BEST OF BOOKS

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DAVID DAVIDAR SHASHI THAROOR TCA RAGHAVAN SRINATH RAGHAVAN IRA MUKHOTY

OPEN

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

28 DECEMBER 2020 / ₹50

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The stereotypes of a father coming home from work, briefcase in hand, and the mother nervously serving him a cup of tea seem set for a change ('The Newborn Dad', December 21st, 2020). Patriarchal structures, with deep foundations in culture, are not easy to break. No wonder it took the force of a pandemic for a societal rethink about the roles of men and women—inside as well as outside the home. The pause that the coronavirus-induced lockdown brought to urban life forced men to notice properly how gender equations work in daily routines, how households are run, how children are raised, how women multitask and what struggle it is to combine household chores with careers. When an icon such as cricketer Virat Kohli announces he is taking time off from his official engagements for his pregnant wife, Anushka Sharma, the idea of a new fatherhood gets a cultural endorsement and approval. It gets people thinking, makes them question the status quo. Hopefully, the future will see us move away from the 'boys will be boys' mindset to a fairer, gender-just social order. Fingers crossed as we hope for the pandemic to deliver a new 'Daddy Cool'.

Sangeeta Kampani

NEW DADDY COOL

The change in the father's role is one aspect of society for which we should be thankful to the pandemic which has otherwise hugely disrupted our lives this year ('The Newborn Dad', December 21st, 2020). Despite women venturing out of their homes and walking along with men and proving their mettle, we tend to demarcate roles in the household according to gender. This notion is now being forced to change for good. Especially in nuclear families , men should know how to cook, wash or clean, etcetera. Why should women bear all the burden? Virat Kohli would certainly be missed for the last three Test matches in Australia but it's one of the most memorable moments in his personal life and he should be applauded for being around for wife Anushka Sharma during her pregnancy.

Bal Govind

Mankind is discovering some home truths. Rarely seen in the kitchen till recently, men in aprons have become cool now. They are not only working from home but working at home as well. This is a welcome trend. Besides, urban couples are choosing not to have children so that the woman doesn't have to sacrifice her career. A well-balanced relationship where men and women share the resposnsibilities in the household equally will probably encourage some such couples to have children.

Ashok Goswami

RAJINI IS COMING

Rajinikanth has finally found an answer to the question everybody has been asking for decades now: 'To join politics or not to join' ('Action! Finally', December 21st, 2020). For the last two years especially, he had been dilly-dallying about jumping in the fray. With Jayalalithaa's untimely death, there has been space for the charismatic leader to replace her. Kamal Haasan's foray into politics has been a non-starter. At 70 and after a series of ailments, a reluctant Rajini will have a hard time surviving cutthroat electoral politics. There are few successful transitions from films to politics.
The list of stars biting the dust is long: Chiranjeevi, Govinda, Vijayashanthi, Pawan Kalyan and Prem Nazir. Moreover, jumping into politics without any groundwork, such as having a track record for supporting causes or social work, is bound to make his journey difficult. At his age, he doesn't really have a chance for multiple takes. This will be a live performance with little chance to regret bad improvisations.

Bholey Bhardwaj

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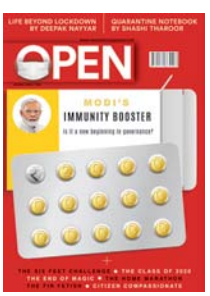
EDITOR'S NOTE

When headlines frightened us, distance was a consolation, borders seemed real, and mortality was someone else's business. The mystery of it, the exoticism of it, puzzled us, but we still chose to be the lucky ones. Then Wuhan exploded, in spite of the totalitarian cover-up, in spite of the martyrdom of the whistleblower doctor who was forced to recant. Statistical lies or subservient WHO endorsement or the war on victims could not stop the pathogen's progress. Blame-it-on-bats was no longer the story. Was it a laboratory accident? That story was not even pursued. By then the coronavirus was everywhere, choosing its hosts at random and defying medicines. A pandemic was upon us. And we were clueless about how to contain Covid-19. We sought parallels in history and literature—in the Black Death of the 14th century and in the moral fable of Albert Camus and in the vivid journal of Daniel Defoe. In the end, memory or metaphors could not lessen the fear of the living in a plague year.

Knowledge was comfort. The experts, divided in



their measurement of the doom, told us what we ought to do to remain alive: stay at home; wear the mask; keep social distance...It's the experts' intervention, at times with oracular certainty, that curtailed the libertarian instincts of some governments. It was good to see politicians listening to them, and it was despairing to see how some politicians behaved. They were all on display: deniers, pooh-pooh presidents, strongmen rearmed, sermonisers and custom-made savants...It was, and still is, a time to lead, to control, to take ownership of destiny even as the virus raged. Some remained ignorant and arrogant. A nation in fear was what some others, the 'strongest' of them, coveted. Wasn't the fall of the pandemic presidency the political story of the year?

Indictments are easy, and ideologies make them all the more selective. Political leadership can't stop a pandemic; only science can. A pandemic will kill, no matter which party is in power. Still, leaders make a difference, in the time of war or natural crisis, through the power of words—or through the suicidal absurdity of them. One of them had admitted that he lied because he thought lies would be reassuring, calming. Such duplicities were matched by the viral morality of the ideological warriors. They tagged every death as a political murder, and they staged a show trial for the leader who didn't care. The tragedy needed an anti-hero. Some leaders fit the bill perfectly.

For some, the lockdown was compassion in action; our only defence against mass infection and death. We are still not sure how successful it was in containing the virus—or the death toll. The only available empirical evidence is on the economic crash—and its human cost. Those who argued for opening up the marketplace were caricatured by the Left as capitalists of de-humanisation, not in this part of the world though. But we need to ask, even if it's politically inconvenient: what did actually cause an economic devastation of this magnitude? Did lockdown begin as a panic reaction and end up as an expensive political position? Not sure whether politicians will have the honesty and experts the humility to listen.

Most of us have become a little more human and a lot more humble anyway. When knowledge was scarce, we took refuge in our own instincts, and in the wisdom of others who bothered to stand by us in our isolated hours. We know the world has changed, and the pandemic literature the media keep bombarding us with tells us how drastic—and permanent—is the change. We are the bigger change, each one of us a story, still unfolding. When death was an indifferent acronym, we realised life had many names that we failed to recognise for so long. As we spent more time with ourselves, our private conversations became more meaningful in the natural order of life and death. These conversations we are having with ourselves will outlast the pandemic.

IT IS THAT TIME OF THE YEAR WHEN THE RETURN GAZE REWARDS US WITH LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE. WE HAVE LEARNED THE LESSONS OF A LIFETIME. AND ONE STANDS OUT: BEWARE RESOLUTIONS. THE BEST OF THEM CAN BE UNDONE BY A HUNGRY PATHOGEN—OR SOMETHING WORSE

It is that time of the year when the return gaze rewards us with lessons for the future. We have learned the lessons of a lifetime. And one stands out: Beware resolutions. The best of them can be undone by a hungry pathogen—or something worse. Still, one enduring, and beautiful, mystery of life is that we live to fight another day—to remember, to look back, and to tell the story.

By S PRASANNARAJAN

OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

IT IS SAID that David Cornwell—better known in this world as John le Carré—was a shy recluse who shunned all publicity and never accepted awards. It is also said that, in his later life at least, he didn't quite like those who gushed over him for his thrillers set in the Cold War. He preferred his later works that dealt with more contemporary themes such as the Palestinian conflict, the arms trade and the post-9/11 War on Terror.

I am glad that I never met le Carré in person. I would probably have irritated him immensely since I absolutely adored his spy thrillers set in the Cold War and involving the mind games between the quintessentially English George Smiley and the deviously clever Karla of the Moscow Centre.

It was the *BBC*'s masterpiece version of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* that drew me to le Carré. I saw the eight-hour long serial twice during the winter of 1977 and must have seen it on another six occasions ever since the DVD was available. I read the book many times subsequently, heard the audio version on long car journeys and was horrified by the 2011 film version that, in my view, was just too flashy.

There was nothing flashy in le Carré's Smiley-Karla books. They resembled long-drawn chess games involving two professionals, both batting for their own sides with sincerity while confronting troubled personal lives. Smiley prevails in the end and even blackmails Karla into defecting—the theme of *Smiley's People*—but doesn't savour the famous victory. Spies and even spymasters had their own vulnerabilities. They batted for their country and cause but were overwhelmed by doubts—a theme that recurs in Len Deighton's Bernard Samson novels.

It is fair to say that I cannot ever separate Smiley from his portrayal by Alec Guinness. The slightly, prematurely ageing man with the hint of a stoop, forever polishing his glasses and weighing his words with the utmost of care, was often my mental picture of an Oxford don. (Of course, once I reached Oxford, I discovered to my amazement they were nothing of the sort.) It was also my mental picture of the mildly eccentric English gentleman who could often be sighted in antiquarian bookshops or the less frequented parts of the London Library on St James' Square, combining a private hobby (in the case of Smiley it was medieval German literature) with a weighty, but totally unrelated, job. I grew to adore Smiley and—quite unconsciously—saw myself in that role. On reflection, it wasn't Smiley I was thinking of, but an England that, alas, no longer exists.

'"Poor loves. Trained to Empire, trained to rule the waves," rued Connie Sachs, the embittered, arthritic Connie Sachs, once the formidable Head of Research at the 'Circus' (the then HQ of MI6 on Cambridge Circus) and now reduced to offering private lessons to A-level students in a tiny Oxford flat. "All gone. All taken away." It was her insight into the treachery of those clever, upper-class Englishmen who broke ranks to become KGB moles inside the British secret service. When finally unmasked, Bill Haydon, the dashing spymaster whose cleverness was legendary, was asked by Smiley why he did it. "It was a question of aesthetics," replied Haydon unhesitatingly.'

In a strange sort of way, it was. England—it was always England, never the UK—was a country overwhelmed by decline and a loss of purpose. Its grand institutions promoted a smug, occasionally supercilious, self-confidence and a dry humour that left foreigners a little bewildered and occasionally infuriated. But it was an England that had mortgaged its future to a brash America that shunned subtlety and the reflective understatement. Le Carré captured this profound existential crisis with finesse and subtlety.

What added to the charm of le Carré's thrillers was the minor characters such as Connie Sachs. An absolute master of assessing the different sorts of people that formed part of the larger spook community, the minor characters gave his stories an added zing. There is the shadowy, reclusive and crotchety Control—the head of the Service—who shuts himself in his office nosing through old files to get a hint of who the mole could be. There is the jolly Roddy Martindale, a familiar bore to be found holding up the bar in clubs frequented by those from minor public schools who never quite made it.

Spying, le Carré told us, was strictly a thinking man's profession. ■

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

How Covid Played with Sport

IT IS NOT impossible to recall the day at the start of this year, when we so naïvely wet our forefingers on our tongues, and flipping through the sport calendar on our news pages, thrilled at the prospect of this year. The Olympics, the big football leagues, the marquee cricket tournaments, not to mention the T20 World Cup, the Grand Slams and its superstars in the twilight of their careers, the list went on and on. It was the same rush of feeling that greets you at the start of a new year. And it felt so much. And we wondered, like we always wonder, can we keep up?

Keeping up, of course, was not going to be the problem. Getting even a little bit of the promised schedule was. We sat locked in our homes, staring blankly in front of TV sets showing reruns of past games. Outside, a beautiful summer raged, but the fields and the stadiums were bare. Games were pruned and called off, and when some of them finally returned, they were so odd and surreal to the point of becoming almost unrecognisable.

The Covid-19 pandemic has asked many vexing questions of organisations and governments. But it also asked equally difficult questions of sport. In a year of countless deaths and financial misery, how important is a game where, for instance, a group of people chase a ball? What about the health of its athletes, the month-long tours now stretching to almost half a year or more? Do we need it? Do we really need it? And a sport is by nature also a spectacle. To play a game is to play it in front of others. What is a sport that is played in front of nobody, even if televised?

When the games returned to our TV sets, they had the touch of the surreal. There was the eerie sight of cardboard and video stand-ins for fans and pre-recorded crowd noises. Few games match cricket in its empty passages of play, where the broadcaster has to fill the time it takes a bowler to walk back to his run-up or someone to retrieve the ball by panning across the stadium for advertisements and colourful figures. In the IPL, they tried to make do by beaming giant videos of people dancing on the loop in their homes. Once seen, it was a sight that couldn't be unseen. Then, there were the changed circumstances. Players now lived in demanding bio-bubbles and were barred from shaking hands. When some players decided against participating, as in the case of Suresh Raina opting out of the IPL, our first instinct was to ridicule, when in fact we should have accepted it as a decision that felt right for him. And then came the amusing moments. Of bowlers fretting over the ban on the application of saliva on the ball, or the sight of players having to retrieve balls from the stadium, now that there were no spectators to oblige them.

It is easy to ride with this feeling of how odd this whole year has been to believe nothing of significance occurred. But that would be incorrect. The virus may have dominated every sporting event, even dimmed the enthusiasm of its fans, but sport's sweet succour, even though limited, was there.

There were moments when some individuals and teams broke through all this miasma of gloom, as can occur only in sport, to grasp something magical. Tennis, for instance, was severely affected, with Wimbledon being called off for good. But the sport witnessed the thrilling return of Rafael Nadal, when he beat the World No 1 Novak Djokovic at the French Open, to signal that there were still many miles left in his legs and his push for tennis' glory is far from over. Or across the other end of the court, his rival Djokovic, who until last year could not put a foot wrong, but who seemed to have unravelled spectacularly this year. Right from the moment when he seemed to scorn at the anxiety about the pandemic and organised that

Sport in 2020 wasn't only about achievements. It was perhaps as a response to questions about its relevance in a time of such hardship that many sought to expand the scope of a game. They tried to make a sporting event not just a performance field but also a platform to deal with the larger questions. To the extent that we may even call 2020 the year sport acquired its voice

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

ill-fated tour where he, along with others, contracted the virus, to the moment when he had to concede the US Open, a Slam for his taking, when in frustration, he accidentally hurt the line judge. There were several such big moments, each one deserving of its own individual attention. Liverpool, for instance, dominating its rivals to finally end its three-decade-long drought to lift the English Premier League. Or the Australian women's cricket team that won the T20 World Cup tournament moments before the world went into lockdown. Or that thrilling back-to-the-wall performance by probably the least fancied cricketer in the least fancied team in the IPL, Rahul Tewatia of the Rajasthan Royals, who in a matter of a few balls went from someone you cringed to watch bat to someone you couldn't take your eyes off. It is the kind of script that could only be written on a sporting field. And it is something unlikely to happen again. Yet, in those few moments, one could even forget we were all in the midst of a pandemic.

Sport in 2020, however, wasn't only about achievements. It was perhaps as a response to questions about its relevance in a time of such hardship that many sought to expand the scope of a game. They tried to make a sporting event not just a performance field but also a platform to deal with the larger questions churning in the world. To the extent that we may even call 2020 the year sport acquired its voice. Again and again, various leagues and its players had to deal with these larger questions burning in society. Players knelt before the start of games, negotiated with their teams and leagues, and wore jerseys supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. Lewis Hamilton—who put in one superlative performance after another, becoming not just the only Black driver in Formula 1 history, but also its greatest, equalling Schumacher on seven world championship titles and going past him in total wins—set the trend when he used his clout to speak for racial justice and force motorsport, a very inward-looking sport, to acknowledge its deficiencies in promoting more diversity.

The other breakout sportstar of this year, Naomi Osaka, won the US Open, while wearing a series of masks bearing the names of African-Americans killed throughout the tournament.

It is easy to romanticise such celebrity activism, and equally to dismiss them as performances, but it has pushed both the sport itself and its fans to imagine a game as something much bigger than it has been so far.

Of course, the biggest sporting news came just a few weeks ago. In a year already made tragic by the early death of the basketball legend Kobe Bryant in a helicopter crash, the death of Diego Maradona, one of sport's most enchanting figures, made the year even bleaker.

We don't fully know yet how the pandemic will reshape sport. We don't even know when we can return to the stadium, or whether elements such as cardboard stand-ins and pre-recorded crowd noises will become commonplace. But in a year when all our lives have been overturned, it is the brief moments in sport that have given us a little respite. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

PORTRAIT • JOHN LE CARRÉ (1931-2020)

THE WRITER WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

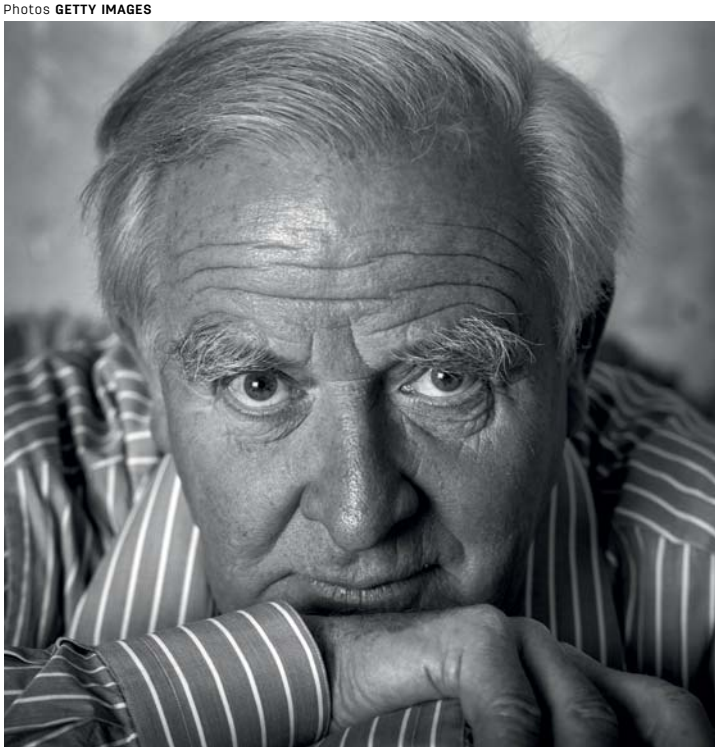
The greatest spy novelist fictionalised his life while his fiction often seemed too real

THE GREATEST SPY novel ever written was hailed by critics and the reading public as authentic, true to the Cold War world of espionage, when it came out in 1963. The man the book made the greatest spy novelist worked for the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) till his cover was blown, with more than a little help from Kim Philby. The irony of it all was lost on the critics and the reading public that *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was 100 per cent an invention, fiction as fiction is. It would not have been cleared by the SIS otherwise.

David John Moore Cornwell aka John le Carré, who died at 89 on December 12th in Cornwall, eluded the biographer because his life was as much an invention as the books he wrote. The dichotomy was summed up by Adam Sisman, the author of *John le Carré: The Biography* (2015): 'In the narrative of his life, fact and fiction have become intertwined. One suspects that le Carré enjoys teasing his readers, like a fan dancer, offering tantalising glimpses but never a clear view of the figure beneath.' Le Carré had already declared: 'People who have had very unhappy childhoods...are pretty good at inventing themselves.'

Abandoned by his mother when he was five and blackmailed as an adult by his conman father, le Carré would take revenge on one of them by creating Magnus Pym's father in *A Perfect Spy* (1986). The mother had a different consequence—le Carré's female characters left a lot wanting, a fact pointed out by his first wife. He would never be comfortable with women. He would never be comfortable with people. He would decline invitations to dinner from the high and mighty. He would stay away from literary festivals although he was fitter than most till a few years ago.

Photos GETTY IMAGES



The writing mattered to le Carré. And that alone, once his "very limited and unspectacular career in intelligence", as he had called it, was over. His MI5 colleague John Bingham, a novelist in the thriller and espionage genres, was an inspiration who morphed into George Smiley, in *Call for the Dead* (1961), le Carré's first novel. Smiley would become the most endearing spymaster in the genre, le Carré showing the reader what a 'real spy' could look and talk (or not) like, but then what did we know then and what do we know now? Smiley, battling many odds, not least his advancing years, would reach his apogee in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) and the trilogy completed by *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977) and *Smiley's People* (1979).

Near the end, le Carré's politics seemed to be entrenching itself in ways that made him sound like an angry old man whose anti-establishment persona was eclipsing the creative genius. His hostility to New Labour's voluntary participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 had made news and in subsequent years the instinctive anti-Americanism became uglier. The pontificator damaged a book like *A Most Wanted Man* (2008) but then *Our Kind of Traitor* (2010) restored to us intimations of vintage le Carré. After all, he was not Harold Pinter. The questioning, seeking, peeling of layers, counterpointing of narratives, and then leaving it all with more questions that cannot be answered are to be found in *A Delicate Truth* (2013) too, which nevertheless couldn't preclude the foregrounding of le Carré's politics.

Le Carré left us with *Agent Running in the Field* (2019), the spy novel of the times: Brexit, Trump, the 'German bug', and everywhere an 'unmitigated clusterfuck'. It is angry, but it's le Carré of old all the way. A poignant swansong. Clive James and Anthony Burgess didn't believe in le Carré's literary merit. Other critics, many academics and most of the reading public argued Alec Leamas is the protagonist of a classic. Then Philip Roth and Ian McEwan declared le Carré a literary giant. His memoir, *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life* (2016), was in part an attempt at pre-empting Sisman whom he had already granted access to his archives but hardly allowed to grasp the Cornwell behind le Carré (it's another matter the book was published after Sisman's). That was the man and the mask. Only, it remains debatable which was which. He never liked opening up to the world. But like every great genre-writer, he transcended it by demolishing it. For, he was the master. ■

By SUDEEP PAUL

ANGLE

THE MYSTERY OF PANEER'S PRESENCE

What's it doing among what Google says people searched the most in 2020?

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T watch *Dil Bechara*. It is a movie that came and went without much of a trace. And yet, in Google's Trends for 2020, it was the number one movie that Indians searched for this year. This is because of its actor Sushant Singh Rajput who committed suicide. The death itself was related to the pandemic, depression fueled by the lockdown's isolation being the most obvious cause. And so by that curious chain, *Dil Bechara* got its moment under the sun. It has a reason to be there.

These Trends are in different categories. Overall, Indian Premier League topped in searches followed by the coronavirus. This, too, is not much a surprise given the obsession with cricket in this nation. In things searched for 'nearby', there were 'food shelters' with 'Covid tests' in second place. Third was cracker shops, and fourth, the predictable liquor shops. In personalities, Joe Biden trumped Arnab Goswami, which might upset some nationalists, but then Goswami has been around forever while the US president has the pull of newness.

Among these trends, there is one that beats all reason. The category it falls under went by the label 'How To' do something. 'How to increase your immunity' should be an understandable question in times like these when the first consideration is staying alive. But that search term was only runners-up in India. What people wanted to know most was how to make paneer. 'How to make sanitizer at home' was ranked fifth, a full four spots below paneer.

Compare the same trend for the US, and there the first and second ranks were—'How to make hand sanitizer' and 'How to make a face mask with fabric'. It is the same two in the UK. In Singapore, again the same but with the order inverted. In New Zealand, again the same two questions. Most countries in the world were clear about what they wanted to know as a DIY exercise in times of Covid. In India, we wanted to make paneer instead.

It even gets more curious when you look at the detailed statistics that Google helpfully provides. The interest in paneer was more or less the same low level throughout the year, but in July it went off the charts and then sharply swung down to normal by August 1st. Something happened in July that made the making of paneer an object of online curiosity. Again, when you look at which parts of India searched the most for paneer tips, one comes unexpectedly at Goa, followed by Chandigarh, Uttarakhand, Nagaland and Dadra and Nagar Haveli. In sixth place, there is Karnataka, rounding it up as an all-India appeal.

Possibly, people sitting bored at home suddenly discovered that what they considered a delicacy could be cheaply made at home with milk and a few drops of lemon. But it still doesn't explain the phenomenal performance of paneer. Unlike, say, sugar or salt or rice, life goes just as usual even if you don't have a single morsel of it for the rest of your lives. ■

IDEAS

EXPLORATION

Exploration is innate to human beings, but the kind that changes civilisations need the added impetus of competition. The colonial age was triggered by warring European nations trying to outdo each other. And now, as China's Chang'e-5 mission returned to earth this week with samples collected from the moon, a new space race has begun. It was the US and Soviet Union who were in the first race but that ended more than four decades ago when the last such samples were brought back. The US, still the superpower today, cannot allow the new superpower China to take over this arena. It will be more willing to spend money for such explorations, which would not be a bad thing for humanity. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'In my opinion, future space exploration will require us to inhabit the moon, initially, and later Mars. This is a humongous task for any one nation to carry out'

RAKESH SHARMA
INDIAN ASTRONAUT

By Bibek Debroy

Hope and Happiness

Sorrow cannot touch the learned person who has conquered his senses

NOT TOO MANY people know about Pingala the courtesan. Her story also figures in the Bhagavata Purana. For the moment, since I have been talking about Gitas in the Mahabharata, let me mention Pingala Gita. This is the first Gita in 'Moksha Dharma Parva' of 'Shanti Parva' and Pingala is the same courtesan. A Brāhmana comforts King Senajit and tells him about the story of a courtesan named Pingala.

Yudhishthira said, 'O grandfather! You have spoken about how one can resort to *raja* dharma. O king! You should tell me about the best dharma for those who are in the *ashramas*.'

Bhishma replied, 'There are many doors to dharma and rites are never unsuccessful. Everywhere dharma, the path to heaven, truthfulness and fruits of austerities have been indicated. Whatever good policy one has thought of and has determined to observe should be understood as the only one—there being no other. Whenever one reflects that the ways of the world are without substance, there is no doubt that non-attachment is generated. O Yudhishthira! When the ways of the world are like this, with many taints, an intelligent man must try to accomplish the objective of *moksha* for his *atman*.'

Yudhishthira asked, 'O grandfather! When riches are destroyed and a wife, a son or a father dies, how can one use one's intellect to dispel that sorrow? Please tell me that.'

Bhishma replied, 'When riches are destroyed and a wife, a son or a father dies, one laments in grief. However, one must act to dispel that sorrow through meditation. In this connection, an ancient history is recounted about the words that were spoken by a Brāhmana to Senajit, when the king was tormented by grief on account of his son and was distracted with misery. On seeing that his face was sorrowful, the Brāhmana spoke these words.'

The Brāhmana starts to speak to King Senajit now: 'You are as dumb as a millstone. Why are you sorrowing? What are you grieving about? There are those who will sorrow over you and those mourners will also advance towards the same end. O king! You, I and all the others who surround you, all of us will go to the place where we have come from.'

Senajit asked, 'O Brāhmana! O one who is rich in austerities! What intelligence, austerities, *samadhi*, *jñana* and learning can be obtained, so that one does not succumb to lassitude?"

The Brāhmana replied, 'Behold. All beings are tied down in misery. For me, my *atman* is not mine. But the entire earth is mine. What is mine also belongs to others. Because of this intelligence, I am not distressed. Having obtained this intelligence, I am neither delighted, nor distressed. Just as a piece of wood approaches another piece of wood in the great ocean, comes together and drifts apart, that is the way beings meet each other. [This is a verse that is often quoted.] Sons, grandsons, kin and relatives are like that. One should not be attached to them, since separation from them is certain. Your son came from what cannot be seen. He has gone to what cannot be seen. He did not know you. You did not know him. Who are you? Who are you sorrowing over?'

'Misery is an affliction created by thirst. Happiness is created by the affliction of sorrow. Then again, misery is repeatedly generated by joy. Unhappiness comes after happiness. Happiness comes after unhappiness. Misery follows joy and is again followed by joy. Unhappiness is not permanently obtained. Nor is happiness permanently obtained. Indeed, well-wishers are not the reason for happiness. Indeed, enemies are not the reason for unhappiness. Wealth cannot be obtained through wisdom. Nor indeed can riches bring about happiness. One cannot obtain riches through intelligence. Nor is stupidity the reason for penury. It is only a wise person, and no one else, who understands the progress of the world. The intelligent, the foolish, the brave, the coward, the dumb, the wise, the weak, the powerful—all of them enjoy their share of happiness because of destiny. The cow simultaneously belongs to the calf, the cowherd, the master and the thief. But it is certain that the cow actually belongs to the person who drinks her milk. [The others have an illusory sense of owning her. One should not sorrow because of an illusory sense of ownership.] Those who are the most foolish in the world and those who have attained supreme intellect—only these men can enjoy happiness. Those who have obtained happiness through their intellect and those who are free from opposite

sentiments (like happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain) devoid of jealousy are never distressed by prosperity or adversity. However, there are also foolish people who have not obtained that intelligence. They have not been able to go beyond excessive delight and extreme torment. There are foolish ones who are bereft of consciousness. They are immensely haughty because of their strength and are given to constant delight, as if they are like *devas* in heaven. However, because of their laziness, such happiness terminates in unhappiness. And because of skill, unhappiness can give rise to happiness. Riches and prosperity dwell with those who are accomplished, not with those who are lazy.'

