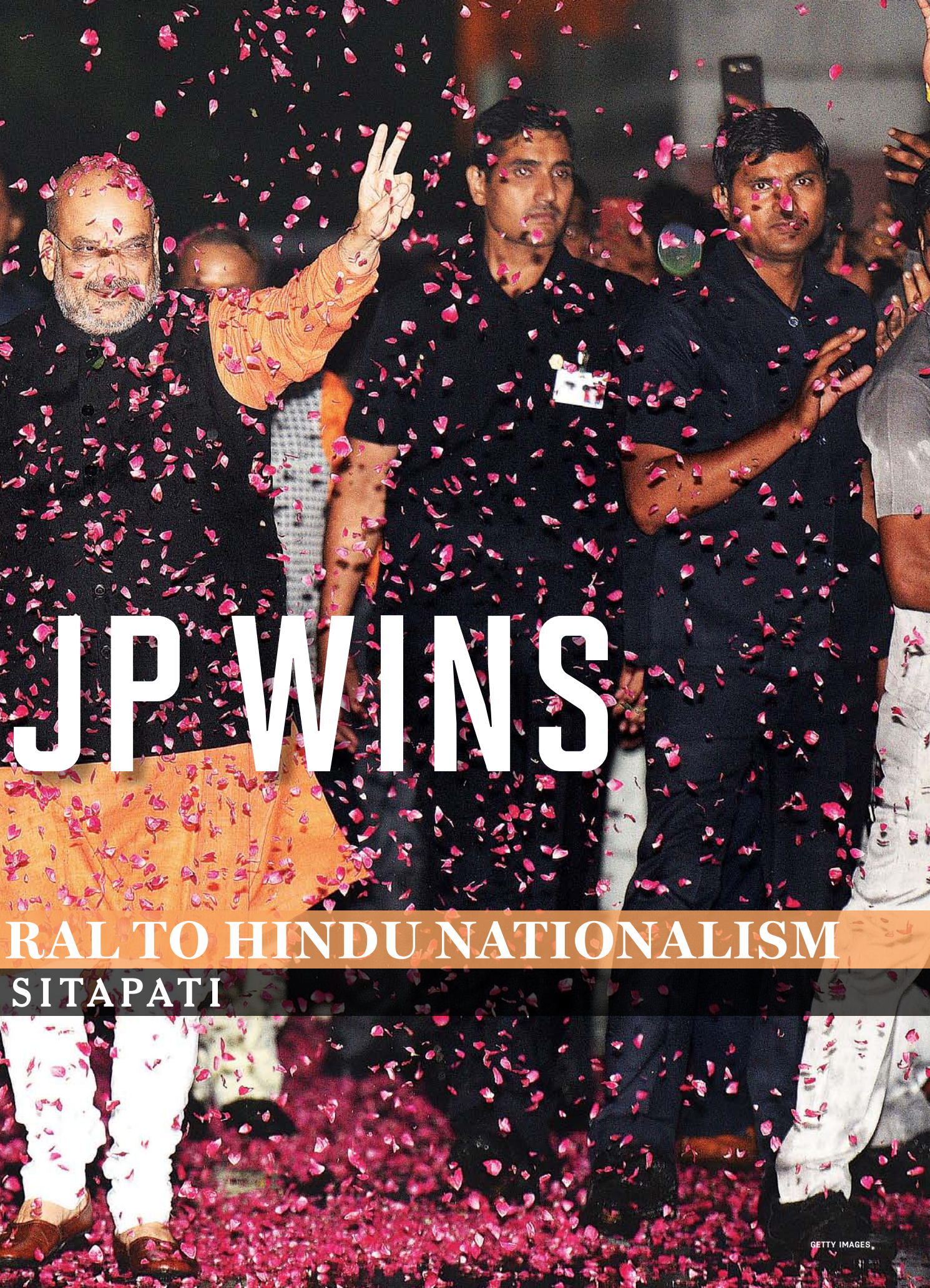
NARENDRA MODI AND
AMIT SHAH AFTER THE
GENERAL ELECTION VICTORY,
NEW DELHI, MAY 23, 2019

A full-page photograph of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, celebrating the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 Indian general elections. He is shown from the waist up, wearing a light-colored kurta and a dark blue patterned vest. He has a white beard and is wearing glasses. He is smiling and making a 'V' for victory hand gesture with his right hand, which is raised high. He is surrounded by a shower of pink flower petals. In the background, other people are visible, some in uniform, but they are out of focus. The overall atmosphere is one of triumph and celebration.

WHY B

BECAUSE TEAMWORK IS CENT

By VINAY



JP WINS

RAL TO HINDU NATIONALISM
SITAPATI

It was 2018 and it was Chandrapur. A polluted mining town surrounded by compressed greenery, Chandrapur is the navel on India's map. I had just visited the family home of the Bhagwats, and had spoken to the younger son Ravindra. The elder, Mohan, lives in nearby Nagpur and heads the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). We spoke about the importance of *shakhas*. These are the Lego pieces with which the RSS has built its immense machine. Part-time volunteers or *swayamsevaks* gather daily for an hour on open ground, alternating physical breathe-outs with ideological breathe-ins.

These were early days for researching my book on the BJP before Modi. Eventually titled *Jugalbandi*, the book looks at the six-decade-long relationship between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani to tell the 100-year story of Hindu nationalism before Modi. I became obsessed with *shakhas*, but I did what good researchers should not.

I began to view video after amateur video of *shakha* sessions on YouTube. I had by then finished my PhD at Princeton University in political science, and had read most of the books, articles and screeds on Hindu nationalism. This Western training had provided me lens of a certain tint to view the synchronised exercises that were being performed in the video. As I saw a motley crew of a few dozen marching together, then standing one on top of the other in symmetry, I interpreted this as a display of martial facility. Founded in 1925 during pioneering bouts of Hindu-Muslim riots, the RSS had sought to muscle-up the puny Hindu to compete with the manly Muslim. This was the theory my intellectual training had taught me; it made redundant the need to actually go to a *shakha*.

I watched languidly when suddenly something struck me. In the eventually 200 interviews that I did for my book, I had been struck by how obsessed the BJP and the RSS were with the Third Battle of Panipat. But that history lesson had made no impact on me until that day spent on YouTube. I had a eureka moment. I saw, in a flash, the connection between the physical exercise in the *shakha* and the intellectual beliefs of Hindu nationalism. I grasped why the BJP wins.

The Third Battle of Panipat was fought in 1761 between the Maratha confederacy and the Afghan warlord Ahmad Shah Abdali. With the Mughal Empire in decline, the Marathas were the ascendant national power. Had they won at Panipat—86 kilometres north of Delhi—the Marathas could have ended the British presence in India before it ballooned into Empire. The results of the Third Battle of Panipat would shape modern India like no other.

Though Ahmad Shah Abdali was from another country, he was able to garner the support of local Muslim rulers. On the other side, the Marathas failed to entice the Rajputs, Jats and Sikhs to fight with them. The other problem was that the Marathas lacked internal unity. Rather than ruled solely by the Peshwas, they were a confederacy of chieftains: the Holkars from Indore, Gaekwads of Baroda, Bhonsles of Satara and the Scindias from Gwalior. This meant that, while the royal guard of the Peshwas supplied 11,000 cavalrymen for the battle, the Scindias alone contributed 10,000 men on horses. The 100,000 Marathas at Panipat on the morning of January 14th, 1761 were not a single army; they were a mishmash of militias.

This was on display when fighting began. As one historian writes: 'In the absence of a coherent and disciplined force under a unified commander...control over the various Maratha cavalry was at best weak.' The cavalry disobeyed orders, and attacked without coordinating with the infantry. The result was that 30,000 Marathas died in battle and 10,000 in retreat, while 10,000 went missing and 50,000 were enslaved or slaughtered. Twenty-seven Maratha commanders were killed in combat, along with the Peshwa's son.

The loss extinguished the dream of a pan-Indian Maratha empire. It also proved a stalemate for the exhausted Abdali, who was forced to leave India. Into this power vacuum crept the British. Amit Shah, no doubt, has memorised this story since he began attending *shakhas*. As he himself put it in 2019: 'The Marathas lost this one battle after winning 131, but had to pay a heavy price and we faced 200 years of colonial slavery.'

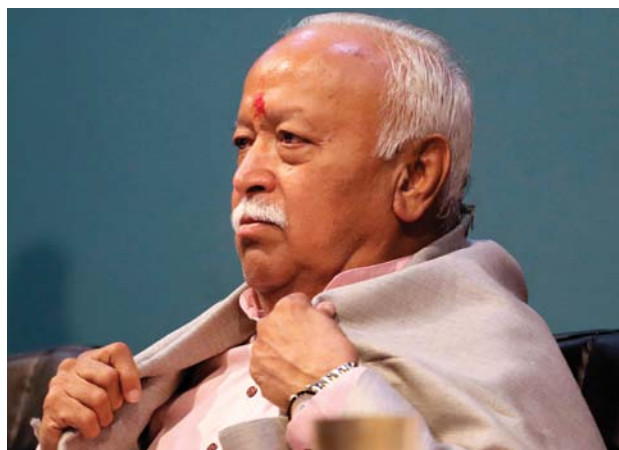
As I remembered the history lesson of Panipat when I saw those videos, what hit me was not its 'truth'. Much of this narrative would not meet a historian's standards, and it reduces a convoluted event to simple religious competition. But what hit me was how the RSS had internalised its own lessons from the disunity at Panipat. The physical part of the RSS training was not just exercise, it was exercise done together. What was being taught was teamwork—whether it was marching synchronously, standing on top of each other in a pyramid, or playing 'games' that are associated more with corporate outings. What both the history lesson and the physical exercise highlighted was the need for coordination among Hindus. It is this belief in teamwork, what I call 'Hindu Fevicol' in my book, that is central to Hindu nationalism. Of the many reasons why the BJP wins, it is the most ignored.

To understand the relevance of this history lesson to today's politics, consider the politics of three states in just the last one year: Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

The elections in Maharashtra in October 2019 produced an easy majority for the

longstanding BJP-Shiv Sena alliance. But a squabble over the post of chief minister led to tense days in which four parties—the BJP, Shiv Sena, Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)—all manoeuvred to reach majority. Every party was terrified of having their MLAs poached, of splitting vertically. Every party, that is, except the BJP. No commentator or politician even considered the possibility of renegade BJP MLAs. This unity was

HINDU NATIONALISTS MAY BE MAJORITARIAN, BUT THEY ARE NO FASCISTS. THEY ARE BIRTHED BY ELECTIONS. THEIR CHALLENGE IS TO CONVINCE ENOUGH HINDUS TO VOTE AS ONE. HINDU NATIONALISM HAS SPENT 100 YEARS NURTURING THIS VOTE BANK



RSS CHIEF MOHAN BHAGWAT IN AHMEDABAD, FEBRUARY 15

not because the state unit was one happy family. Poonam Mahajan and, as is now clear, Eknath Khadse, were smarting under Devendra Fadnavis' domination. The BJP was unified despite discord.

Consider next the dynamic in Rajasthan, where Congress' Deputy Chief Minister Sachin Pilot rebelled against Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot earlier this year.

In those conspiratorial weeks, there was talk of a re-alignment in Rajasthan politics. But all through, it didn't even occur to anyone that the state BJP heavyweight Vasundhara Raje Scindia—who had been kept out of the loop by Modi and Shah—might quit the party along with her loyalist MLAs. This was not because Scindia likes the prime minister. It is because she will not betray her organisational family. Literally: the Sangh Parivar.

Consider finally, Madhya Pradesh. The state Congress had long been a three-corner fight among Kamal Nath, Digvijaya Singh and Jyotiraditya Scindia. These are the Holkars, Bhonsales and—the irony!—the Scindias of today's Panipat. And true to form, it was a Scindia who split the

Congress in March while the BJP stayed united—despite similar tensions between Shivraj Singh Chouhan and his once equal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Another example from the same state stretches back five decades, to yet another Scindia: Vasundhara's mother and Jyotiraditya's grandmother. 'Rajmata' Vijaya Raje Scindia was the star campaigner for the Jana Sangh (the precursor to the BJP) for the 1967 state elections in Madhya Pradesh. But the Congress still won a comfortable majority. What should have been an easy return to power, however, was stymied by infighting of a type that we saw 50 years later in the state Congress. Incensed with the chief minister-designate DP Mishra, Congressman Govind Narayan Singh—the dynastic son of a former Congress chief minister—left the party along with 30 legislators. Although Vijaya Raje could have laid claim to chief ministership, 'she told Govind Singh to become the CM in order to form a stable government'. Twenty months later, Singh would rejoin the Congress on condition that he remain chief minister. Vijaya Raje, on the other hand, would remain in the Jana Sangh, continuing to finance and campaign for it, continuing to abjure power. Their contrasting sense of loyalty showcases why the BJP wins and why the Congress loses.

Such an ideological emphasis on teamwork is of course not the only reason the BJP wins today. Various scholars have pointed to Modi's personal charisma, the use of money power, the unsubtle scapegoating of Muslims, and the progressive reach-out to Tribals, backward castes, and now Dalits. But this emphasis on organisational unity is the glue that holds these multiple explanations together.

This Hindu Fevicol is very much in evidence in the national leadership of the BJP today. I am revealing no secrets when I say that many BJP leaders dislike Modi. Many of BJP, RSS and VHP leaders I interviewed admired Modi's fidelity to ideology and knack for winning elections. But many found him ruthless, self-aggrandising and solitary. Will they say so in public?

Notice those former partymen who have spoken against Modi (and were happy to tell me so when I interviewed them). I mean the Arun Shouries, the Yashwant Sinhas. They are not from an RSS background. Not for them the history lesson that disunity now will mimic the disunity of the Hindu past. In contrast, those BJP leaders with an RSS upbringing—Lal Krishna Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi most plainly—have refused to cry pain despite humiliation at the hands of the new Jugalbandi. However deep their dislike of Modi, they will keep up appearances. Family fights shall remain within the house.

Modi has responded in kind, paying public obeisance to the elders in his *parivar*. This was palpable a few weeks ago when Advani turned 93. Modi visited him head bowed and called him a "living inspiration". Advani in turn blessed him. Their acting was not to convey mutual love, of which there is none. They both wanted to signal that family rituals will be adhered to.

The more visible instance of this was when Vajpayee died in August 2018, at the age of 93. Vajpayee had done much to ruin Modi's career, from trying to get him sacked as Gujarat chief minister after the 2002 riots to trying once again after the BJP's national election defeat in 2004. Yet, Vajpayee's funeral was a national event, with the prime minister accompanying the hearse to its final resting place

THE RSS HAD INTERNALISED ITS OWN LESSONS FROM THE DISUNITY AT PANIPAT. THE PHYSICAL PART OF THE RSS TRAINING WAS NOT JUST EXERCISE, IT WAS EXERCISE DONE TOGETHER. WHAT WAS BEING TAUGHT WAS TEAMWORK, THE NEED FOR COORDINATION AMONG HINDUS



GETTY IMAGES

AN RSS SESSION IN BHOPAL, OCTOBER 2015

on foot for six kilometres.

Contrast this with the funeral of PV Narasimha Rao in 2004 by the Congress government in power then. Though Vajpayee had done as much to hurt Modi as Rao had done to Sonia Gandhi, that former prime minister's dead body was denied entry into the party headquarters, was not allowed to be cremated in Delhi, and the funeral pyre was exposed to stray dogs in Hyderabad. This sequence of events is detailed in a biography of Rao, *Half Lion*, which I wrote some years ago. When Advani read those pages, he told me: "We also have differences in our party. But we don't treat each other like that." This, in a nutshell, is why the BJP won then, why it wins now.

Perhaps the most significant example of this teamwork—this ideological commitment to keep the marriage going even when the love has left—was Vajpayee's decision not to leave the BJP in the late 1980s. The RSS had ordered the 'Gandhian socialist' Vajpayee to step down as party president in 1986. For the next seven years, he was unwanted in his party as Advani rode atop a converted Toyota chariot on his Rath Yatra to Ayodhya. Vajpayee opposed this mixing of religion and politics saying: "The difficulty of the *rath* [is that] once you ride it you do not feel like getting down from it."

Other parties sensed Vajpayee's isolation during this period. VP Singh later claimed that Vajpayee wanted to break away from the BJP. The Congress also came fishing. "Rajiv wanted the Hindu vote, and Vajpayee was the kind of person who may have been able to get it without...(antagonising) Muslims," a senior Congress leader who met Vajpayee to entice him remembers. But, this leader adds, "(Vajpayee) would listen, and then laugh. He would not say anything...(but) we knew. He was not going to come." When asked by journalists about leaving Advani's BJP, Vajpayee would reply, "*Jaayein to jaayein kahan?* (If one were to leave, where would one go?)"

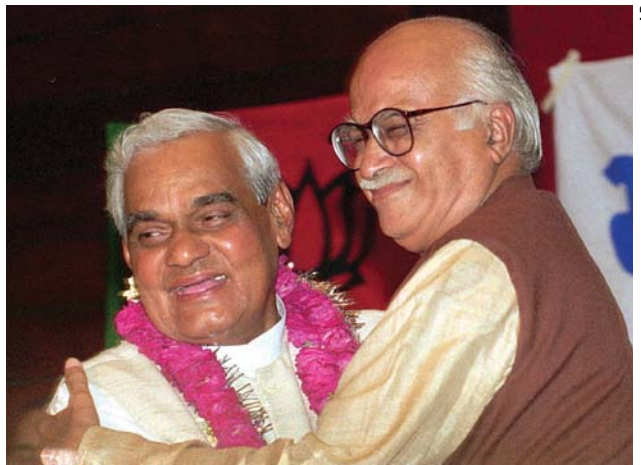
Had Vajpayee left the party in the 1980s, the BJP would not have been able to mainstream itself in the late 1990s and attract the range of coalition allies it did. His decision against divorce was vital to the first bloom of the lotus.

That it was a history lesson which weighed in on his decision to not leave can be seen from a speech Vajpayee gave at the height of his estrangement, in 1988. Vajpayee referred to the battle between the East India Company and the Nawab of Bengal in 1757 which marked the beginning of British rule: "In the Battle of Plassey, as many people were fighting as were standing outside the battlefield and seeing the entertainment. They were waiting to hear the results of the battle. The future of the country was being decided, but the entire country was not involved in this decision."

Vajpayee's fear of division was not just moored in history; it was anchored in the rifts that were tearing apart the Congress right then. He made a trip to England in the late 1980s to attend an academic conference in Oxfordshire. There he met the Princeton political scientist Atul Kohli who had written at length about the de-institutionalisation of the Congress. "I have read your books," Vajpayee told him during their evening walks. "That is what we are worried about. That's why organisation matters so much for us."

Some readers may argue that the BJP's teamwork stems not from a reading of history but from alike social backgrounds. But Vajpayee (UP Brahmin), Advani (Amil Sindhi), Narendra Modi (Gujarati Ghanchi) and Amit Shah (Gujarati Baniya) come from diverse castes and parts of India. And the social base of their party has evolved from only

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EXAMPLE OF THIS TEAMWORK WAS VAJPAYEE'S DECISION NOT TO LEAVE IN THE LATE 1980S. HAD HE LEFT, THE BJP WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO MAINSTREAM ITSELF. HIS DECISION WAS VITAL TO THE FIRST BLOOM OF THE LOTUS

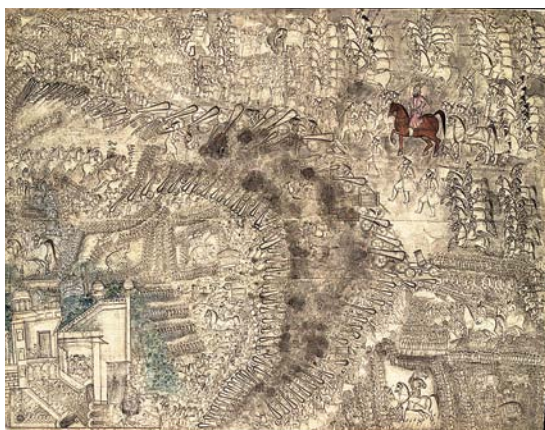


ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE AND LK ADVANI, MAY 1996

upper castes to Tribals, OBCs and even Dalits. In the 2019 General Election, for example, Modi won more Tribal, Dalit and middle-caste votes than his opponents. And the symbolism of India currently having a backward caste prime minister and Dalit president tells you what the ruling dispensation wants to convey about itself.

Besides, even if the BJP were a

THE BJP AND RSS ARE OBSESSED WITH THE THIRD BATTLE OF PANIPAT. ALL FOUR—VAJPAYEE, ADVANI, MODI AND AMIT SHAH—HAVE LEARNT THE SAME VERSION OF HISTORY. IT IS ONE PLAGUED BY THE ABSENCE OF HINDU UNITY



A DEPICTION OF THE THIRD BATTLE OF PANIPAT FOUGHT IN JANUARY 1761

single-caste leadership, kinship alone is no guarantee of teamwork. Single-caste parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) are as plagued by infighting. Hindu nationalists rely on history, yet again, to grasp this point. To quote the longest-serving RSS chief MS Golwalkar: 'The person responsible for the defeat of Prithiviraj, the Hindu King at Delhi, by Mohammed Gori was his own caste relation Jaichand. The person who hounded Rana Pratap from forest to forest was none other than his own caste-man Raja Mansingh. Shivaji too was opposed by men of his own caste. Even in the last-ditch battle between the Hindus and the British at Poona in 1818, it was a fellow caste-man of the Peshwas, Natu by name, who lowered the Hindu flag and hoisted the British flag.'

It is this analysis of history, not the affective bonds of caste or gender, that have made both *jugalbandi*

dis value teamwork above all else. This is as true of Modi as it is of Amit Shah. By the early 1980s, Shah was visiting *shakhas*, swallowing the same physical and ideological doses that Vajpayee and Advani had gulped in the 1940s and Modi in the 1960s. Although attending *shakhas* a thousand kilometres and several decades apart, all four have learnt the same version of history. It is one plagued by the absence of Hindu unity.

So far, I have argued that the secret sauce for the BJP's victories is the ideology of organisational unity, and that this sauce is made by a certain squeezing of history. Let me conclude with a final, even more provocative point. Why did Hindu nationalism adopt this focus on teamwork? Why care about unity in the first place?

To answer that question, one must go back to the origins of Hindu nationalism, to a hundred years ago. The triggering event was the introduction (by British colonialists responding to nationalist pressure) of limited elections in the 1920s. Any definition of democracy is founded on free elections. One individual, one vote. But Indians lived lives built around group identities such as caste, religion, region and language. The introduction of elections was thus an experiment. Would democracy transform Indians into voting as individuals rather than groups?

We know what happened. India's groups now had an incentive to increase numbers, either through re-definition or through coalitions. For instance, the question 'What is Hinduism?' morphed into 'Who is a Hindu?'—the final subtitle of a 1923 essay by

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the clearest thinker of Hindu nationalism. Savarkar was closely following the elections of the 1920s and the vote-bank politics it was incentivising. And the creation of the RSS, and the first national Hindu party, the Mahasabha, were also responses to these elections of the 1920s.

Their challenge now, a hundred years later, is as clear as it was then: to convince enough of India's Hindus—divided into 3,000 castes, 25,000 sub-castes and 19,000 languages—to vote as one. Hindu nationalism has spent a hundred years nurturing this vote bank—by reaching out to lower castes, celebrating common cultural symbols that can unite Hindus, and fomenting an atavistic fear of Muslims. This vision—both progressive and regressive—makes sense only in the context of democracy and its emphasis on numbers.

Hindu nationalists may be majoritarian, but they are not fascists. They are birthed by elections, the first ingredient of any definition of democracy. This umbilical link is made stronger by the fact that Hinduism provides no religious model of the state, no Caliphate or Papal State, that can supplant democracy. The Hindu state requires elections. That's why the BJP is so good at winning them. ■



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ADVANTAGE ADITYANATH

As the chief minister's approval ratings rise, the divided opposition in Uttar Pradesh is scrambling for the anti-BJP vote

By AMITA SHAH

THE RECENT BYPOLLS in seven of the 403 seats in the Uttar Pradesh state Assembly would not have attracted much national attention had it not been for the way they were fought. Although they covered only a fraction of the electorate of the most populous Indian state, the elections were projected by a section of pundits and pitched by the enthusiastic yet disparate opposition—the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress—as a test for Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's brand of governance and an opportunity for each party to establish itself as a key challenger to the incumbent in the 2022 Assembly polls. While the outcome was expected by some of these parties, which had railed against the Chief Minister in a no-holds-barred campaign, to be a morale booster for their cadre, it turned out that the BJP had the last laugh, winning six of the seven constituencies and retaining its poll glory of 2017 and 2019. In his moment of triumph, Adityanath called the results a confirmation of the “common man's faith”.

The scene looked distant from the April of 2019 when the SP and the BSP had joined hands in a major realignment of forces in the state. Standing on a dais, flanked by SP leader Akhilesh Yadav and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) chief Ajit Singh, BSP leader Mayawati had asked the people not to let their votes get split between the Congress and the Grand Alliance of SP and BSP in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress, she had told her audience comprising a large section of Muslims, was not strong enough to stop the BJP. It was in Deoband, where the Darul Uloom, Asia's largest Islamic seminary, is located, that the SP-BSP-RLD alliance decided to begin its campaign for the Lok Sabha elections.

Nearly a fortnight before that rally, Adityanath, who had become chief minister in the 2017 state election, had kicked off his campaign near the Shakumbhari Devi temple, just 40 km



AP

away, in the same district of Saharanpur. Back then it looked like the BJP had locked horns with an alliance that had got its caste math right. This game of numbers, however, failed to click despite the old arch-rivals hoping to consolidate the Jatav, Yadav and Muslim votes. The BJP swept the state, winning 62 of the 80 seats with nearly half the vote share. Last year's results showed how the Grand Alliance fell like a house of cards.

This time round, the BSP and the SP were back on the warpath to ride the wave of anti-incumbency they had expected against the ruling government. Their hopes seemed high despite both ruling out an alliance with each other or with the Congress. The SP had aligned with the Congress in the 2017 Assembly elections only to face a humiliating defeat. With the results showing them their respective slots in state politics ahead of the next election in the state, around 14 months from now, what we have in the most electorally significant state is a



shrunk opposition cocking a snook at one another in their fight for the anti-BJP vote.

By the next state elections, Mayawati would be a decade out of power in Uttar Pradesh. Over the last two years, she has vacillated between strategies. First, she amiably joined hands with the SP and then bitterly parted ways. She deviated from her resolve of skipping the bypolls this time. Though the BSP lost all these seven bypolls earlier this month, it secured a 19 percent vote share thanks to the caste loyalty of the Jatavs. But trouble seems to be brewing for her. At 64, apparently weary of running the show all by herself, she has brought members of her family into party posts, going against her own earlier promises not to turn the party into a dynastic entity.

It was at the Saharanpur rally last year that she had introduced her nephew Akash Anand, the eldest of the three sons of her brother Anand Kumar, to the public, sending the mes-

sage that he would be her political heir. Mayawati was herself 45 when Kanshi Ram, who belonged to the Sikh Chamar community among the Dalits, which has 66 sub-castes, gave her the reins of the party he had founded in 1984. The BSP fought its first Assembly elections in a tie-up with Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP in 1993, a year after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Kanshi Ram brought the Dalits, particularly Chamars, under one umbrella, giving them a separate political identity—and dignity—among the Hindus. The parting with the SP in 1995 following the infamous guesthouse episode—in which Mayawati risked being killed by SP men—was the beginning of a long rivalry that they buried briefly during the Lok Sabha polls in 2019 hoping to stop the Modi juggernaut.

This year, the BSP was hoping to cash in on the state police's handling of the Hathras case involving the death of a 20-year-old Dalit woman. Mayawati may have been condemning it but her

absence from Hathras triggered protests in the community, alleging she no longer believed in justice for Dalits. Notably, Mayawati made her entry into politics by projecting herself as '*Dalit ki beti*' (daughter of a Dalit) and reaching out to the Jatavs who comprise close to half of the 22 per cent Dalits in UP. They have remained her trusted supporters although her party's vote share has been declining since 2007.

Soon after her party's bypoll debacle and the Bihar victory of the BJP-led NDA against the Mahagathbandhan, Mayawati lost no time in devising her strategy for 2022—focusing on the 'Most Backward' among the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), large sections of whom have shifted allegiance to the BJP. She has appointed Bhim Rajbhar of Mau in eastern UP as the party's state chief, replacing former Rajya Sabha member Munquad Ali, the only Muslim holding a key party post. The Muslim vote in the state generally gets divided between the SP, which draws the larger chunk of it, and the Congress.

So fierce is her hostility towards the SP that she has even sent signals of getting cosy with the BJP in the recent Rajya Sabha polls. The BJP was once the BSP's former ally at a time when the SP's militant secularism was at its peak under Mulayam Singh Yadav. Thanks to her outreach, the BJP refrained from putting up a candidate against Ramji Lal Gautam, a Rajya Sabha candidate of the BSP. Her party has just 10 seats in Lok Sabha and five in Rajya Sabha. Mayawati, to get back at Akhilesh Yadav for trying to wean away seven members of her party in the cut-throat world of UP's regional wranglings, had said she could vote with the BJP to keep the SP out. This is not the first time that Mayawati, who is embroiled in disproportionate assets cases, has warmed up to the BJP. In July, when the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan was faced with a crisis following a

revolt within the Congress, she issued a whip asking the six MLAs, who had won on a BSP ticket, to vote against it.

POLITICAL PUNDITS ANTICIPATE a tug-of-war among opposition parties in Uttar Pradesh for the 10-12 per cent Brahmin vote. But then the recent bypolls have reinforced the BJP's confidence that the Brahmin voter is not disillusioned with the party. "We won seats which are Brahmin-dominated in the byelections. The BJP's governance has a constructive agenda with its ear to the ground, while the three opposition parties have none. Second, the BJP has a strong leadership in Yogi Adityanath," says Sidharth Nath Singh, a cabinet minister in the state.