'Whether it is happiness or unhappiness, whether it is hated or agreeable—whatever has been obtained must be honoured with an unvanquished heart. From one day to another day, there are a thousand reasons for misery and a hundred reasons for joy. Stupid people are submerged in these, but not those who are learned. If a man is intelligent, accomplished in his wisdom, given to serving seniors and lack of envy, and is self-controlled, having conquered his senses—sorrow cannot touch him. A learned person resorts to this intelligence and guards his consciousness. Sorrow cannot touch a person who knows the origin and the end of everything. The reasons behind sorrow, fright, unhappiness and exertion must be severed from the roots, like casting aside one of the limbs in the body. If objects of desire are cast aside, this fills one with happiness. Indeed, a man who follows desire is destroyed by that desire. The happiness obtained from the pursuit of desire in this world or the great bliss obtained in heaven is not even one sixteenth of the happiness obtained from the extinction of thirst. The karma committed in an earlier body, auspicious or inauspicious, and the consequences of those deeds are enjoyed by the wise, the foolish and the brave. In this way, the pleasant and the unpleasant, unhappiness and happiness, circulate among living beings. Knowing this and resorting to this intellect, a person with qualities lives in joy. He shuns all desire and turns his back on attachment. The wise regard this kind of conduct of the heart as mental death. A tortoise draws in all its limbs. Like that, such a person draws in desire and finds pleasure in his own radiant *atman*. Even if there is the slightest sense of ownership left, that will give rise to repentance and pervade everything. He is not frightened of anything. No one is frightened of him. He has no desire and no hatred. He is then immersed in the *brahman*. He gives up truth and falsehood, sorrow and joy, fear and freedom from fear, pleasant and unpleasant. Having abandoned these, he is serene in his *atman*. That patient person does not do anything wicked towards any being, in deeds, thoughts and words. He abandons the thirst that is so difficult for the evil-minded to give up. Even when one ages, it is not digested. It is like a disease that brings an end to life. Having done this, he obtains happiness.'

PINGALA THE COURTESAN SAID, 'I HAVE NOW CONQUERED MY SENSES AND HAVE OBTAINED THE REALISATION THAT I AM WITHOUT FORM. I AM WITHOUT ANY HOPE AND AM HAPPY. THERE IS GREAT HAPPINESS WHEN THERE IS NOTHING TO HOPE'

Though this Gita is named after Pingala, it is only after all this that we come to Pingala. 'O king! On this, a verse sung by Pingala has been heard. This is about how she obtained eternal dharma at a time of hardship. A prostitute named Pingala went to the place meant for the rendezvous, but was rejected by her lover. Despite facing that calamity, by resorting to her intellect, she found peace.'

Pingala said, 'I have been crazy for a long time. In my madness, I have dwelt with my beloved. Because my beloved was nearby, I did not pursue the path of the virtuous earlier. This pillar has nine gates and I will cover it. [The body is the pillar and the nine gates are two eyes, two ears, one mouth, two nostrils, one anus and the genitals. It will be covered with knowledge.] Even when the *brahman* approaches, which woman in this world regards him as a beloved? I have been thwarted in my desire. But, in the form of desire, those crafty human lovers are like hell. They will not deceive me again. I know now and have woken up. Depending on destiny and earlier deeds, adversity gives rise to prosperity. I have now conquered my senses and have obtained the realisation that I am without form. I am without any hope and am happy. There is great happiness when there is nothing to hope. Having destroyed hope, Pingala sleeps in happiness.' ■

A Million Manufactured Mutinies

The Modi government should not compromise on core principles

By Minhaz Merchant

IN INDIA, THERE'S a mutiny brewing in every corner. Some are spontaneous. Many are manufactured.

When Narendra Modi took office as prime minister in May 2014, the opposition, smarting from defeat, predicted there would be 'riot after riot'. His record in the 2002 Gujarat riots hung over him like the sword of Damocles aimed at his political jugular.

How could a man, who as chief minister of Gujarat had presided over the deaths of 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus in three blood-soaked days in late February and early March 2002, not cause riots across India as prime minister?

When riots failed to materialise, other mutinies were manufactured: artists returned their awards; historians wrote open letters denouncing a climate of intolerance; producer Kiran Rao declared she would leave the country (she didn't); Arvind Kejriwal called the prime minister a psychopath; Rahul Gandhi questioned the Indian air strikes in Balakot, deep inside Pakistan.

In India, the mutinies never end. Having won Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh four months before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Congress was confident of ending the five-year shift of the '*chowkidar*'.

When the *chowkidar* turned the tables and got elected for another five-year shift, there was an eerie silence. But the mutineers soon received an unexpected gift: the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

The troops were quickly marshalled. The principal recruitment grounds were already in ferment: Jawaharlal Nehru University, where 32-year-old students labour over desultory PhDs, and Jamia Millia Islamia, a made-to-order tinderbox.

Other mutineers from among those disaffected by five years in the political wilderness rallied enthusiastically to the cause. Shaheen Bagh was a warning shot across the bow to the usurpers of power.

Fortune occasionally favours the anarchist. Serendipitously, US President Donald Trump arrived with his official entourage and a large possé of family. Within hours, the mutineers got their riot. They had spent nearly six years flailing and failing to engineer one. Now, in front of the presidential party and the international media, they finally had one, made to precise specifications.

But it wasn't to prove enough. The courts had the effrontery to chargesheet the mutineers for the Delhi riots that killed over 50 people. The pandemic finally did to Shaheen Bagh what the Government had failed to do by design: end the capital city's blockade.

A mutiny cannot succeed if the narrative spun around it doesn't succeed. In the past, several narratives had been impaled by facts: church attacks that weren't; a Dalit rape that wasn't.

The Narendra Modi Government had itself to blame for allowing fraudulent narratives to acquire a life and momentum of their own. Modi refused to hold press conferences—a fatal mistake. The job of journalists is to be adversarial to those in power. The obligation of leaders is to be open with the media, however biased they might think sections of it are towards them.

If you don't control the narrative, the narrative, however spurious, can subvert the facts. Open, even combative, press conferences denote strength, not weakness. They remain the unfinished business of Modi's second term.

> The farmers of Punjab will return eventually to their fields. But in dealing with the protests, the government has displayed a weakness: vacillation

But the mutineers never give up. India's complex social architecture allows many opportunities. The farm reforms presented themselves in the nick of time. Quickly, a coalition of the disaffected and disenfranchised was assembled. The catchment area was wide: communists, Punjab separatists, opposition opportunists and farmers' wealthy commission agents.

The farmers of Punjab will return eventually to their fields. But in dealing with the farmers' protests, the Modi Government has displayed a weakness: vacillation. When confronted by protests against policies that are in the public interest—as farm reforms clearly are—never compromise on core principles. If you do, it opens the way for a new mutiny.

When VS Naipaul wrote *India: A Million Mutinies Now* in 1990, he saw rumblings of dissent as a sign of India finally awakening from its postcolonial slumber.

Naipaul travelled around the country to research his book. He found areas of darkness slowly emerging from the shadows. A civilisation wounded by invasion and fallen into ennui was beginning to stir. In the last decade of his life, Naipaul—to his admirers' consternation—had leant right.

Meanwhile, the left-leaning opposition in India has yet to fulfil its prophecy. The Modi Government might oblige it in the new year. It has promised to notify the CAA. The gleam is back in the eyes of the impatient mutineers seeking their elusive riot. ■

Minhaz Merchant is an author, editor and publisher

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RETIREMENT GAMBIT

Kamal Nath, former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Congress leader, suddenly announced his retirement in his constituency Chhindwara. It has puzzled everyone. He said that he didn't crave power any more and it was time to take political *sanyas.* Some say he has a different motivation. He is not keen to be in MP and wants to shift to Delhi. There were rumours earlier that he could be the next treasurer of the party after Motilal Vora. But Pawan Bansal got the post, something that Kamal Nath was upset about. Several Congress leaders still think that after the death of Ahmed Patel, the party needs Kamal Nath in Parliament to maintain good relations with other opposition leaders. Retirement might be a gambit to get into the good books of the Gandhis again.

UNEXPECTED SUPPORT

The latest twist over the farmers' protests is that the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM), a wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is supporting them, going against their own Government. It is being asked whether SJM can take such a position without getting the green light from RSS. But some think this is actually a ploy by BJP and Sangh Parivar to enter the farmers' agitation that has been monopolised by the opposition. The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the BJP trade union front, often does the same. It supports workers' issues with Congress and Left trade unions.

PEOPLE FIRST

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who has Z-plus security, recently had to inaugurate a Kailash Mansarovar Bhawan in Ghaziabad, a project for pilgrims very close to his heart. He was supposed to fly from Moradabad to Ghaziabad on helicopter, but decided to travel 150 kilometres by road instead. He stopped at several villages to interact with people, much to the anxiety of his security detail. Politicians just can't keep away from their voters, can they?

Darjeeling Moves

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's political mind was on display regarding Darjeeling, where two opposing factions of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), led by Binay Tamang and Bimal Gurung, will play an important role. GJM is an ally of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). In the previous election, there were differences between Gurung and Trinamool, which led to the latter losing seats. This time, TMC leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee corrected the faultlines and Gurung is also with her. But then Shah immediately got active and reached out to the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), also an important party in the region. A GNLF delegation came to Delhi and met Shah recently.

State of Affairs

Congress leader Anand Sharma is the chairman of the standing committee on home affairs in Parliament. Recently, he called a meeting with the West Bengal chief secretary and home secretary. Committee member Dilip Ghosh, who is from BJP, had demanded that West Bengal be discussed because of the deteriorating constitutional relations between the Centre and the state. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee instructed the two secretaries to tell the committee that she didn't seek confrontation, and it was BJP doing so. But the meeting was suddenly postponed. It could happen again, soon.

Old Friends

When Sharad Pawar turned 80 on December 12th, an early morning phone call he got, wishing him on the occasion, was said to be from Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Opposition parties are trying to unite against BJP and Pawar is becoming the main face of this endeavour. Even several Congress leaders are said to be keen on Pawar as the new United Progressive Alliance (UPA) convenor. But despite the antagonism between their parties, Modi's relationship with Pawar is that of two old friends. Before the 2014 elections, they used to be in frequent contact.

PEACE PROFITS

Before the municipal elections in Rajasthan, Sonia Gandhi advised Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot to sort out his differences with Sachin Pilot. Gehlot, in turn, told the party's state president to mediate and the arrangement worked. Congress was the party with the most seats while BJP lost several municipalities.

A NEW ALLIANCE?

The Tamil Nadu Assembly elections are going to be held next year. Kamal Haasan has said that his party, Makkal Needhi Maiam, will also contest. The main battle is going to be between the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Which side will Haasan take? Neither, by all accounts. But he is said to be in touch with Asaduddin Owaisi, the head of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM). Following a good showing in Bihar, AIMIM's next port of call is West Bengal and after that Owaisi wants to have a presence in Tamil Nadu. Haasan can have an alliance with him. BJP is siding with AIADMK and is worried that Haasan and Owaisi could eat into their votes too, not just DMK.

BUDGET PLAN

The next Union Budget is a big challenge for Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is very active. Principal Secretary PK Mishra has been holding meetings with officials of not just the finance ministry but also of the health ministry since the Budget will have to be heavily focused on expenditure related to the Covid vaccine and its delivery.

By DIPANKAR GUPTA

SCIENCE AND PUBLIC TRUST

As we wait for the vaccine

WHAT 2020 HAS stamped in our minds is a heightened suspicion of science on a much wider scale than ever before. This has climaxed with contrary messaging around the Covid-19 vaccine. Earlier, the pile of anti-science believers was limited to Darwin doubters, a few religious bigots and New Age know-alls who suspect all. Now it seems to include sensible people too.

It all began when Covid-19 struck early this year. Science wasn't ready for it and all known medicines were useless. To add to the despair, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in America, as well as the World Health Organization (WHO), poured in buckets of confusion with contrary advisories, hurting science, like dams kill wildlife.

Multi-speak in the press regarding the Covid vaccines, the claims and counter-claims, only aggravated the situation. This pumped up anti-science voices to a crescendo and all their past accusations about corporates cornering health services started sounding more legitimate. It began, they say, with medicines, and now it's vaccines. When you sleep with dogs you wake up with fleas.

This is one of the big issues that 2020 has raised on the back of the pandemic. If there are any doubts on this subject, consider the following:

Vaccinations in the past were known by the scientists who created them. Jenner is remembered for small pox, Bordet and Gengou for whooping cough, Pasteur for rabies, Theiler for yellow fever, Enders along with Rose and Feldman for measles and, very recently, Gary Kobinger for Ebola. They were all imaged like Tintin's Professor Calculus, other-worldly knowledge seekers.

In contrast, when it comes to Covid-19 vaccinations, the names going around are not of scientists but corporates: Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Moderna, Glaxo, and BioNTech, to name a few. There is not a single scientist that stands out; only giant pharmas showboating to their stock holders. BioNTech's fortunes, for instance, jumped by billions when its vaccine became news.

This is the major reason why there is contrary messaging on the vaccination front. Each corporate entity is trying to outdo the other, now there is vulgar nationalism too. As long as the pairing of business and politics was coquettish and covert, there was room to dismiss as alarmist allegations of romance between the two. Now it seems to be out in the open.

The vaccination squabbles have aroused suspicions in the popular mind, including many who were once ardent believers in science and scientific institutions. Has science left the building after giving in to the market? The taxi was honking outside for a long time, but have scientists now finally boarded it? So, are they as fallible as the rest of us, white coats notwithstanding?

Interestingly, headlines commending BioNTech and Pfizer for the scientific breakthrough with regard to messenger mRNA

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

Multi-speak in the press regarding the Covid vaccines only aggravated the situation. This pumped up anti-science voices to a crescendo and all their past accusations about corporates cornering health services started sounding more legitimate. It began, they say, with medicines, and now it's vaccines. When you sleep with dogs you wake up with fleas. Vaccinations in the past were known by the scientists who created them. In contrast, when it comes to Covid vaccinations, the names going around are not of scientists but corporates

technology and T-cells research are not exactly deserving. Layers of corporate hurrahs hide the fact that the actual science behind this vaccine was done by actual people, namely by the Nobel Prize-winning duo of Rolf Zinkernagel and Peter Doherty.

Yes, a Turkish entrepreneurial couple, Ugur Sahin and Ozlem Tureci, established BioNTech, but the brains behind the vaccine need also to be acknowledged. Yes, BioNTech did the smart thing by including Zinkernagel in its scientific advisory committee. Its promoter, Ugur Sahin also spent a year in Zinkernagel's laboratory in 2000 and set up BioNTech soon after, that is, in 2008.

BioNTech carries a happy political lesson too. It has brought colour back to the faces of the centrists and leftists in Germany. The couple that own BioNTech is Turkish but based in Germany, therefore they are a good iron mitt to sock the far-right with. Germany can now take credit for the vaccine, but it's the migrants, stupid! Open your doors.

The life story of Ugur Sahin and Ozlem Tureci is also a story of good capitalism; start from scratch and then grow so big that you begin negotiating in billions of dollars. There is no doubt that Sahin and Tureci are a great combination of learning and business skills. It is also true that without Zinkernagel and Doherty's work, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine would never have happened.

As this aspect is not properly highlighted, the Pfizer-fronted vaccine comes through primarily as a corporate effort. The competition between the different trademarked vaccines, including Pfizer-BioNTech, in terms of their efficacy, has turned into a blatant expression of corporates in a cage fight.

This is evident from the way each vaccine company, from Pfizer to Moderna to AstraZeneca and many others, has made claims in the mass media. We have always known scientists to first put out their views in peer-reviewed publications. By and large, this remains true even today. This is why the public grandstanding around the vaccine is such a departure from past practice.

Not surprising then that the Covid-19 vaccine has made us

think like a bunch of bookies; what are the odds at the counter? In the past, there may have been in-house lab backchat, but did we ever ask whether Jenner or Pasteur was besting somebody else in the stock market? Donald Trump made all of this much worse by accusing Pfizer of politics in the timing of its vaccine announcement.

Science has never been as distrusted in recent memory as it has in the times of Covid. The distrust has been growing but it has now reached a head with the vaccination claims. This is paradoxical; it is also an irony, but it is true. At the time when we need it the most, trust in science on the streets and in parlours has been rocked.

The steady erosion of trust in the health sector is inversely proportional to the rise in medical technology and the growth of pharma companies. People are living longer, yet doctors and drugs are under the scanner because health has become big business. Medicine, in fairness, has served us well; we are living longer, but business equals profit and will forever be suspect.

The single-most important reason for the rising distrust in science is because governments today insist that research institutions pay their way. This is why some of the most revered scientific establishments, such as the National Institutes of Health and National Cancer Institute in the US, both responsible for major scientific breakthroughs, are now starved of state funds.

It is so widely believed that drug companies bribe doctors to do their bidding that in some countries medical practitioners must disclose if they have financial interests in pharma companies. This is also why governments keep a close watch on how evergreening of patents takes place to keep drug prices high. Recently, there was a spat on this issue involving Novartis.

The Pfizer vaccine, which should have been heralded, worldwide, has instead met with a mixed reaction. The science behind the mRNA should have said it all; instead all kinds of past accusations against Pfizer have crawled out now that the log has been rolled. Its 1990s' record in Nigeria along with the many legal cases it has faced, involving billions of dollars, is now big news.

This is obviously not good for science. Ugur Sahin of BioNTech, recalling his scientific past, candidly stated: "If you do a project with a large pharmaceutical company, sometimes you find out that the decision to continue the project isn't based on the quality and potentiality of the research; it is more of a business strategy." To equate science with business is bad for both.

In this fraught-with-suspicions atmosphere, science took a further wallop with Trump and the pandemic just heightened this fact. When it is the president of the US, no less, who thumbs a nose at science, its repercussions are felt worldwide. Bushes that were burning unthreateningly now suddenly flare up and even sensible people fan the flames.

First, the White House raised a finger against WHO, but before long it was the whole fist that was being waved at scientists. When scientists said please worry, there is a pandemic out there, Trump said there was no reason to worry, it "will just go away". Simultaneously, we didn't know if masks should or should not be worn while the virus was calmly multiplying itself.

Nor are we certain whether doctors really understand the disease and whether there is any unanimity on how best to tackle Covid-19. Trump said Remdesivir cured him in five days

US President Donald Trump at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, October 12

REUTERS

Science took a further wallop with Trump and the pandemic just heightened this fact. When it is the president of the US, no less, who thumbs a nose at science, its repercussions are felt worldwide. When scientists said please worry, there is a pandemic out there, Trump said there was no reason to worry, it 'will just go away'. Simultaneously, we didn't know if masks should or should not be worn

An anti-vaccine protest in Boston, August 30

GETTY IMAGES

Ultra-individualist activists in the West, who object to curbs on their movements by the state, including mask-wearing, to contain Covid, have joined this attack on science. The term 'anti-vaxxers' has now gained much wider currency. A survey shows that 50 per cent of New York firemen are among the newly converted anti-vaxxers. This should send warning bells clanging as they are frontline workers

flat, but later we were told that this may not be an accurate claim. Plasma therapy, too, was once believed to lessen the severity of the virus' effect; now we are told that is not so.

IT IS UNFAIR TO blame medical scientists entirely for they were uncertain as well. They too were crossing the river feeling the stones. What was, however, unprecedented, was how specialists were publicly contesting each other's position on everything in the media. It was as if there was just not enough dirty linen for them to wash; the desire to be in the news was so compelling.

The way scientists and assorted experts fought over every inch of the way was rather unbecoming. What should have been discussed in specialised journals and seminars was being put out for public consumption without adequate peer review. Corporatisation of medicine encouraged this public display because funding for science now depends on public prominence.

Unfortunately, ultra-individualist activists in the West, who object to curbs on their movements by the state, including mask-wearing, to contain Covid, have joined this attack on science. This is why it is important that leaders come forward, as Joe Biden has done, and be among the first to take the new vaccine and show the world that science has won. We have several instances in history when vaccine inventors were the first to inject themselves to allay public fears.

Initially, we thought that the pandemic would have a different reaction. As we are all falling sick together, as the virus does not give a fig if one lives in a slum or in a gated community, it was hoped this would give a boost to public health. Indeed, in the early pandemic days we were clapping and banging pans to honour health workers, but soon that gave way to cynicism against science.

Today, once again, public funding for health has lost its place in political discourse after dominating it briefly in the months of April and May this year. The corporates have come back with a difference. Instead of striding to centrestage with mass adulation at their back, their public reception is laced with concerns of chicanery and deceit.

That is not good news as the long-awaited vaccines, and the truth that they hold so much promise, are now suspect in the popular imagination. There were people who made fun of those who sang *bhajans* and recited the *Hanuman Chalisa* to fight Covid. Yet, they didn't mean these incantations to replace science, but act as a supplement, as if to remind the gods.

The term 'anti-vaxxers' has now gained much wider currency than ever before. A survey conducted early this month, shows that 50 per cent of New York firemen are among the newly converted anti-vaxxers. This should send warning bells clanging as they are frontline workers and, hopefully, this attitude will not spread to others who are also professionals of this kind.

There is the long run and the short run. The long run is to reinstate science as a non-corporate activity and fund disinterested scientists in non-profit laboratories. Cuts in these expenditures must be restored if the next generation is to benefit from the accumulated knowledge of centuries of scientific work. But that is the long run.

In the short run, the 'beware of science' writing on the 2020 walls needs to be replaced with the graffiti: 'Science is good'. India has probably given a demonstration of this by asking AstraZeneca to comply with stricter regulations before the vaccine can be approved for public use.

Such oversight by the state is faith-restoring, to one and all. ■

Dipankar Gupta is a sociologist and public intellectual. He is the author of, among other titles, Q.E.D.: India Tests Social Theory

Photograph by **ROHIT CHAWLA**

INVERSATIONS IN THE YEAR OF FEAR

By MJ AKBAR

December began with a mild joke, so it is easy to forget the month of March when laughter suddenly disappeared, and a deep, pervasive panic consumed our nation. Maybe amnesia is necessary for survival after passing through the valley of the shadow of death. Death, the god or angel of the immense void, stood knocking at the world's door, with dreadful persistence. Death has no class, no caste, no mercy and stands at the crossroads

of every religion. Hearts echoed with silent lament; the air was quickly polluted by the hysteria of psychological spreaders, that puffed and puerile tribe of doomsday-mongers, some of them garbed in the quackery of false doctors. Their pestilence is littered across the endless fields of the internet.

Panic is the contagious corollary of a pandemic. No chapter in the history of this endless year was more heart-rending than the sight of mass migrations as the poor fled their urban nightmare and sought the familiar sunrise of their original communities. Philosophy had an answer for our wracked consciousness: this too shall pass. But that comfort, while coherent in the collective, trembled on the edge of individual uncertainty. No one knew who would survive the scythe as it reaped havoc.

It was in the overlap between November and December that a weak joke began to flit through mobile screens: given the declining numbers, the pandemic would disappear even before the vaccine arrived. Jokes are like the famous buses of London: you can't see any for a long time, and then suddenly they arrive one after another. A second one turned up. The success of the vaccine has been estimated at between 70 per cent and 95 per cent, but India's survival rate is over 98 per cent so who needs the vaccine in India?

Like all good humour, it originated in lived experience. India had the lowest death rate of any major country with a democratic and open system of records. From the middle of September, the figures began to decline in a consistent slide. That was the miracle no one had expected, in media or private chatter. On the day of writing, the total number of dead is 1,43,709, out of 99,06,165 registered cases.

Long before the arrival of any vaccine, Indians came to terms with this upheaval. In October, the public mood began to change perceptibly. It was not that people became careless; they merely decided they were not going to die before their death. They were not victims of illusion. They simply factored in the various equations of a complicated calculus, and decided that they could deal with the negatives if they remained positive. This did not happen by accident. Indians were not being foolhardy; they were becoming confident that while the pandemic was a scourge of fate, its management was in safe hands.

There is still debate over whether the country should have been put into lockdown in the third week of March; that debate, like so much else, is rife with partisan opinions. The more sensible option is to test it with logic. The first lockdown was necessary not because it was a wave of some magic wand that would drive out pestilence in a brief minute, but to prevent dislocations inherent in panic. It would control contagion, but could not possibly eliminate it. India needed time to create the vast healthcare infrastructure and emergency commodities-supply chain essential to handle this sudden, fearsome calamity; and slowly build the confidence of the people as they began to understand that Indians were not going to become helpless victims of an incomprehensible terror.

PTI

Who wore a mask in India before March? Who produced a mask? No one. Which was why in the first stage Prime Minister Narendra Modi advocated covering your nose and mouth in rural areas with a *gamchha*. We had no ventilators. Sanitisers? How many medical centres used them then as they do now? We had insufficient knowledge. In the circumstances, Prime Minister Modi's pandemic management was practical and comprehensive; it addressed the requirements of every corner of a vast geography and demography. Nudged into line, hospitals and medical centres began to adjust to the demands of this crisis. They did so brilliantly. Those with some memory will recall that railway coaches were repurposed to become coronavirus beds in an emergency. That was a confidence-building measure, which became unnecessary as the healthcare system found its bearings.

Prime Minister Modi used a mix of symbolism and pragmatism that worked. You cannot command in a democracy; that can only be done in an authoritarian regime. In a democracy, people must believe that a decision is in their best interests;

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ADDRESSES THE NATION ON APRIL 14

only then will they accept it. The brilliant turn he gave was to make people a part of the solution, instead of only being part of a problem for which they were not responsible. The village and the *mohalla* became guardians against the virus.

Prime Minister Modi led a federal and national effort, in cooperation with every chief minister, including the one or two who remain recalcitrant, to create as good a safety net as India could improvise. Nothing is impervious, but doomsday had been postponed to some future age.

In a democracy, recognition of quality leadership by the people comes not in newspaper articles or internet pontification, but through elections. Prime Minister Modi has won almost every election since the pandemic began, including in bitterly contested Bihar, where opinion polls almost unanimously predicted victory for his opponents.

Pollsters often get things wrong because they are so busy with variable text that they have little patience for context. How many of the number-jugglers, to offer just one example, remembered what happened to the rabi harvest this year when they were checking in the villages to find out who would vote for whom?

For those unfamiliar with that distant land called agriculture, rabi is the crop sown in winter and harvested around April. This

WHO WORE A MASK IN INDIA BEFORE MARCH? WHO PRODUCED A MASK? NO ONE. WHICH WAS WHY IN THE FIRST STAGE PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ADVOCATED COVERING YOUR NOSE AND MOUTH IN RURAL AREAS WITH A GAMCHHA. HIS PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT WAS PRACTICAL AND COMPREHENSIVE; IT ADDRESSED THE REQUIREMENTS OF EVERY CORNER OF A VAST GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

year April was the month of gloom and doom. The country was at a nervous standstill. Prime Minister Modi took measures, quietly, without fuss, to ensure that the harvest process, with its large requirements of labour for mowing and transfer of produce, was completed. This was good governance in the midst of a severe challenge. There was no reason for farmers to forget in October what had saved their harvest in April.

At the start of the lockdown in March, there was genuine apprehension of food shortages. Food scarcity is not only a condition of production and supply. Fear can turn a problem into a calamity. If an average urban household decides to hoard five kg of grain, all the supply in the world cannot keep up with demand. But people quickly found the confidence to buy what they needed and no more. They were certain of assured availability by a hands-on Government. Bread and sport, says an ancient adage, keep the people calm, although you do not have to be ancient or modern to appreciate the necessity of food or the value of entertainment. With the arrival of rains, sport crept back onto the television screen, which has become the common man's stadium while the stadium has been upgraded into an upper-class theatre.

Even though the casualty radar flickered between heavy and light blips, there was no return of lockdown. India found its feet, one step at a time. By November, the economy began to show evidence of revival; manufacturing was up, as was the Goods and Services Tax collection, an accurate measure of commercial transaction. The inveterate sceptics stationed in Delhi, who had been reporting the imminent onslaught of unprecedented disaster, discovered that the daily infection rate had slid as sharply as the descent of an Everest; while the death rate remained the lowest among major nations with an open system similarly afflicted. So what did the alarmists do? They changed the subject, of course.

What was the big story of 2020?

May I suggest an unusual answer to a seemingly redundant question? The virus was, one assumes, an accident, perhaps one waiting to happen but nevertheless an accident; an insidious tsunami from the air selecting victims with the random eye of a tyrant. A story, in my view, is a narrative of human endeavour. For me, the big story of 2020 was the quiet, persistent and meticulous way in which democracy conquered dread.

WE WITNESSED IN 2020 PERHAPS THE MOST PEACEFUL ROUND OF ELECTIONS IN OUR HISTORY. THIS WAS DEMOCRACY AT ITS BEST—AND ITS MOST NORMAL. THIS WAS CLINCHING PROOF THAT LIFE WAS BACK TO ITS REGULAR CYCLES IN INDIA

VOTERS AT A POLLING STATION IN PALIGANJ, PATNA, OCTOBER 28

Elections were held in India, at every level from state to village and municipality, all through the pandemic. The decision to hold them is taken by the Election Commission in consultation with governments, which must provide the security and bureaucracy required. But they are successful only if people vote. Without a voter there is no ballot. In every case the voter turned up, followed the discipline, marked his and her preference, and surprised the know-all pundit with rare relish. We also witnessed in 2020 perhaps the most peaceful round of elections in our history. This was democracy at its best—and its most normal. This was clinching proof that life was back to its regular cycles in India. Remarkably, the elections did not lead to any spike of virus cases.