Adityanath has demonstrated his government's firm will to crush crime by hunting down gangsters and history-sheeters, many of whom are now in jail. He has earned praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is an MP from the state, for his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the concomitant migrant crisis in UP. Besides, the chief minister has won accolades for pursuing development. Listing out achievements on the completion of three years of his government in March, he said the Uttar Pradesh Investors Summit has brought investment proposals worth Rs 4.68 lakh crore, of which 371 projects have been implemented. These, he said, will generate more than 33 lakh direct and indirect employment opportunities. His government is planning 12 new airports, including one in Jewar, in a state where only three cities are currently connected to the air grid.

It was Mayawati who had proposed the Jewar airport in Greater Noida. She, too, built projects like the six-lane Yamuna Expressway and laid out the framework for the Ganga Expressway as

NOIDA METRO RAIL CORPORATION'S
AQUA LINE CONNECTING NOIDA
AND GREATER NOIDA



GETTY IMAGES

BSP CHIEF MAYAWATI AND SP LEADER AKHILESH YADAV IN LUCKNOW, JANUARY 12, 2019



So fierce is Mayawati's hostility towards the SP today that she has sent signals of getting cosy with the BJP. In devising her strategy for 2022, she has focused on the 'Most Backward' among the OBCs, large sections of whom have shifted allegiance to the BJP. She has appointed **Bhim Rajbhar** as the party's state chief



REUTERS

chief minister from 2007 to 2012. But the building of sprawling memorials and lavish homes overshadowed her rule.

The BJP, flaunting Adityanath's development agenda and the Ram Temple, is hoping to cut across caste lines, in an effort to further weaken the challenge from the opposition. "The BJP will get the advantage of a divided opposition. It's pure simple mathematics. The social base gets fragmented. Besides, Yogi is seen as an active chief minister and there is no significant anti-incumbency against him," says political analyst Badri Narayan. No longer just a Brahmin party, the BJP has managed to wean away large sections of the most backward classes, as was evident in Bihar. In UP, it has brought into its fold the non-Jatav Dalits and the non-Yadav OBCs who are outside the core support base of Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav.

The SP has failed to expand beyond its Yadav voters who are increasingly veering towards the BJP. Of every six Yadavs in the state, two voted for the BJP in 2019, according to a study by the Centre for the Study of Society and Politics, Kanpur. The SP lost its three family boroughs—Kannauj, Badaun and Firozabad—which it had won in the Modi wave of 2014 to the BJP's non-Yadav candidates. Mayawati had even accused the SP of failing to transfer its votes to her candidates during the 2019 alliance. In the last General Election, it was the SP that bore the bigger brunt, winning just five seats—13.7 per cent—while the BSP secured 10—26.3 per cent.

In the recent bypolls, the SP managed to win Malhoni, but only with a margin of less than 5,000 votes, while it trailed the BJP in Tundla, Deoria and Naugawan. The only consolation for it was an increase in its vote percentage by 1.8 per cent. Akhilesh Yadav, who was missing in action, has recently tried to build bridges with his estranged uncle Shivpal Yadav and hinted at seat adjustments with the latter's Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party. For his part, the for-

mer chief minister has ruled out any alliance with either the BSP or the Congress. "Since the past three elections, voters of UP have provided a clear and decisive mandate. In 2017, the BSP portrayed itself as the main opposition party and tacitly supported the BJP by giving 99 tickets to Muslims. But after snapping ties with the SP and taking BJP support in the Rajya Sabha elections, the confusion is cleared. Now, anti-BJP voters have only one choice—the SP," argues SP leader Sudhir Panwar.

The BSP however insists that Mayawati is the best alternative to the BJP. "People have seen three governments—Mayawati, Akhilesh Yadav and the BJP. It was Mayawati who provided the best law and order. The development index was high," claims BSP leader Sudhendra Bhadoria. The Congress, despite the hype around its general secretary Priyanka Gandhi's professed spell, has been a non-starter. It drew a blank in the bypolls and lost deposits in four seats, though its vote share rose by 1.2 per cent. She, too, was conspicuous by her absence during the polls, although the party's state committee chief Ajay Lallu claims Gandhi was able to galvanise the cadres. "Our party workers are taking to the streets. Many of them have gone to jail in one year. We will fight on the basis of issues like women's security and farmers' woes." According to political analyst Sajjan Kumar, the Congress, which does not have a core caste-community support base, is way down the ladder in the war of perception as far as winning ability is concerned. Gandhi, he says, may contribute to the anti-Adityanath discourse of the opposition, but he doesn't see her party gaining from any such moves. "After all, nobody wants to waste a vote." With the three main opposition parties—the SP, the BSP and the Congress—planning to go it alone in 2022, each hoping to be the BJP's main contender, it is not difficult to foresee the winner. But in politics, 14 months is a long time. ■

THE TWIN ENGINES

THE GOVERNMENT NOW HAS THE RESOURCES AND THE MANOEUVRA

FINANCE MINISTER
NIRMALA SITHARAMAN
ADDRESSES THE MEDIA IN
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 12



GETTY IMAGES

OF REVIVAL

BILITY TO SPEND ITS WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

EVER SINCE THE first Atmanirbhar Bharat package was launched in May, dreary commentary and dire prognosis have followed the announcements. Critics have been quick to point out that while the packages look impressive on paper, the Government has shied away from spending what they think is necessary for economic revival. Comparisons are made to the stimulus package implemented in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008. So it was not surprising that the third such package, announced last week, met with the same scepticism.

However, instead of sinking in the absence of 'large spending', India seems to be responding well to the allegedly homeopathic economic medicine administered by the Narendra Modi Government. As in the past, some excuse is always available. This time, it is the festival season that is seen as the reason for the 'temporary' blip in India's economic fortunes. Never mind that before the festival season, 'unlit lamps' was the refrain. The Government, however, has continued with its programme. In the third economic package, a slew of measures for real estate, production-linked incentives for key sectors, encouragement to companies to hire more and clearing off the pending subsidy of the fertiliser sector were announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on November 12th.

In absolute terms, the outgo from the Government's coffers will be low, as has been the case with all Atmanirbhar packages. There has been constant criticism ever since the May 12th package was announced. The reluctance to spend more should be seen against the backdrop of the changing nature of risks in the last six months. These packages differed substantially from what fiscal stimuli are ordinarily understood to be. In common terms, a fiscal stimulus is usually expenditure undertaken by a government to give a boost to the economy. This can also be a reduction in taxes so that firms and individuals have more money in their hands for spending. The Modi Government could not do this back in May as its revenues had collapsed. In April, Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections stood at Rs 32,172 crore as compared to Rs 1,13,865 crore in April last year, a decline of nearly 72 per cent. May was only slightly better. In those months, no one could say anything about the duration and the extent of the

pandemic. Not spending to revive the economy made sense for an additional reason: India had enforced what was one of the most thoroughgoing lockdowns anywhere in the world. Mobility came to a halt in May and was not restored until late June. The immediate need was to provide succour to the more than three million migrants who had returned to their villages in northern and eastern India from the industrial hubs in western and southern India. The criticism sounded appealing at that time: it was now or never for the Indian economy. Except, it was not.

In mid-June, the nature of risks changed dramatically. The death of 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley shifted the risk from domestic uncertainty to external threat. Even the most sophisticated analysis and modelling cannot predict the extent and end of a raging pandemic and the probability of war. Either way, this was a situation of extreme uncertainty in which the Government could not give preference to spending for economic revival

The outgo from the Government's coffers will be low, as has been the case with all Atmanirbhar packages. The reluctance to spend more should be seen against the backdrop of the changing nature of risks in the last six months. These packages differed substantially from what fiscal stimuli are ordinarily understood to be

instead of preserving money in case of unforeseen situations and challenges arising from the Chinese threat or further waves of Covid-19 infections.

Then, sometime in October, officials began hinting that the Government was not averse to spending more to stimulate the economy, a demand that economists had been making since May. In late October, the Government revoked the spending curbs it had imposed on April 8th because the 'cash position of the government may be stressed in Q1 of 2020-21.' By then, many things had begun falling in place that allowed a re-evaluation of spending possibilities and priorities. For one, GST collections picked up smartly from June. But the Government seems to have gained confidence in the sustainability of these collections only from September, when they crossed the Rs 95,000 crore mark—higher than the corresponding period in 2019. The same trend was witnessed in October when the psychologically important Rs 1 lakh

crore barrier was breached. The collections were, again, higher than the same month last year. Over and above this, a number of high frequency indicators, such as the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), showed expansion that had not been seen for a very long time. A number of other indicators, such as a healthy increase in railway freight—based on iron ore exports, coal and foodgrains—picked up from July. This indicated a recovery in economic activity from the lows of April and May. By November, the most pessimistic private sector forecasts began being revised again. To give one example, the investment bank Goldman Sachs had estimated India's growth contraction in 2020-2021 at 14.8 per cent in September, a figure that was revised to a contraction of 10.3 per cent. It estimates a rebound of 13 per cent in growth in 2021-2022.

'A pivotal assumption for our 2021 India growth outlook is broad-based availability of an effective vaccine, which could allow containment policies and mobility to normalize fully by mid-2022,' Goldman Sachs economists Jonathan Sequeira and Andrew Tilton declared in a report.

THESE POSITIVE CHANGES are held to be the reason behind the Government's willingness to contemplate higher spending and loosening of its purse strings. But there is one big, unstated, factor at work that has changed spending calculations.

At the end of August, the Indian Army launched a surprise operation and secured the Kailash Range of mountains on the southern side of the Pangong Tso Lake in eastern Ladakh. The operation caught the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) by surprise. Military observers hinted that a Chinese reaction was likely "sooner than later" to regain the military initiative in that area. Given the elevation and topography of the area, such an operation was more likely before the snow set in. Snow on the high ranges and passes makes such actions very difficult. From this perspective, September was a critical month when a Chinese reaction was likely. By then India had begun hectic diplomatic efforts to contain the Chinese threat. Yet, with an aspiring hegemon like China, diplomacy is weak medicine and India had to be prepared for a military offensive. But as October passed, the chances of a Chinese offensive dimmed considerably. This situation is likely to remain unchanged for the next three to four months while eastern Ladakh remains snowbound.

Had India's hand been forced and the country compelled to take military action to counter Chinese aggression through defensive operations, the costs incurred would have been extremely heavy to the point of being catastrophic for the Indian economy. In such a situation, undertaking an economic stimulus would have been foolhardy. Costs of war are very hard to estimate and extrapolations from past conflicts are almost useless. For example, it has been estimated that the 1971 war with Pakistan cost India Rs 200 crore per week. This has been extrapolated to the present on the basis of inflation and increases in material costs and estimated to be Rs 2,000 crore per week. With China, a far more powerful adversary, these costs are certain to be much

AP



PRODUCTION OF STEEL FURNITURE
IN A FACTORY NEAR JAMMU,
SEPTEMBER 26

A number of indicators, such as rising GST collections in economic activity from the lows of April and

higher for a variety of reasons. Over and above these operational costs of running a war, the damage to the Indian economy would be very hard to estimate. For one, the marshalling of resources for the war effort would bring normal economic activity to a halt. For another, foreign investments—both direct investment and portfolio investment—would reverse. An economic collapse would not be beyond the realm of the imagination. This was in all likelihood a determining factor for the Government's reluctance to launch a stimulus programme.

Now that the Chinese threat has receded, for the time being, can the Government afford higher spending? Writing for *Open* in August, economist Sajjid Z Chinoy explained India's slowing economy and its dependence on public spending ('Growth in the Time of Corona'). He wrote: 'India therefore entered Covid with both private consumption and investment slowing. Instead, GDP growth was largely held up by government spending, which grew twice as strongly as the private sector since 2017 and almost four times as strongly in the pre-Covid year.' The result was that when the pandemic hit India, the Government was already spending a very high amount and it is certain that India's fiscal deficit will be significantly higher than the budgeted figure of 3.5 per cent of GDP for 2020-2021. In 2019-2020, the situation was so dire that the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR)—a more expansive definition of government's borrowing requirements than what is suggested by fiscal deficit—stood at 8.9 per cent of GDP, fully exhausting household savings of around 7.2 per cent of GDP. The Government was clearly living beyond its means.

This may have changed now. Preliminary estimates by the



A TRUCK BEING LOADED WITH PADDY IN AMRITSAR, SEPTEMBER 29

or a healthy increase in railway freight, picked up from June-July. This indicated a recovery May. By November, the most pessimistic private sector forecasts began to be revised again

Reserve Bank of India (RBI)—released in its November bulletin—show that household savings in the first quarter of 2020-2021 stand at a whopping 21.4 per cent of GDP. This is higher than the annual household savings in 2018-2019 (7.2 per cent of GDP) and 2019-2020 (8.3 per cent of GDP). The RBI noted that private consumption declined by 26.7 per cent (year-on-year) during the first quarter of 2020-2021 due to the lockdown, thus increasing savings. People simply did not have the opportunity to spend as only essential services and goods were available and the options for discretionary spending were extremely limited. Another reason for this trend is likely to be 'precautionary savings', as people worry about their jobs and future income along with the possibility of much higher medical expenses that may become necessary due to the pandemic.

The result is that the pandemic has had an unexpected but happy effect: the Government now has the resources necessary to 'spend its way' out of the economic morass. To use political phraseology, there is now a 'double engine' of reviving economic activities leading to a healthy inflow of indirect taxes and much higher household savings. It can, if it wishes, undertake expenditures that were unthinkable even six months ago.

The political economy of government spending in India before 2014 had one marked feature: leaky spending on 'welfare schemes' for the poor. The poor did get something but, along the way, large sums were siphoned off by corrupt intermediaries. Under the Modi Government, spending for the poor has continued as before but in a much more tightly managed manner to prevent leakage and corruption. Emergency help programmes,

such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, managed to get relief aid to migrants and other people in distress in a relatively clean manner. Predictably, this has not gone down well in certain quarters where it has been dubbed as a fetish for small schemes. The idea that the government should borrow more and spend liberally during a crisis has impeccable Keynesian roots. But in India, the danger of 'Keynesianism for the corrupt' is ever present and under Modi one of the priorities has been to prevent this politically damaging outcome. This has been cited as an example of a 'conservative government' unwilling to spend. If anything, fiscal deficits have remained high in the past years. The overriding concern has been how to spend for the poor without letting corruption and cronyism set in.

There is little doubt that India has been hit hard by the pandemic. It is unlikely that the country will return to a high growth path before 2022. Along the path, there are plenty of imponderables and the same structural features that have held back the country. To cite another example, the RBI has flagged the danger of high inflation rearing its head again. In the last two months, retail and wholesale inflation has returned. But unlike past bouts of high inflation, this is due to broken supply chains, labour shortages—and higher wages demanded by available labour—and other ravages of the pandemic. This calls for a different remedy than restricting money supply and tightening interest rates. Call it a fortuitous event or a thought-out response, the RBI did the heavy lifting in the earlier rounds of the Atmanirbhar packages in providing a credit lifeline. Chance, it seems, has favoured India, so far. ■

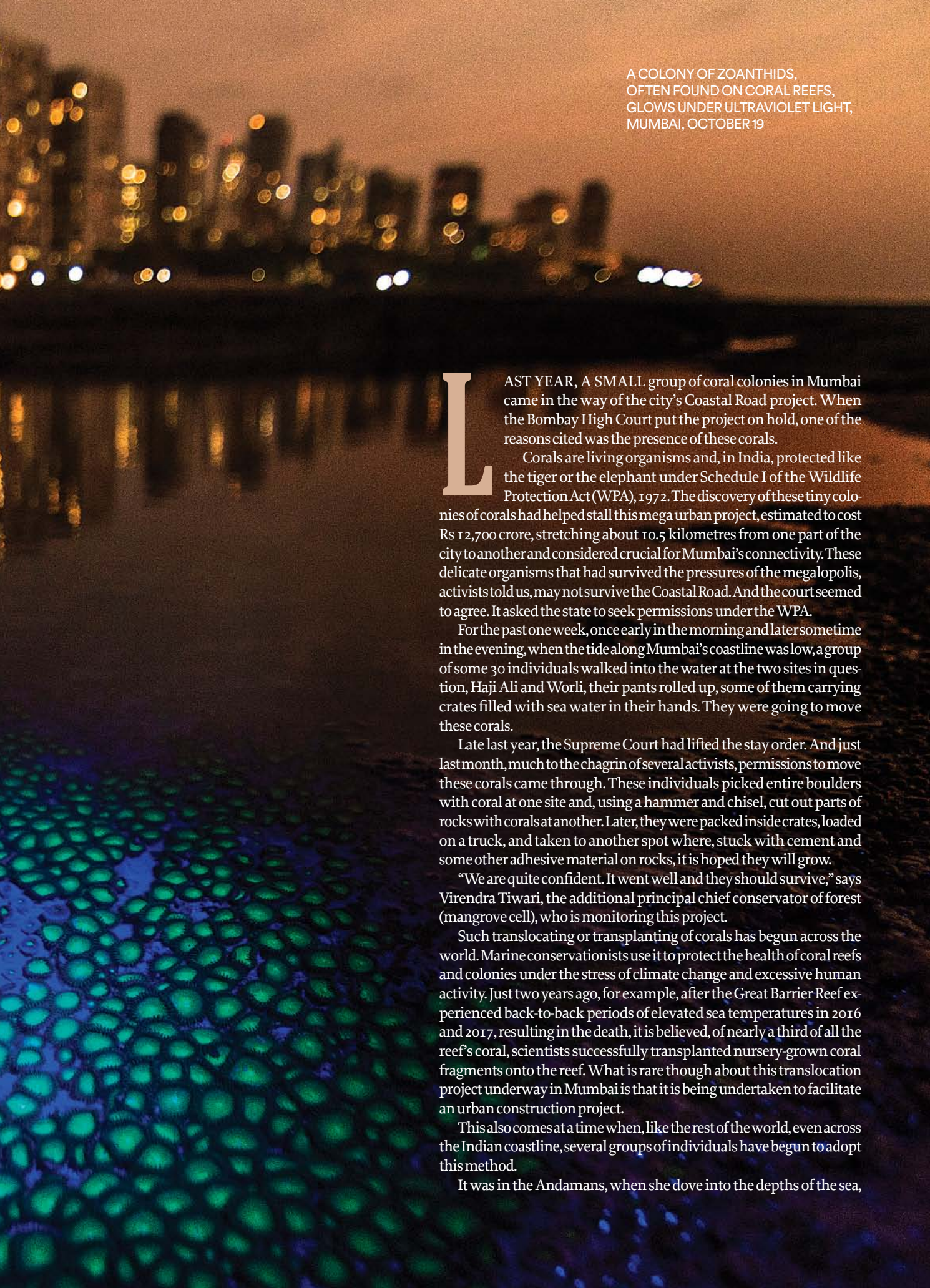


ENVIRONMENT

CORAL RELIEF

How researchers in India are relocating corals to facilitate urban projects and protect the reefs

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA



A COLONY OF ZOANTHIDS,
OFTEN FOUND ON CORAL REEFS,
GLOWS UNDER ULTRAVIOLET LIGHT,
MUMBAI, OCTOBER 19

LAST YEAR, A SMALL group of coral colonies in Mumbai came in the way of the city's Coastal Road project. When the Bombay High Court put the project on hold, one of the reasons cited was the presence of these corals.

Corals are living organisms and, in India, protected like the tiger or the elephant under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972. The discovery of these tiny colonies of corals had helped stall this mega urban project, estimated to cost Rs 12,700 crore, stretching about 10.5 kilometres from one part of the city to another and considered crucial for Mumbai's connectivity. These delicate organisms that had survived the pressures of the megalopolis, activists told us, may not survive the Coastal Road. And the court seemed to agree. It asked the state to seek permissions under the WPA.

For the past one week, once early in the morning and later sometime in the evening, when the tide along Mumbai's coastline was low, a group of some 30 individuals walked into the water at the two sites in question, Haji Ali and Worli, their pants rolled up, some of them carrying crates filled with sea water in their hands. They were going to move these corals.

Late last year, the Supreme Court had lifted the stay order. And just last month, much to the chagrin of several activists, permissions to move these corals came through. These individuals picked entire boulders with coral at one site and, using a hammer and chisel, cut out parts of rocks with corals at another. Later, they were packed inside crates, loaded on a truck, and taken to another spot where, stuck with cement and some other adhesive material on rocks, it is hoped they will grow.

"We are quite confident. It went well and they should survive," says Virendra Tiwari, the additional principal chief conservator of forest (mangrove cell), who is monitoring this project.

Such translocating or transplanting of corals has begun across the world. Marine conservationists use it to protect the health of coral reefs and colonies under the stress of climate change and excessive human activity. Just two years ago, for example, after the Great Barrier Reef experienced back-to-back periods of elevated sea temperatures in 2016 and 2017, resulting in the death, it is believed, of nearly a third of all the reef's coral, scientists successfully transplanted nursery-grown coral fragments onto the reef. What is rare though about this translocation project underway in Mumbai is that it is being undertaken to facilitate an urban construction project.

This also comes at a time when, like the rest of the world, even across the Indian coastline, several groups of individuals have begun to adopt this method.

It was in the Andamans, when she dove into the depths of the sea,

that Nayantara Jain, then working as a scuba diving instructor, began to witness the effects of climate change. Sea temperatures were rising rapidly and, in front of her, corals bleached and died. It convinced her, she says, to become involved in marine conservation. “As an instructor I was always there in the water. And this (experience of witnessing the effects of climate change) touched me deeply,” she says.

Over the years, as the executive director of ReefWatch Marine Conservation, Jain has been undertaking various marine conservation activities. Three years ago, she and her colleagues began a new pilot project. They were going to use the coral transplant method to build an artificial coral reef.

Jain and her colleagues would collect naturally broken coral fragments, which would have otherwise died, and tie them to a metal frame. They also became the first in the country to use a mineral accretion method, she says, where a low-voltage electric current from floating solar panels above would be passed through this frame. This electric charge is believed to make the water more alkaline, aiding in the formation of calcium carbonate, which is what coral polyps try to create in order to grow.

The group has built nine such artificial structures totalling an area of about 20 square metres. This is the extent of space for which they were granted permission. With the success of their project, where not only have the corals grown but marine life around them appears to have developed as well, Jain hopes they

CORALS ARE HARDY organisms. They have been around for thousands of years and are capable of recovering naturally. But the heavy hand of climate change is forcing conservationists to intervene. On India’s coastline, there are several projects underway using such transplant methods, from the Andamans and the Lakshadweep islands to the coasts of Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Goa and near Mumbai in Maharashtra’s Sindhudurg area.

On Gujarat’s Mithapur coast, where the Wildlife Trust of India has been carrying on a long-running coral restoration project, some years ago they even managed to successfully re-introduce two *Acropora* species of corals that had gone extinct from the area’s reef. This was done by taking live coral polyps not from a nearby site, as happens frequently with most coral transplants, but, for the first time in the country, hundreds of kilometres away from Lakshadweep.

A similar type of transplant, over an equally large distance, is what Deepak Apte thinks could hold the key to the survival of Lakshadweep’s coral reef.

Apte is the director of the Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai’s well-known wildlife research organisation. Last year, as part of a group of researchers, he published a study, carried out over 14 years, which revealed the extent of the threat to Lakshadweep’s coral reef.

The researchers used a species of giant clams in Lakshadweep known as *Tridacna maxima*, known to have a higher threshold for elevated sea temperatures than corals, as a surrogate for the coral reef.

TRANSPLANTING OF CORALS HAS BEGUN ACROSS THE WORLD. MARINE CONSERVATIONISTS USE IT TO PROTECT THE HEALTH OF CORAL REEFS AND COLONIES UNDER THE STRESS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN ACTIVITY

During the period of the study, ‘bleaching’ events were observed twice, once in 2010 and again in 2016. Bleaching is the process when, under the impact of elevated temperature, corals begin to lose their colourful algae which nourish them, leading ultimately to their death. Apte and his colleagues observed that after a period of stable increase in the density of the giant clams between 2004 and 2010, they declined immediately after the bleaching incident in 2010, followed by a period of stable decline until the next bleaching

event (in 2016), when the density saw a further rapid decline.

If this was happening to the giant clams, something similar must have been going on with Lakshadweep’s coral reefs.

Since the corals of Lakshadweep reach their thermal maxima, the threshold after which they begin bleaching between 28.5 to 29.5 degrees Celsius, Apte points out that coral restoration work must be undertaken keeping in mind the latest research. “If thermal maxima is a reality, and this may happen over the course of

GETTY IMAGES



WORK IN PROGRESS ON THE MUMBAI COASTAL ROAD PROJECT

will be able to further expand it. Seeing their success, other groups have also begun to adopt these methods. Jain has also begun conducting workshops for local forest officials to help them start their own coral restoration project.

“You have to do these things (coral restoration) now because corals are going through repeat stressor events, and they aren’t getting enough time to recover between these stressor events,” she says.

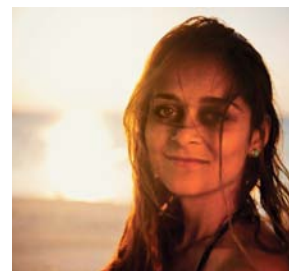


“IF THERMAL MAXIMA IS A REALITY, AND THIS MAY HAPPEN OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT 10 TO 15 YEARS, THEN WE NEED TO LOOK AT CORAL REEF MANAGEMENT VERY DIFFERENTLY”

DEEPAK APTE director, Bombay Natural History Society

“YOU HAVE TO DO RESTORATION BECAUSE CORALS ARE GOING THROUGH REPEAT STRESSOR EVENTS, AND THEY AREN'T GETTING TIME TO RECOVER”

NAYANTARA JAIN executive director, ReefWatch Marine Conservation



the next 10 to 15 years, then we need to look at (coral) reef management very differently,” he says.

One of the suggestions offered by Apte is transplanting corals from the warmer waters of the Gulf of Kutch, where they have been naturally exposed to temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius, to Lakshadweep's reef which is struggling to combat high temperatures. “Of course we need to study this properly before we do such a thing, to ensure we don't end up introducing pathogens and diseases. But if it is found okay, perhaps there lies the answer to our problems,” he says.

This method is still in its nascent stage globally and it has its naysayers. But many have begun to look at this more seriously. If corals that have naturally adapted to extreme climate can be successfully transplanted—or at least if their critical heat-withstanding genes can be transplanted—to our vulnerable reefs, perhaps this can help avert the catastrophe many believe is waiting to happen.

“We are at that stage right now where we really need to look at such interventions,” Apte says, who has submitted a proposal to conduct a study on the feasibility of such a transplant to the government.

In Mumbai, the translocation of the corals is much simpler in comparison. There were just 18 colonies originally, about nearly 3 square feet in Worli and about 1.1 square foot in Haji Ali. While the corals at Haji Ali have been moved to another spot, in South Mumbai's Navy Nagar region, the ones at Worli have been moved just a little distance away.

But the entire undertaking has been conducted under a fierce glare. Many activists have complained that the corals may not survive this relocation.

Even Jain from ReefWatch mentions that translocation of corals cannot be the first choice of action when an infrastructure construction is proposed. “You cannot use it (this method of translocation) as a free pass. Even when it (translocation) is done

it needs expert care and management to ensure that it survives,” she says. “When we do our restoration, for instance, we always put the (coral) fragments within a 100-metre radius of where we found it.”

There are others who stress that the infrastructure project is too crucial to be cancelled for a few colonies of corals. “These corals or at least most of it should survive the movement. Besides, you'll find these types of corals everywhere. There is nothing unique or distinct about them,” says a marine biologist who has spent several years studying corals. “The problem is that it is all a smokescreen. It is great; people are coming together and uniting over something. But here we go on talking about a few colonies of corals. While nobody is talking about what is happening in Lakshadweep, or the Andaman and Nicobar islands, where our 1,000-square metre reefs are reaching their thermal threshold.”

HARSHAL KARVE, A marine biologist appointed by the state's mangrove cell to oversee the translocation process in Mumbai, has spent the last few days at the two sites observing the work underway. While the work went on smoothly, there were a few challenges, such as the possible discovery of a few more coral colonies than had been surveyed before (although this has to be confirmed by the National Institute of Oceanography team tasked with this project later). During the first two days, the weather held up well and the water remained low for the team to spot the corals. So even when the water became a bit higher and rougher on the third, Karve says, it posed no problems.

As someone interested in corals, Karve has been curious about what impact all this chipping and lifting of the host boulders will have on these small organisms.

A few days ago, he looked into a crate and took a photograph to see if they exhibited any sign of stress. “But there were no such signs at all,” he says. “I think they will survive.” ■



SAY CHEESE, INDIA

Changing urban lifestyle
gives the emerging market of
local artisan cheeses a boost

By V SHOBA

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WODAYS BEFORE a nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 25th to slow the spread of the pandemic, Prateeksh Mehra's phone started ringing off the hook.

For the first time in the five years that Mehra, 36, had been supplying to Mumbai restaurants, his clients were calling to cancel orders. Hanging up on a major client, he turned to his brother Agnay, 34, and said, "What the hell just happened?" It hadn't occurred to them that restaurants would become irrelevant overnight and remain unviable for months to come. The Mehra brothers were sitting on hundreds of kilos of cheese that was to have made its way into weekend cheese boards and wood-fired pizzas, and filled many a pastry—and Instagram pages—with gooey goodness. The Spotted Cow Fromagerie sells about a tonne of cheese in a month—down to 400-500 kg now because of the persistent slump in the food and hospitality industry—which means holding and ageing at least twice the quantity. Their 'Tomme de Bombai', an oozy raclette-style take on the Tomme de Savoie from the French Alps, is aged for two months; the 'Bombrie' and the 'Camembay', the names a hat-tip to their home city, for several weeks. "Going into the lockdown, we were a B2B-focused cheesemaker. We were selling at select retail stores, too, but even those were shut now. We were very worried. It would have been criminal to throw all the cheese away," says Prateeksh Mehra, who was a food photographer before he became a full-time cheesemaker. "Suddenly, we started getting a lot of orders on our website. People who could no longer eat out wanted good cheese delivered at their door. As gourmet stores slowly re-opened in April and May, many approached us, instead of us approaching them. Places that were selling coffee, bread and chocolate online wanted to carry our cheeses. Word of mouth spread quickly." If overseas travel and cooking shows like *MasterChef Australia* that sowed the seeds of the buy-local culture in India helped homegrown cheesemakers make inroads into the hospitality industry in 2014-2015,

the lockdown, Mehra says, has made the average urban consumer more aware of the provenance of food. "By May, when we resumed production, all our cheeses were sold out, inspiring us to persist with R&D. We are proud of our traditional cultured mozzarella, for instance, which we make without citric acid and took a long time perfecting. We don't want anyone to taste our cheeses and say they are mediocre."