There were 7.3 crore voters in Bihar; 57 per cent participated in three phases, taking their decision on 71 seats on October 28th, 94 seats on November 3rd and 78 seats on November 7th. It was better than a carbon copy of an electoral schedule in a non-pandemic year. There were elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad, Assam and Goa. The only subdued turnout was in Hyderabad, and this had more do with an absence of political enthusiasm rather than a fear of disease.

Here are the newspaper headlines a day after the panchayat elections in Goa: 'Amid Covid, 57% of rural Goa votes, keeps parties guessing'; 'Usually vocal, mining belt goes silent this time'; 'Salcete records 47% turnout'; '31 Covid patients turn up in PPE suits to cast vote'; 'Police drop rifles, arm themselves with thermal guns'; 'Cong., NCP in verbal duel at Benaulim'. In other stories, the ruling party, BJP, claimed victory and the principal opposition, Congress, accused the election panel of turning a blind eye to violations. Gripe is usually a sign of weakness, and

RELATIVES MOURN A FAMILY MEMBER WHO DIED OF COVID IN GUWAHATI, SEPTEMBER 28

Photos **AP**

so it proved. BJP won an overwhelming victory.

One self-important American newspaper, always happy to overegg the pudding, uses as its brand line the claim that 'Democracy dies in darkness'. Quite the opposite. Everyone can see in light. It is only democracy, illuminated by the principle of the collective good, powered by an accountability mathematics that can bring down any government, which has the force to outlast darkness. The American presidential elections proved this, not because of the results but because of voter participation. Both candidates got over 74 million votes: Biden had 81,282,896, Trump got 74,222,484. The figures are the highest ever for both parties, in the middle of a health disaster that has already taken over 300,000 American lives.

A virus without borders should encourage solutions without borders. A century ago, the world learnt little from the global affliction of the so-called Spanish Flu. There is some good news today. According to one estimate, 200 million would have been dead by now instead of 1.5 million if the lethal rate had been the same as it was in 1918 and 1919. If there is hope of control in 2020 and 2021, it is because the crisis has lifted national compartments. Manufacturing abilities in India have teamed up with research facilities in Britain; testing is transnational; and pricing has to become affordable. Alas, such facts and figures may comfort the living but are meaningless to the million and half that have died.

Death is not sentimental. Age has its demands, if disease has let you slip through to dotage. There is an unconscious but prescribed routine for normal fatality: tears dry within a day; kitchen fires are re-lit in 24 hours; memories begin to leave the conversation although they might never quite leave you; and then comes some anointed day when speeches and prayer bid an official goodbye. Life must go on.

The pandemic of 2020 was cruel. This year, death was lonely. You disappeared into the void alone and isolated, without family or friends. The only conversation you had was with yourself.

Eerily, this was also true of those who survived. For long periods, conversation was rationed. You spoke, mostly, to yourself.

THE PANDEMIC OF 2020 WAS CRUEL. THIS YEAR, DEATH WAS LONELY. YOU DISAPPEARED INTO THE VOID ALONE AND ISOLATED, WITHOUT FAMILY OR FRIENDS. THE ONLY CONVERSATION YOU HAD WAS WITH YOURSELF. EERILY, THIS WAS ALSO TRUE OF THOSE WHO SURVIVED

This probably needs another term: perhaps 'inversation' rather than 'conversation'. When I think back to an elder I loved and respected but who has now gone, or a friend of long ago who passed away, thoughts sink into a conundrum. Of what use were those hedgehog quills of ambition, or the many years of telephone power to an individual trapped for a month in a sterile room staring at the slow but inexorable arrival of the angel of death?

Why does religion offer an angel of death, but no angel of life?

I think, said a French philosopher, therefore I am. The truth may be elsewhere: I think and therefore I am not.■

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

THE OUTLIER STATE

THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY HAS DEFIED GRIM FORECASTS BUT THERE ARE ENOUGH REASONS FOR CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

By the time the gravity of the Covid crisis was appreciated by the Union Government, the Indian economy was already cooling down. Seen on a quarter-by-quarter basis, it was as if a plane had cut off its engines and was gliding down. Then, when the pandemic necessitated stringent lockdowns, the economy went into a tailspin. The first quarter of the new financial year (2020-2021) showed a 24 per cent contraction in output, probably the worst posted by the country in a very long time. Critics of the Government seized on that data and issued a dire prognosis. Some even went as far as to say that it would be three to four years before the economy returned to its pre-Covid growth trajectory.

Those days seem to be fading away. India continued to be in the zone of contraction in the second quarter, but the level of contraction was much smaller than that in the first quarter. At 7.5 per cent, the level of contraction has been dubbed as a 'rebound' by many. This has been cheered as a sign of incipient recovery. While there is cause for optimism, it is best to remain guarded. Unlike the forecasts of a 'total washout' and India's grim economic future, the situation stabilised in the second quarter for a number of reasons. The exact causes—festival season demand, 'pent-up' demand after the stringent lockdowns, and more—are debatable, but India does seem to be an outlier in some respects.

When the first lockdown was imposed by the Government in late March after Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the situation in a national telecast, it was accepted by Indians at large. Soon enough, critics began carping at the steps. It began as poking fun at some of the steps meant to mobilise the country: 'clanging and banging' being a favourite trope to describe an allegedly ineffective Government. By mid-June, when the national lockdowns began to give way to strategies based on regional requirements, a full-blown economic critique was at hand: the lockdown was way too severe and in trying to save lives, the Indian economy had been 'killed' in the bargain. But perhaps these lockdowns did have a positive effect. By mid-September, India had 'bent' the curve. The seven-day moving average of new confirmed cases peaked by this time. At the same time, there were fears that restoration of mobility would lead to second and later waves in the pandemic. Nothing of that sort happened. In terms of full restoration of mobility and a continuing fall in the number of new cases, India is a complete outlier. In countries like the US where there were no national-level lockdowns but only regional measures, the situation has gone from bad to worse. Much of the world is located in a low mobility, rising cases situation. The reasons why India has managed to restore mobility and has 'peaked' will only be known later. But it is safe to say that the early lockdowns helped.

The second feature that distinguishes India from the rest of the world is the rather low spending and fiscal support by its Government. If anything, in the second quarter, government expenditure fell as a percentage of GDP. While India launched a series of support packages that were impressive, the bulk of the support came from the central bank and in the form of credit guarantees instead of actual outgo from the Government's coffers.

Much of the criticism of the Government by economists, many of whom are conservative in their approach to government spending, rests on the Centre not doing enough to revive the Indian economy. The Government did launch a series of Atmanirbhar Bharat programmes but these packages, as records show, had a rather meagre government spending component. Until October, the Government had sound reasons to be careful as external circumstances (China) and domestic concerns

UNLIKE THE FORECASTS OF A 'TOTAL WASHOUT' AND INDIA'S GRIM ECONOMIC FUTURE, THE SITUATION STABILISED IN THE SECOND QUARTER FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS. THE EXACT CAUSES ARE DEBATABLE, BUT INDIA DOES SEEM TO BE AN OUTLIER IN SEVERAL RESPECTS

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

necessitated caution. But things changed after that. Suddenly, GST revenue picked up smartly; household savings witnessed a huge jump and with a current account surplus, the Government, it seemed, had enough resources to spend its way out. It did not. That criticism appears valid, at least on paper.

What remains unanswered while building a case for higher government spending is whether this will impart the necessary momentum to the Indian economy. Careful economists like Jahangir Aziz of JP Morgan have made a case for an extensive income support programme and have convincingly argued that India does have the required resources. But it is quite likely that a one-shot, one-off spending plan will not work and lead to a demand revival. Instead, there is every possibility that this will lead to a hoarding of cash. Aziz calculated that India has lost close to 10 million jobs. This shows that a situation of economic uncertainty exists in India. In such conditions, an income support programme will be effective only if it is extended for a foreseeable future. To borrow game theory terminology, the Government finds itself in what is often called a 'Centipede Game'. If the income support programme is of a short duration and the recipients know the end date of the programme, they will tend to hoard cash. For the programme to be effective, the Government will have to continue spending for a long time without disclosing what is 'long'. That is the only way that those enrolled in the programme will have confidence to spend and not hoard cash. This is likely to be an expensive proposition, economically and politically. A rough calculation will show that if the Government decides to support one crore individuals by

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA SITHARAMAN ANNOUNCES NEW ECONOMIC SCHEMES IN NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 12

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giving them Rs 1,000 every month for a year, the cost will be Rs 12,000 crore. But that may not be enough to create sufficient, economy-wide demand. Suppose this number is increased to 10 crore people, the cost will gallop to Rs 1.2 lakh crore every year. This may be a sufficiently 'thick' layer of people to make a difference to the economy, but it will also blow a hole in the Government's budget.

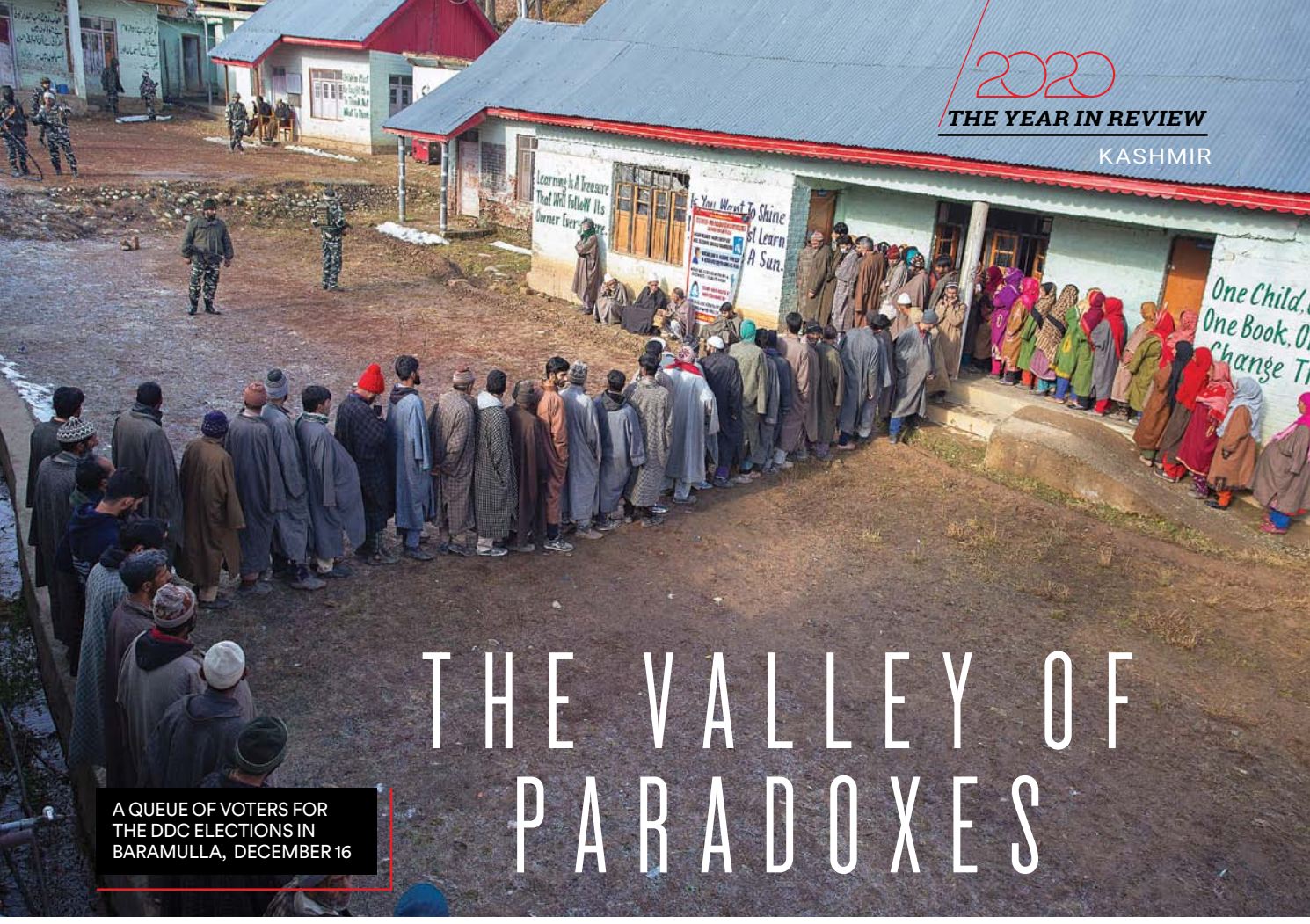
Even if one ignores all the constraints, the length of time for which the income support programme has to be carried out, marshalling of financial resources for it and figuring out the design of the programme to make it effective, the real constraints will be political. Once it is launched, it is politically impossible to shut down such programmes: there is always a crisis in any developing country where a case can be made for continuing with such programmes indefinitely. Apart from a permanent drag on the Government's spending priorities, these programmes also complicate macroeconomic management. There is one possibility, however, under which this kind of spending can become feasible: if the minimum support price (MSP) operations in Punjab and Haryana are rationalised, the Government can always muster the necessary amount of money after diverting what is shelled out for food procurement in these states. If planned carefully with a proper design, this can become the nucleus of a 'mini' Universal Basic Income (UBI) programme. If the Government holds its nerve against the rich farmers from Punjab who are trying to hold it to ransom, there is a distinct possibility that in the years ahead, the Government may be able to re-engineer its spending priorities.

The impressive 'rebound' in the second quarter economic output data has led to optimism that India may finally be out of the woods by the end of 2020-2021. There is, no doubt, reason for cautious optimism. But the data itself, when viewed differently, offers reasons for worry as well. In a recent opinion piece, Sajjid Chinoy, another JP Morgan economist and a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC), parsed the September quarter output data in terms of profits, wages and indirect taxes. The other two ways are to break down output into private consumption, government expenditure, investment and net exports; and breaking it down into sectoral composition (industry, agriculture, services, etcetera.) It is the latter two methods that seem to give 'comfort' as some parts of the economy have picked up from the first quarter doldrums.

What Chinoy showed, however, paints a sombre picture. He noted that net profits of listed companies grew by 25 per cent in the second quarter even as revenue growth of these companies declined. How is this possible? One way for that is when companies slash costs such as wages. This does not bode well for economic growth in the coming quarters. With income uncertainty, reduced wages and job losses, demand is likely to remain muted. There is, of course, a debate among economists about wages and economic growth that is complicated and, at times, assumes an ideological colour. But it is safe to say that in a country like India with limited exports, domestic demand is probably the most important source of growth.

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT CAN DO IS PUSH PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN AREAS LIKE INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC WORKS THAT CAN SERVE AS A SOURCE OF WORK. THIS IS THE CLASSIC KEYNESIAN REMEDY TO SUPPORT AN ECONOMY IN TROUBLE

There is, however, a limit to what the Government can do to push private demand. What it can do is push public investment in areas like infrastructure and public works that can serve as a source of work. This is the classic Keynesian remedy to support an economy in trouble. Probably that is what the Government has in mind as it pushes ahead with its spending plans in the months ahead. ■



A QUEUE OF VOTERS FOR THE DDC ELECTIONS IN BARAMULLA, DECEMBER 16

THE VALLEY OF PARADOXES

Photo **ABID BHATT**

BETWEEN ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370 AND DISTRICT-LEVEL POLLS, NO ONE IS SURE YET WHICH WAY THE PENDULUM WILL SWING IN KASHMIR

By **RAHUL PANDITA**

In October 2019, in Kashmir, two months after the abrogation of Article 370, the Indian Army held a recruitment drive in Srinagar to fill a few hundred vacancies. On the first day, about 2,000 young men appeared at the gates of the Army's Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry (JAKLI) centre.

The drive particularly saw men from South Kashmir being screened for recruitment. As Army personnel kept watch, hundreds of them, in vests and shorts, participated in physical fitness tests, hoping to be selected.

Kashmir watchers are used to such paradox. From July 2016 onwards, since security personnel killed Burhan Wani, the commander of the Pakistan-based terrorist organisation Hizbul Mujahideen, in an encounter, South Kashmir remained close to being a war zone. Terrorists—young Kashmiri men like Wani, hardly trained, and their Pakistani handlers and trainers, trained well in camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan—found a safe refuge in big pockets, enabling them to carry out deadly attacks like the one on a convoy of the Central

Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Pulwama in February 2019. It was not unusual to see terrorists appearing at the funeral of a slain terrorist and cheered on by thousands of people, especially young men.

And yet, some from the same areas ended up on an Army recruitment drive to be part of the force they supposedly abhor so much that, several times in the past, they have come to throw stones at its personnel while they were engaged in gun battles with terrorists trapped in houses.

Both these sides of the Kashmir story are true at the same time. Perhaps nothing reflects it better than the case of a young man called Mudasir Khan, one of the terrorists involved in the Pulwama suicide attack, which resulted in the killing of 40 CRPF personnel. Khan had helped the terrorist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed in making the bomb used in the attack. He was killed soon afterwards in an encounter with the security forces. His father told investigators from the National Investigation Agency (NIA) that he had always wanted to wear a uniform and had expressed a desire to join the police.

But then he ended up with Jaish and shortly afterwards in a grave as a slain terrorist.

It is easy to get carried away by stories of how young men in Kashmir become terrorists. They often say that the men who crossed over the Line of Control (LoC) in the late 1980s and returned to start the insurgency in Kashmir were just ruffians who had no idea what they were fighting for. They said they were fighting for an independent Kashmir whereas it soon became clear that it was a euphemism for merger with Pakistan.

By the mid-1990s, it was clear to a majority of those who picked up arms and their ideologues that India was never going to let go of Kashmir. So they adopted ways to make money from both Pakistan and from the Indian state that was desperate to see a solution. In the name of asset-building by intelligence agencies, many, who should have been tried for murder, became political leaders, some even 'Gandhians', and continued to make the best of the turmoil.

Even as these games were being played, Kashmiri society was gravitating towards a more rigid form of Islam, resulting in radicalisation of young people like Mudasir. With the help of media narratives, though, a very dangerous spiel would be offered every time a terrorist was killed.

When Burhan Wani died, his father said he had become a militant after he and his brother were beaten up by the police for no reason. But nobody asked what kind of lessons he, as a member of the fundamentalist Jamaat, had imparted to his children.

The same story gets churned many times, year after year.

PASSING OUT PARADE OF NEW RECRUITS AT AN ARMY BASE IN SRINAGAR, OCTOBER 10

AP

Even last year, after Sajjad Bhat, one of the conspirators of the Pulwama suicide attack and an active Jaish terrorist was killed, his relatives told journalists it was because they had been harassed by the police. But Bhat's father did not mention that he was a hardcore Jamaat member and had sent his son to a religious seminary in Shopian affiliated to the Jamaat-e-Islami, now banned in the state. In October this year, a crackdown finally happened on the seminary, Jamia Siraj-ul-Uloom, leading to the arrest of its three teachers under the Public Safety Act (PSA) for anti-national activities. Investigating agencies found that 13 of its students had joined terrorist groups.

It was in Shopian in 2009 that a major lie was constructed around the deaths of two women, which continues to be used as a weapon against the Indian state. The two women were found dead in a rivulet that year in May; right afterwards, it was alleged that the two had been raped and killed by security forces, leading to a major unrest in the Valley. In the din raised by the separatist machinery in Kashmir, aided by their sympathisers in Delhi and elsewhere, truth became a casualty.

That the women could have drowned was rejected at once. This, despite the fact that between 1995 and 2008, 10 other people had died by drowning in the same rivulet, while three more did between 2010 and 2013. It was only after an independent team of doctors from Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) performed another autopsy on the two bodies, ruling out rape and establishing their deaths as asphyxia (from ante-mortem drowning), that the conspiracy was unearthed. Later, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) found six Kashmiri doctors, among others, responsible for fabricating evidence. One of the doctors, the CBI found, had fudged the vaginal swab samples to falsely show that the women were raped.

But even years later, the two deaths were being used as a propaganda tool by Islamist radicals. A 16-year-old boy in Kulgam in South Kashmir said in 2017 that the doctors conducting the post-mortem of one of the drowned women had found five litres of semen inside her body. He said he was told this in a conference in his village.

Even as these things were happening, the Centre went ahead with the abrogation of Article 370 in August last year. This was something nobody had expected. It happened along with a ban on the internet and mobile networks. Hundreds of people were picked up and detained, including overground workers of terrorist organisations.

Nobody was sure what would happen and how Kashmiris would react. While additional forces were rushed to the Valley, the Government was prepared for casualties in the wake of clashes after possible mass protests. The milk would come to a boil at some point, police officials said.

Yet, even as months passed, nothing of this sort happened. Of course, young men kept on joining terrorist organisations and got killed in security operations. But for the majority, a dividing line they always visualised in their minds between Kashmir and the rest of India was erased.

Whether this erasure will bring long-lasting peace to Kashmir, getting rid of New Delhi-encouraged political schizophrenia in Kashmiri minds, is yet to be seen. There are no indications so far that radicalism has ebbed in Kashmir. This means that there will be people ready to carry Pakistani terrorists from the International Border in the Jammu sector and bring them to the Valley to strike and create mayhem. Till October this year, over 200 terrorists were killed in encounters. Most of them, according to the police, came from four districts of South Kashmir.

IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL TO SEE TERRORISTS APPEARING AT THE FUNERAL OF A SLAIN TERRORIST. AND YET, SOME FROM THE SAME AREAS ENDED UP ON AN ARMY RECRUITMENT DRIVE TO BE PART OF THE FORCE THEY SUPPOSEDLY ABHOR SO MUCH

A year ago, the Government finally withdrew 72 companies of paramilitary forces, sent to Kashmir for additional security requirement in the wake of the August abrogation. But there has been an increase in infiltration attempts, with Jaish sending its terrorists to carry out Pulwama-type attacks.

That Pakistan's attempts to disturb the peace in Kashmir will continue is clear from the fact that, recently, its Prime Minister Imran Khan appointed Sheikh Rasheed as the country's new interior minister. Rasheed is close to terrorist organisations and has been known in the past to have run training camps for them. It was at his farmhouse in Rawalpindi in the late 1980s that many among the first batch of Kashmiris to have crossed over received training in arms. He has been in the past detained in the US for his links with the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Toiba and terrorist masterminds like Hafiz Saeed. After the abrogation of Article 370, Rasheed said that the last battle for the 'liberation' of Kashmir had arrived.

For its part, the Narendra Modi Government has forced Kashmir's two main regional parties, National Conference (NC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), to come together, along with a couple of others, to fight the District Development Council (DDC) elections jointly. In the fourth phase, the Kashmir division recorded an average turnout of 31.95 per cent. This phase included voting in terrorist hotbeds like Shopian and Pulwama which saw very little voting. But still, many people came out in the harsh winter cold and said that they were voting in the hope of some development.

Some of the same lot may come out any time and begin pelting stones again at a police vehicle.

The Kashmir paradox continues. ■

TERRA INFIRMA

/ WHAT STILL MAT

By SUDEEP PAUL

I know that I am alive
between two parentheses.
— Octavio Paz

2020 ran out of time wrapped in two uncertainties. Rather, variations on the self-same uncertainty: US-China and the pandemic. The year was a qualitative departure, not just a difference in degree or magnitude. A cataclysm befell the globe, making metaphors redundant. It spread from one city and affected most of humanity.

TERED MOST WAS HOW THE US AND CHINA DEALT WITH EACH OTHER /

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

By the time December was here, we had forgotten that the year had begun with the death of 500 million animals. Ironically, the UN had declared 2020 the International Year of Plant Health.

Tempting as it is to see the Australian bushfires that heralded the year as symbolic of a universe out of joint (they had actually started in mid-2019 and lasted almost a year), the bushfires became a footnote in the Year of the Rat that brought the plague. Not one of the Sustainable Development Goals was met. Climate change action apparently had its worst year on record. Who'd have seen that one coming when everything had shut down, triggering the worst global recession since the Great Depression? As we talked about paradigms shifting, the year, aping the human compulsion to impose order on chaos, overdid its patterns. Take this pair of parentheses: On January 3rd, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, was assassinated. On November 27th, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, top-dog nuclear scientist and a brigadier-general in the Revolutionary Guards, was eliminated. If Soleimani died in a precision drone strike, Fakhrizadeh was killed by a 'machine-gun with AI'. From the beginning of the year to its end, the world had changed in many details. Somewhere in the midst of it all, Africa freed itself of wild polio. And 2020 took John le Carré before it ended.

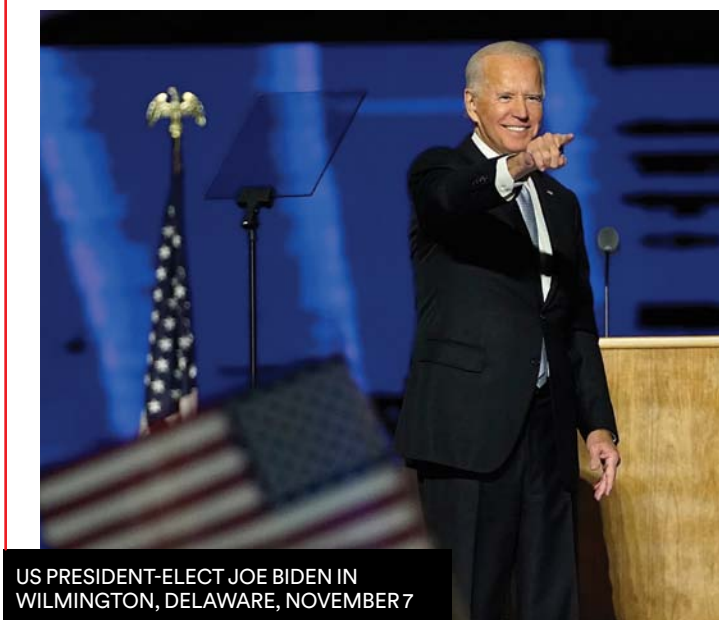
Pivoting on the pandemic, however, certain near-certainties evaporated. In the first quarter, Donald Trump was riding the

economy to re-election, strengthened by an impeachment by the House and a foregone acquittal by the Senate. But as booths and ballots were dared across Europe, Africa and Asia, the results of the year's biggest election—after a historic demonstration of what going down to the wire means—delivered America's oldest president-elect to his first term. The end-parenthesis of 2020 thus became a question: How much of the world as changed *by* Trump for the better will survive through 2021? And its obverse: How much of America as changed *under* Trump for the worse will heal itself? India would have been spared its terrible uncertainty on the first count had the pandemic not wrecked the 'Trump boom'. And yet, in a year of readymade signs of the apocalypse, a Black man died under the knee of a white policeman in America's 46th city almost at the midpoint of the year. Not an uncommon American reality, except it was crowd-shot and crowd-sourced across the eighth continent. Perhaps it was at that midpoint of 2020 that the Trump presidency ended.

In a year defined by a pandemic for the first time in a century, the US presidential election was the supreme instance of the persistence of the species. Bihar's Assembly elections, India's first after lockdown, could well compete, but then in Trump's curtailment, the US not fighting a new war through an entire presidential term—and yet intervening, often surgically, in places it needed to but wouldn't under another president—could be coming to an end. Is it for this reason that those who would be smirking in Beijing have been cautious in congratulating Joe Biden? Or holding their breath, expecting America to overinvest in a bloodbath soon? Biden, set to be the 46th president, isn't of course talking any more of letting China eat America's lunch, let alone doubting China eats anybody's lunch. But the end-uncertainty is just that: Whither the solid Made-in-America wall that Trump had built for India? Perhaps they would be more worried in Taipei, with talk of an invasion every other day, but for the fatal skirmish in eastern Ladakh. Will Canberra have the strength of mind (and pocket) hereafter to stay on in the Quad? Or will the Quad be watered down from the Eastern Seaboard after January 20th? Can Russia, primordial and Petersburgian instincts notwithstanding, expect Washington not to obsess about Moscow once again and look elsewhere despite evidence of big-ticket hacking?

Uncertainty hangs over the Middle East too. No matter how much Binyamin Netanyahu tries to couch it in diplomatic correctness. If the saddest story from West Asia and North Africa was Beirut almost being wiped off the map, the biggest was not so much Iran and the assassinations, or the downing of Ukrainian International Airlines' Flight 752 by an Iranian missile (in which 176 people died), or the Saudi intervention in Yemen and Libya. On November 10th, Israel and Morocco established diplomatic relations, Israel's fourth with a Muslim nation since September when the UAE and Bahrain normalised relations with it, followed by Sudan the next month. Maybe this was Trump's last triumph in a foreign policy that ended America's pursuit of the persistent practice of 'liberal hegemony' on the one hand and delivered results on the ground that no US presidential administration had—and at such rapid succession—on the other. While across the border from Rafah to Eilat, Egypt became more authoritarian than ever in recent memory, perhaps the most significant steps towards long-term peace in the Middle East since the Camp David Accords were taken in the middle of the pandemic. The Palestinians terminated their agreements, including the security deals, with Israel and the US, but then their Arab neighbours had long ago decided they had had enough. All of this, as the Knesset dissolves itself again and Israel prepares for the fourth parliamentary election in two years. (Israelis began the year getting ready to vote; they end the year getting ready to vote.)