In an industry where shortcuts abound—from spray-can cheese and pizza crust fillings to analogue cheese slices and powders added to instant noodles and popcorn—artisanal cheeses are a labour of love. Much of the effort that goes into the making of a cheese with character—let alone bringing out the distinct character of a terroir—goes unappreciated in a country that lacks a cheese culture. The hulking wheels in the imported cheese aisle, we know, are better than locally mass-produced emulsifier-and-vegetable-oil-laden processed cheese or the vacuum-sealed cheddar from the US. We would even pay top dollar for a sliver of Parmigiano-Reggiano to grate into our pastas, for briny feta from Greece to make summer salads with. But are we ready to lap up a wheel of a washed-rind Gruyere made in Mumbai, a soft pyramid of ash-coated Valençay from Chennai, a parcel of mulberry-leaf-wrapped Banon à la Feuille matured in wine at a Pune farm, an annatto-infused blue cheese with copper veins dreamed up in Bengaluru, a Montasio aged for a year in a cave in Kodaikanal?

"A handful of fromagers in India are making some world-class cheeses today. But the question to ask is how often is good cheese consumed in Indian homes? If it is for a party platter, then price is no issue. But if you were eating cheese regularly at breakfast and dinner, you'd think before stocking up on a product that costs Rs 2,500 a kg," says Christopher Albuquerque, who ran a cheese shop in Bengaluru named '10 Cuts of Cheese', where he stocked Indian and imported brands, until early this year when he shut it down to rethink the business. There are many reasons why the cost of artisan cheese in India is often on a par with what one ends up paying for imports—sourcing

quality milk is not easy, urban real estate costs and imported equipment add to the overheads, cold-chain logistics are non-existent, not to mention the challenge of safely ageing cheese in a warm country. Over the past few years, even as discerning consumers switched to buying fresh pasta-filata-style cheeses locally—most famously from Bengaluru's Vallombrosa cheese shop run by Benedictine monks—not many were yet convinced India could produce good aged cheese. Cheesemakers who were experimenting with crusty rinds, goat milk and bold savoury flavours, considered too sharp for the Indian palate, were dismissed as hobbyists who had allowed their passions to run amok. "I don't think Indian cheesemakers have yet got the hang of making a Stilton with the right texture, for instance," says Albuquerque. "While we have a long way to go in aged cheese, there are exceptions that stand out and instantly win you over." A fromagerie in Bengaluru that has developed a cult following over the past year could contribute to a change in perceptions, he says.

B

EGUM VICTORIA CHEESES, made with high-quality A2 milk and wrapped in wax paper printed with chic silhouettes of native cattle breeds, are Instagram favourites. They are definitive in their category and taste even better than they look. Some have netted chef Manu Chandra, fromager at the Bengaluru startup, compliments from a French Consul-General and British chef Marco Pierre White, among others. While the brand was a cheesehead's delight, the pandemic, says Chandra, helped it "segue into people's homes". Despite being billed as artisanal, a chunk of Begum Victoria's customers are regular consumers of processed cheese who leapfrogged overnight, he says, on a conference call with *Open* and Shruti Golchha, a partner and fromager in the venture. "We have had our hands full with orders since the lockdown," says Golchha. "We produce 30 kg of cheese a day and we can hold inventory of up to about 2,000 kg. The idea is to slowly scale up and supply across the country."

They are proud of the state-of-the-art cheese 'cave' in the heart of Bengaluru, especially the exclusive cave just for their by-now-iconic brie where a *Penicillium* fungus that imparts a special characteristic flavour to the cheese is allowed to thrive, forming a downy white crust over weeks. Among European cheeses, the brie is arguably the most popular in India, possibly because it is the easiest to pronounce, but also because it is approachable, with its warm mushroomy flavour, bloomy rind and luscious centre. Not that Begum Victoria has only made safe bets. "At one level, cheesemaking is like reinventing the wheel," says Chandra, who made a blue cheese only to find that it was a cave management nightmare. "The *Penicillium roqueforti* is an aggressive bacteria that will climb on to everything. It's a little like Covid," he jokes.

One of the testimonials on the web-

B2C hasn't been easy for the brand, which makes a tonne of cheese in a month. "Local producers don't get as much shelf space and display at retail stores as imported cheeses. You have to pay a listing fee and build relationships with store managers," says Sharad Madiman, the Caroselle distributor for Bengaluru. "Without a clear B2C strategy, it is hard to build scale."

Scale is a double-edged sword, says MHari Shanker, director of Kodai Cheese, a half-century-old family-owned dairy in Kodaikanal that makes natural cheeses. While scale means that he can refuse to pay a listing fee and price his cheese competitively, it also meant making compromises. "In 2010 or so, we had grown to a point where we were going through nearly 1 lakh litres of milk in a day. We had factories in Maharashtra; we had a tie-up with Domino's. We could no longer control the quality of milk we

following a customer complaint. Among his personal favourites from Kodai's menu is the Parmesan, priced affordably at Rs 350 for 200g, the Camembert, flavoured Goudas and some of the ambitious new goat's cheeses he has been developing. "I want to be proud of every cheese we make. Then the pricing will change," he says. Shanker has set up a factory in Nashik that processes milk from 18,000 goats and works with distressed women. After Covid struck, Kodai, too, began selling directly to consumers through online channels, but it also exported 40 per cent of the hard cheeses at hand to the US. "In the specialty segment, we will never be able to compete with, say, Dutch cheeses because quality milk is much cheaper there. But as the Indian artisan cheese market blooms, we expect to play a big part."

If the pandemic forced larger natural cheesemakers to rethink their priorities,

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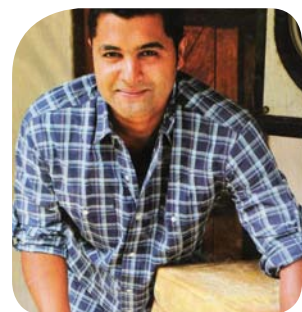
"We have had our hands full with orders since the lockdown. We produce 30 kg of cheese a day and we can hold inventory of up to about 2,000 kg. The idea is to slowly scale up and supply across the country"

SHRUTI GOLCHHA
co-founder, Begum Victoria LLP



"In three years' time, I don't want to be doing 25 cheeses, or even 10 cheeses. I want to do just 5-8, and do them well"

M HARI SHANKER
director, Kodai Cheese



site of Caroselle Cheese, a fromagerie in Tamil Nadu that started operating in 1990, is that of an expat chef at an Italian restaurant exclaiming in disbelief at the brand's Parmesan and Edams. "It is all made in India, unbelievable," he notes. "Chefs and restaurateurs know we make some of the best Parmesan and Montasio in the country. No one else has a natural cave in the hills that makes ageing for over a year possible," says Dinesh Kumar, business head, Tulya Foods, which acquired the Kodaikanal-based cheesemaking brand in 2018. With cheaper preservative-laced cheeses competing for shelf space, selling

bought, or the processes. We decided then that we would go back to being a quality-based company," says Shanker, 40, who has a Master's in cheesemaking. By 2014, Kodai Cheese had scaled back to just 4,000 litres a day. Now they have a throughput of 5,000 litres a day and make 15,000 kg of cheese a month, with 70,000 kg in stocks. "In three years' time, I don't want to be doing 25 cheeses, or even 10 cheeses. I want to do just 5-8, and do them well," he says. To that end, Shanker has blacklisted retailers who didn't stock his cheeses at the right temperature, and even de-listed from Big Basket for six months

it jolted small urban creameries out of their comfort zones. Käse, a small, four-year-old fromagerie in Alwarpet, Chennai, that works with clean, ethically sourced milk from micro dairies, had to halt operations for two months. "Orders have gone through the roof since we reopened in mid-May. We are seven of us, but we are just working with three now. Volumes have almost doubled since July—from 150-200 litres of milk a day pre-Covid to 300-350 litres now," says Namrata Sundaresan, who along with Anuradha Krishnamoorthy, runs Käse. Their most popular cheese is a 10-day-old cheddar

coated with *molagapodi*, the quintessential Tamil condiment served with idli. “We debuted it at a pop-up event where we called it Ode to Chennai [OTC]. OTC became all the rage on social media. We got a lot of flak for it, but also, customers wanted more of it,” says Sundaresan, who has experimented with over 30 cheeses and stocks about 1,000 kg at any given time. With customers increasingly seeking transparency, she is hopeful that the artisan cheese market will expand in the coming years. “We have had young moms calling to ask if we have unsalted cheeses suitable for their kids. This only goes to show that people want to know where their dairy products come from and what they contain.” According to Sundaresan, 11,000 new visitors landed on Käse’s website in the past month, from just 4,000 before Covid.

Dhananjay Singh, the man behind Nutoras, a cheese company with a focus

those on a ketogenic diet. From Gouda and smoked cheddar to Mozzarella di Bufala and American-style cream cheese, Nutoras makes quality cheeses that are affordable, and more importantly, available across the country. “We are building a mass premium brand that bridges the gap between the processed cheese market and small artisanal players. The way we do that is by keeping the focus on quality and functioning like an FMCG distributor at a very crude level.” Singh’s company, based in Panchgani in Maharashtra’s Satara district, makes 30 tonnes of cheese, of 25 kinds, in a month. “My guess is we control 25 per cent of the quality cheese market in the country,” he says. Nutoras, which as a policy was built as a B2C brand, retails across India, from Puri and Patna to Gangtok and Mysuru. While it has scaled back production of its soft cheeses temporarily, the brand has been getting requests from

the operation to my mother’s garage,” she says. After shutting down for Covid, she re-opened three weeks ago in response to demand from home cooks and a new breed of individuals who are discovering cheese. Her buffalo feta in brine continues to be popular, but she wants to move on to Swiss-style cheeses with a longer shelf life. “B2C demand is definitely growing. It’s a question of making your unit economics work,” she says.

Eleftheria, another artisan creamery from Mumbai’s central suburbs, took a hit as B2B sales collapsed. “We were already working on launching a website and B2C branding, and got it up and running immediately,” says Mausam Narang of Eleftheria, who specialises in fresh Greek-style cheeses. “With deliveries resuming, we soon went back to doing pre-Covid volumes. We are at two tonnes a month now,” she says. Narang’s clientele is well-

“Suddenly, we started getting a lot of orders on our website. People who could no longer eat out wanted good cheese delivered at their door”

PRATEEKSH MEHRA
co-founder, The Spotted Cow Fromagerie



“Orders have gone through the roof since we re-opened in mid-May. Volumes have almost doubled since July—from 150-200 litres of milk a day pre-Covid to 300-350 litres now”

NAMRATA SUNDARESAN
co-founder, Käse



on nutrition, says the pandemic has only accelerated a shift in the urban Indian diet that was already afoot. A former investment banker, Singh, 40, says he has been tracking the changes in Indian consumer behaviour since 2012, when the country’s per capita income crossed the Rs 50,000 mark. “With more money to spend on food, and a better understanding of why fats and proteins are better sources of energy than carbohydrates, people were consuming dairy protein, eggs and chicken,” he says. Nutoras’ high-protein cottage cheese is a staple among sportsmen—it even travelled to the IPL in Dubai—and

small supermarket chains across metros and smaller cities in what Singh says is a sign of changing consumption patterns.

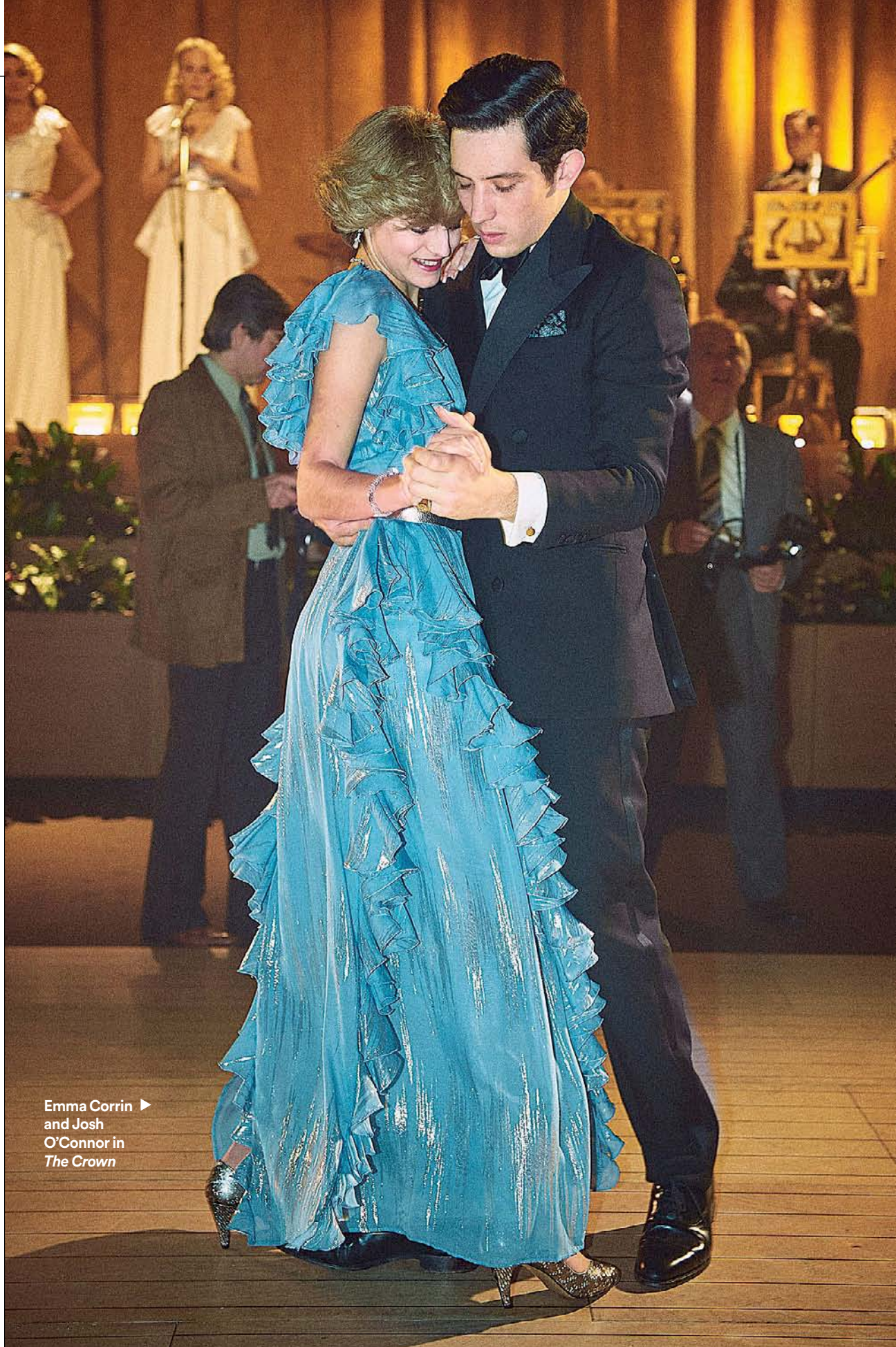
“I sense a conservative streak in the market,” says Dhvani Desai of Casa del Cheese, a micro-fromagerie in Mumbai. A former financial journalist, Desai, who had been dabbling in cheesemaking, started a full-fledged business in 2017 largely catering to restaurants and hotels. “In 2019, the restaurant industry in Mumbai was already in a slump, with credit lines extending from one month to four-five months. Orders had halved. It was getting harder to sustain, so I moved

travelled and likes to experiment. So while her moneybag-style burrata remains a hot seller, she also makes offbeat cheeses like a Norwegian-style Brunost made of evaporated caramelised whey.