On January 31st, the UK left the European Union (EU), triggering an 11-month transition period that ends on December 31st,



US PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN IN WILMINGTON, DELAWARE, NOVEMBER 7

with no extension on the cards as per EU laws. With one eye on Britain's hard exit after its year-long experiments with itself and another on the carnage wrought by Covid, few noticed Serbia and Kosovo proceed with their economic normalisation agreements, doing a bit more to lay the Balkan ghosts to rest, even as Poland and Hungary ganged up on Germany and took Berlin before the year's end. And yes, on March 1st, Luxembourg became the first country in the world to make its public transport free. Well, good for the Grand ol' Duchy. But nothing has gone well for Emmanuel Macron for a while, not since he decided to discard the kid gloves for terrorists and vandals and double down on 'Islamic separatism' after what must have been a refresher course on *laïcité*.

2020 was nevertheless the year Europe redeemed itself even as it struggled to outlive the pandemic. Its redemption was the hard call it took in refusing to be an always obliging partner in Beijing's neo-colonisation project, aka the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this case. European scepticism about the BRI predates 2020 but it assumed a tangible shape as anger rose at the People's Republic's

evident role in obfuscating the origins and trajectory of the virus in its early days.

It was the year Kim Jong-un went missing and the world couldn't make up its mind whether his sister, Kim Yo-jong, was pretty and ruthless or pretty and evil. Do they wonder in Pyongyang if their last chance at becoming less abnormal is disappearing with Trump?

IN ANOTHER YEAR, WE WOULD HAVE MADE MORE OF BUSHFIRES AND BITCOIN SCAMS. OR THE AFGHAN WAR CRIMES INQUIRY. OR POLAND-HUNGARY BULLYING GERMANY. OR KIM JONG-UN DISAPPEARING. OR NOTED THAT MOUNT EVEREST HAD 'GROWN' AGAIN

Across the Sea of Japan (or the East Sea as the South Koreans would call it) though, there was little scope for speculation. Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Shinzo Abe, called it a day when the ulcerative colitis got to him again. A pragmatist abroad and a nationalist at home, Abe had done more than most to try and build workable alliances against the never-quite-peaceful rise of China and was instrumental in resurrecting the Quad. He loved India for reasons of his own and of his country, and he will be missed in South Block for a long time.

AP

On the banks of the Moskva, much happened besides the return of Sputnik. In January, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his government resigned. In July, Russians paved the way for Vladimir Putin to extend his presidency till 2036. And then, in November, reports surfaced of Volodya planning to step down as early as next year amid fears of Parkinson's. It might still be possible to rule Russia without strongmen and vodka but not to pull it out of China's orbit, given the sins of the West when all Moscow needed was a friend who meant well, 30-odd years ago. Even the pandemic couldn't have changed that. (In Minsk though, Lukashenko has had it worse, with the protests nearing their eighth month now.)

It's an understatement to label 2020 a year of mispredictions. Here's the Eurasia Group's list of top 10 global geopolitical risks published in *Time* magazine in early January: One, the US elections (a test for institutions and lawsuits dragging for months, all in a political vacuum); two, the US-China tech decoupling (moving beyond the $5 trillion sector and creating a permanent economic, business and cultural divide, the 'Virtual Berlin Wall'); three, an explicit US-China clash; four, politicians under pressure asserting themselves at the expense of MNCs; five, in 'Modi-fied' India, the prime minister not backing down on Kashmir and CAA, leading to a 'harsh government response' in turn emboldening the opposition to corner Modi, leaving him little room for economic reforms; six, an increasingly assertive Europe stepping up the antitrust war on US tech giants, and this 'more independent Europe' leading to friction with both the US and China; seven, the politics of climate change putting 'governments, investors, and society at large on a collision course with corporate decision-makers'; eight, the consequences of the failure of US policy towards Iraq, Iran and Syria leading to 'deadly skirmishes'; nine, discontent in an increasingly polarised Latin America; and ten, Turkey and Erdogan.

In predicting India, there's a universal instinct to go by hearsay instead of tabulating facts. (Another thing the pandemic didn't change.) But none of these predictions, by itself, was unjustified. Nor has any been wide off the mark. And yet, they were mispredictions (except Erdogan who, among other things, reverted the Hagia Sophia to a mosque) because the Great Disruption was missing from the equation. Instead, the lasting images of 2020 were goats and leopards (or nilgais) where they shouldn't be and of lockdown protests (including the aesthetics of protesting in a pandemic courtesy of Hong Kong) or virtual summits. The biggest headlines were vaccine wars. Even the trade war, oil-price battles, bans on Chinese apps, and hair-splitting over supply chains were eclipsed by the WHO's fall from grace. The year's most desperately awaited news, if you were not an anti-vaxxer, came in November—the 'success' of the Phase 3 vaccine trials. In another year, we would have made more of Twitter-hacking connected to Bitcoin scams. Or of the Afghan war crimes inquiry. Taken sides in the bid to break up Facebook. Welcomed the closing of Mount Everest; even noted that it had 'grown' again. (In Salamanca, they found a 1634 edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the oldest Shakespeare in Spain.)

The empty streets are conditioning experiences for several lifetimes. But the Great Disruption was, equally, in the postponement of the Olympics, Euro 2020 or Copa America. The return of football to empty stands. The first cancellation of Eurovision. And then, the death of Diego Maradona to wrap up the year (again in November), followed a few days later by Paolo Rossi's which went largely unlamented outside Italy.

On November 22nd, the US formally withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies (while in April the Pentagon had released the videos, leaked in 2017, of 'unidentified aerial phenomena' experienced by US navy pilots). One might have thought that with Covid, trade wars and Hong Kong, Beijing would have had its hands full, but the South China Sea came close to a full-blown conflagration too often, leading to a verbal face-off with Washington. The world exits the year as it entered: suspended between the US and China, pandemic be damned. Now if only 2021 were the Year of the Cat! But that's 2023 and Vietnamese, and Al Stewart is younger than Biden but older than Trump. ■

COVER

A 17TH CENTURY ILLUSTRATION OF THE PLAGUE DOCTOR

GETTY IMAGES

UP OR BE DAMNED

WITH US SINCE THE BEGINNING OF CIVILISATION, THE MASK FINALLY TOOK OVER THE FACE OF HUMAN BEINGS BUT CHANCES ARE NOT FOR LONG

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

Take a look around you at the masks next time you are in public and a sly element of class becomes noticeable. There will be the bare bones plain piece of cotton mask. This is for ordinary folks, the middle class, the poor, the ones worried about value. There will be slightly thicker lush-looking ones. Some will sport an N95. There will be a few so loud that these are people for whom presentation is important. In the spectrum of masks, you can see a spectrum of society. Like when Priyanka Chopra stepped out of isolation after two months in May and put up an image of herself in a mask, with a note of thanks to a fashion designer who crafted it for her. For someone whose career relies on finetuning her appearance, this is no more surprising than her wearing a dress by the same designer at a red-carpet event. Even though the fundamental reason to wear a mask is protection, once that is performed, the human mind wants more. It wants identity. It wants to tickle vanity. It wants beauty. Aesthetics comes into the picture. In the evolution of the mask over the span of this year, you can also see echoes of the evolution of art.

Take the earliest masks that we know of. They are from 9,000 years ago and come from Israel, in an area known as the Judaean Hills. These are of stone and one can only guess at the purposes they might have been used for. It could be for ritual or ceremonial ends because who, even in his right primordial mind, would walk around with a heavy stone mask on a daily basis. But what you can see from the masks even then is that the idea of form had taken precedence. There are a number of these masks and they all look like human faces. But different human faces. Some have round holes for eyes, some the shape of the eye itself. One is laughing. They have teeth-like striations etched on them. The mask could function without those teeth but they decided to have it anyway because *the look* had become important. Nine thousand years ago would place it right in the beginning of civilisation itself for humankind. The mask has been with us all through its journey since then, right up to the latest avatars that can block the smallest of microbes or are finessed by designers at the demand of the present elite.

In times of disease, it is clear what the fundamental role of a mask is. But why would human beings want to wear them when no such exigency exists? It can denote the desire to conceal one's face and identity. It is why so many superheroes, from Batman to Ironman, are depicted masked. It also opens an extra dimension to their character that makes for fertile storytelling. Or, to take another example of concealment, robbers wear masks. The other reason to wear masks is to take on the face of another. In ancient times, for the primitive mind, it was an instrument to negotiate the world outside and beyond by taking on a better identity. Underpinning it is the awareness of an individual's powerlessness and the mask, a device to overcome it. As a 1907 paper on the anthropology of mask wearing among native American Indians noted: 'Throughout North America masks were worn in ceremonies, usually religious or quasi-religious, but sometimes purely social in character. Sometimes the priests alone were masked, sometimes only those who took part, and again the entire company. In all cases the mask served to intensify the idea of the actual presence of the mythical animal or supernatural person. The simplest form of mask was

one prepared from the head of an animal, as the buffalo, deer, or elk. These realistic masks did not stand for the actual buffalo, deer, or elk, but for the generic type, and the man within it was for the time endowed with or possessed of its essence or distinctive quality where the belief obtained that the mask enabled the wearer to identify himself for the time being with the supernatural being represented.' Only the supernatural could meet the world on its terms and, even though the human could not be god, he could, through propitiation, get his abilities for a while and the mask was the medium, a rubbing off of that strength.

Using masks to mediate with the supernatural can be seen in the performance of Indian folk dances that retell stories associated with mythology or the divine. A prominent example of this is in the faces of Kathakali performers that are layered with vivid colours making a painted mask that depicts the character. Kathakali itself draws on earlier folk arts in Kerala like Koodiyattam which too has elaborate make-up for the performer to take on a persona. In a recent Q&A titled 'The Expressive Power of Masks', Sara Brown, director of design for MIT Theater Arts, wrote in the institute's website on why they are intimately related to the performing arts: 'A performer in a mask is obscuring one identity in order to embody another one. Often, masks have meanings that can be instantly understood by an audience familiar with the specific codes embedded in a particular theater form. In Japanese Noh theater, for instance, a mask is worn by the shite, or principal character, and can indicate the character's age, gender, and if the character is human or divine. Though the masks are static and cover the entire face, the skilled performer can invoke a range of expression through changing the mask's orientation and relationship to light. These masks obscure the mortal dimension of the wearer in order to stir the imagination of the audience.'

The masks that we now wear and see all around us are ones forced on us, the decision made by circumstances not in our control. But even then, it opens an entire gateway of impulses.

Photos **ALAMY**

MASKED COMMUTERS IN SEATTLE DURING THE SPANISH FLU (1918-1920)

THE MASK IS GOING TO BE WITH US SO LONG AS THE VACCINE IS NOT. AFTER THAT, IT WILL PROBABLY BE A REMNANT. PEOPLE GET USED TO THINGS ONCE THEY HAVE BEEN USING IT DAILY FOR A WHILE BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT THEY WILL CONTINUE WITH IT IN THE SAME MEASURE AS BEFORE

You will want to make a statement about yourself through the mask you have been forced to wear. There are masks you can buy at present which are in the design of the Indian Tricolour. Think of who would buy such a mask. Someone who wants to be identified with the love of his country. Or a mask in the logo of your favourite sports team. The mask can be all together—protection to ornament to identity marker.

The mask didn't begin well this year even after it became clear that a new virus was in our midst, and the pandemic, a certainty. This was from a hotchpotch of flailing in the dark. The World Health Organization (WHO), which was the agency everyone looked to for direction, seemed in a state of inordinate confusion. There was then the introduction of the virtuous lie. As late as March 30th, three months after the virus had started travelling over borders, the WHO would still be defending its recommendation to not wear masks for everyone. *Voice of America* would report on that day: 'Don't wear face masks to fend off the coronavirus, the World Health Organization says. "There is no specific evidence to suggest that the wearing of masks by the mass population has any potential benefit. In fact, there's some evidence to suggest the opposite in the misuse of

wearing a mask properly or fitting it properly," WHO Executive Director of Health Emergencies Mike Ryan said Monday.' Dr Anthony Fauci, who was heading the US government efforts and had decades in the field against pandemics, was telling people not to wear masks because, he argued, it could actually be bad for them. In an interview with *60 Minutes* in early March, he said: "There's no reason to be walking around with a mask. When you're in the middle of an outbreak, wearing a mask might make people feel a little bit better and it might even block a droplet, but it's not providing the perfect protection that people think that it is. And, often, there are unintended consequences—people keep fiddling with the mask and they keep touching their face."

All this flew in the face of the history of disease and masks. One of the most famous and evil-looking masks is of the 17th century plague doctor who wears one that looks like a bird with a sharp long beak. If a patient who had contracted the disease wanted to imagine what death would look like, that mask would have been his nightmare coming true. But it served a purpose and there was function to it. The beak was stuffed with aromatic herbs that they believed would ward off the disease and it also kept the stench of the dead putrefying body away. The 1918 Spanish Flu, the worst pandemic in history, might have led to Japanese culture itself becoming one of mask wearers. The book *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* noted: 'In some places, for example, the wearing of a layered gauze mask over the mouth was recommended—and in Japan this probably marked the beginning of the practice of mask-wearing to protect others from one's own germs—but health officials disagreed as to whether masks actually reduced transmission.' In another part of the book, it speaks of studies that showed how masks reduced deaths then in the US saying: 'One 2007 study showed that public health measures such as banning mass gatherings and imposing the wearing of masks collectively cut the death toll in some American cities by up to 50 per cent [the US was much better at imposing such measures than Europe].'

As a prevention against respiratory diseases, which Covid is, there is near consensus on the imperative of masks. Why did WHO and experts like Fauci sound like they were trying hard to make people not wear masks in the initial days of the pandemic? They thought the larger interest was served in keeping the scarce supply of available masks to healthcare workers. But consider what it looks like from the point of view of the person who believed in them, didn't wear a mask and contracted the disease? Now the agreement is near total about masks. On its website, WHO says: 'Make wearing a mask a normal part of being around other people.' Dr Fauci advocates making masks compulsory by the government. He told *CNN* in October: "Well, if people are not wearing masks, then maybe we should be mandating it...I think that would be a great idea to have everybody do it uniformly." The ethical grounds for the virtuous lie had fallen apart. In the damage that WHO finds its reputation in at present, its recommendation against masks has had a big contribution. It also had unintended political consequences with US President Donald Trump making the non-wearing of masks a form of communication to his constituency to not take the pandemic seriously enough. To get re-elected, he had to downplay the pandemic and the mask, or the non-wearing of it, was his instrument. But it only lasted till he himself contracted the disease. The mask won.

The mask is going to be with us so long as the vaccine is not. After that, it will probably be a remnant. People get used to things once they have been using it daily for a while but it doesn't mean that they will continue with it in the same measure as before. Possibly, it might metamorphose into a fashion accessory. As a choice to wear it, the mask might slip into one of the nooks of popular culture. Most of us will, however, be relieved to be rid of masks. They are just very uncomfortable. ■

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SALON

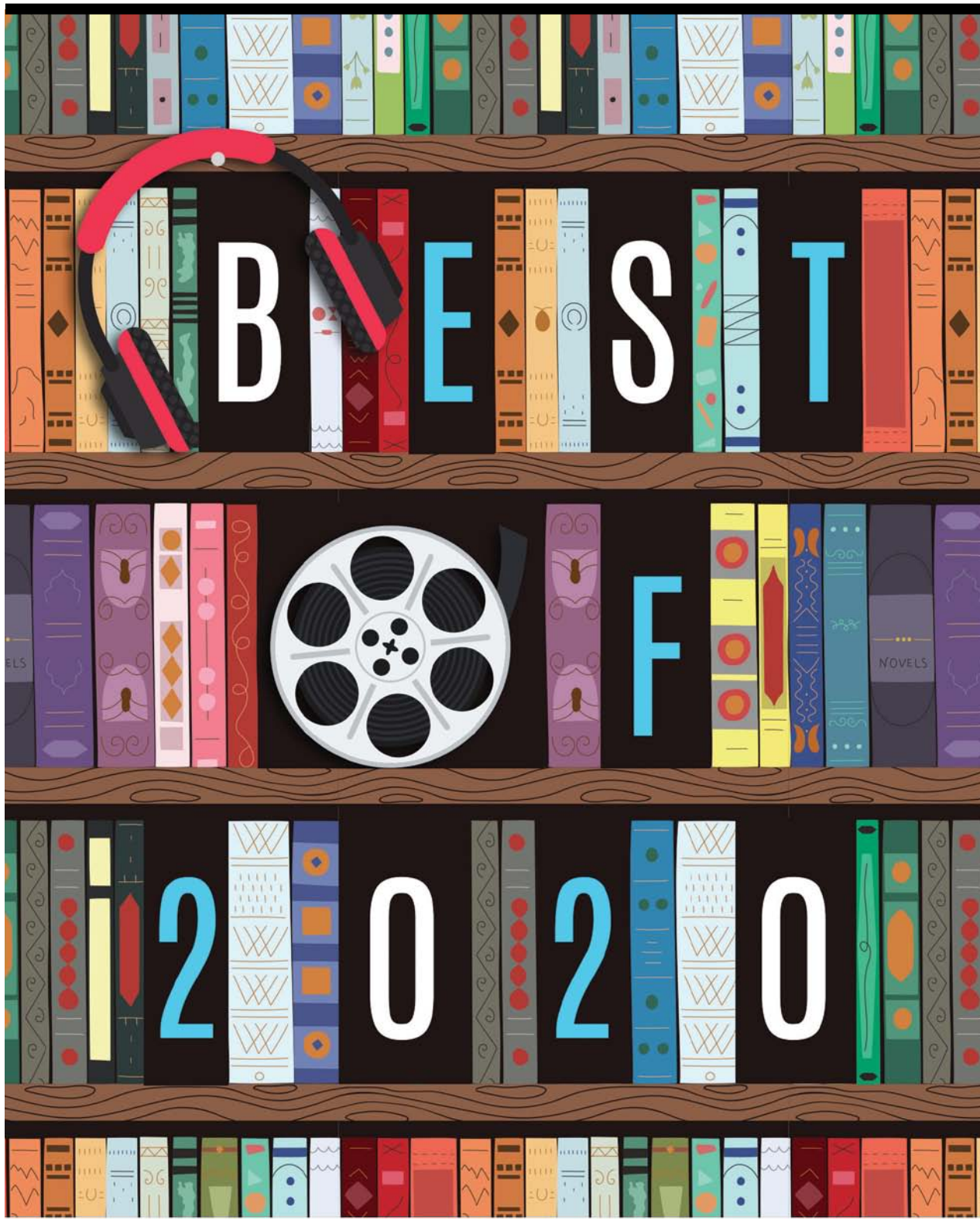
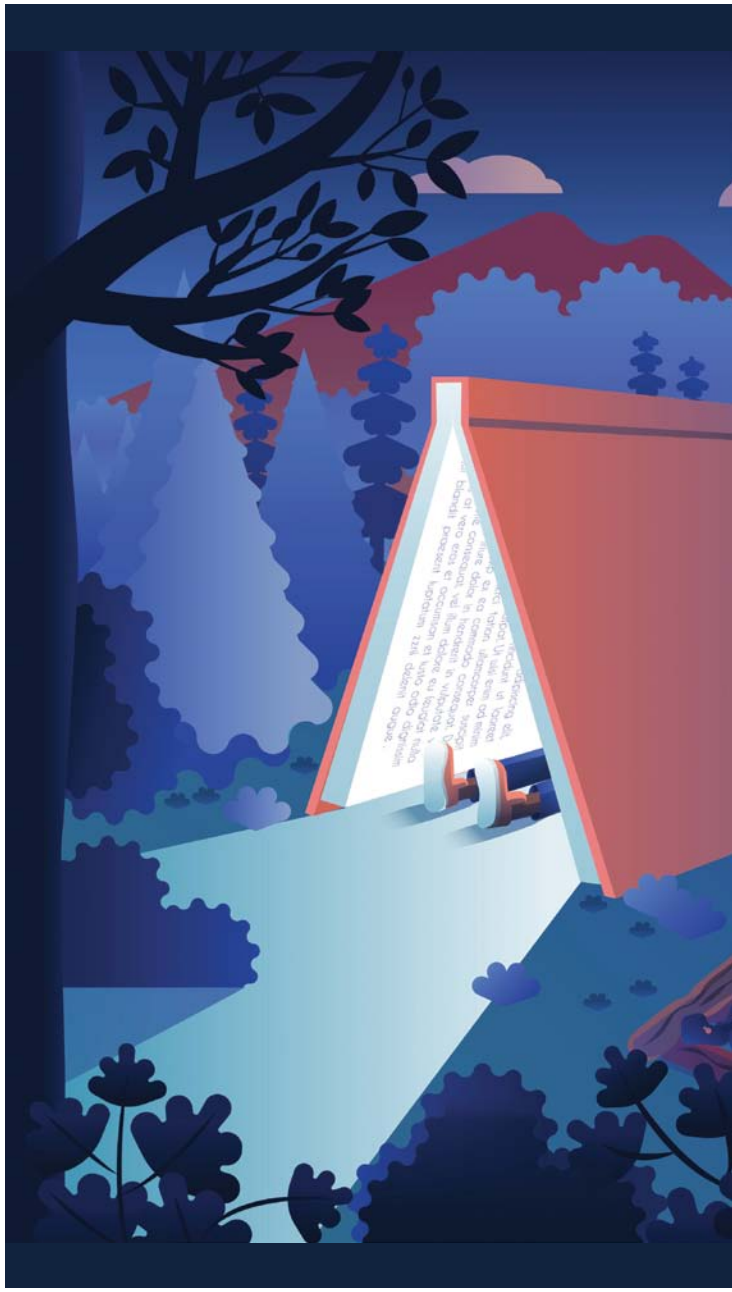


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

CELEBRATING

By NANDINI NAIR



This year started off well for me in terms of reading. Poetry found its way back into my register. In the pre-internet days I used to listen to poets read their work on CDs and cassettes. But it'd been a decade since I surrendered to the verse. I spent days in January listening to and reading Simon Armitage, the current Poet Laureate. Many of his poems have been etched into stones in the English countryside, allowing hikers and trekkers, shepherds and farmers to have chance encounters with his poems. In his words and under his gaze, 'Dew enters the field/ under cover of night,/ tending the weary and sapped,/ lifting its thimble of drink / to the lips of a leaf... or carries its torch/for the rain.' His words enforce a stillness. In that moment when you first read him, you feel your vision of a dew drop has been altered forever. His collection of poems ***Sandettie Light Vessel Automatic*** (Faber & Faber) glistens with other similar gems and revelations, whether it is about returning soldiers or walking home or the natural landscape.

But after the enthusiasm of the early months, as one unsettled into March and April and realised that this was to be a year like no other, my reading faltered. Looking at the personal choices of the host of eminent authors and intellectuals, in the following pages, one realises how at times of unease, the sources of comfort are as particular as they are manifold. The choices of our 15-odd contributors span history and politics, poetry and fiction, writing in English and translations, some have found books published in previous years to be especially relevant today. In the 100-odd books on our 'best of' list, repetitions are rare, proving the diversity of choice and the rich pickings on offer.

Three novels stood out for me this year. ***Djinn Patrol on the***

DIFFERENCES

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

Purple Line by Deepa Anappara (Hamish Hamilton); ***Girl in White Cotton*** (also called *Burnt Sugar*) by Avni Doshi (Fourth Estate); and ***Red Pill*** by Hari Kunzru. It is particularly exciting that Anappara and Doshi are both debut writers, which means one can only hope that they have prolific careers ahead.

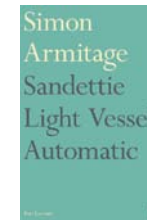
Djinn Patrol is both pacey and tender. Anappara uses her journalist's skills to weave a story of children who go missing from a *basti* in an unnamed Indian metropolis. The story is told through a young boy who takes on the role of a detective and whose neighbour is the first child to go missing. This is a contemporary novel that while dealing with the injustices, inequities, brutalities of India, never loses its narrative grip.

Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton* also holds its reader in a pincer grip. But this is no easy read as it deals with a mother-daughter relationship and one that is especially fraught as the mother is losing her memory and the daughter has secrets from the past. It is a slow read as it examines human relationships with a surgeon's precision and reveals the ooze beneath the surface, with every cut of a sentence.

Kunzru's *Red Pill* on the other hand, is a novel that one can race through as one keeps wondering, what next. It tells of a writer hoping to use the time at a writing residency in Berlin to finish his book. Instead he slides down a rabbit hole of a violent cop show and grows obsessed with its creator Anton. This obsession will take him into the world of the alt-right and the recesses of the internet. It forces one to reckon with questions on paranoia and reality.

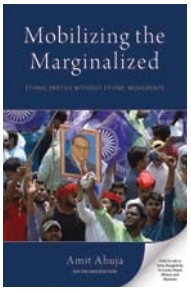
My favourite book of the year is the collection of essays ***Vesper Flights*** (Jonathan Cape) by Helen Macdonald. As a fan of her memoir *H Is for Hawk* (2015), I felt I'd been waiting five years for her new book to land. And I was not disappointed. I am no nature expert. I am a nature novice. But this is the kind of book that takes Simon Armitage's verse and turns it into prose. It tells us of the art and science of berries and corn, sun birds and murmurations. To me it is the most important book of the year, because, as Macdonald writes, 'Most of all I hope my work is about a thing that seems to me of the deepest possible importance in our present-day historical moment: finding ways to recognise and love difference.'

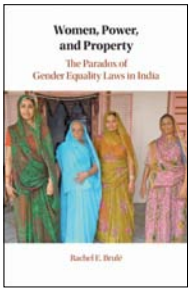
In our choices of 2020, we hope you, dear reader, will come to recognise and appreciate the many different preferences. ■

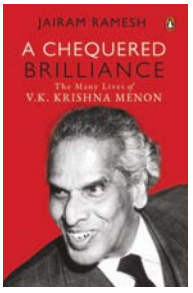


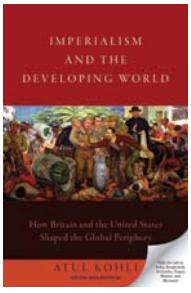
PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

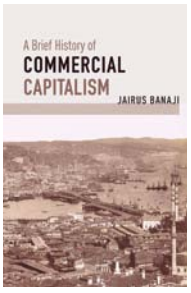
Political scientist and columnist

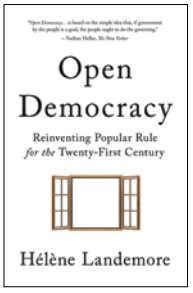


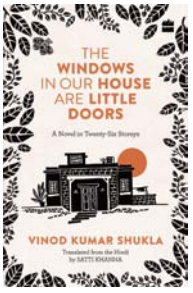


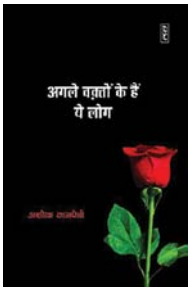










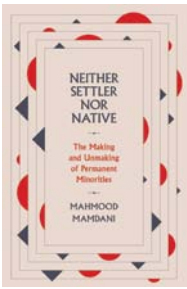


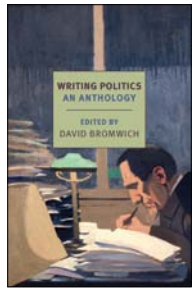
It is difficult to pick new books in a year where there is an embarrassment of riches; one is also hampered by the fact that some of the best ones are written by close friends and colleagues that mentioning them felt like self-promotion and had to be left off. So the list below should be read with the caveat that many other books easily deserved to be on this list.

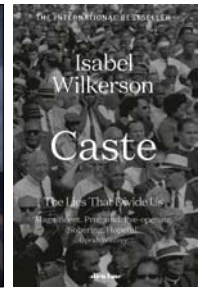
Professional matters first. Amit Ahuja's ***Mobilizing the Marginalized*** (Oxford University Press) is a brilliant study of the interface between Dalit social and political movements. Rachel Brulé's ***Women, Power and Property: The Paradox of Gender Equality Laws in India*** (Cambridge University Press), is a marvel of data collection, history and insight into the relationship between gender and the state. Jairam Ramesh's biography of VK Krishna Menon, ***A Chequered Brilliance*** (Viking), is stunning in the sources it collects, and in letting the sources speak for themselves. It still leaves Jawaharlal Nehru's undue regard for the man a bit of mystery. Atul Kohli, ***Imperialism and the Developing World: How Britain and the United States Shaped the Global Periphery*** (Oxford University Press) is the magnum opus of an amazing scholar, but also vital to understanding the modern world. It is well read in conjunction with Mahmood Mamdani's ***Neither Settler Nor Native*** (Harvard University Press) and is a sharp argument on the pathologies of the Nation State Form.

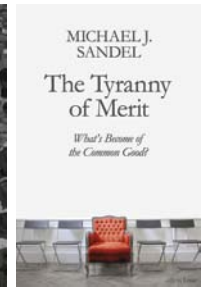
I happened to chance upon a new anthology by David Bromwich, ***Writing Politics*** (NYRB Books), a collection of some of the greatest political writing ever. But a short essay in it, written by one of the greatest 19th-century minds, George Eliot, on anti-Semitism, 'The Modern Hep!Hep!Hep!' cuts through the cant of any nationalism displaying prejudice. On that theme, Isabel Wilkerson's ***Caste*** (Allen Lane) takes on the subject of caste and race. Indian critics are quibbling over the details, but its anatomy of human oppression is powerful and crystal clear.

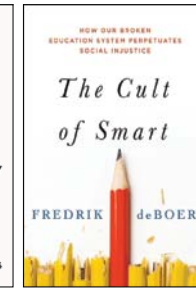
The theoretical attack on meritocracy to which I fully subscribe seems to be the big theme of the year, captured in three books. Michael J Sandel, ***The Tyranny of Merit*** (Allen Lane), is a work of great elegance and insight; Daniel Markovits, ***The Meritocracy Trap*** (Penguin), is comprehensive and compelling; and a lesser known book by Fredrik deBoer, ***The Cult of Smart*** (All Points Press), is impassioned and radical on the subject. On a larger canvas of capitalism, Thomas Piketty, ***Capital and Ideology*** (Harvard University Press), is a tour de force worth the thousand pages. Jairus Banaji, ***A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*** (Haymarket Books), is a brief but stunningly erudite contribution to the history of capitalism, and relevant to debates over the relationship between merchants and producers in capitalism. For a big idea for the rein-

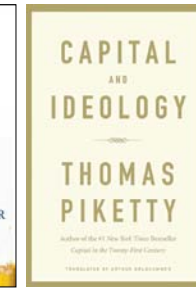


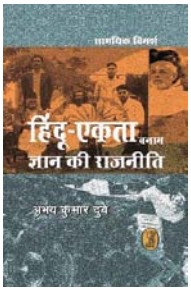


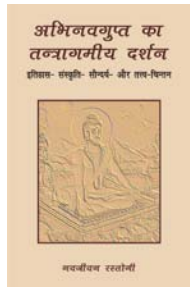


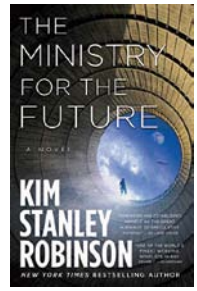


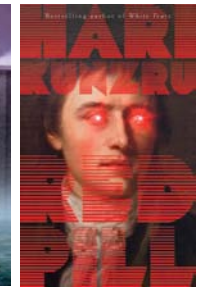












THE THEORETICAL ATTACK ON MERITOCRACY TO WHICH I SUBSCRIBE SEEMS TO BE THE BIG THEME OF THE YEAR, CAPTURED IN THREE BOOKS. MICHAEL J SANDEL, ***THE TYRANNY OF MERIT*** IS A WORK OF GREAT ELEGANCE AND INSIGHT; DANIEL MARKOVITS, ***THE MERITOCRACY TRAP*** IS COMPELLING; AND FREDRIK DEBOER'S ***THE CULT OF SMART*** IS IMPASSIONED AND RADICAL

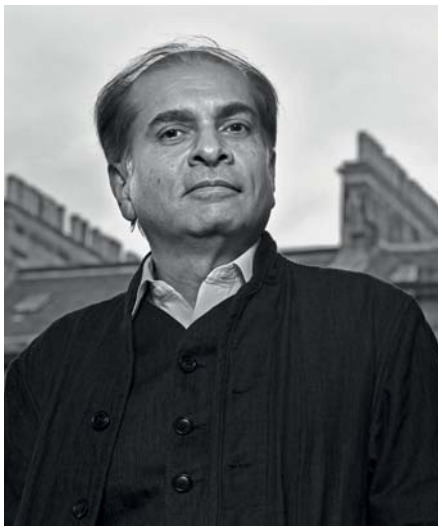
vigoration of democracy, Hélène Landemore, ***Open Democracy*** (Princeton University Press) is a great defence of both sortition and deliberation as complements to representative democracy.

Vinod Kumar Shukla, *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rehti Thi* (Vani Prakashan) is a beguiling and beautiful novella, now published in a translation by Satti Khanna (***The Windows in Our House Are Little Doors***). Ashok Vajpeyi's ***Agle Waqton Ke Hain Ye Log*** (Setu Prakashan), turned out to be a light but lovely personal history of the key figures of Hindi letters and music; Apoorvanand's forthcoming book on Premchand, already serialised on *Satyahindi.com*, is a sensitive, poignant take on the writer and our times. Abhay Kumar Dubey, ***Hindu Ekta Banam Gyan Ki Rajneeti*** (CSDS), gets the longer term trajectory of Hindu nationalism in ways that most English commentators miss. Navjivan Rastogi's collected philosophical essays, mostly on Abhinavagupta and the history of tantrism, ***Abhinavagupta Ka Tantragamiya Darshana*** (DK Printworld), is an unusually interesting contribution to Indian intellectual history.

These days if you want serious social theory, you should turn to fiction. There is no clearer and more entertaining guide to the combination of financial capitalism, environmental catastrophe, and technological optimism than Kim Stanley Robinson. His ***The Ministry for the Future*** (Orbit) is a nice companion to his *New York 2140*; Gautam Bhatia's ***The Wall*** (HarperCollins) is a significant Indian debut in science fiction on the theme of freedom. Hari Kunzru's ***Red Pill*** (Scribner) seems to capture the paranoia of our time, over both privacy and right-wing conspiracy theories, quite well. Hilary Mantel's ***The Mirror & the Light*** (Fourth Estate), the final volume of the Cromwell trilogy, is truly great literature that leaves you wanting more. ■

SUNIL KHILNANI

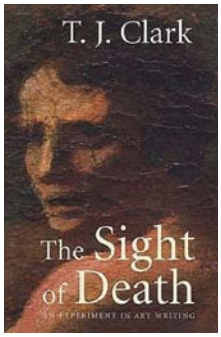
Political scientist and author

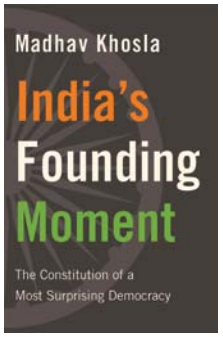


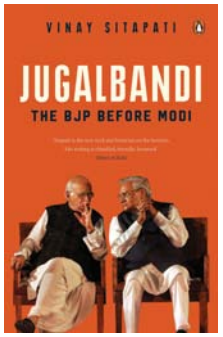
ALAMY

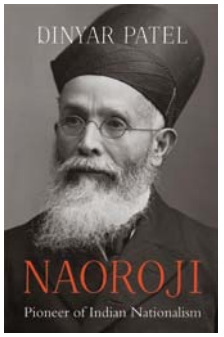
A grim year, which at its best moments felt like the boring holidays of my Delhi youth: nothing much to do but fiddle with the shortwave radio—and read. I began the year trying to catch up in fields I had neglected, and was particularly gripped by a book published well over a decade ago, TJ Clark's ***The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*** (Yale University Press). It's effectively a log-book of Clark's daily observations, over months, of two paintings by the 18th-century French master, Nicolas Poussin. Setting aside the certainties of art historical scholarship, Clark plunges into the dubieties we experience when we look closely at anything, in this case, paint on canvas: things missed at first or second, or even twentieth, sight, but which one day—as, perhaps, a cloud scuds across the sky, altering the light on gallery walls—pierce our field of vision, and transform our understanding of the work in front of us, sometimes even of the painter's entire oeuvre. Reading Clark is a perfect a way to test and train one's eye, in our image-saturated age. This was especially so for me, as I was lucky enough to be reading him while at the Getty Center, a courtyard's walk away from where I could view one of the Poussin paintings Clark writes about. During that idyll, I enjoyed also learning about the work of the Chandigarh-based architect and thinker, Aditya Prakash, the subject of a new book by his son, the architectural historian Vikramaditya Prakash. ***One Continuous Line: Art, Architecture and Urbanism of Aditya Prakash*** (Mapin) is an intimate portrait of Prakash's career and resonant ideas: initially a member of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's team, he was never an ideologue of modernism, but chose instead to figure out his own eclectic humanist sensibility, enrooted in values of an era when architecture was—even more than a profession—a vocation.

It's inspiriting to see that ethical pursuit of a vocation, rather than the grim clamber for professional preferment which is modern academic life, still animating some of our younger scholars. So, even as public discussion about our politics and history drift further from the shores of reality and truth, we should be grateful for the rich recent stream of high-quality political and historical work written for a broad public. Madhav Khosla's deeply considered and subtly articulated ***India's Founding Moment: The Constitution of a Most Surprising Democracy*** (Harvard University Press), foregrounds the sheer radicalism that emboldened India's founders to launch the new nation on an experiment in democratic self-invention; Vinay Sitapati's ***Jugalbandi: The BJP before Modi*** (Viking), an illuminating and fluent narrative charting the rise of the BJP, reveals the labile, deeply political quality of that founding democratic experiment. Sitapati explains the BJP's rise less as a triumph of grandiose ideology, more as grounded in an understanding and deft manipulation of electoral politics by the party's two founding shapers, AB Vajpayee and LK Advani









(his book is useful primer for Christophe Jaffrelot's prize-winning study of Modi, forthcoming soon in English translation). Dinyar Patel's authoritative biography ***Naoroji*** (Harvard University Press)—a name often, invoked but whose career has rarely been examined—brings to life the capacious human sympathy and staggering intellectual vigour of one of our greatest public intellectuals. Delving back into India's 'early modern' history, Manan Ahmed Asif's ***The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India*** (Harvard University Press), effects a striking recovery of the rich precolonial language of 'Hindustan'—more than just a name for the subcontinent, the term embodied an entire cultural history and imagination. Yet it was obliterated by colonial historians, who substituted their own term, 'India'—adopted, Manan Ahmed argues, with self-harming effects by Indians themselves.

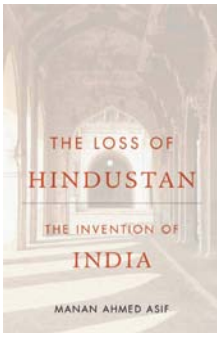
I took time also to re-read some classic texts, warming up for a new course I will be teaching at Ashoka University. Particularly striking in the current moment was Simone de Beauvoir's ***The Second Sex*** (Vintage)—I was yet again amazed by its unblinking analytic drive, explosive today as ever (asked late in life about her book's continuing power, de Beauvoir agreed, wryly regretful that the book remained as entirely relevant as ever).

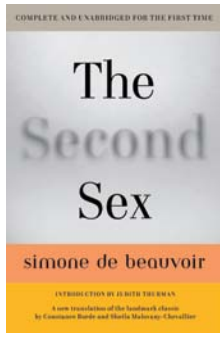
Also entirely relevant, a clutch of books published this year: David Bell's ***Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution*** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)—a study of the aura of power, from George Washington via Napoleon Bonaparte and Toussaint Louverture to Simon Bolivar, which shows how modern democracy, even as it rid itself of the divine halo, once claimed by rulers, found it necessary to re-anoint its new leaders with superhuman qualities. The ballot box and the martial strongman became symbiotically linked, Bell argues, in a historical study that has depressingly contemporary resonances.

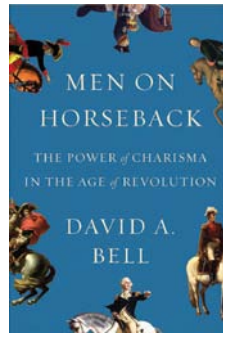
> IT'S INSPIRITING TO SEE THAT ETHICAL PURSUIT OF A VOCATION, RATHER THAN THE GRIM CLAMBER FOR PROFESSIONAL PREFERMENT WHICH IS MODERN ACADEMIC LIFE, STILL ANIMATING SOME OF OUR YOUNGER SCHOLARS

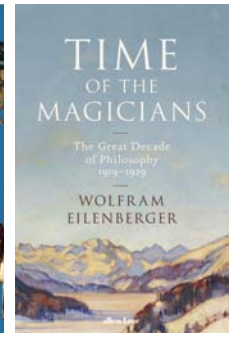
An enjoyable example of the current mode for group biographies is Wolfram Eilenberger's ***Time of the Magicians*** (Allen Lane), an account of the 1920s, a turbulent decade in which four thinkers—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger—crossed intellectual and actual paths, as they each developed their original philosophies of language, time, and meaning. Alex Ross' ***Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*** (Fourth Estate) is a study that, in its heft and tightly choreographed meandering over the entire terrain of late 19th and 20th-century European history, appears to mirror Richard Wagner's own signature ambition of creating a *gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total work of art'. Ross traces how Wagner's life and work served as a foil for the emergence of the unruly, unstable cultural politics of 20th century modernity.

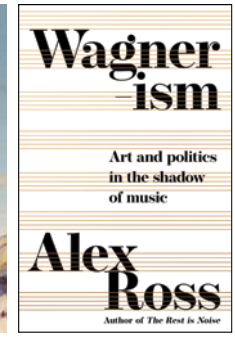
And finally, another gem from the great Irish historian RF Foster: ***On Seamus Heaney*** (Princeton University Press) is a brief and brilliant study that weaves together the life and work of the Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet. Foster shows Heaney's profound connection to and pride in the Irish landscape, ways, and life—and makes equally clear Heaney's refusal of nationalist vanities and pieties, in favour of a dissident cosmopolitanism. Looking ahead, I have my reading list prepared for any future pandemic lockdowns or end-of-the-world hole-ups: just grant me the Kolkata-based Seagull Books list, which by some editorial magic keeps finding new treasures to add to its magnificent catalogue. The end may be nigh, but I shall happily devote my remaining minutes to reading my way through all their titles.■

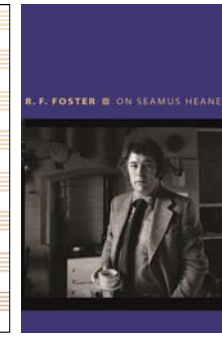












WILLIAM DALRYMPLE
Author

ALAMY

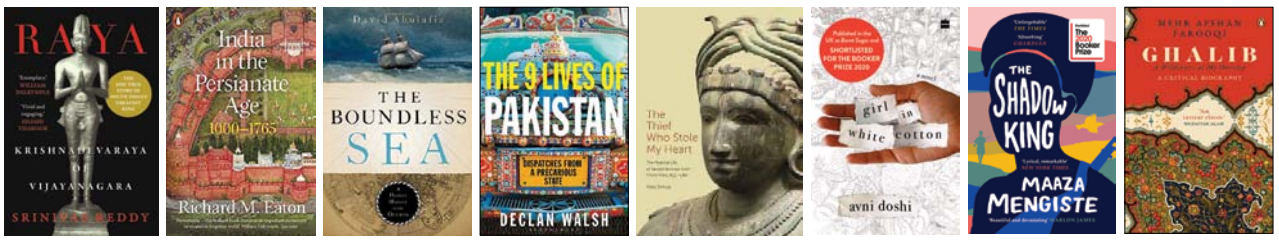
I **hugely enjoyed Srinivas Reddy's *Raya* on** Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara (Juggernaut). It is an exemplary biography that brings the whole world of Vijayanagara to life as no previous book has ever before succeeded in doing. Minutely researched, full of new material with apparently effortless command over primary sources in multiple languages, this finely written study of the great king Krishnadevaraya is full of good stories, revealing anecdotes and cleverly analysed myths. It makes an excellent introduction to the history of Vijayanagara and should be required reading for all visitors to Hampi.

For 600 years from the 12th century until the seizure of India by the East India Company at the end of the 18th century, South Asia was part of a transregional Persianate world dominated by Persian language and culture, and bound together by a canon of texts that circulated from the Middle East and Central Asia through to southern India. As Richard Eaton writes in his remarkable study, ***India in the Persianate Age*** (Allen Lane), South Asia 'would quickly grow to become a major centre in its own right for the production, and not just the reception, of Persianate culture. Over the course of the next six hundred years, India—not Iran—would become the world's principal centre of Persian dictionaries.' This cultural mixing took place with ever-greater thoroughness and complexity throughout the subcontinent over the next 600 years as entire hybrid languages—notably Deccani and Urdu—emerged, mixing the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of India with Persian, as well as Turkish and Arabic words. Eaton's brilliant book stands as an important monument to this lost and almost forgotten multi-linguistic and multi-cultural world.

David Abulafia's ***The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*** (Penguin) is a hugely ambitious book and quite rightly was the winner of this year's Wolfson Prize for History. It is a mighty thassolo-gasm and a triumphant successor to Abulafia's wonderful history of the Mediterranean. Remarkably, it manages to stitch together and make accessible and fascinating some hugely diverse and often pretty intractable bits of ocean history, and is a masterly work of both scholarly synthesis and fluent narrative history.

Declan Walsh's ***The Nine Lives of Pakistan*** (Bloomsbury) is a wonderful book which sets a new benchmark for non-fiction about the complex palace of mirrors that is Pakistan. Walsh has a rapier wit, a talent for skilfully sketched pen portraits and a sharp eye for tragedy, paradox and absurdity. With this cleverly stitched tapestry working up some of the best of his writing from the country, he has produced a beautifully, lightly, fluently written book that is as profoundly nuanced as it is sharply perceptive.

Vidya Dehejia's ***The Thief Who Stole My Heart*** (Princeton University Press) is an art historical masterpiece that transforms our appreciation of some of India's greatest sculptures. Combining deep research, close observation, and gorgeous prose, Dehejia brings to a triumphant climax four decades of study in Indian art history. She presents a range of important new discoveries about Chola bronzes, and does so with a lightness of touch and poetic sensitivity that make this work both pleasurable and enlightening. This is an exquisite book about exquisite objects.



Among novels, I loved in particular Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* (***Girl in White Cotton***) (Fourth Estate) and Maaza Mengiste's ***The Shadow King*** (Canongate), either of which would have made a worthy winner of the Booker.

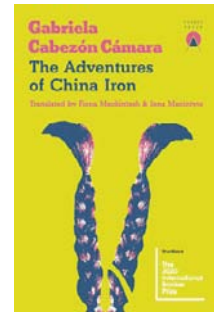
Finally, Mehr Farooqi's forthcoming ***Ghalib: A Wilderness at My Doorstep*** (Allen Lane) is an outstanding and much-needed critical biography of the greatest poet in Urdu. It is deeply scholarly, yet completely accessible, and casts a judicious but impartial eye over all the major literary battlefields surrounding Ghalib's work in both Urdu and Persian. Above all, it sends us back to Ghalib's writing and reminds us of the delightful *khushbagh*—or garden of delights that awaits any who wish to explore this lost, syncretic world of such deep profundity and wit, subtlety and beauty. ■

JEET THAYIL
Author

GETTY IMAGES

As one of the judges for the International Booker Prize this year, I was one of five writers who read 124 books to arrive at a shortlist of six titles. I'd like to talk about two books from the shortlist that have stayed with me, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's ***The Adventures of China Iron*** translated by Iona Macintyre and Fiona Mackintosh and published by the independent Charco Press; and Yoko Ogawa's ***The Memory Police***, translated by Stephen Snyder and published by Harvill Secker.

Camara's playful, subversive retelling of Argentina's national epic *Martin Fierro* moves the focus from the gaucho to the gaucho's wife, China Iron. In this version the manly Fierro sleeps with men and writes songs about his encounters, while China Iron's great love is an Englishwoman named Liz. The not-quite-ironic references to 19th-century Great Britain are immediately recognisable to colonials from the former Empire, and somehow poignant in the Age of Brexit when Britain seems anything but Great. Here is a description of China Iron and Liz's lovemaking in which three lines of lyrical prose unpack several chapters of conventional history: 'Both of us would get in the wagon and take off our clothes, dry ourselves with those towels from the mills of Lanchashire, that before that had come from the Mississippi Delta and from the cracks of the whip on the backs of black people in the United States; almost everything that I touched knew more about the world than I did.' Thanks to the verticality of Camara's project, the reader is immersed in simultaneous snapshots of the founding of a nation: the larvae, the animal life, the songs and



poems, the nomadic way of the gaucho, the usual violence and skullduggery, and the answer to the question, what manner of woman made Argentina?

I've been a reader of Yoko Ogawa ever since I found copies of *Revenge* and *Hotel Iris* in a second-hand bookshop on Bangalore's Church Street. I was struck by the elliptical, understated nature of the prose and I liked both books enough to want to find everything by the author that had been translated into English. *The Memory Police*, in my opinion, is her great achievement. It is hard to believe that the novel was written in 1994, considering how primed it is for today, when so many objects have vanished from the world and our consciousness. Not that the process is complete: we know more vanishings are on the way—the ecosystems we depend on, the flora and fauna we take for granted, the democracy

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we cherish, the future we envision. The idea of absence is rendered in language that is a kind of revelation, as muted and colourless as the society it describes, full of atmosphere, nuance and repressed menace. The choice of prose style is emblematic of a world in which everything disappears, from roses to body parts to novels and language itself—nothing can stay. The authoritarian figures that enforce the system ensure that the memory of things also disappears. In this pitiless world, the act of writing becomes an act of remembrance. This is sophisticated, visionary fiction, and Yoko Ogawa is a major writer. ■

SHASHI THAROOR

Member of Parliament and author

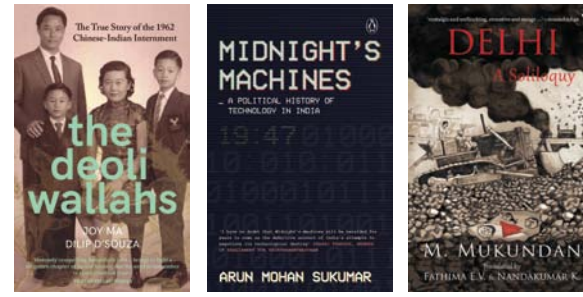
ALAMY

The Deoliwallahs: The True Story of the 1962 Chinese-Indian Internment by Joy Ma and Dilip D'Souza (Macmillan)

It remains a blot on our democracy that after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, India transported 3,000 residents of Chinese heritage to a disused World War II POW camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, and interned them forcibly there in appalling conditions for nearly five years. We disrupted and destroyed the lives of people who knew no other homeland but India, only because of their ethnicity. This marked the first time since the adoption of the Indian Constitution that neither birth nor belonging, nor roots nor livelihood, were deemed sufficient to accord nationality in India—just as today, to some unsavoury nationalists, Muslim Indians' religion is deemed to raise questions about their entitlement to be regarded as citizens of India on a par with others.

Midnight's Machines by Arun Mohan Sukumar (Viking)

I have no doubt that *Midnight's Machines* will be heralded for years to come as the definitive account of India's attempts to negotiate its technological destiny. In this trail-blazing book, Arun Mohan Sukumar masterfully blends history, science and politics to deliver a narrative that both enthrals and informs. He proves himself to be that rare historian with a journalist's eye for detail and a novelist's ear for prose. A must-read for all interested in India's technological role in the 21st-century world.



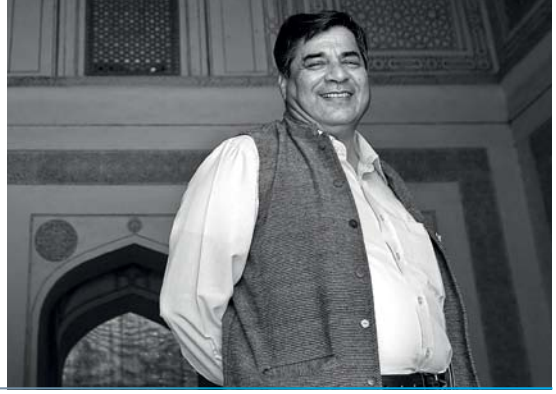
Delhi: A Soliloquy By M Mukundan, translated by Fathima EV & Nandakumar K (Eka)

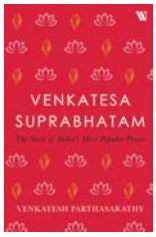
The eminent Kerala writer's 2011 Malayalam novel, *Delhi Gaathakal* (*Delhi Tales*), has just emerged in a long-awaited English translation as *Delhi: A Soliloquy*. The novel describes the city's turbulent evolution for nearly four decades from 1959 through the eyes of its Malayali community, from an overgrown provincial city overcome by refugees and stark poverty, acquiring the trappings of authority as the national capital, to the gleaming prosperity of today, while taking in the major historical events that shaped the author's experience of the city's evolution: the war with China in 1962, the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971, the Emergency of 1975, and the Sikh riots of 1984. Mukundan's strength is as a great teller of stories. He inveigles you into the lives of his characters with his eye for the telling detail. As a portrait of the city over four eventful decades—and of the diaspora Malayali community within it—*Delhi: A Soliloquy* has no equals. I commend this English-language version to non-Malayali readers everywhere: a compelling, absorbing read by a master storyteller at the height of his powers. ■

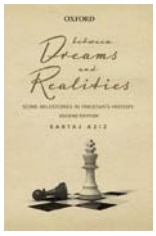
ARUN MOHAN SUKUMAR BLENDS HISTORY, SCIENCE AND POLITICS TO DELIVER A NARRATIVE THAT BOTH ENTHRALS AND INFORMS. HE PROVES HIMSELF TO BE THAT RARE HISTORIAN WITH A JOURNALIST'S EYE FOR DETAIL AND A NOVELIST'S EAR FOR PROSE

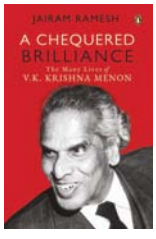
TCA RAGHAVAN

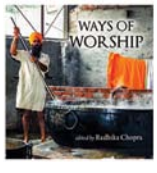
Historian











I begin with a delightful little book by Venkatesh Parthasarathy—***Venkatesa Suprabhatam: The Story of India's Most Popular Prayer*** (Westland). This is in part a translation of a 14th-century Vaishnavite devotional morning prayer, in part a brief biography of its composer Prativadi Bhayankara Anna, the story of its association with the temple in Tirupati and finally how this composition eventually became amongst the best known in, at least, the Vaishnavite register but possibly even more widely. Obviously this story also intersects with MS Subbulakshmi and her rendition is what made this devotional prayer so ubiquitous in south India and in its disapora. Parthasarathy combines history, reportage and devotion with a light touch and this made for a rewarding read.

Then I was lucky in being able to get from Pakistan the second edition of Sartaj Aziz's ***Pakistan: Between Dreams and Realities*** (Oxford University Press). This had covered, when it first appeared in 2009, the period till the end of the Musharraf's era and included the tumultuous time of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Lahore visit in 1998, Kargil, etcetera. The new book has some 150 new pages and brings the story up to Imran Khan as prime minister. I found the portion on Nawaz Sharif's third tenure most interesting. Aziz was the de facto foreign minister, so his perspective is valuable. The book's basic thesis, however, remains unchanged from the first edition—that the Pakistan army is tactical rather than strategic in its thinking and, on a broader canvas, the inability of its power elite to match policies with realities. Hence the title.

His assessment of Sharif, whom he supports, is especially interesting: 'Nawaz Sharif's transition away from the military establishment grew incrementally when his core political interests or stakes were threatened by the absence of real democracy. Sadly, his belief in civilian supremacy were not accompanied by a deeper understanding of political realities. If he had such a grasp of the theoretical foundations of real democracy he could have adopted a stronger institutional approach to civil military relations.' A critique of a political leader for his lack of theory is novel, but that is what makes the details in this book so interesting.

Ideal for the lockdown (and for any other time one feels like a long and meaty read) was a three-volume ***A Comprehensive History of Modern Bengal***—*1700-1950* (Primus and Asiatic Society of Bengal), edited by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya who unfortunately died before its publication. This is as good a point of entry one can wish for to see the vast scope of modern history writing in India—gender relations, cinema, art, music, ecology, science, public health, apart from the traditional themes of political and economic history. It has set a standard for other states as indeed for the country as a whole and historians will be hard pressed in the years to come to match its ambition, rigour and analysis.

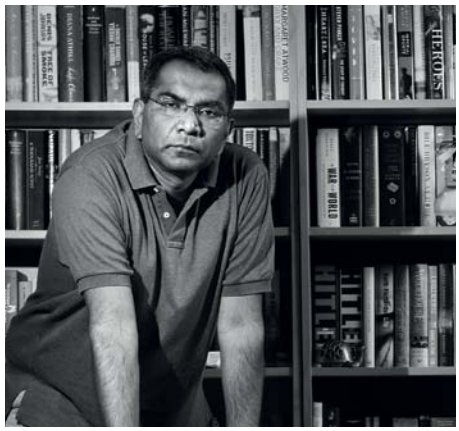
I like reading about courtiers and a late 2019 book that I read in early 2020 was Jairam Ramesh's biography of VK Krishna Menon: ***A Chequered Brilliance*** (Viking) which seeks to unravel the personality of this complex and highly controversial politician. Using multiple primary sources, some for the first time, Ramesh explores Menon's role as a negotiator, his relationship with Jawaharlal Nehru, and of course, his role in the 1962 India-China war. What comes through in the correspondence, quoted in some detail, is Nehru's patience and affection for his volatile defence minister and Menon's own intelligence, industry and knowledge. But the seeds of self-destruction were also present in his personality and Ramesh's portrait of this complicated man and the turbulent times he lived in is most compelling reading.

Also while on courtiers, ***The Mirror & the Light*** (Fourth Estate), the third volume of Hilary Mantel's treatment of Cromwell, had me riveted, though it is a longer, slower read than the first two. Seemingly invincible, Cromwell's position starts to crumble as the Anne of Cleves' marriage that he arranges, and its attendant alliances with Protestant Europe, displeases the king and allows his enemies to consolidate and bring him down. This set of events, all too familiar and happens in all courts past and present, is vividly brought to life by Mantel in over 857 pages. It sets a really high standard for historical fiction to follow.