From cheddars with a satisfying bite and a natural rind that you’d want to slice like a good communist, equally cutting into the crust and the golden interior, to soft milky cheeses that dance lightly on the palate like a belle of the ball, the local artisan cheese scene is gathering confidence and scale. Here is hoping that given the hot market, Indian cheese matures even faster. ■

SALON

Emma Corrin ►
and Josh
O'Connor in
The Crown



THE JOY FOR US WAS DISCOVERING THE COMPLEXITY AND NUANCES OF THEIR MARRIAGE'

Emma Corrin and Josh O'Connor speak to **RAJEEV MASAND** about the responsibility and challenges of depicting Lady Diana and Prince Charles and their fraught relationship on screen

WHEN WE FIRST see her in the fourth season of *The Crown*, which dropped on Netflix on November 15th, Lady Diana Spencer is dressed as a tree. Hardly one of Diana's show-stopping fashion moments, agrees 24-year-old Emma Corrin, the English actress trusted with playing the late princess through this season before handing over the baton to Elizabeth Debecki, who will play the Princess of Wales in her final years.

Corrin, who was cast in the role after several rounds of auditions, recognises the privilege and the responsibility. Diana, Princess of Wales, was arguably the most loved member of the British royal family. Wife of Charles, mother of William and Harry, and the subject of many biographies, documentaries, and scandals, Di, as she came to be known, remains a figure of mystique, and the recipient of adoration and sympathy, more than 20 years after her tragic death as the result of a car crash in a road tunnel in Paris at the age of 36, in 1997.

"I was terrified when I got the job,"

Corrin reveals. "Unbelievably nervous," she adds earnestly while chatting over a Zoom call. But, she explains, she became comfortable when she started to think of these parts as (writer and creator) Peter Morgan's versions of the real people. Anyone who has ever seen a video of the real Diana will tell you Corrin has the Princess' voice down pat; the other mannerisms are also freakishly similar. But beyond the tics, it's a respectful performance that conveys the spirit of the tortured princess.

Also on the call is Josh O'Connor, the 30-year-old English actor who plays Prince Charles opposite Corrin. Having first appeared as the Prince of Wales in the third season of the show, O'Connor didn't have the same nerves going in, but jokes that there isn't very much he can do to endear the Prince to viewers. As the man who was always in love with another woman—one he was forbidden from marrying—Diana loyalists are unlikely to look at him with a fresh set of eyes even though the new season is a tad kinder to him than the tabloids have ever been.

EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION

The Charles and Diana story is one that people around the world are familiar with. It's been documented so extensively. And yet was there anything that caught you by surprise, or that you found especially fascinating when you were preparing to play these characters?

Emma Corrin: That's such a good question. Yes, they are so well documented, and initially it was very hard to overcome all the information that's out there about them. We both felt quite drowned in it, to be honest. But the wonderful thing was getting the scripts and figuring out that this is Peter's world and these are *his* characters that we're playing. I really enjoyed finding out how much Diana loved to dance. Those were some of my favourite scenes to film. That was a lot of fun; I didn't know that she was such a fan.

Josh O'Connor: I think everything about them was a discovery for me. The most instant discoveries for me were while just doing a scene. Emma's a brilliant actress to be acting across from, and I suppose the joy of being an actor is that you turn up and you think you've got the scene all planned out, and you see that Emma's doing something ridiculously good. And you're like, 'Okay, think again.' Those discoveries that you find together—that's often the thing that gets you excited.

Emma, what was it like playing Diana over the course of the season? When we are first introduced to her, she's just a girl smitten by the idea of meeting a prince. By the end of the season, she's changed considerably. How was it playing her at these different stages?

Corrin: To have that kind of trajectory is a gift for an actor. When I first read the script I thought it was very interesting, because Diana's life is so well-documented when she's older—in fact, over-documented some might say.

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I WANTED TO DO IT
JUSTICE"

Emma Corrin, actor

So it's good to have that juxtaposition. It's good to see that innocence and her youth going into it, in order to understand where she goes at the end.

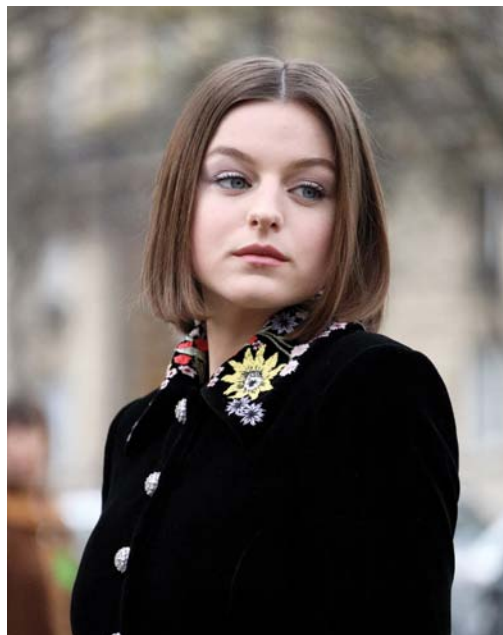
The show addresses Diana's struggles with bulimia and mental health, and some of those scenes are hard to watch.

Corrin: It was something that I was really concerned about getting right. Diana had spoken quite candidly about her struggles, so when I got the script and noticed that they'd put the bulimia scenes in and were alluding to it, I really wanted to show it. I didn't want to just suggest that she was going through these things. I wanted to do it justice, because I think it's important, especially these days, to represent it on screen.

And they weren't the easiest scenes to film. I had underestimated how hard they would be. But I felt they were important and so I committed to them.

Josh, in the last season of the show we saw that Charles was overcome by

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isolation, he felt disconnected from his parents, and betrayed for not being allowed to marry the woman he loves. It helped us understand him in a way that he doesn't come off entirely as Diana's villain in this new season. Were you grateful to have established that? Especially because now we do see what a knob he can be when he suggests, even before their marriage, that Diana have lunch with Camilla.

O'Connor: I know, that is a massive fail, isn't it? *(Covers his face in mock embarrassment)* Look, I'm unbelievably grateful to have that little period in Season Three, because when I took the role on I had some reservations. And one of them was: How the hell am I going to do this show and come off in any way other than have the whole world hate me? So they said to me, 'Look you've got Season Three, try and win over some hearts and then hopefully you can get away with some stuff.' *(Laughs)*

To be fair it wasn't just Season Three, it was also the fact that Emma and I worked together to try and make

AP



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Josh O'Connor, actor

the marriage believable. Because in a [failed] marriage, it's not that simple... that one person is the villain, and one person is the angel. I think both parties are guilty.

Contrary to the popular belief that this marriage was doomed from the start, this show suggests that there was in fact love between them, and that they did in fact try to make their marriage work.

Did that change your own perceptions?

O'Connor: I think so. One of the first things I did in terms of research on this season was to understand that it was no point going through accounts of Diana and Charles' real-life marriage because you'll never find the truth if you look in the press, or if you look through accounts from either Diana, who's talked about it a little bit, or Charles, who's never talked about it. It's very hard to know what their reality is. So a lot of my research was about marriage breakdown, full stop.

In any case, Emma and I always had the out—we didn't have to tell

the end of the story. And we all know the end. But I believe there must have been love there; even if that love was a different kind of love. For instance, in the ninth episode, Charles is looking on at his kids and Diana in the swimming pool, and you can see that there's so much love for Diana as a mother and a partner. [It's sad] that they just couldn't offer each other what they needed. As soon as you look at it as a straightforward marriage, it's much easier to handle.

Corrin: Josh has really hit the nail on the head. The joy for us was discovering the complexity and nuances of their marriage. And that was a really interesting thing.

Both of you have said that you saw these people as fictional characters—as Peter Morgan's version of Charles and Diana. And yet you do the little things that one recognises about them. How long did it take to ace these details: Emma, the head tilt, the voice; Josh, the speaking through gritted teeth, the

hand wave, checking the cufflinks?

Corrin: They're really great on *The Crown* because they give you a lot of time to prepare. I got the role in March and we started shooting in September, so it's a nice chunk of time to get ready. And you do need that time, because as you said, it's a lot, and it took me a long time to get them completely down. I had a really wonderful movement coach and a voice coach. And with both those things we not only worked at replicating her voice and to include some of her mannerisms, but really to justify why she tilted her head in that way or gestured in that way, or why she spoke in the way that she did.

O'Connor: Those things are so helpful in just getting you in that space. But the moment I always feel really comfortable in a role is when you've done all that work, and you can put it on the back-burner and really focus on the creation of the character. Things like [fixing] the cufflinks and the wave...that's all great. And it helps you at times. If I was ever struggling, I'd find that I'd just do my little cufflink trick and no one will know that I'm not doing any good acting. So it's quite a good distraction technique. But beyond that, the exciting bit is when you're getting to act with each other and create stuff.

Emma, so much of Diana's iconography was her fashion, her tiaras, that wedding dress. Did you enjoy recreating some of those looks, and did you have to pinch yourself when you looked in the mirror sometimes?

Corrin: I actually loved recreating some of her looks when she was younger. She wore a lot of very iconic jumpers—there was one with sheep on it, and one with a llama on it, I think. There were some moments where I really saw the similarity but it was more hearing it from other people. I know that when Olivia [Coleman] and Gillian [Anderson] and some of the others saw me in costume on the first day, they completely freaked out. That was really funny. ■

RAYS OF LIG

Satyajit Ray and Soumitra Chatterjee showed what it is to be a man in modern India



H T

By Kaveree Bamzai



SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE (LEFT) AND SATYAJIT RAY ON THE SETS OF GHARE BAIRE, 1984

ALAMY

HERE IS A MOMENT in *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970) when Asim, a successful executive out on a jaunt in a forest with his friends, comes upon the books that city girl Aparna is reading: *New American Drama*, an Agatha Christie, *The Survival of God in the Scientific Age* and *The Metaphysical Poets*. Her music LPs are even more eclectic: duets of Vilayat Khan and Bismillah Khan, The Beatles, Joan Baez and Indo Jazz. He cannot fully understand her and says as much. At the end, when they part, she gives him her phone number scribbled on a five-rupee note, by the illumination of his lighter. It's an inversion of the moment in *Apur Sansar*, eleven years earlier, when Sharmila Tagore, Apu's shy young bride, lights a match for his cigarette.

Much had changed with India and the cinema reflecting its realities in that decade. Satyajit Ray and his alter ego Soumitra Chatterjee had much to do with it. Ray and Chatterjee had taught us to negotiate love and death in *Apur Sansar* (1959), love and abandonment in *Charulata* (1964), love and cowardice in *Kapurush* (1965). By the time *Aranyer Din Ratri* came along, all three themes were in full bloom as was the primary idea: what it is to be a man in contemporary India, specifically a Bengali man in modern Kolkata.

This was the cinema that Nargis Dutt erroneously described as exporting poverty to the world. What it did was export a deep humanism. It was a humanism born of the comfort of Ray and Chatterjee with the home and the world, with the feminine universe and with the transition between the village and the city. In all four movies, Chatterjee is almost in constant motion, either travelling to Palamau in *Aranyer Din Ratri* or to the small tea planters' town in *Kapurush*. He is discovering not merely himself but also the women in his life and the city without.

Much like Rabindranath Tagore's global humanist, Chatterjee was secure in different cultures, as at ease in reciting Bangla poetry as he was at acting as King Lear on stage, as at ease giving a long speech on Lord Curzon's perfidious ways in *Ghare Baire* (1984), as he was casually asking Sharmila Tagore in *Aranyer Din Ratri*'s memory game, 'Which Kennedy?', only to hear, 'Bobby, of course.'

Bengali masculinity has had many versions.

There is the muscular Hinduism advocated by Swami Vivekananda, a fearless cultivation of mind and body. There is also the genteel romanticism of Tagore, embodied in the best intellectual traditions of Santiniketan. Caught between the revolutionary and the poet, the Bengali man may be forgiven for being confused, especially since he had to live with the idea of being effete through much of colonial rule. But in Chatterjee, the Bengali man perhaps found the best resolution of this: a man of refined intelligence, he nevertheless could also on occasion show the common touch, less often than his famous contemporary Uttam Kumar, but no less memorably. One only has to watch him as Narsingh, the taxi driver in *Abhijan* (1962), to see how well he did this.

In *Charulata*, his Amal shows us all shades of the ultimate *bhadralok*, the Bengali gentleman—arm-wrestling with his brother (after inviting him to feel his muscles), singing *Amichini go chini* while playing the piano, or discussing the virtues of dissent (as his brother says, to be outspoken is not necessarily to be disloyal).

Chatterjee was certainly one of the last representatives of a cosmopolitan but pre-globalisation generation of Bengalis who were open to the world whilst remaining, like Ray, firmly rooted in their Bengali identity, says scholar Chandak Sengoopta. "He did not even work in Mumbai, let alone Hollywood, but was not the least parochial in his mindset. We are in a different age now, but I shall always respect him as one of the finest exemplars of post-Independence Bengali culture, somebody who was Bengali to the core, but nonetheless a true citizen of the world," he adds.

In his long and illustrious career, marked by 14 remarkable collaborations with Ray, Chatterjee showed a tremendous hunger to work on his characters, whether it was to accompany Ray to Nadia to work on his dialect for *Ashani Sanket* in 1973 or to change his handwriting for *Charulata* in 1964. He was once asked how he would like to be remembered, by his more serious body of work or his popular cinema. Chatterjee said, with his usual shy smile, like a river, that goes on and on. His interviewer in that clip, filmmaker Ramesh Sharma added, "He was an icon—could easily be in the pantheon of some of the great actors in the world. What Toshiro Mifune was to Kurosawa, Soumitra was to Satyajit Ray but because he never made Bollywood films, he was not given the

recognition he deserved. He was not just a cinema and theatre actor but also a poet and published and edited the magazine, *Ekshan*, for years.”

For Sengoopta, what remains most striking is Chatterjee’s incredible diversity as an actor. Unlike many stars, he never got typecast and the influence of Ray was, of course, crucial in this. He says it is hard to believe that the same actor could portray a rural priest with total plausibility in *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and then, in the subsequent *Sonar Kella* appear as a consummately urban, erudite private investigator. “Add to these his previous performances as Amal or Apu and his later roles as Udayan in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980) and one fully appreciates why the American critic Pauline Kael called him Mr Ray’s one-man stock company. This diversity could only have come from a total immersion in his role that famous stars avoid in order to retain their brand image,” he says.