Finally, I'd like to mention a very unusual book. ***Ways of Worship*** (Penguin Enterprise), edited by Radhika Chopra, comprises photographs taken by social anthropologists in the course of their fieldwork and research—a map of the prolonged, obscure and myriad ways Indians worship. As Chopra notes, 'The sheer breadth of ways of worship from feeding a dog to decorating a tool shed presents the diversity of worship.' ■

DAVID DAVIDAR

Publisher and author



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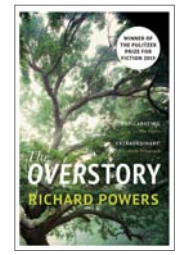
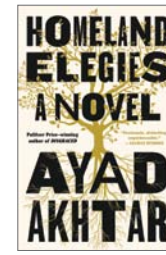




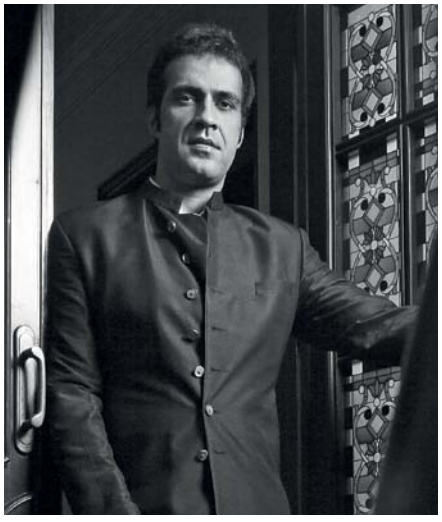
As a publisher I am not allowed to talk up my own books, which is a pity, as I truly believe some of them were by far the best books I read in 2020, but such conventions are what they are so here are the non-Aleph books I was enthralled by in this bleak and browned-out year. The first is ***Overstory*** (Random House UK) by Richard Powers, one of the most unusual novels I have read in a long, long time, in which trees are as important as the characters they shade, and whose lives are entwined with their human neighbours. It was a book that was designed to appeal to someone like me, a lapsed botanist, who has never stopped wondering whether I should have spent my life studying plants rather than making books. Powers, who won the Pulitzer in 2019 for the novel, is faced with no such dilemma—he embraces both his love of storytelling and trees in this remarkable work. Essentially, this is a book about the natural world and why we need to cherish it, but there is nothing in it that is in the least bit academic or polemical or dull. His stories about trees and the people who build their lives around them, even if they aren't aware they are doing so, show us exactly how novels can be made fresh and original.

The second novel I grew to love this year, as I immersed myself in it, was Ayad Akhtar's ***Homeland Elegies*** (Little, Brown and Company). Memoir, current events, history and so on permeate the fiction—it is, in other words, the sort of non-fiction novel that VS Naipaul wrote late in his career (*The Enigma of Arrival* is one of my favourites), and what Amitava Kumar currently writes with great panache. A novel of this genre needs to be done really well to hold my attention, otherwise it comes off as reheated stale news, and there is nothing worse than that when it comes to fiction. Not that I should have worried. The book is brilliantly structured and written and so full of delights that it is very difficult to describe in a para. Suffice to say, that if you want a remarkable delineation of what it means to be a person of colour (and a Muslim!) in America today you need look no further than this novel. It's also an amazing and curiously tender examination of the father-son relationship (the author's father, a doctor who emigrated from Lahore, is an unforgettable character), an enthralling disquisition on art and culture in our time, identity, Trump (he has a walk-on part) and much else besides. Akhtar has won a Pulitzer for one of his plays, and this book has placed high in many Best of 2020 roundups, so it is to be hoped he will gain a large following in this part of the world.

HOMELAND ELEGIES PROVIDES A REMARKABLE DELINEATION OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PERSON OF COLOUR (AND A MUSLIM!) IN AMERICA TODAY

The last book on my list has also, unsurprisingly, made it to several Best of 2020 lists. Helen Macdonald's previous book, *H Is for Hawk*, won major prizes, and was loved by readers everywhere, and her new book, ***Vesper Flights*** (Jonathan Cape), is just as good. If the earlier book was about hawks, this one is a book of essays about various marvels of the natural world, especially birds. The title essay is about swifts, and is one of the finest pieces of nature writing I have read now or as far back as I can remember. When I was a boy growing up on a tea estate in Kerala, I would often confuse swifts with swallows (there was an abundance of the latter in the neighbourhood, especially an endemic species, the dusky crag martin, which built nests under the eaves of our house) as they are superficially similar, especially on the wing. After reading this book I will never make that mistake again. Macdonald starts off by comparing swifts to angels—'creatures of the upper air'. She then details all their other magical qualities—they rarely descend to the ground and are able to 'sleep on the wind', among other things. The essay ends with the author telling us how we can use the example of swifts 'to look clearly at the things that are so easily obscured by the everyday. The things we need to set our courses towards or against. The things we need to think about to know what we should do next... (and) how to make right decisions in the face of oncoming bad weather, in the face of clouds that sit like dark rubble on our own horizon.' The perfect book for our year of bad weather. ■

AATISH TASEER
Author



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Thomas Mann's War by **Tobias Boes**
(Cornell University Press)
"German culture is where I am," Thomas Mann once said, in exasperation at his exile from Nazi Germany. I have always been fascinated by Mann's experience of the two wars. He spent most of the first, locked into a bitter exchange of letters, with his brother, Heinrich, arguing about the character of the German soul. But, when finally after the humiliating defeat of World War I, and the economic hardship that ensued, the German soul found utterance, it brought into world where Mann's books were being burnt in the Opernplatz. Mann became one of the fiercest, most outspoken critics of the Nazis. In Boes' book, we find him in exile in America, which was his making abroad—(he had been a huge star in Germany since *Buddenbrooks*, which sold a million copies between 1929-1935)—and a time of great moral courage, when a deeply patriotic writer had to find it in himself to congratulate Nazi Germany's enemies, as they dealt the 1000-year Reich blow after ruinous blow. To me, Boes' book spoke of how people who love a place have a patriotic duty to turn on that place with fury when it becomes something monstrous and unrecognisable.

Hitler: Downfall 1939-1945 by **Volker Ullrich** (Knopf)
I inhaled the first volume of this two-volume biography when it appeared in 2016. Part II is even better. I am one of those people who do not believe that the history of fascism in the 1930s is a good manual for this present moment. What I do believe is that the mechanics of that history are full of the resonance of history rhyming rather than repeating. 'The Hitler Phenomenon," writes Ullrich, 'is not merely the sum of his thoughts and deeds: it can only be understood by simultaneously examining the social pathology of German society at the time.' Ullrich is razor-focused not merely on what the Nazis were, but what it was about the world around them that was so accommodating. We learn of 'how quickly democracy can be prised from its hinges when political institutions and civilising forces in a society are too weak to combat the lure of authoritarianism,' but we also learn of how our cultural and historical weaknesses and insecurities make us putty in the hands of the mediocre figure of the authoritarian. He is what he is, but what is it about us that makes us his playthings? I also found it fascinating, given that today's authoritarians are hardly students of history, how intuitively they gravitate towards the same tools, now needing the figure of a reviled minority, now demonising the press and elites. No one can read Ullrich's books without feeling themselves subject to a mechanism that is identical to what the Nazis deployed, even if the conditions and realities are wildly dissimilar.

The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War by **Michael Gorra** (Liveright)
Until this year, I had never been able to read Faulkner. I found him too hard, harder than Proust, harder than James. I never got 50 pages into any of his books before I had to put it away. Then, magically, I picked up *Light in August* this summer, and I found it wonderful. I read it compulsively and felt I could read everything else afterwards. Gorra's book brings together some of my favourite themes: literature, the Civil War, the historical pain of the South and Faulkner's convulsed relationship with that history. The writer in him could see it with perfect clarity, but Faulkner, the man, fell prey to the prejudices of his time. His books never lied, about the violence, the cruelty, and the injustice of segregation, but as a man, Faulkner, would routinely take it upon himself to defend the indefensible. I love Gorra's writing generally, but this is a particularly astute book, especially for these times, as it shows us how a single person can contain within him a tawdry human being and a great artist. ■

IRA MUKHOTY

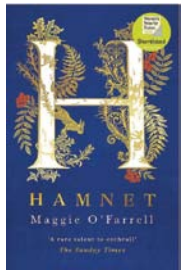
Author

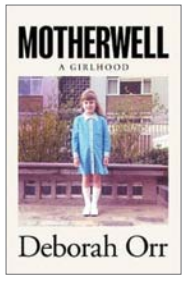
Striding the genres of historical fiction and literary biography with great skill and confidence, ***Hamnet*** (Tinder Press) by Maggie O' Farrell reimagines the fate of Shakespeare's wife Agnes when her son, Hamnet, is shadowed by a terrifying disease. Shakespeare did, indeed, have a son by this name who died in 1596 of a disease that was never formally identified but was believed to be the bubonic plague. The playwright's famous and almost eponymous play was written just a few years after Hamnet's death, and is believed to have been inspired by this very personal tragedy.

But Shakespeare is not the focus of O' Farrell's work. He is, instead, a roughly conjured absence, increasingly lured away by the bright lights of London as his star begins to rise. The gaze is directed at more inconsequential things—the fate of his wife and children in 16th-century rural England. Shakespeare's wife, whose real name was Anne Hathaway, has been reclaimed here by O' Farrell with great tenderness and care, like breathing life into a scuffed out background figure in an old scroll. With fine, sparse prose, O' Farrell brings to vivid life a landscape of gently furling leaves, dappled light and noxious fumes, for swirling in from a distant land is a deathly disease—the bubonic plague. *Hamnet* is, at its heart, a book about grief and loss. A mother's grief, icy and all consuming. In its reclaiming of a marginal female character with such power, it is by a long way my favourite read of 2020.

Motherwell: A Girlhood (W&N) is a posthumously published memoir by acclaimed *Guardian* journalist Deborah Orr who died from cancer in 2019 at the age of only 57. Orr's memoir focuses on her childhood and her growing up years in a town in Glasgow and is thus a book with twin 'motherly' concerns; the town called Motherwell in which Orr grew up, convulsed by the social changes of the 1970s, and Orr's relationship with her own mother Win, a dominating, controlling woman and her inability to 'mother well'.

Orr's family were working class and conservative, charming and infuriating. When Orr decides to go to St Andrews for college, her parents are disapproving, shackled by notions of a woman's place in the world. They are deeply misogynistic, regressive, and intensely distrustful of the changes the world is going through, fractured by the violent end of their industrial town of Motherwell. But Orr returns to Motherwell and to her mother, time and again, to exorcise the demons of her past and while this memoir is set in Scotland, its tale of class, belonging, and the complicated struggles between a mother and a daughter, are universal. ■

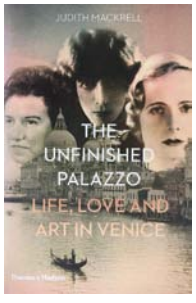


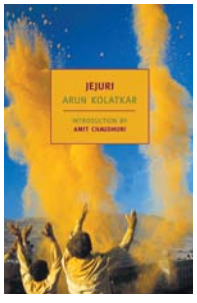


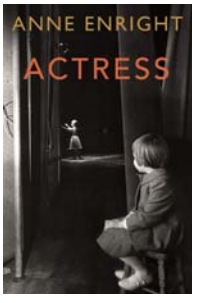
IN ***HAMNET*** MAGGIE O' FARRELL BRINGS TO VIVID LIFE A LANDSCAPE OF GENTLY FURLING LEAVES, DAPPLED LIGHT AND NOXIOUS FUMES, FOR SWIRLING IN FROM A DISTANT LAND IS A DEATHLY DISEASE—THE BUBONIC PLAGUE. ***HAMNET*** IS, AT ITS HEART, A BOOK ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS. A MOTHER'S GRIEF, ICY AND ALL CONSUMING

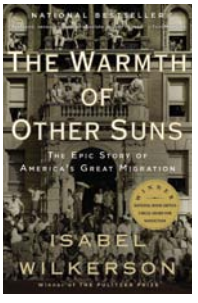
MAHESH RAO
Author

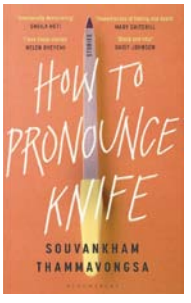
I was having a perfectly normal reading year until March when India went into lockdown. From that week onwards, like so many others, I suffered a complete inability to focus on a book in any meaningful way. Snippets of news, statistics, memes, vague hopes and anxieties, all swilled around in my head. Nonetheless, I continued to pick up books before tossing them aside, confident that there was a remedial book for each of us, one that would lead us out of the swamp. I was lucky that I found mine sooner rather than later and I am immensely grateful to it. ***The Unfinished Palazzo*** (Thames and Hudson) by Judith Mackrell tells the story of the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni in Venice and three women who owned it at different times: an eccentric and exhibitionistic Italian aristocrat, an English socialite and 'professional mistress', and the American art collector Peggy Guggenheim.











The book was otherworldly enough to divert me from the rupture of lockdown, wholly engaging as a social history of Venice and a study of the relationship between artists and patrons, and, with its elegantly gossipy tone, not too taxing for my addled brain.

My favourite novel this year was ***Actress*** by Anne Enright (Jonathan Cape), both for its exquisite prose and its nuanced exploration of the many facets of a mother-daughter relationship. The actress in question is a charismatic stage and screen star in Ireland whose mammoth influence both enriches and depletes her altogether different novelist daughter's life. Steeped in the textures of film and theatre, the book brilliantly excavates a rich life through the prisms of fame, sexual power and family psychodramas.

The non-fiction that captivated me the most this year was Isabel Wilkerson's ***The Warmth of Other Suns*** (Vintage), a hugely powerful and moving account of America's Great Migration, undertaken by millions of Black people in an attempt to escape the Jim Crow South. Wilkerson traces in warm and intimate detail the journeys made by three individuals at different times and shows how the Promised Land failed to make good on its pledges and brought us to where we are today.

A collection of short stories that I loved this year was ***How to Pronounce Knife*** by Souvankham Thammavongsa (Bloomsbury). The stories mostly focus on immigrants from Laos to Canada and the practical realities of life in a new country, without resorting to any nebulous musings on what it might mean to belong. Thammavongsa's spare writing is wonderfully effective at tenderness, quiet humour and devastation; I read the stories through once and then returned to study them.

I gained so much pleasure from reading poetry this year. My standout experience was Arun Kolatkar's cycle of poems, ***Jejuri*** (Rhus). Kolatkar swoops into this site of pilgrimage in Maharashtra, dedicated to Khandoba, in order to explore its architecture, landscape, faith, corruption and stillness.

There is such a wealth of unforgettable imagery and breathtaking language in these poems that I—never much of a pilgrim—was desperate to make my way to Jejuri and see it for myself.

I also thoroughly enjoyed the tightly controlled menace of Leesa Gazi's ***Hellfire*** (Eka; translated from Bengali by Shabnam Nadiya). In this novel a woman emerges from the control of her family, wandering unaccompanied on the streets of Dhaka for the first time on her 40th birthday. Gazi alternates between the claustrophobia of her domestic life with this sudden and strange freedom, ratcheting up the tension and horror as we wonder what will happen when she gets home. ■

DIPANKAR GUPTA

Sociologist and author

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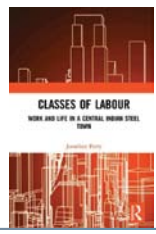
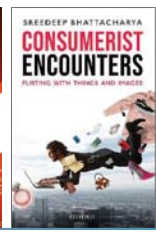
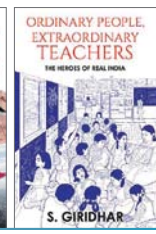
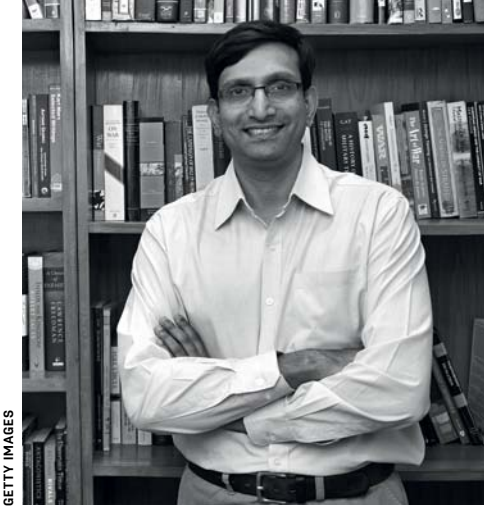
Three books stand out in my mind from among the few I read in 2020. The contents of each of these surprised me besides adding enormously to my knowledge. Let me begin with Jonathan Parry's ***Classes of Labour*** (Routledge). In this work the author clearly demonstrates how differently permanent and casual workers in the Bhilai Steel factory view their social circumstances. Permanent workers not only seek better education for their children but feel secure enough not to rely excessively on traditional kinship ties. This aspect is also reflected in their marriage choices and inter caste dining practices. Second in line is Sreedeep Bhattacharya's book ***Consumerist Encounters*** (Oxford University Press). Bhattacharya examines how built-in obsolescence is passé as far as contemporary consumer attitudes are concerned. The accent instead is on a flirtatious connection with commodities highlighted in the extreme by the ephemeral life of a T-shirt whose outstanding feature is its whimsical inscription and not its fabric and cut. Finally, I come to S Giridhar's volume titled, ***Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers*** (Westland and Azim Premji University). Giridhar provides a corrective to the negative opinions that are popularly held against government school teachers for being remiss and uncaring in their duties. This book lovingly curates the achievements of a select band of unsung heroes who perform their labour of love, on a routine basis, seeking no other reward but that their students excel academically. ■









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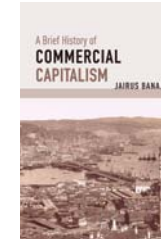
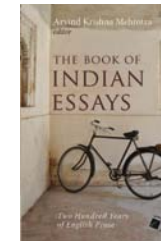
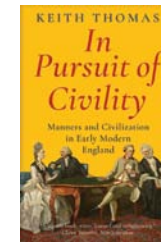
SRINATH RAGHAVAN

Historian







Thanks to the pandemic I found myself reaching for older volumes on my shelves rather more often than picking up new ones. Yet this strange year also saw the publication of books by some of the historians I most admire. Jairus Banaji's ***A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*** (Haymarket) is a brilliant, wide-ranging yet succinct study of merchant capitalism from the 12th to the 19th centuries. John Darwin's ***Unlocking the World: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam 1830-1930*** (Allen Lane) is a magisterial account that takes the story forward and shows how port cities acted as crucial vestibules for global capitalism to transform their hinterlands.

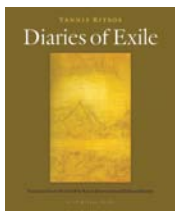
Roy Foster's ***On Seamus Heaney*** (Princeton University Press) is a crystalline study that at once places the great Irish poet in a historical context and offers acute and subtle readings of his work. It sent me right back to the two volumes of Heaney's *Selected Poems*. The book I have most enjoyed over the past couple of weeks is Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's ***The Book of Indian Essays: Two Hundred Years of English Prose*** (Black Kite). This capacious but reasonably sized volume includes many lesser-known authors and difficult-to-find pieces. Editorial modesty has alas prevented Mehrotra from including his own wonderful essay, 'Partial Recall', which I nevertheless re-read.

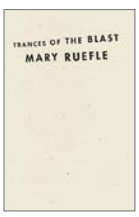
Keith Thomas' ***In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England*** (Yale University Press) was published in paperback this year. The book is a useful reminder of what an extraordinary scholar he is. I was tickled to notice that the first footnote in the book refers to Early English Books Online. Thomas is something of an EEBO himself. It almost feels unfair that anyone could have read so much—even over a long lifetime. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of his masterpiece, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Pandemic or not, that's a book I am definitely going to re-read in 2021.■

TISHANI DOSHI
Author


ALAMY

Given the strangeness of the year and the bouts of isolation, I thought I'd be reading a lot of fiction, but what grounded me were poetry and essays. In February, before the world closed its doors, I read with the brilliant, irreverent poet Mary Ruefle at a festival in Norway, and her collection ***Trances of the Blast*** (Wave Books) has been carrying me through. Every absurd thing about being alive in this world—our smallness, the explosions we must bear—she captures. ***Diaries of Exile*** by Yannis Ritsos (Archipelago Books) is a series of diary-style poems written when Ritsos was a political prisoner between 1948 and 1950 in detention camps during Greece's civil war; they are a reminder of the project of poetry as a connecter between the I and the we, how language is our humanity. I'm partial to essays written by poets because there's a kind of world-building which is carried over from one genre to the other, and an attention to detail funnelled by wild curiosity. Andre Bagoo's ***The Undiscovered Country*** (Peepal Tree Press) hits so many registers in this glorious wide-ranging collection, from the complications of VS Naipaul to the contradictions of *doubles* (the Trinidadian street food which is a riff off *chhole bhature*), to the author coming into his own queerness by reading *Jane Eyre*. And finally, the late Inger Christensen's ***The Condition of Secrecy*** (Bloodaxe Books), which is, to pinch her own words, 'a small and mysterious miracle'. This woman had a cathedral of a mind, someone who wrote a sequence of poems combining the alphabet and the Fibonacci sequence. If ever there was a year to recognise the interconnectedness of things, this was it. It's such a revelatory book you don't know whether you want to keep it a secret or shout it from the rooftops (I'm choosing to shout). ■

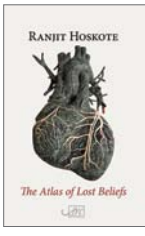




TABISH KHAIR
Author

I avoid endorsing Booker-shortlisted novels. Most of them are good, but the Booker is an 'over-dorsed' prize, and it leaves out many novels, just as good, either because they do not meet its eligibility criteria (which privilege big publishing and UK and US imprints) or for other reasons. But there are always exceptions. Maaza Mengiste's ***The Shadow King*** (Canongate) was my exception in 2020, a year that saw a strong Booker shortlist. But, alas, it was published in 2019. That was also the case with another book I read only this year and wanted to include: William Dalrymple's ***The Anarchy*** (Bloomsbury). Based in Denmark, I obviously run the risk of getting books just a few months too late.

Of the books I can recommend, because I read them in their year of publication, 2020, there are four that stand out in my memory. Two are collections of short stories, one a novel, and one a poetry collection. Of these four, two were translated into English in 2020, but were published earlier in the original languages.



Translated by Nandini Krishnan, Perumal Murugans's ***Estuary*** (Eka) is an unusual novel from a writer who, after being forced to declare himself dead, has come fully alive with the years. I suppose it will be labelled 'speculative fiction' by those who market books. Comparisons might be made to Orwell and Kafka and Gogol, and they would be justified, but not entirely apt. Because *Estuary* shares just as much with RK Narayan. It presents an idiosyncratic dystopia whose dark corners hide a jester, and whose public concerns are always rooted in the small-town domestic.

In her first collection of stories, ***Sweet Home*** (Picador), Wendy Erskine is absolutely brilliant at capturing the many shades of Belfast, especially in its broken corners. She is enabled by a pitch-perfect ability to write in a language spoken by her characters. Erskine's use of

the English spoken in Belfast is something that Indian English writers can only envy, because attempts to capture Indian versions of English flounder on the rocks of the very different linguistic realities of India. Erskine writes with absolutely no pity, and with the greatest magnanimity—a very difficult act.

What struck me most about Ranjita Biswas's translation of Arupa Patangia Kalita's Assamese collection of stories, published as ***The Loneliness of Hira Barua*** (Macmillan), was not the gendered aspects of her engagement with violence and oppression in ordinary settings. Kalita is justly renowned for this. But, to me, even rarer and more difficult is her complex and sad affirmation of life, despite its many tragedies; this comes through most magnificently in the title story. Kalita's stories also share with Erskine a refreshing ability to step out of genteel middle-class concerns and, with Murugan, an ability to go beyond metropolitan realities.

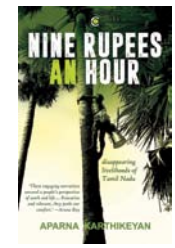
Ranjit Hoskote's ***The Atlas of Lost Beliefs*** (Arc Publications) is the only new Indian English poetry collection that I read this year. Alas. Hoskote has a

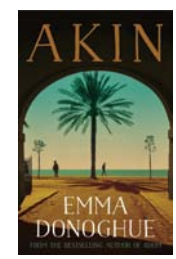
reputation as a difficult, intellectual poet, and I avoid overly intellectual poetry. But, in Hoskote's case, this reputation is misleading, because his sensibility is steeped in a very wide reading of literature and in folk poetry, much of it through translation, and he engages with the world out there, the material world on which any idea can bounce and knock you out cold, the world of poetry. That is why the intellectual effort one needs to put into reading Hoskote is always rewarded.

Like all lists, this is a partial one: I read only about 15 books that were published in 2020, though many more from earlier. There are so many books I could not read, will never manage to read. And some that I definitely intend to read, such as Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*. ■


ALAMY

ANITA NAIR
Author





Every couple of years that much awaited moment arrives. A book by Ian Rankin and when it is a John Rebus novel, my cup runneth over. When Rankin's ***A Song for the Dark Times*** (Orion) reached me in early October, I was torn between wanting to read it in one sitting and measuring it out in coffee spoons to stretch it out as long as I possibly could. By the end of the second page I felt the familiar frisson of excitement that comes when you have a spectacular book in your hands. And especially if it has a much-loved character, it is akin to stepping into a crowded bar full of strangers and spotting your friend—the relief at seeing the much-loved face; the exhilaration of knowing you are going to have an amazing time. Suddenly the crowds slip away and there is just you and your friend catching up.

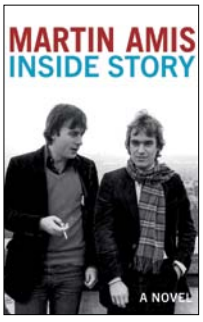
John Rebus, who first stepped into the literary firmament of crime-writing in *Knots & Crosses*, still packs his punch despite having retired. He is just as astute, just as wilful, just as wry, and probably a wee less cantankerous having acquired a dog, Brillo, and an inhaler in recent times. In *A Song for the Dark Times*, Rebus abandons his house-moving and rushes off to a wind-swept town where his daughter and granddaughter live. Her husband is missing and Rebus isn't sure about what awaits him there. And there is of course the fact that Rebus has to decide if he is to be father or detective.

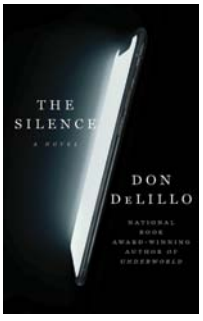
This is Rankin's 23rd Rebus book and it is an extraordinary writer who can make his character just as robustly complex and engaging as he did when he first introduced Rebus to the world. There isn't one false note or a misstep and its pure Rebus (and Rankin) through and through. The pace is taut and there are as many sub-plots to keep you guessing and Rebus (and Rankin) are just as funny as you would want them to be. As for Detective Inspector Siobhan Clarke, she has come into her own for a while now and one of the highlights of the Rebus novels is the nature of friendship between Rebus and Clarke. Minor joys include: discovering a not much used word in our part of the world: 'thrawn'; a reference to Karin Slaughter (a crime writer I like very much); Leonard Cohen and Adam and The Ants, et al.

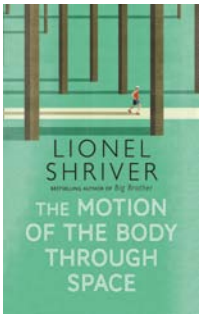
Grab it and read it in one sitting or ten, I assure you that you are going to feel as I did when I finished *A Song for the Dark Times*—mostly awe and a tremendous sense of loss that the tryst with Rebus has sadly come to an end. For now.

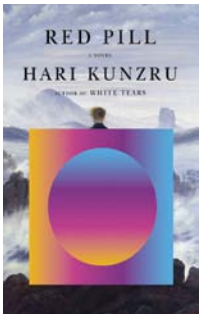
My other noteworthy books for 2020 include: ***Nine Rupees an Hour*** by Aparna Karthikeyan (Context); ***One Hell of a Lover*** by Unni R (Westland) and ***Akin*** by Emma Donoghue (Picador). ■

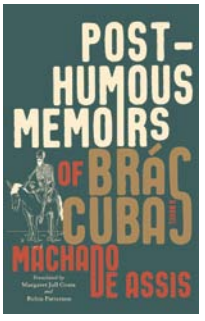
By S PRASANNARAJAN



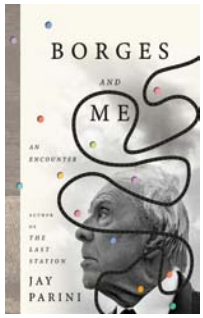


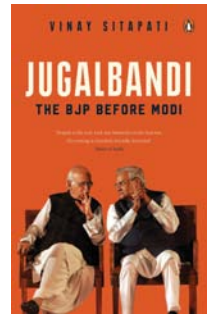


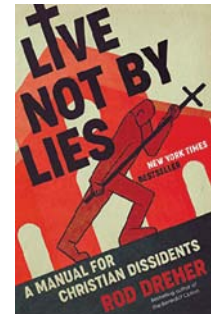




When memory powers the pages of a good writer, time shrinks, and imagination makes the real starker and intimate. Martin Amis, yesterday's enfant terrible and today's elder statesman of English fiction, is not a sentimental writer. The best of him exudes the comedic exuberance of a writer whose every sentence is a showy declaration of craftsmanship, still emulated by fanboys. ***Inside Story*** (Jonathan Cape) is a novel in which Martin Amis plays the lead role, in the company of writers he admires and friends he has lost. The best passages are reserved for Saul Bellow and Christopher Hitchens. Maybe not. In the end, you realise that *Inside Story* is what the title suggests: Amis, from his Brooklyn town house, is looking in the mirror, and the shifting images of emotion are the pleasure of this novel, which should be read, as the novelist himself advises, leisurely, without the hurriedness of a reviewer. If Amis is mammoth, Don DeLillo's ***The Silence*** (Scribner) is a chiselled aside, not more than 117 pages, from America's greatest living novelist. Five chatty people—two of them just survived a plane crash—in a Manhattan drawing room on a Super Bowl day and the city—or the world?—undergoes a digital breakdown. It's a meditation on technology and existential deep freeze, with Einstein hovering over. Science again makes DeLillo prophetic. In *Zero K*, his last novel, it was immortality and cryogenics. Now algorithms write Apocalypse ('Black Noise', *Open*, December 7th, 2020). In a year I read few novels—the other two notables were ***Red Pill*** (Knopf), which will warm the hearts of those who like novels as dissent, and Lionel Shriver's ***The Motion of the Body Through Space*** (The Borough Press), which will quicken the pulse of ageing runners and other loners—what I'm reading just now is the time travel—and what a joy ride—we all need. The epigraph prepares you for Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis' ***Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*** (Liveright Publishing Corporation): 'To the first worm to gnaw the cold flesh of my corpse I tenderly dedicate these posthumous memoirs.' Originally published 140 years ago in Portuguese, and now translated into English by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, this Brazilian classic may owe its subversive novelty to the original subversive, Laurence Sterne, but 'this is, after all, the work of a dead man.' I can't resist quoting the first para: 'For some time, I could not decide whether to begin this memoir at the beginning or at the end, that is, whether I should start with my birth or my death. Since the usual approach is to begin with one's birth, two considerations led me to adopt a different method: firstly, I am not so much a writer who has died, as a dead man who has decided to write, and for whom the grave proved to be another cradle; the second is







that this approach will make what I write more elegant and more modern...' I have not yet reached the last page of Cubas' autobiography, a sketchbook for future practitioners of magical realism.

Borges is a natural choice to begin my non-fiction list. In 1971, Jay Parini, an American student at St Andrews,was given the envious but unexpected assignment by his mentor: take the great Jorge Luis Borges around the Scottish Highlands. ***Borges and Me: An Encounter*** (Doubleday) is Quixotic in its own hilarious ways, with Parini playing an accidental Sancho. He has read nothing by Borges yet. In their adventure, the young Parini becomes the eyes of the blind genius, and, finally, sees his own true worth. This Borges, fuelled by local beer, you are unlikely to find in his stories or essays. Memories provide the rustle to the pages of ***A Remarkable Friendship*** (Macmillan), Yogi Vaid's elegant portrait of his friendship with Aman Nath. Writer, hotelier, restorer, connoisseur, Aman Nath turns ruins into monumental rhapsodies, ideas of culturally sustainable habitation into rare aesthetic experiences. He echoes a great writer from another time: "Beauty shall save the world." His good friend Vaid, a natural storyteller, has written a celebratory book worthy of its subject, with endorsements from others thrown in. And my political book of the year is ***Jugalbandi: The BJP before Modi*** (Viking) by perhaps the most original academic of his generation with a storyteller's flair, Vinay Sitapati. *Jugalbandi* is the Indian Right's one hundred years of rectitude. Apart from answering, with a historian's authenticity, why BJP ticks, it personalises history with the parallel lives of Vajpayee and Advani. Rod Dreher's ***Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*** (Sentinel) has relevance beyond its primary premise of America. In the age of what Dreher calls 'soft totalitarianism', which is sustained by forces as varied as identity politics and techno-capitalism, freedom has to be a relentless struggle, not for American Christians alone.

POSTSCRIPT: Barack Obama's ***A Promised Land*** (Viking) is the book I half loved. I loved the pre-presidential part of his first volume of memoirs ('Dreams from Obama', *Open*, November 30th, 2020). Those passages were unedited by power, and there I got a glimpse of the writer I first met in *Dreams from My Father*. ■

IF MARTIN AMIS IS MAMMOTH, DON DELILLO'S ***THE SILENCE*** IS A CHISELLED ASIDE, NOT MORE THAN 117 PAGES, FROM AMERICA'S GREATEST LIVING NOVELIST. FIVE CHATTY PEOPLE—TWO OF THEM JUST SURVIVED A PLANE CRASH—IN A MANHATTAN DRAWING ROOM AND THE CITY—OR THE WORLD?—UNDERGOES A DIGITAL BREAKDOWN

OUR MALADIES

By SUDEEP PAUL

2020 **has been defined by China** and things of Chinese origin. ***The Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World*** (One World), by Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, is one of the more important books of the year. Beijing long ago penetrated the mind and pocket of US presidential candidates, European MPs and MEPs, ambassadors, industrialists and journalists. What's less well-known is the extent of this influence. Hamilton and Ohlberg take us on a nightmare trip with evidence at each step (The Bidens are serial offenders, but then the Bush and Trump families don't come off any better). Every individual, company, organisation in the West connected to China, no matter how tenuous the link, is a front for the Party, the United Front Work Department, or the PLA. Westerners often aren't even aware of it. The Party has been applying the Maoist dictum of surrounding the city with the countryside in the West and was getting away with it till Trump (the one thing he got right) came along and Europe became sceptical about Beijing. Confined to North America, West Europe and Australia, the book is nevertheless a must-read for China watchers—and worried citizens everywhere.

In ***The Story of China: A Portrait of Its Civilisation and People*** (Simon & Schuster), historian Michael Wood attempts the impossible—4,000 years of history in a single volume—and succeeds. He's given us a page-turning account of one of the greatest and oldest of civilisations. China passes before our eyes like a free-flowing yet ordered array of images, with the author's own travelogues sharpening colour and context. Wood's calling card is not merely his scholarship of China's past or his insight into its present but also his intimations of its future.

Timothy Snyder, historian of the Holocaust and Soviet Bloc Europe, had a brush with death in end-December 2019. It took a few days for him to be correctly diagnosed and then operated upon. Recuperating from surgery in hospital as 2020 dawned, the author of the seminal *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), meditated on health and everything wrong with the US healthcare system, on how American society, politics and governance had brought things to such a pass. And the pandemic was yet to unleash itself. The book that appeared in September, ***Our Malady: Lessons in Liberty from a Hospital Diary*** (Crown), asks that healthcare be elevated to a human right. Less than 200 pages and a minor work, the book is still enlightening, forcefully argued and powerfully written.

The Butcher of Lemberg, SS Brigadeführer Otto Freiherr von Wächter, died in Rome, inexplicably, in 1949 and was

among the biggest Nazi war criminals to evade justice. Wächter, sheltered by the Vatican after years hiding in the Austrian Alps, was planning to escape to Argentina on the ratline. Lawyer and author of *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* (2016), Philippe Sands has written a biography, history and thriller in ***The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive*** (W&N), collaborating with Wächter's son Horst, named after...well, Horst Wessel. Horst doesn't accept his father's criminality—a father indicted in 1945 as the overseer of some of the worst mass murders of Jews and Poles under the Final Solution—but he gives Sands a free hand and unhindered access to his archives. The personal and political story that emerges pushes beyond the Nazi darkness to the beginnings of the Cold War and the pursuit and recruitment of former high-ranking Nazis by, chiefly, Western intelligence agencies. In many ways, it confirms what was always known—that many Nazi fugitives could have been caught if Western governments had wanted them caught. The book is also a revelation, not least because Sands seems to grasp what really 'killed', or didn't kill, Wächter. Incidentally, Sands lost family in Lemberg to Wächter's genocide.

The Soviets wouldn't have got an atom bomb, let alone in 1949, without Ursula Hamburger, aka Ruth Werner, aka Ursula Beurton (Mrs Burton), born Ursula Kuczynski. A Jewish-born German colonel in the Red Army and possibly recruited by legendary German-born Soviet spy Richard Sorge, Agent Sonya (or Sonja, as Kuczynski was codenamed) passed on the atomic secrets from Klaus Fuchs. She operated in China, Switzerland and Britain before returning to Germany (East Germany) in 1949. Agent Sonya hoodwinked MI5 for years, partly because her appearance (and reality) of a housewife in rural Oxfordshire, her retinue of children, and her integration in English village life did not make anybody suspicious enough. Back in the GDR, she wrote about herself, albeit redacted and altered. Ben Macintyre has brought her back to life (she died in 2000) in ***Agent Sonya: Lover, Mother, Soldier, Spy*** (Viking). Macintyre, author of *Operation Mincemeat* (2010), *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (2014), *The Spy and the Traitor: The Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War* (2018), etcetera, is a master of the espionage true story. Kuczynski, like Sorge, was a dedicated German communist working for the Soviets who had a hand in changing world history. This book was overdue.

IN ITS DAY, THE EMPIRE'S SUBJECTS MAY HAVE FELT OTHERWISE, BUT IN THE AFTERMATH OF TWO ROUNDS OF 20TH-CENTURY TYRANNY, MANY OF THOSE FORMER SUBJECT NATIONS HAVE LOOKED BACK WISTFULLY AT VIENNA, AT THE HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR. *THE HABSBURGS* MAY BECOME ONE OF THE BEST POPULAR HISTORIES WRITTEN IN OUR TIME

Another tome on the Habsburgs? Martyn Rady hasn't written one, but he's produced, under 400 pages, a tour de force of Europe's most important dynasty and shown why, and how, popular history matters, if skilfully written. Rady sustains the pace, covers a millennium of a family's story and European history, underscoring every event of import and preserving each detail that can be niched but not missed. In focusing on central Europe, Rady also stays true to the origins and the core of Habsburg power. A chaotic stew of languages, ethnicities and creeds, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, nevertheless, remains the 'good' alter ego of what post-Bismarck Prussian-German power could have been—cosmopolitan, largely tolerant because of its complex demographics, patrons of learning, purveyors of continental peace, and lasting a millennium. In its day, the empire's subjects may have felt otherwise, but in the aftermath of two rounds of 20th-century tyranny, many of those former subject nations have looked back wistfully at Vienna, at the long-lost Holy Roman Emperor. ***The Habsburgs: The Rise and Fall of a World Power*** (Allen Lane) may become one of the most important popular histories written in our time.

New York Times' Chief Africa Correspondent Declan Walsh was thrown out of Pakistan in 2013 on the eve of the general election for 'undesirable activities' after living in Islamabad for a decade. In 2017, he had a near-similar experience in Egypt. The book that took him seven years to write, ***The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Precarious State*** (Bloomsbury), is as much *his* story in Pakistan as of the 'nine lives' he set out with, most of whom met violent ends. Walsh leads us to the most dangerous corners in one of the most dangerous countries on the planet but never misses its vibrancy and love for life even as it seems to perpetually flirt with death. What's more, he keeps his wits about him and knows how to wed the sacred and the profane.■

RETHINKING HISTORIES

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

Sixteen Stormy Days: The Story of the First Amendment to the Constitution of India

by Tripurdaman Singh (Vintage)

In 1950, after much fanfare and celebration, the Constitution of India was inaugurated and the country declared a republic. The centrepiece of the document was the chapter on Fundamental Rights, an innovation that Constitution-makers were especially proud of. Yet a year later, in May 1952, the First Amendment proposed—and carried out—far-reaching changes to these rights. A new section describing 'reasonable restrictions' was added. Another amendment sought to weaken the right to property. And there were more. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared individual liberty and freedom to be animating ideas of the 19th century. He wanted to push social justice at the cost of individual rights and succeeded. These changes had far-reaching political effects in the decades ahead. Singh describes those debates and sketches those events of that time in a masterful manner.

JON ELSTER HAS MANAGED TO PLUMB THE DEPTHS OF ARCHIVES AND COMBINE THAT WITH HIS PENETRATING INSIGHT INTO HUMAN BEHAVIOUR. THE RESULT IS A VERY DIFFERENT PICTURE OF THE MOTIVATIONS FOR THE FRENCH REVOLUTION INSTEAD OF THE USUAL 'LET THEM EAT CAKE' VARIETY OF HISTORY

France before 1789: The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime

by Jon Elster

(Princeton University Press)

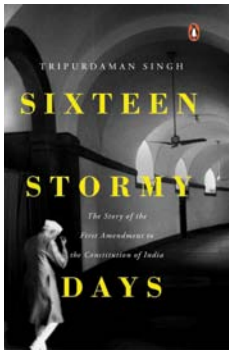
Most analyses of the French Revolution and revolutions in general try to find 'causes' based on observed events. In the French case it is usual to stitch together disparate events like the Bread Riots in Paris, the Storming of the Bastille and more into a 'narrative' about the revolution. But in this story there is no mention of the motivations, preferences and beliefs of individuals who participated in those events. These 'micro-foundations' are essential if one is to have a coherent understanding of the events of 1789. Surprisingly, there are virtually no studies that do that. Jon Elster, a celebrated social scientist, tries to do that in this first, exploratory, book of a planned multi-volume study. Given the distance between the book and the events, he has managed to plumb the depths of archives and combine that with his penetrating insight into human behaviour. The result is a very different picture of the motivations for the revolution instead of the usual 'let them eat cake' variety of history.

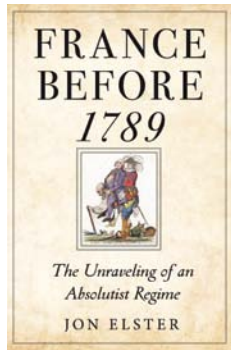
The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War

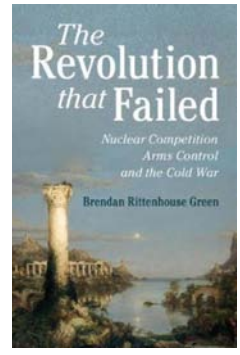
by Brendan Rittenhouse Green

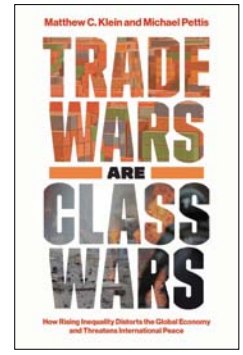
(Cambridge University Press)

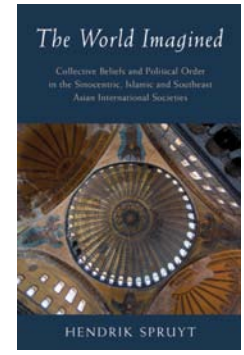
The keystone of Cold War politics was the so-called nuclear revolution that prophesied stability between nuclear-armed rivals. Nuclear war was so terrifying that the US and the USSR abjured fighting wars and the Cold War passed peacefully, by and large that is. Brendan Green's book does a thorough demolition job of that claim based on what these states actually did. Instead of predicted stability, there was an acute arms competition; instead of realising that nuclear war was futile—Mutual Assured Destruction or MAD was for real—these states pursued nuclear war-fighting doctrines. So much that counterforce strategies—selective targeting, or











'taking out' of nuclear infrastructure with missiles—was even thought to be conceivable. These are not academic questions and in the Second Nuclear Age they have become even more important.

Trade Wars Are Class Wars: How Rising Inequality Distorts the Global Economy and Threatens International Peace

by Matthew C Klein and Michael Pettis (Yale University Press)

If the authors are to be believed, trade is now war minus the guns. The imbalances in the global economy, with countries like China enjoying massive surpluses, have made trade a zero-sum game between countries. The trade wars of 2020 are driven by these imbalances. The authors argue that this is a mistaken way to understand what is going on. The real culprit is rising inequality within countries and the gap between the haves and the have nots that has now acquired a global dimension. There is certain plausibility to this claim as has been shown by many studies since the last decade. This is, however, a contested area: while there is no doubt that within a country inequality has gone up, at the same time poverty in developing nations—and China is the exemplar—has come down considerably. But whatever be one's persuasion, this is a work worth reading to understand our contemporary political flux.

THE FASCINATING STORY OF HOW RIVAL POLITICAL FORMS WERE OUSTED BY NATION-STATES HAS BEEN HENDRIK SPRUYT'S LIFE'S WORK. IN ***THE WORLD IMAGINED***, HE LOOKS AT MEDIEVAL FORMATIONS IN EAST ASIA, THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, SAFAVID PERSIA AND MUGHAL INDIA

The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies

by Hendrik Spruyt

(Cambridge University Press)

The world is now populated with nation-states and in an evolutionary sense, this form of political organisation has eliminated all other forms: empires, city-states, chieftainships and more, have all disappeared. But this was not always so and the fascinating story of how rival political forms were ousted by nation-states has been Hendrik Spruyt's life's work. In *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (1994) he looked at Europe from this perspective. In the present volume he completes the story by looking at medieval formations in East Asia, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia and Mughal India. Of the two books, the new book tells a more interesting story. This part of the world is yet to complete its journey: nation-states exist but they are in constant crisis with ever-present threats of secession. The nagging question whether this form of organisation is even suitable never really goes away. Then there is China, a Behemoth that defies any neat classification (a nation-state? a civilisational state? an autocracy? or something with bits of all?). Spruyt's book offers a very different and interesting perspective on the tumult in developing countries. ■

THE BODY IN THE ATTIC

By SHYLASHRI SHANKAR

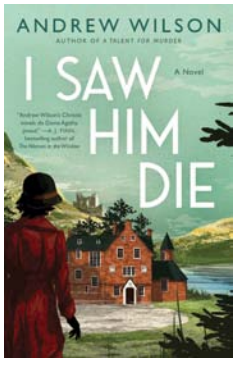
I Saw Him Die by Andrew Wilson (Washington Square)

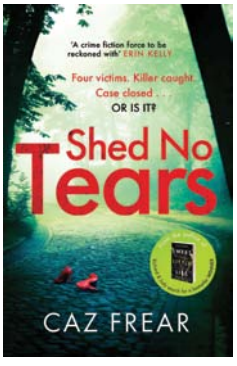
In *I Saw Him Die*, the fourth book with Agatha Christie as the main character, Christie is asked by the British secret service to find out who has sent a threatening note to murder a former operative (Robin Kinmuir) who now runs a hotel in his ancestral home in the Isle of Skye (Scotland). Robin was responsible for a failed mission that led to the deaths of 11 operatives. They expect the attempt to be made by one of the guests. Christie, who is preparing to marry her second husband, agrees reluctantly to accompany Davison, also a secret service agent, as his cousin. They meet the host who is 'a difficult and promiscuous' man, his nephew and the nephew's artist friend, Robin's actress-mistress, a beautiful botanist, twin sisters who write romances, a handsome and mysterious man who is not what he seems, and a cheery doctor. Robin is killed the next day, and the nephew-heir confesses to shooting him in the leg after mistaking him for grouse. After examining him the doctor announces that it is murder. Enter Hawkins, a policeman sent from the mainland who too may have things to hide. Wilson uses several of Christie's motifs including embedding clues in sentences and nursery rhymes, using her expertise in poisons to figure out the solution. The dramatic wildness of Skye is used to vivid effect. Like the earlier books, it is wonderfully atmospheric and captures the spirit of Agatha Christie's voice and era.

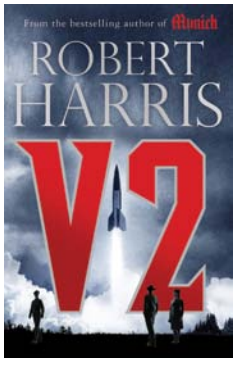
A Will to Kill by RV Raman (HarperCollins)

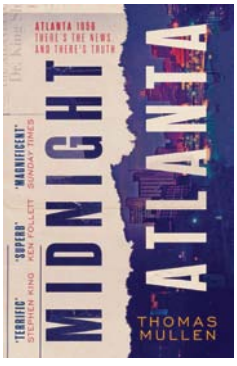
A Will to Kill is a deftly executed country house mystery set in a mansion in the Nilgiris. Having finally won the court case launched by his now deceased siblings, and reclaimed his family property, Greybrooke Manor, a wheelchair bound patriarch (Bhaskar Fernandez) has called his nephew and two nieces to reconcile with him and his son. Having suffered an attempt on his life, Bhaskar hires a seasoned investigator (Harith Athreya) to discover who is planning to kill him. Bhaskar has made two wills whose contents are not known to his family. Which one comes into force will depend on whether he dies a natural or an unnatural death.

Athreya, a cool, rational man with links to the police, arrives to find that a landslide has cut them off from the rest of the world. The cast of characters includes a willowy son, an anxious but plucky niece who is worried about her ne'er do well brother, another less plucky niece married to a 'crook of the first water' who has been barred from showing his face in the manor and is staying in the resort next door, Bhaskar's devoted Man Friday, a mysterious artist, a cheery padre, a retired and bluff armyman and his young attractive wife and the disreputable owner of the resort next door. When one of the characters is murdered in the chapel, and another one follows, Athreya has to piece together a complicated story that goes back to Bhaskar's past. Raman weaves in a believable and well-thought-out plot that stays faithful to









the mood of a country house murder. The ghost-ridden misty landscape of the Nilgiris is an ideal setting for a cosy winter afternoon read.

Shed No Tears

by Caz Frear (Zaffre)

An excellent police procedural starring DC Cat Kinsella. A body is found in a muddy field in Cambridgeshire. It turns out to be Holly Kemp who was last seen six years ago entering the house of a convicted and now dead serial killer. But discrepancies (unreliable witnesses, missing evidence) crop up in the original investigation which was led by a now high-ranking officer. Can Cat take on her colleagues who may have something to hide? Cat pops off the page as a snarky cop with an unusual background with a complicated love life. Her father is a high-up gang member, a fact that she has hidden from her colleagues and boss. This is a twisty, pacey, tension-filled read not to be missed.

V2 by Robert Harris (Hutchinson)

A superb blending of fact and fiction, Robert Harris' book is set in the winter of 1944. The story is told from two viewpoints: Kay Connolly, a young Women's Auxiliary Air Force officer and Rudi Graf, a German rocket engineer. Graf is a dreamer who wanted to build a spacecraft with his motley group of fellow dreamers but ended up creating V2, the long-range ballistic missile that is wreaking havoc in London. His discomfort at having their experimental rocket used as a killing machine has got him into trouble with the Nazis in the past and they are now very suspicious of him as he inspects the rockets before they take off from a secret site on the Dutch coast. Having narrowly escaped death from a V2 strike, Kay, a convent educated, Cambridge University archaeology major manages to get a job with a team of mathematicians in Belgium who have to find these secret launch sites. Harris is a superb storyteller and keeps us at the edge of our seats. A gripping historical thriller.

IN *A WILL TO KILL*, RV RAMAN WEAVES IN A BELIEVABLE PLOT THAT STAYS FAITHFUL TO THE MOOD OF A COUNTRY HOUSE MURDER. THE GHOST-RIDDEN MISTY LANDSCAPE OF THE NILGIRIS IS AN IDEAL SETTING FOR A COSY WINTER READ

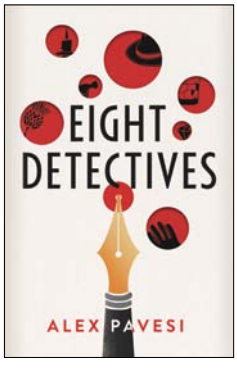
Midnight Atlanta

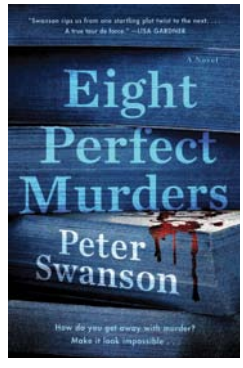
by Thomas Mullen (Little, Brown)

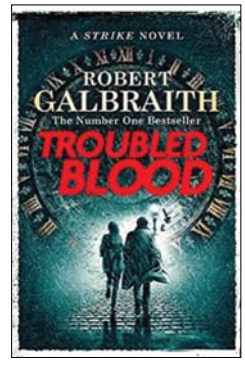
Mullen's highly acclaimed Darktown series is set in the American South during the segregation era of the 1950s. The editor (Arthur Bishop) of Atlanta's premier Black newspaper is murdered in his office. Reporter Tommy Smith, formerly a cop in Atlanta's only Black police unit, who discovers the body, finds himself being viewed by racist white cops as the main suspect. He has to find out what story Bishop was working on just before his death in order to figure out who wanted him dead. Tommy is helped by his ex-boss, a white sergeant, Joe McInnis, who has to tackle belligerent racist detectives and federal agents who would prefer that the truth remain hidden. The historical landscape—Rosa Park's protest, the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr and the anti-communist drive—weaves in seamlessly with the high drama of Smith's race to exonerate himself by finding the killer.

Eight Detectives by Alex Pavesi (Michael Joseph)

Eight Detectives is a charming and clever ode to the classic







Golden Age cozies that speaks to the bones of the perfect mystery novel. Julia Hart, a young editor, arrives on a remote island in the Mediterranean to meet and convince a reclusive author (Grant McAllister) to republish a set of detective stories he wrote 30 years ago to demonstrate his theory. The mathematician-turned-author's theory is that a mystery structure can be explained by four ingredients: two or more suspects, one or more victims, a detective or detectives, and a killer or a group of killers. The only condition is that the killer must come from the group of suspects. As the editor reads and discusses stories with the author, she is struck by several inconsistencies that leave her wondering how much was based on facts. The elegance of the narration is matched by the intelligence of the plotting, and the integral link between the settings (deserted island, a manor house) and the stories (families ruled by a terrifying matriarch, poisoned drinks and chocolates, vanishing weapons, bodies in the attic).

Eight Perfect Murders
by Peter Swanson (William Morrow)
Years ago, the owner (Malcolm Kershaw) of a mystery bookshop made a list of eight perfect murder mysteries for a blog on crime fiction. An FBI agent (Gwen Mulvey) shows up at the doorstep of his Old Devil's Bookshop in Boston with the list. Someone has been recreating and carrying out murders based on the list. Someone who knows Mal, and who has been to his bookshop. As the bodies begin to pile up, we realise that the victims are linked to Malcolm who has his own dark secrets, and with whom the killer is playing a grisly game. Another splendid ode to the mystery genre even if the denouement is not as satisfying as one had expected.

IN *EIGHT DETECTIVES* THE MATHEMATICIAN-TURNED-AUTHOR'S THEORY IS THAT A MYSTERY STRUCTURE CAN BE EXPLAINED BY FOUR INGREDIENTS: TWO OR MORE SUSPECTS, ONE OR MORE VICTIMS, A DETECTIVE OR DETECTIVES, AND A KILLER OR A GROUP OF KILLERS

Troubled Blood by Robert Galbraith (Sphere)
Cormoran Strike, the wounded war hero-turned-detective, is back with his partner, Robin Ellacott in this 900-page mystery by JK Rowling. A doctor (Margot Bamborough) disappears on her way to the pub from her surgery, after seeing her last patient. No body, no sighting, and a badly botched-up police investigation. The policeman in charge of the case is in the midst of a nervous breakdown and begins thinking in star signs, black magic and pentagrams while investigating the case, which makes for a very peculiar set of notes. Forty years later, Anne, her daughter, hires Cormoran to investigate her mother's disappearance. The suspects include the staff (the receptionist, a nurse) and partners (a misogynist doctor) in Margot's practice, her husband who is now married to the nanny, a former boyfriend and a couple of patients who had come to see her on the evening she disappeared. As they track the suspects and piece together Margot's personality and preoccupations, the duo also tackles their own private demons, and a simmering but unspoken attraction to each other. The book sketches the emotional landscapes extremely well, creating in the process depth and vividness.

Blue Moon by Lee Child (Bantam)
Bionic man, ex-military cop and proverbial loner Jack Reacher gets off the bus to prevent the mugging of an elderly man carrying a wad of cash to repay a loan shark. Reacher escorts the man home after the Albanian gangster sends a message saying, 'Come in the evening'. There he learns why the couple are in the clutches of a loan shark and offers to help. He arrives in the bar and finds a Ukrainian gangster who has just taken over the business. Reacher realises he has landed smack in the middle of a gang war between the Ukrainians who own the west side of town and the Albanians who own the east side. A waitress who seems to know more than she lets on quickly becomes his love interest. She helps him along with her friends who (too handily) possess all the right skills to face brutal mobsters. Unlike some earlier books, this one has all the signature elements of a Reacher novel. Fast paced, gritty and a well-researched subject, ticking clock, minute details, and action scenes. It is also more savage, and Jack is even more of a superman than in the earlier books. Reacher fans will enjoy it.