Chatterjee’s brand image was constant: the authentic Bengali *bhadralok*, which he almost caricatured in *The Bengali Night* (1988). His appeal in France owed a lot to Ray’s popularity. The Cannes Film Festival director at the time, Gilles Jacob, was a great admirer of Ray, and continues to count him as one of the 15 greatest directors of all time. His advice to Indian filmmakers is what Ray did: tell simple stories about life, love and family that are authentic. Jacob, an old-fashioned storyteller, believes there is more to cinema than mere PR stunts and shallow storytelling. Cinema, he told *Open*, has to move us, inspire us, maybe not change the world but at least “open our eyes to the wonder of life.” That is the lure of Ray for the world, who saw a culture through the wonderstruck eyes of Apu, as he moved from the village to the city, from childhood to adulthood, from joy to grief to acceptance.

His last three films with Ray, *Ghare Baire* (1984), *Ganashatru* (1989) and *Shakha Proshakha* (1990), embody the anxieties of the *bhadralok* in a rapidly modernising world. *Ghare Baire* casts him as a fiery swadeshi revolutionary chastising Lord Curzon’s divisive tac-



SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE
(1935-2020)

Courtesy PARAMBRATA CHATTOPADHYAY

SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE WAS ONE OF THE LAST REPRESENTATIVES OF A COSMOPOLITAN BUT PRE-GLOBALISATION GENERATION OF BENGALIS WHO WERE OPEN TO THE WORLD WHILE REMAINING, LIKE SATYAJIT RAY, FIRMLY ROOTED IN THEIR BENGALI IDENTITY

tics while *Ganashatru* has him playing the role of a doctor who busts a temple trust that is misusing religion. But it is in Ray’s penultimate movie, *Shakha Proshakha*, that he plays an ageing, mentally ill son who can see through the heart of darkness of everything and everyone around him, from fractured families to corporate corruption.

It is interesting that Ray did not cast Chatterjee in his Calcutta trilogy, *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1976), which capture the discomfort of the urban Bengali man with the economic and social crises of the time. Perhaps he was too urbane to play the young men at the core of these films, too much of a gentleman. Critic Suranjan Ganguly has called the trilogy a filmmaker’s anguished cry at the debasement of a whole culture. “In it he portrays a city without hope,” he says, where corruption is rampant, jobs are rigged, women walk the streets and the unemployed stare vacantly into space.

His middle-class protagonists—all young men—are the victims of a dehumanising rat race, struggling to

hold on to their inherited values in the face of betrayal and compromise. Having grown up in a different era, he says, Ray embarks on “a search for identity” with this generation and the world they inhabit in order to “understand them, or discover his relationship with them.”

When Ray wanted to return to a more gentle engagement with a transformed world, he came back to Chatterjee towards the end of his career. In *Shakha Proshakha*, Proshanto is first regarded as the crazy one in the family. Chatterjee plays him as a man most at odds with contemporary life, and yet for his ailing father, eventually he becomes the most favoured child.

As he speaks in fragments, “work is worship”, “honesty is the best policy”, listening to Bach and Beethoven, he turns out to be the sanest of them all.

Chatterjee worked in over 200 films, including with other masters such as Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha, but it is as Ray’s screen version that he is his most perfect articulation, his most perfect self. ■

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IN HIGH SPIRITS

A great mountain runner relives the romance of ascending

By Shail Desai

IF KILIAN JORNET had his way, he would be content living the life of a hermit, wandering the high mountains in search of his fix of solitude amid nature. It's essentially what he does today, though there's a spotlight following him wherever he goes. There are days when he considers it to be a part of the job but on most occasions, it's an annoyance.

Such is his aversion to the limelight that there was a time he considered announcing his own death on social media, after spending many glorious weeks running and climbing around Mt Everest. He dreaded returning to civilisation and his image of a running superstar. Jornet is considered one of the greatest living athletes today: he is a six-time champion of the long-distance running Skyrunner World Series and has won some of the most prestigious ultramarathons. He holds the record for the fastest known ascent and descent of the hardest peaks such as Matterhorn, Mont Blanc and Everest.

Given his superstar status, his aversion to the limelight emerges time and again. But Jornet has figured the right balance, well aware that it's also how he earns a living today. "I've learnt to find the time to 'work', either with the press, social media or sponsors, and then found my space and peace when I'm not in focus," Jornet says.

For, as long as he's in the mountains soaking in the wonders of nature, Jornet is content. In *Above the Clouds: How I Carved My Own Path to the Top of the World* (translated by Charlotte Whittle; HarperOne; 223 pages; Rs 2,023), the Spaniard relives the affair that blossomed while growing up in La Cerdanya that lies in the Pyrenees and which eventually led him to the top of Everest. And the philosophy that makes him one of the top endurance athletes in the world today.

His early days were spent hiking, scrambling up slopes and skiing alongside his folks. By 12, he was part of cycling tours that covered a distance of over 150 km. Once he hit his teens, Jornet discovered his 'masochistic tendencies' and that someday, he wanted to be a professional athlete.

"My parents shared their deep connection with nature with me. We were in the mountains 24/7 and I soon realised that in order to learn, I had to fail and try again," Jornet says.

While most youngsters were getting their first drink or spending time socialising, Jornet was transforming into a

performance junkie. He sought exhaustion in his heart and pain in his legs, all in a bid to get better each day.

When he started competing in trail runs across Europe, the early days were anything but easy. For instance, to travel to a distant race, he writes in the book, he lived in the dark for a week to save money on the electricity bill. On another training stint, he abstained from food to understand how long his body could go without it, eventually breaking down at the end of five taxing days. Even today, Jornet willingly transforms into a lab rat when needed, enduring physical and mental hardships to understand his trade better.

"I don't think of them as sacrifices—more as choices that you make in life. And once you do, you need to accept that another door will be closing because of it. If we consider it to be sacrifices, it means we are not sure about the direction we are taking," he says.

"It is important to keep learning because we always discover new things. I think my greatest learning has been to accept my ignorance," he says.

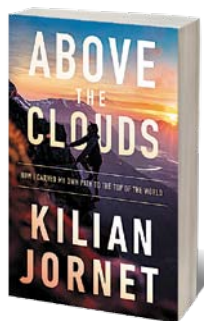
With every win and smashed course record, he amassed a following, drawing attention wherever he went. Over time, the trophies meant little—in fact, he's given away every single one of them, a few doubling up as a chopping board in the kitchen. He feared ending up as a prisoner of his past. The winning feeling was always welcome, yet competition simply translated to another avenue to put in a few hours of rigorous training alongside the best in the world.

What drew him instead were challenges and adventures in the mountains during the off season. It took him back to where it had all started out for him—running, skiing and climbing, embracing loneliness when it was possible to do so, far from the madding crowd. At the same time,

it was all about a continuous, fluid movement on technical terrain to traverse mountains at high speed.

"When I was younger, races were my main motivation. Now it doesn't interest me much. I rather focus on personal projects to explore different capabilities of my body and the place where I am," Jornet says.

As part of his project 'Summits of My Life' that culminated in Everest, Jornet took on zippy climbs in search of speed records on prominent mountains around the world. During other times, he joined likeminded purists such as alpinist Ueli Steck and mountain guide Simon Elias Barasoain, who





MATTI BERNITZ/LYMBUS

Kilian Jornet running in Norway, 2019

“WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, RACES WERE MY MAIN MOTIVATION. NOW IT DOESN'T INTEREST ME MUCH. I RATHER FOCUS ON PERSONAL PROJECTS TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT CAPABILITIES OF MY BODY AND THE PLACE WHERE I AM”

KILIAN JORNET ultramarathoner and author

believed in a minimalist style of climbing that often threw challenges back at them.

There were times when things didn't go according to plan; other occasions when he received devastating news of friends perishing in the mountains. But riding on the belief that 'death would be to not go at all', Jornet always tries to make the most of his ever-expanding directory of knowledge and resources to improvise when needed.

That in turn continues to add to his fandom—he has a million followers on Instagram—suckers for all-things-Kilian such as his breath-taking ridge runs while linking summits

around his current home in Norway.

“It's dangerous and risky, but it is also something that I've done for the past 30 years. You need to think, assess the risk and the rewards, and make a decision,” he says.

“Pain is a situation that is uncomfortable in different degrees. If the motivation to do something is bigger, then the discomfort is very easy to accept,” he adds.

After successful speed climbs up mountains such as Matterhorn, Denali and Aconcagua, Jornet trained his eyes on Everest. By then, he had paid multiple visits to understand conditions on the mountain in different seasons. In the spring of 2017, he set out for the top—solo, without oxygen, communication or camps en route and on a single push. In a span of a week, he announced that he had made it to the summit on two occasions.

It was a revolutionary climb to say the least and Jornet had defined his own style of climbing the highest mountain in the world. His account detailed in the book is an incredible one—stomach trouble at over 8,000 metres, going a second time to make amends for his shoddy first attempt, reaching the summit in relative darkness and even losing his way on the descent. A few have disputed his claim over the years, but he's made peace with the critics.

“I understand that not everyone will like what I do and the way I do it. But I've learnt this and I respect all the opinions. I don't really care about what other people say,” he says.

In March last year, he embraced fatherhood after the birth of his daughter with partner, Emelie Forsberg, who also thrives in the mountains just like him. Besides projects that make him feel alive, Jornet wants to don the role of a climate advocate in the future and draw attention

towards carbon neutrality, conserving biodiversity and reducing pollution.

“I can bring the conversation to my community, from fans to companies, and promote actions that make a change,” Jornet says.

This book isn't an elaborate account of his climb up Everest. Like his runs from the deepest valleys to the highest peaks, it traverses key moments that have shaped Jornet—a man at the top of his game, who would be happy to put it all behind him and simply enjoy his next jaunt in the wilderness. ■

Myopic Versions

The problem with conspiracy theories around the plot to secede Punjab

THE KILLING OF ML Manchanda, an All India Radio official in May 1992, was a particularly gruesome incident even by the standards of terrorism in Punjab. It was not unusual for terrorists to segregate people travelling by public transport on the basis of their religion and then gun down the 'unwanted' group. But Manchanda's case was unique in the blood-soaked annals of insurgency in the state. He was picked up from Patiala, where he worked, and beheaded. His head was thrown onto a busy road in Ambala, a neighbouring district in Haryana. The incident sent shockwaves across Punjab. By then, the state had been battling insurgency for 13 years and 1992 was one of the most violent years. Then, all of a sudden, the terrorists were gunned down one by one. Sporadic violence continued but, for all purposes, 1992 marked the terminus of Punjab's journey of separatist violence that began in April 1979.

The insurgency in Punjab was relatively short and lasted a mere 13 years when compared with conflicts in Kashmir, Nagaland and leftist insurrections. It was also particularly intense and bloody: the last three years witnessed the most bloodshed. In 1992, 5,265 civilians, security personnel and terrorists died; a number higher than what was observed in Kashmir at the peak of the insurgency in 2000 and 2001. The intensity of killings in those years and the relatively short span of the conflict are yet to receive scholarly attention.

There is, however, no shortage of explanations for what happened. The received wisdom is that from 1973 to 1983, Punjab veered to an extreme political direction due to destructive competition between the two main parties, the Congress and the Akali Dal. Both sought to outdo each other in attracting the Sikh vote. This was not a direct pitch to voters as seen in India in recent years but creating a political platform that was more extreme than the other party. Sikhs were expected to follow the most radical one in a Pied Piper-like fashion. In the bargain, both Congress and the Akalis became irrelevant for more than a decade when the gun ruled Punjab. It was only after the death of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the man who

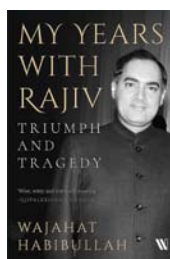
gained most from this ruinous politics, that the state began limping to normalcy.

In *The Khalistan Conspiracy: A Former R&AW Officer Unravels the Path to 1984* (Harper Collins; 296 pages; Rs599), GBS Sidhu, a former Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officer, sketches this story with an additional layer. He claims that the sequence of events, from the rise of Bhindranwale to the storming of the Golden Temple in June 1984, was part of a 'conspiracy' designed to secure political advantage for the Congress. In Sidhu's version of the story, the sequence of events can be broken down into 'Op-1' and 'Op-2' that were to culminate in the 1985 parliamentary elections. But events followed a different course and in 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—supposedly the prime beneficiary of the plan—was assassinated by her guards.

It is a historical reality that politicians in Punjab—Zail Singh, his rival Darbara Singh and the Akalis—did play with fire in outbidding each other (Sidhu's 'Op-1') but it strains credulity that national-level politicians could foresee, let alone plan, events with near-perfect foresight years in advance. The time horizon for Indian politicians of that age was considerably shorter; their ability to chart the treacherous politics of Punjab even less so. Even if one were to believe that a shadowy

group operating out of Akbar Road in Delhi was plotting events, the author presents no direct evidence for that in the book. His heavy reliance on secondary sources to patch together his story, peppered with his conjectures and observations as India's top spy in Canada in the course of his career, make for interesting reading but don't add anything more to the literature on the subject.

This is the macro or 'top down' view of insurgency in Punjab. But there's another part of the story that the scholar, bureaucrat and spy alike have ignored or, at the least, not paid attention to. Why did a part of Punjab's population get swayed by what was clearly an unrealistic hope: a separate state of Khalistan? The fact remains that even after Operation Blue Star, by when the Union Government's resolve in tackling terrorism was firm, recruitment to separatist



GBS Sidhu and Wajahat Habibullah had successful careers in the civil services of India. They had the opportunity to observe crucial decisions made at critical times. Readers don't look for salacious details but for perspective on what went wrong

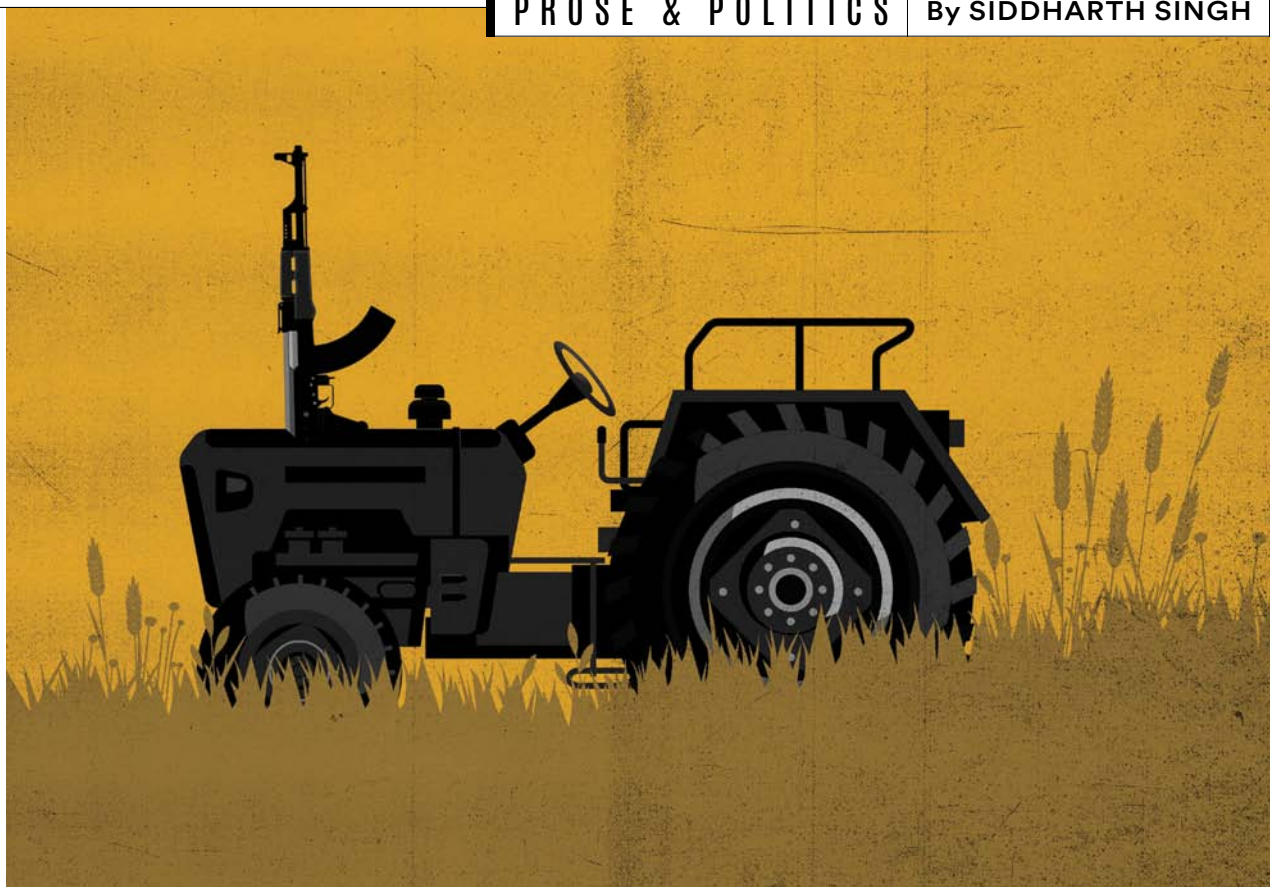


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

ranks did not stop. There was a Pied Piper element at work.

Here is where the short-but-intense aspect of the conflict catches up with macro-level explanations for what happened. One can conjecture that extremism in Punjab's politics did fuel terrorism but did not gain sufficient traction that prolonged insurgency became viable. In the spectrum that ranged from mere sympathy, to helping terrorists, to actually picking up a gun, a majority of Punjab's population remained tethered at the sympathy end. But clearly some did turn to terrorism. It is this micro-level murkiness that allows suspension of disbelief for stories like the one Sidhu tells. Hence the enduring belief that terrorism could be neatly switched off by getting rid of men like Bhindranwale and, after his death, by crafting a suitable formula that could placate the preacher's less violent and less extreme successors.

This is where Wajahat Habibullah picks up the thread in his expansive memoir *My Years With Rajiv: Triumph And Tragedy* (Westland; 356 pages; Rs799). His book is padded with historical backgrounds of various conflicts in Rajiv's India but says little that is worthwhile. The one chapter ('Discord and Accord') that could have set the record straight on Kashmir, Punjab and Assam, blithely elides crucial details and the reader gets to know nothing. The Rajiv-Harchand Singh Longowal 'accord' is dismissed in a single paragraph while spending inordinate time on the background of the Punjab issue. What is left unsaid is how key provisions of the so-called accord, such as the transfer of Chandigarh, were not implemented after promising

them. In other instances, inquiry commissions and judicial tribunals kicked the can down the road. The result was that separatist sentiment hardened further in Punjab and whatever little moderate leaders like Longowal could have done—which was not much to begin with—could not even be attempted. Longowal himself was gunned down in August 1985, a month after he signed the 'accord'. His fault: he was 'too moderate' for the Punjab of that time. By then, educated Sikhs like the civil servant Dr Sohan Singh, who imagined a viable Khalistan on the basis of rational calculation, however erroneous that may have been, had no power. It was criminals and extortionists who roamed the plains of Punjab. Eliminating them was dirty work and took time. Conspiracy or no conspiracy, there was no other way to restore normalcy.

Memoirs by former officials in India are mostly self-serving and when they display traces of honesty, they are usually worthless. The two authors discussed here had successful careers in the civil services of India. They had the opportunity to observe crucial decisions made at critical times. Readers don't look for salacious details but for perspective on what went wrong. Habibullah imagines Rajiv's India as a Camelot; in reality it was an interregnum between the latency of a host of problems from Assam to Kashmir and the later, violent, upheaval in these states. Sidhu's story is believable but only in snatches. The full story of these conflicts is unlikely to come from official reminiscences. That will have to wait for scholarly elaboration. ■

Mum Is the Word

An extraordinary novel on toxic relationships in a family

By Sharanya Manivannan



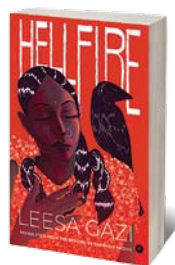
Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

BY UTTER CHANCE, Lovely is allowed to leave home alone for the first time on her 40th birthday. If, in their lives, a different kind of day appeared, it was like a meteor, manifesting and disappearing, she ponders, while a choice stands before her. Leesa Gazi's stunning novel *Hellfire* unfolds over this day of unprecedented possibilities.

Lovely and Beauty, younger by three years, are held under permanent house arrest by their mother, Farida Khanam. It is a house arrest in which elaborate meals are served, birthdays celebrated, lengthy beautification rituals performed, and television viewing is encouraged. The sisters are allowed to go out together sometimes, or with their mother. It's only around fifty pages into the book that one realises that Farida is not a widow; her feeble husband is around but often out of sight and mind, carefully stepping out of her way.

The powerfully narcissistic Farida is brilliantly etched by Gazi. This is a mother who first forced her family to move houses because her children had gone to the roof unsupervised, then pulls them out of school for a year when the principal reprimands her for being paranoid, eventually choosing a school that she can watch from her balcony. She ultimately ensures that her adult daughters have no foothold in the world which is not directly under her thumb. She has an unshakeable belief in her goodness as a mother, coupled with a sense of injury: 'Nobody understood she was saving her girls.'

As for the daughters themselves: they are complex beings, largely driven by subconscious feelings, gaslit within an inch of their lives yet lulled into comfort. Lovely has prayer, and a man in her head whose voice keeps her company. Beauty has obsessive pampering routines. Both have their contraband pleasures that make life easier. Somewhere deep down, they know their family is unhealthy. Lovely, considering what might happen if she misses her curfew, imagines: '[She] would get the whole story out of her, bit by bit, like a grater scraping the flesh from a coconut. Then, in the dead of night, Amma would just give her a little tap on the back of her head with a pestle. Game over.' Beauty knows this too—when Farida had discovered Lovely's dalliance with a cousin, it was Beauty who was threatened: 'You don't know me—I'll just finish you off.'



HELLFIRE

Leesa Gazi

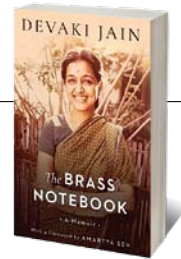
Translated by Shabnam Nadiya

Eka

197 Pages | Rs 399

Expertly paced, the novel is structured so that at a crucial point in Lovely's day, the perspective shifts instead to Farida's household as they wait for Lovely's return. Farida is an accurate portrayal of one way in which abusive women express their internalised misogyny. Her own helplessness, perceived or otherwise, within a larger societal framework works to an advantage. Farida exerts perfect control over her household through the ruse that she is protecting them from the evils of the world. 'Nothing took priority over their needs and safety... She hadn't even married them off. Her anxiety over what kind of life lay in store for them after marriage hadn't allowed [this].' This is only one among her ruses; the household pivots on a secret from her past.

In its terrifying realness, *Hellfire* offers a convincing counterpoint to trigger warnings in art. 'It sounds a bit heavy,' a close friend said while I was reading it, gently omitting the 'for you'. I did not see myself in this book, because I am neither Lovely nor Beauty. But I know their mother very, very well. Indeed, there is nothing caricaturish about this novel that absorbingly depicts what life within toxic families can be like. How could a novel that reflects the most profound source of my wounding have left me feeling uplifted for days afterwards? Uplifted, and fortified perhaps by the knowledge that one's darknesses are not unique in the world. Gazi's extraordinary novel does just this: raises the shadows to the light, thereby setting something free. ■



THE BRASS NOTEBOOK
A MEMOIR
Devaki Jain

Speaking Tiger
232 Pages | Rs 599

On Her Own Terms

An autobiography of lived freedoms

By **Zakia Soman**

INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE movement and the birth of a free nation were amongst the most significant and historic events of the 20th century. The Indian landscape at the time was filled with revolutionary and original leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru. Devaki Jain modestly anticipates at the outset that her story may be too insignificant. 'I was more like an ant' and there were several individuals who were like a tiger or a storm. But as one reads *The Brass Notebook: A Memoir* it seems that Jain's free spirit and her extraordinary personal story capture the sense of freedom that was in the air at the time.

The author was born in 1933 in a traditional Brahmin family from south India. It speaks for her bold and courageous personality that she went on to study and work in different parts of the world, all by herself. She came to be a renowned economist and feminist intellectual and leader. She married another free-spirited and committed pioneer in the Indian cooperative movement, Lakshmichand, who came from an orthodox north Indian Jain family. Hers is a unique journey of lived freedoms, humanism and feminism. She beautifully sums up her lived realities thus: 'Looking back, I am convinced that freedom, or emancipation from bonds, comes from fighting for freedom, which in itself is the affirmation of freedom.'

There are anecdotes from the author's diary which can be true for many Indian girls. Parental controls, taboos around menstruation, burden of patriarchal customs, molestation by a close relative, desire to study further, wanting to run away from an arranged marriage—these are all true even today

for crores of Indian girls. The author was 14 years old when India gained independence and she got deeply politicised by the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Her father knew Gandhi and had met him on January 29th, 1948, the day before he was assassinated. Jain continued to discover Gandhi by attending meetings and interacting with volunteers in Wardha and other places. She came to appreciate Gandhi's idea of 'second freedom' from poverty and deprivation. Her meetings with idealistic young volunteers and encounters with those living in poverty made her empathetic to the cause of humanity and justice.

Against several odds, the author goes on to study in England where she discovers true freedom in her personal life. She enrolls for various courses, makes friends, deciphers the world and discovers herself and fellow human beings. Ruskin College's deep association with labour issues and anti-colonialism leave an indelible mark on young Devaki. She gets deeply interested in trade unionism and global politics even as she continues to enjoy her

personal freedom hitchhiking alone from Oxford to Edinburgh in a sari!

Back home in India, the author engages meaningfully with Minoo Masani to work out 'the Democratic Alternative', an economic path to alleviating poverty and other ills afflicting society. She gets deeper into the search for socio-economic solutions. She teaches at Delhi's Miranda House college, meets some of the best minds of the time, including Amartya Sen. She joins the Indian Cooperative Union in Delhi and works for making a difference in the lives of ordinary Indians, particularly women. Devaki Jain is a pioneer feminist and equally a pioneer development economist. She is credited with putting women and gender-based realities at the centre of economic policy not just in India but globally at the UN and other policy bodies. She is among the early feminists of our century to whom millions of women and men look up for inspiration and guidance. She made friends with Fatima Mernissi, Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, Desmond Tutu and other social revolutionaries who all strived for a fairer and more just world order.

The book is very engaging. It is interspersed with the personal and the political. The author is not afraid to write about love, sexuality and sexual freedoms enjoyed by a woman. It is one of the most fascinating, candid and inspiring accounts of an extraordinarily courageous woman's epic life. It is a must read for all who love freedom and who want to live life on their own terms. It is equally a must read for all who empathise with fellow humans and their predicaments. ■





RAJEEV MASAND

Up and Running

Taapsee Pannu doesn't have much of a break between shooting three films...but she's not complaining. "After not working for all those months during lockdown, it's a relief to be back on set," she says. The *Thappad* star was shooting *Haseen Dilruba* with **Vikrant Massey** before she took a Diwali break, and now has dived into *Rashmi Rocket* in which she reportedly plays a girl from Kutch who's so nimble on her feet that the locals address her as 'Rocket'. She eventually goes on to become a professional fast-runner in this underdog story.

But she has more running in store for her when she begins shooting the *Run Lola Run* remake right after she wraps up *Rashmi Rocket*. "The styles of running and the approach in both films are entirely different," she explains, in case you were wondering why she would do two films with similar themes. "For *Rashmi*, I've gone through serious training because I play a competitive athlete. In the other film, the character is running for entirely different reasons. The running has to look urgent and desperate, but not professional," she says.

Curtain Raiser?

Earlier this week, **Aamir Khan** and his daughter **Ira** visited a suburban multiplex to catch a show of *Suraj Pe Mangal Bhari*, the comedy starring **Manoj Bajpayee**, **Diljit Dosanjh** and **Fatima Sana Shaikh** that released during the Diwali weekend. The actor sportingly posed for the paparazzi, who'd turned up outside the cinema after learning from the actor's social media posts that he was heading out to watch the film.

Footfalls at cinemas have been scanty despite assurances that all chains have put social distancing measures in place. Those in the film trade are pointing out that Aamir turning out to support his *Dangal* protégé Fatima can be construed as a gesture to encourage more movie buffs to return to the cinemas at a time

when the theatrical film business is at its most vulnerable.

Plans to release **Ranveer Singh's** World Cup film *83* in cinemas appear to have been scrapped for now. Insiders are saying it is unlikely that any 'big' film will open in cinemas this year. There has been talk that the makers of the **Kiara Advani**-starrer *Indu Ki Jawani* are firm on a theatrical release in December, but no date has been announced yet.

Meanwhile, streamers are expected to make the most of the situation. **David Dhawan's** remake of his own 1990s hit *Coolie No 1*, which stars his son **Varun** and **Sara Ali Khan**, will drop on Amazon Prime Video on Christmas Day. Not to be outdone, rival streamer Netflix is likely to drop the **Vikramaditya Motwane**-directed inside-Bollywood meta drama *AK vs AK*, starring **Anil Kapoor** and **Anurag Kashyap**, the same weekend.

Hot Right Now

Masoom, *Mr India* and *Bandit Queen* director **Shekhar**

Kapur is helming a romantic comedy for Working Title, the British company that produced such beloved films as *Four Weddings and A Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, among others. Titled *What's Love*

Got To Do With It?, the film will star **Lily James** and **Emma Thompson**, and

Kapur has described it as 'a story about identities, a comedy about cultural clashes.' The film is written and co-produced by **Jemima Khan**, former wife of cricketer Imran Khan, now the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Announcing on Twitter earlier this week that he was beginning rehearsals with Thompson, Kapur shared his excitement: 'Been blessed with the opportunity to work with smartest, most talented, brilliant actresses in the world.'

Closer home, Kapur has said he's got a few passion projects he hopes to get off the ground if he can find partners who might bankroll his vision. ■



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