Fair Warning by Michael Connelly (Orion)
Veteran journalist Jack McEvoy returns home from work at Fair Warning (an investigative news organisation) to find two homicide detectives waiting for him. A woman with whom he had a one-night stand a year ago has been brutally murdered. Though he is a 'person of interest' McEvoy's reporter instincts kick in and he carries on a parallel investigation with the help of another reporter and his ex-FBI ex-girlfriend. They discover links between the murder and other similar murders and realise that a serial killer is loose. Connelly, a reporter in his previous life, skilfully uses the techniques of investigative journalism to draw us into the billion-dollar unregulated world of DNA testing and its dark side. A solid thriller. ■

OPEN

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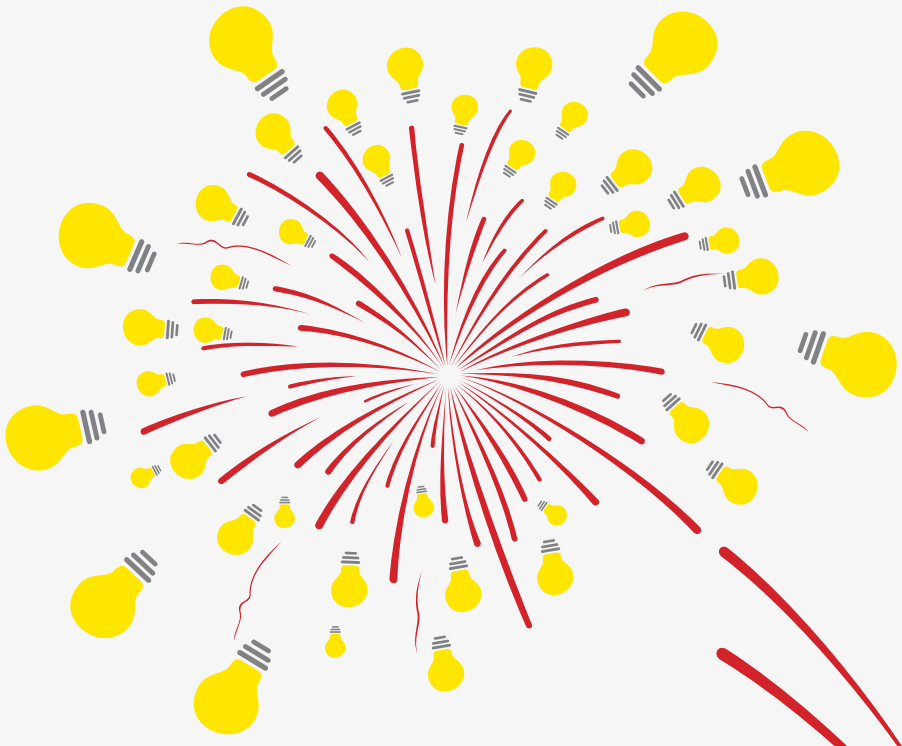

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TRUE GRIT AND GR

By RAJEEV MASAND

PUSHPAVALLI SEASON 2

Director: Debbie Rao
Actors: Sumukhi Suresh, Manish Anand, Naveen Richard
Streaming on: Amazon Prime Video

After a solid first season (that dropped at the end of 2017) established the unlikely but delicious premise of this 'stalker black comedy' and earned a small but fierce fan following, the second season (that came out in March) cemented its position as a work of extraordinary sharpness. Creator and star Sumukhi Suresh dialled up the drama as her 'pathetic' and recently shamed protagonist now returns to seek revenge for her humiliation from the man she was besotted with. When he is nice to her, putting her troubling behaviour behind them, she risks falling into the same pattern as before. Terrific performances from Suresh, Naveen Richard as Pankaj, the boss with anger issues at the library she works at and especially popular was Bengaluru's RJ Shraddha in the scene-stealing role of Vasu the landlady whose digs Pushpavalli crashes at, making this show impossible not to love.

PANCHAYAT

Director: Deepak Kumar Mishra
Actors: Jitendra Kumar, Raghuvir Yadav, Chandan Roy
Streaming on: Amazon Prime Video

Anyone who can remember as far back as (and as fondly of) those charming Doordarshan shows *Malgudi Days* and *Mungerilal Ke Haseen Sapne* probably smiled through this similarly low-key drama about the rhythms of life in small-town India. TVF regular Jitendra Kumar perfectly embodied the disenchanted city boy who reluctantly takes a government job in a village, then proceeds to moan and groan about the laidback work ethic of his co-workers and the idiosyncrasies of the locals. The show's real charm—even as the protagonist thaws and embraces the vagaries of village life—is the alarming regularity with which mountains are made out of molehills. Each episode focused on a seemingly innocuous matter that somehow balloons into an 'issue', such as getting a passport-size photo taken or the arrival of a new chair. The makers shrewdly but gently tuck in social commentary amidst the bittersweet goings-on and give us winning characters like the village *pradhan* (played by Neena Gupta) and the *pradhanpati* (Raghuvir Yadav) who officiates the *panchayat* by proxy.

IPPING

AARYA

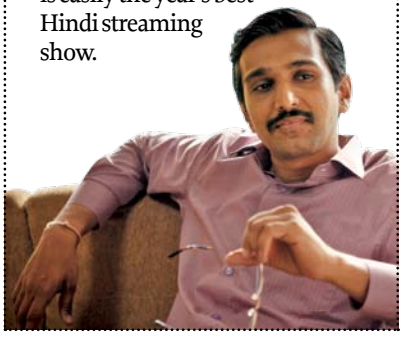
Directors: Ram Madhvani, Sandeep Modi, Vinod Rawat
Actors: Sushmita Sen, Vikas Kumar, Namit Das
Streaming on: Disney+ Hotstar

Ram Madhvani's elegantly mounted drama about a middle-aged mother of three who must step up and take charge of her husband's crime business after he is killed gave Sushmita Sen the best role she's ever played and enough room to flex her as-yet-unseen dramatic chops. Perfectly accoutred and coiffed—her persona, her frame and her manner suiting the character to a tee—the former Miss Universe slipped into the part like a glove. But even with her at the centre of the drama, the show offered a battery of exciting actors in key roles: such as Namit Das as the drug-dependent partner of her dead husband, Sikandar Kher as a strong, silent bodyguard-type and especially Vikas Kumar as a stub-born cop who routinely gets in her face. Filmed handsomely in the la-di-dah parts of Rajasthan, the show is as much about the dynamics within a criminal family as it is the survival story about a mother who will go to any lengths to protect her brood. This was pure bingeworthy entertainment served in style.

SCAM 1992—THE HARSHAD MEHTA STORY

Directors: Hansal Mehta and Jai Mehta
Actors: Pratik Gandhi, Shreya Dhanwanthary, Anjali Barot
Streaming on: SonyLIV

In telling the story of Harshad Mehta, one of India's biggest white-collar criminals, creator Hansal Mehta also gave us an evocative portrait of '80s and '90s Mumbai. Pratik Gandhi's pitch-perfect portrayal of Harshad Mehta (down to the casually delivered 'Lala') was arguably the show's biggest strength, his empathetic performance humanised Mehta. In equally solid form was Shreya Dhanwanthary as hard-nosed journalist Sucheta Dalal whose exposé of Harshad's dodgy trades led to his eventual downfall. Hansal successfully achieved telling a thoughtful and objective cautionary tale about endless ambition at the cost of losing one's moral compass. *Scam 1992* is easily the year's best Hindi streaming show.



PAATAL LOK

Directors: Avinash Arun and Prosit Roy
Actors: Jaideep Ahlawat, Neeraj Kabi, Ishwak Singh
Streaming on: Amazon Prime Video

As much a journey into the coldest, darkest recesses of the human heart as an explo-ration of the sordid link among crime, lawmakers, the media and men who walk the corridors of power, this thrilling drama gave us a clutch of desperate characters, each a victim of his circumstances no matter which side of the moral divide they were on. Chief among them was Hathiram Chaudhary, the cynical, middle-aged cop from the Jamuna Paar station who becomes determined to prove his worth when he's tasked with the biggest case of his career. Jaideep Ahlawat's star-making turn as the world-weary Hathiram is some of the best acting we've seen all year, and the script's skilful blend of procedural, noir and mythological allegory makes it one of the smartest shows in recent times.

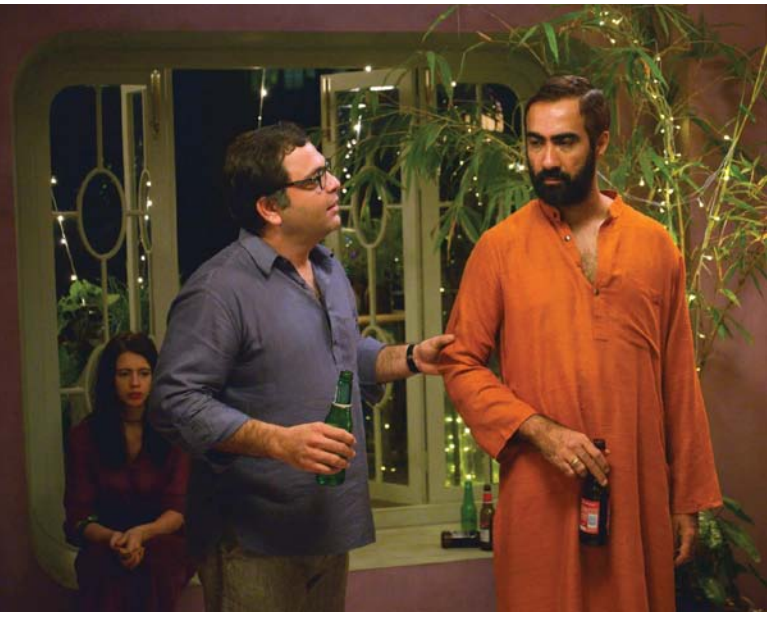
Runners Up

UNDEKHI on SonyLiv | **TAJ MAHAL 1989** on Netflix
BANDISH BANDITS on Amazon Prime Video

THAPPAD

Director: Anubhav Sinha
Actors: TaapseePannu, Pavail Gulati, Kumud Mishra
Streaming on: Amazon Prime Video

Anubhav Sinha's third terrific 'issue film' in as many years is a powerful and urgent drama about male entitlement and outdated gender expectations. When a husband slaps his wife in a moment of misdirected anger, it leads her to question the very foundation that her marriage is built on. Taapsee Pannu is excellent as the wife who is advised by everyone—including her mother—to let it go, but realises that she can't. The film forces uncomfortable but important questions about deep-rooted sexism and selfishness within the Indian marriage, and manages to make its point without beating you on the head with it.



KADAKH

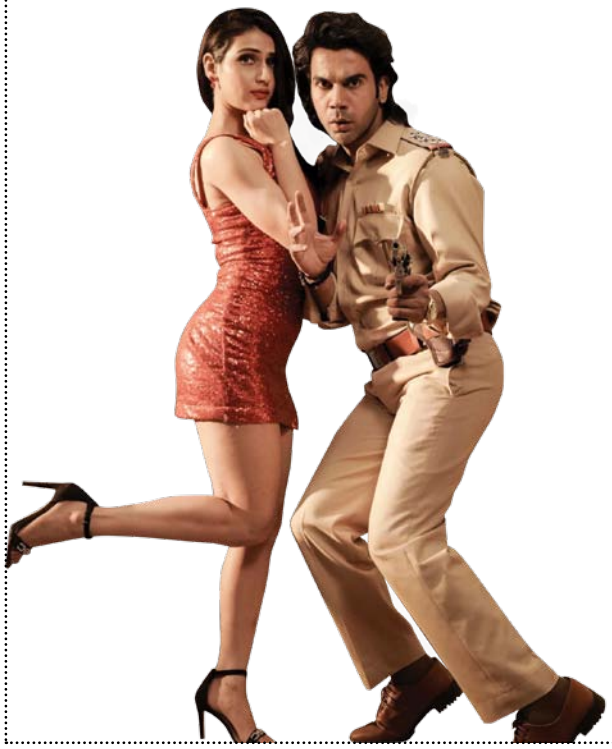
Director: Rajat Kapoor
Actors: Ranvir Shorey, Mansi Multani, Palomi Ghosh
Streaming on: SonyLIV

Rajat Kapoor's delicious pitch-dark comedy about marriage, infidelity, and the morals you would sacrifice for friendship unfolds over the course of a Diwali house party whose hosts are hiding a dead body from their guests. Ranvir Shorey and Mansi Multani play the hosts in question, and the rest of the cast is populated with smart actors like Cyrus Sahukar, Sagar Deshmukh, Kalki Koechlin, Manoj Pahwa, and Rajat himself. Held together by a crackling script, the film is shot as if you're eavesdropping on conversations between different groups scattered around a middle-class flat in a Mumbai apartment building. And while you spend much of the film cracking up over the bizarre scenarios that unfold as the party progresses, Rajat delivers a sting in the end that forces you to ask yourself how far you would go for a friend.

LUDO

Director: Anurag Basu
Actors: Pankaj Tripathi, Abhishek Bachchan, Rajkummar Rao
Streaming on: Netflix

There are many imperfections in Anurag Basu's dark comedy that features four interlocking stories—not every character is adequately fleshed out, the film is too long by at least 25 minutes, the climax is a bloated mess, and the writing is inconsistent. Yet the film benefits from his singular vision and the unmistakably unique lens through which he looks at life. In Rajkummar Rao's Mithun-aping character Aloo he gives us one of the year's most charming romantics—a man so besotted with his school crush that he remains devoted to her even after she's married and has a child. He crafts a winning relationship between Abhishek Bachchan's former convict and the little child who assists him in staging her own kidnapping. He gives us Pankaj Tripathi in strong form as a flamboyant don. Like *Barfi* and *Jagga Jasoos* this film too suffers on account of not knowing where to stop, but give me an ambitious, risk-taking imperfect experiment over another tried-and-tested assembly-line product. Ultimately there is much to appreciate and enjoy in this at-times-whimsical-at-other-times-baffling enterprise.



BULBBUL

Director: Anvita Dutt
Actors: Tripti Dimri , AvinashTiwary, Rahul Bose
Streaming on: Netflix

Writer Anvita Dutt's evocative directorial debut is a smart cocktail of supernatural horror, folklore, and feminist fantasy. Set in Bengal in the late 1800s, it tells the story of a child bride who grows into a lonely young woman trapped in a sprawling *haveli* and the abuse she suffers at the hands of men. Dutt expands this premise to include a subplot about a series of mysterious deaths taking place in the nearby village...and it doesn't take a genius to foresee where things are heading. Yet it is a testament to the luminous presence of leading lady Tripti Dimri, the film's Raja Ravi Varma-inspired visual design, and the empowerment message cleverly woven into the plot that makes it a powerful and essential viewing experience.

SIR

Director: Rohena Gera
Actors: Tillotama Shome, Vivek Gomber, Geetanjali Kulkarni
Playing in cinemas

Rohena Gera's thoughtful and deeply moving drama asks if love is indeed enough to bridge the yawning gap of wealth and privilege when an affluent young man and the woman who works as his domestic help develop feelings for each other. Tillotama Shome delivers a career-best performance as Ratna, who hopes to learn tailoring and become a designer one day. Vivek Gomber is her employer Ashwin, whose marriage has just been called off. Gera's script treads delicately and respectfully around their feelings and their actions, giving us moments of quiet heartbreak but also hope. Few films got under my skin like this one did, and stayed with me for as long. It asks us to introspect and re-evaluate our prejudices, it tells us that we're all complicit in creating an unfair, unequal world. But it does all this with the gentleness of a feather. The year's best Hindi film, no question about it.

Runners Up

KAAMYAAB on Netflix | CHINTU KA BIRTHDAY on Zee5
LOOTCASE on Disney+ Hotstar

BREAKO

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

PRATIK GANDHI, 31

Scam 1992

Gujarati cinema audiences fell in love with him with the 2016 film, *Wrong Side Raju*. Pratik Gandhi had taken 20 days leave for the film which won Best Gujarati Film at the National Awards, but the movie's success convinced him he could give up his day job as consultant engineer in Mumbai. It took national audiences another four years to discover Gandhi which they did with Hansal Mehta's extraordinary recreation of stockbroker Harshad Mehta's rise and fall in Sony LIV's *Scam 1992*. Gandhi captures Mehta's indomitable spirit with swagger. He channels his angst at the class divide in the financial markets but he also portrays his undoing by greed. Gandhi has done a considerable amount of experimental theatre in Gujarati since 2005 and that long internship will stand him in good stead as his star rises.

RASIKA DUGAL, 32

Mirzapur II

The graduate of Lady Shri Ram College for Women and Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) was never the cookie-cutter pretty young thing in Bollywood. She always stood out for her grace and gravitas, whether it was as Safia, Saadat Hasan Manto's wife in *Manto* (2018), or the young IPS probationer in *Delhi Crime* (2019). But 2020 was Dugal's breakout year with a brilliant return as the simmering Beena Tripathi in *Mirzapur II*, a nuanced performance as Lata's elder sister Savita in Mira Nair's addictive *A Suitable Boy*, as well as much needed comic relief in *Lootcase* and the short film, *Banana Bread*. With many memes as Beena Tripathi (including her love for Chinese food and sex), it was clear that Rasika Dugal had arrived.

UT STARS

DIVYENDU, 37
Mirzapur II

Mirzapur was written for Kaleen Bhaiya and Guddu Bhaiya so it is quite extraordinary that Divyendu's character, Munna, caught everyone's imagination. Somewhat of a local hero in Varanasi where the series was shot, the wannabe king of Mirzapur enjoyed another successful run in Alt Balaji's *Bicchoo Ka Khel* this year. It is not always easy to transition from the hero's best friend, a role the graduate of Kirori Mal College and FTII has played in numerous films such as *Pyaar Ka Punchnama* (2011), *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) and *Batti Gul Meter Chalu* (2018). Now much in demand, theactor symbolises the democratisation of talent spurred by streaming services.

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT, 40
Paatal Lok

Jaideep Ahlawat got noticed as Alia Bhat's mentor-spymaster in Meghana Gulzar's *Raazi* in 2018. But as the loser police officer Hathi Ram Chaudhary, he slumped his shoulders, crunched his face, and copied his father's hesitant walk in Amazon Prime's ugly-beautiful *Paatal Lok*. The 40-year-old actor remains philosophical about his slow-burn success and advises newcomers to keep working on their craft. Ahlawat had initially wanted to join the Army but couldn't make it. Their loss. Bollywood's gain.

SANJAY KAPOOR, 55
The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives

The youngest brother of Boney and Anil Kapoor was once the oldest newcomer in Bollywood with a much talked about debut with Tabu in *Prem* (1995), one of the many Hindi movies abandoned by Shekhar Kapur. Unsuccessful as a lead actor, despite starring with Madhuri Dixit in the hit movie, *Raja* (1995), Sanjay Kapoor appeared on and off on TV and in movies until he got noticed for his portrayal of a cuckolded husband in *Lust Stories* (2018). But the 55-year-old was the best thing in Netflix's *The Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* as a homespun Punjabi husband who has to contend with his very Anglicised and glamorous wife and daughter. 'A legend with an espresso obsession' is how comedian Anuvab Pal describes him. He should know. He was the show's script consultant for the husbands. ■

THE **FIERY** AND THE **FRAGILE**

By AKHIL SOOD

GETTY IMAGES

FOLKLORE
by Taylor Swift

There's a tragedy to pop music that's camouflaged in the flashing lights. The pop star—young, bright-eyed—enters an unforgiving world that will consume them from the inside in exchange for adoration and dollars. And then it'll toss them aside. It's a manufactured, fatalistic reality. *Folklore*, Taylor Swift's surprise album, announced and delivered to hungry Swifties in less than a day with no fanfare, no hoopla punctures that bitter world in some small way. She's always tried to retain her own narrative and pop culture arc; this one is another step in that direction. In *Folklore*, Swift finds delight in music itself, writing fictional love stories over simplistic, folksy, indie-rock/pop arrangements. It's delicate in a way that's not contrived—calling it understated would be a step too far, but there's no grand spectacle. For once, it's not a *whole thing*. This is a warm, thoughtful collection for a rainy day.

BE UP A HELLO
by Squarepusher

Electro-pandemonium, simply put. Glorious nonsense. Squarepusher, aka Tom Jenkinson, put out, like, his 100th album in 2020, and it's just as hysterical and violent as anything he's done. *Be up a Hello* is both futuristic and a throwback: it recalls a lot of elements that defined the Intelligent Dance Music (IDM) revolution of the '90s; at the same time it marches resolutely forward. Frantic, twitchy breakbeats send the music in weird directions, occasionally pulled back by optimism as the synths open up large landscapes and slow things down. This is the kind of music you feel and not hear, that you experience physically—a hallmark of so much of the exciting work that's come out from the radical IDM/electronic/avant-garde record label Warp.

FETCH THE BOLT CUTTERS
by Fiona Apple

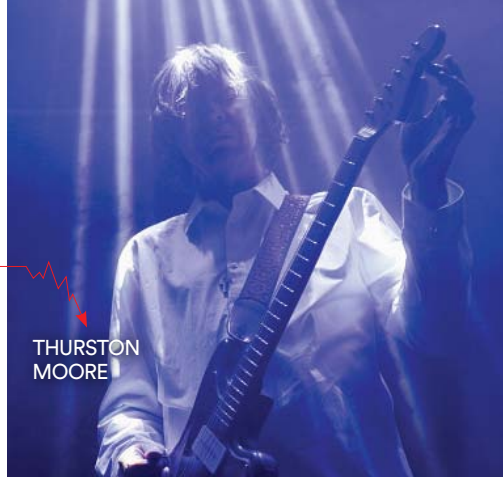
With the way we consume music today, there's a tendency to fetishise the past and ignore the remarkable work that's being put out as we breathe. So let's underline the fact that *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* is a breath-taking release. Fiona Apple kept a low profile for almost a decade—basically disappeared—only to return with what will perhaps be a career-defining album. She uses her colossal voice to swivel incessantly between fiery and fragile, as pianos, her yappy dogs, and a clangy percussion-heavy base act as a springboard for her flights of fancy. Her words remain as charming, self-aware, hilarious, honest, confessional, confrontational, caustic as ever. And at their heart lies a vulnerability, a voice with a lot to say, torn between saying too much and saying too little.

RTJ4
by Run the Jewels

In an America roiled by the killing of George Floyd and the widespread protests against police brutality and racism that followed, in June 2020, Run the Jewels dropped *RTJ4*, a couple of days early for free. Run the Jewels have always spoken about building a better world. They've never pulled their punches, and *RTJ4* is no different, as Killer Mike and El-P (and a whole host of guests, including the forever elusive Zack De La Rocha of Rage Against the Machine) rap about injustice and inequality. Less importantly perhaps, but the songs are absolute bangers. Their sense of groove, of bounce gives life, in vivid technicolour, to their biting lyricism. It's angry and hard-hitting, but it's also fun. Set the world on fire and have a blast doing it.

BY THE FIRE
by Thurston Moore

A luminous, wandering progression of chords, delivered in trademark chunky strums on album opener 'Hashish' is preceded by an arrangement and vocal melody that recalls his old band Sonic Youth. Ah, familiarity. Not long after, the record flips. *By the Fire* is the latest in a frankly astonishing career spanning 30-something years with art-rock heroes Sonic Youth, as well as a significant number of solo releases and collaborations. And, if anything, his resolve to mess around, jam endlessly and experiment with the sonic extremities of noisy alternative guitar music is only strengthening. There's an ever-present spirit of rebellion in Moore's music, one that allows him to wander off in 12-minute-long instrumental odysseys on the guitar, only to bring the song back to a mournful vocal melody so that it all makes sense. This isn't avant-garde music to marvel at from a distance; there's an emotional core to the operation.



ZEROZEROZERO
by Mogwai

Nobody does gentle terror quite like Mogwai. Add a touch of sadness, a generous sprinkle of melancholy, and you have the soundtrack to the year we've just lived inside. You also, in this case, have the musical score to *ZeroZeroZero*, an Amazon Prime Video crime drama. The album relies on restrained strings and synths, underpinned by ephemeral, brittle, occasionally sinister melodies on the keys and piano. Take 'Space Annual': it's not even 90 seconds, setting off with sparkling plink-plonks, taking tentative steps forward with each passing cycle. And before it even registers fully, it's gone.

IN THE DEAD, DEAD WOOD
by Vennart

Mike Vennart has honed an ability to write these technically challenging, complex alt-rock pieces which don't *feel* complex. They're intricately crafted without sounding so—it's only once you dive deep that you realise all the little bits floating around. Enjoyable frills—flashy bits—tend to decorate the core sound. These are pop songs dressed in progressive attire, a secret that comes to light only once you try to tap your foot to the songs—and fail. *In the Dead, Dead Wood*—Vennart's latest in a string of solo releases—ditches some of the frills in favour of an inward gaze, focusing on vocal melodies, set against walls of rousing guitar fuzz.

THE ASCENSION
by Sufjan Stevens

The Ascension provides an insight into Sufjan Stevens' often pained, oblique rumination about himself, god, religion, faith, life, love. He puts himself in an unfiltered way at the centre. Here, he retains a spirit of exploration in his song writing and arranging, using clumpy, flip-flopping electronic drum grooves placed underneath giant, swelling textural melodies. His lush, breathy voice and approach to writing melody mean the whole thing often melds into one whopping sonic blob.

COLOR THEORY
by Soccer Mommy

Shimmering, colourful guitar plucks and reverbs form a deceptive backdrop to Sophie Allison's words of pain and anguish on Soccer Mommy's latest. Lyrically, vocally, the record has an air of gloom to it, as Allison lays it all bare—grief, depression, self-harm, bitter comedy in emptiness. No subject is too precious on the painfully honest and reflective *Color Theory*.

MAY OUR CHAMBERS BE FULL
by Emma Ruth Rundle and Thou

Everything here is so grand and messy. Emma Ruth Rundle is a prolific and versatile songwriter, getting together for this record with American doomsters Thou to create a seven-song journey at the precipice of accessibility and eclecticism. Each element, even the screeching black-metal-esque vocals, is buried deep into the sludgy mix. ■

RAJEEV MASAND

The 'AK' Effect

Lootera director **Vikramaditya Motwane**'s experimental project *AK vs AK*, which stars **Anil Kapoor** and **Anurag Kashyap** as themselves in a story that teeters delicately between fact and fiction, will begin streaming on Netflix next week. The film's plot sees Anurag kidnap Anil's daughter **Sonam** and film the *Ram Lakhan* star's search for his sprog over the course of a single night across Mumbai.

Few might remember that a version of this same film was originally offered to—and shot with **Shahid Kapoor**—but production reportedly halted after only a few days in 2015. According to insiders, Shahid realised he did not share Vikram's vision and asked to be let off the project. Vikram reveals that he revived the project when he imagined Anil Kapoor in it. A new version of the script was banged out and the project was offered to Anil, who said yes. "You get to a place in your life and your career when you want to take bold chances. I didn't have a moment's hesitation," Anil reveals. Vikram, however, admits he gave Anil the script "and then I ran off." When it came to convincing his kids Sonam and **Harshvardhan** to appear in it (as themselves), Anil says he left it to Vikram. "I didn't want to be held responsible if the project didn't turn out the way we hoped for it to. So I didn't want to ask them to do it for me. They had to *want* to do it if they were going to."

Eventually, both Harsh and Sonam were in and their mum, **Sunita**, famously media-shy and intensely private, wouldn't so much as listen to the script. "Harsh asked her if she'd do a small cameo. She said there was no chance in the world," Anil remembers. His elder brother **Boney** does show up, and Anil jokes that it was the most stressful day of the film shooting with Boney "because he makes up his own lines and keeps changing them in every take".

Cross-Border Project

According to the Bollywood grapevine, **Sanjay Leela Bhansali** is in advanced talks with Netflix to produce a lavishly mounted limited series based on his passion project *Heera Mandi*. It is no secret that the *Devdas* director has been fascinated with the subject for some years now; he flirted with the idea of helming a feature film—a love story—set around the titular red-light district in pre-Partition Pakistan but never got around to it—until now.

Sources are saying the show has been greenlit by the streamer, even as a script is being whipped into shape. Bhansali is currently finishing *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, which is reportedly a 'female gangster film' that stars **Alia Bhatt**. He will move on to *Heera Mandi* following that, but there is some talk that he may not direct the series himself. Bhansali could serve as the creative brain behind the show (and he will produce it) but it will likely be helmed by a director of his choice. Sources are saying Bhansali has already discussed the project with **Deepika Padukone** but nothing is locked yet.

Hot Right Now

Burning up at the moment, certainly as far as her popularity with producers goes, is **Kriti Sanon**. She has signed three big films in quick succession, getting everyone in Bollywood to sit up and take note of her. Currently filming a 'middle-class drama' opposite **Rajkummar Rao** in Shimla that is bankrolled by her *Raabta* and *Luka Chuppi* producer **Dinesh Vijan**, Kriti reportedly beat out a clutch of other young promising actresses to land the lead opposite Telugu superstar **Prabhas** in *Tanhaji* director **Om Raut**'s ambitious saga *Adipurush*.

Kriti will also star opposite **Tiger Shroff** again in *Heropanti 2*. Her third biggie is *Bachchan Pandey* opposite **Akshay Kumar**.

Film trade sources are saying it is the actress' solid work ethic and her pleasant manner that endears her to every unit she works with. Plus unlike **Alia**, **Deepika**, **Taapsee** and others who're seeking out female-driven projects for the most part, Kriti is happy to star in films where the hero has to do the bulk of the heavy lifting. ■

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