

# NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE

11 JANUARY 2021 / ₹50

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# OPEN



THE LEADERSHIP TEST

THE END OF THE AMERICAN SCREAM

INCONVENIENT HISTORIES

LOVE IN THE TIME OF COVID

SEX AND THE PANDEMIC

LIPSTICK ON THE MASK

EPICS AND COVID METAPHORS

A TALE OF THREE ACTORS

EYES WIDE OPEN

A PORTRAIT OF PROTEST

GRIEF AND TRAUMA LITERATURE

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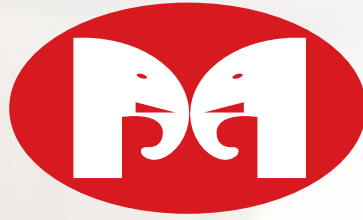
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THE JOKE IS ON US

FICTION

DHARMA FOREST  
BY KEERTHIK  
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## [ SHOOTING STARS

Their pictures tell a bigger story. Raul Irani (left) and Ashish Sharma



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They make what you see and read a beautiful experience. (Clockwise from top left) Jyoti K Singh, Saurabh Singh, Veer Pal Singh, Anup Banerjee and Sharad Tailang



## WEB OF EXCELLENCE]

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NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE

# REVELATIONS



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



## EDITOR'S NOTE



BY S PRASANNARAJAN

**I**t was different for Daniel Defoe in the 17th century London. “We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practised since. But such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation, as they do now,” he wrote in *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Information overwhelms us as we struggle to leave the Plague Year behind and step into a new year, our hope still clouded by fear. Information, when it comes in multitudes, puts a clause in the best of scenarios we wish for the year after the plague. Unlike Defoe, we read and listen and, in the end, allow scepticism to foreshadow knowledge, optimism to be tempered with doubt.

A passage to the new is marked by uncertainties only science can name.

Let's begin with the brighter side. Science has kept pace with the virus whose nastiness we are yet to fully comprehend. Usually, a vaccine comes along after the worst has passed. Now there are many, of varying scientific ancestry. They come at a time when the new information about the mutating virus—desperate for receptive host bodies—has already panicked the world. The speed and urgency with which the vaccine has arrived shows what's possible in a world different from Defoe's: our determination to overcome is as strong as the persistence of the virus. The mysteries of life are explained by philosophers in abstractions that take us to further mysteries; science demystifies them to useful information that we can manage and control. As we look back with dread, and anticipate a bearable tomorrow, we realise that it's knowledge that sustains life. That's no small consolation.

Still, we take hope in moderation. Why is it that many continue to frown upon science—and all of them are not necessarily idiots? Why is it that knowledge doesn't always spawn trust? Is it that a lack of trust is a libertarian position, an expression of freedom in a world of mutual dependencies that compromise on individuality? Trust is an attitude virtuous societies can't do without, and—don't we know?—virtue is the most required item in a pandemic world. Virtue has been monopolised by the kind of liberal radicals now known as progressives. Virtue, or its clashing definitions, has not united the world in the grip of a pandemic. It has made popular response to the pandemic a fragmented political statement. It is the politicisation of virtue that has contributed, more than anything else, to the trust deficit.

Take the image of Joe Biden, the next president of America, getting his Covid vaccine. This is what leadership looks like, his vice president-elect, Kamala Harris, tweeted along with the photograph. Getting a vaccine jab, president-elect or not, in another time, would have been a private matter, and not an abiding image of leadership. No longer. Everything has changed, from the idea of leadership (Narcissus as media victim) to the authenticity of expertise (science as elitist conspiracy), during the four years of Donald Trump's performative presidency. Today's vaccine-scepticism is a logical extension of anti-maskism and lockdown ideologies. This scepticism owes a great deal to the power struggle between political leadership and expertise. Trump's America may have institutionalised the struggle, but, in varying degrees, it continues to influence popular response to the expert advice on Covid-19 elsewhere as well. In America, racial politics and ideological blood-lust may have made the response louder; elsewhere, India included, it's more an instinctive reaction to the urgency with which modern science intervenes for our lives. Some are more frightened than relieved by the science of new vaccines. Trust is too human to be gained by the miracles of knowledge alone.

That's where the leader steps in. How leaders win popular trust could be a science in itself. The most popular of them gain it by making it seem that they expect nothing in return. The textbook dictator expects complete submission, and claims full ownership of the popular mind. The dictator legitimised by manipulated institutions of democracy—a familiar type that goes with the tag 'populist' today—enforces the politics of trust. A pandemic makes the enforced idyll of public trust look real, for there's nothing more useful for a populist autocrat than a threatened nation. The state rearmed is a prerequisite for standing up to the enemy, which, this time, is the virus. So trust the leader who has declared war on the pathogen. (Yes, when it comes to illness, as Susan Sontag has famously argued in her essay, the metaphor is drawn from war. Elsewhere in this issue, Arshia Sattar returns to our epics to show us that there are other kinder ways to narrate a pandemic.) When we look back, we realise that few even from legitimate democracies scored high on the trust quotient. There were still some who deemphasised the omnipotent "I" and refused to be scientific revisionists—and believed in the honesty of a conversationalist rather than in the shrillness of a liberator. Their victory is worth toasting.

Arguments about our responses and remedies are unlikely to come to a close with the year, and, maybe, when we are too exhausted to carry on, we may seek each other. As Anne Applebaum writes in her new book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, "no political victory is ever permanent, no definition of 'the nation' is guaranteed to last, and no elite of any kind, whether so-called 'populist' or so-called 'liberal' or so-called 'aristocratic,' rules forever." In the relativism of life, our unshared fear is the only constant. More than the protectors of the Threatened Nation, it's the Unsettled Me that's more receptive to ideas and attitudes that keep us alive, and aware—even if with a dash of doubt. We are in it together—that's what we used to say. In our separateness, and from our designated zones of aloneness, we have found the common cause of staying safe—and formed the fraternity of the living as another year beckons with its own mysteries.

Happy reading. Happy holidays. ■

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**A MAHARATNA PSU**



NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE [ ESSAY



# WE HAVE DONE IT OURSELVES

In praise of cooperative leadership



BY SHASHI THAROOR



**W**hen the editor asked me to write on leadership in the global context in our pandemic-afflicted world, I felt a certain dismay. We are living in an era where our

societies are increasingly becoming fractured, where questions of identity and ideology appear to be driving us further away from each other—and at a time when the vacuum created by the absence of a leadership that can once again help us achieve the collective aims of unity and consensus is being felt across all aspects of our daily lives.

It started with a backlash against globalisation that took two forms: economic and cultural.

The economic backlash was straightforward. The poor and the unemployed in the developed world began to feel that they had no stake in the globalised system, and demanded to know why their governments' policies benefited people in faraway lands like China and India with what used to be *their* jobs. They wanted to reduce the growing inequality in every 'developed' economy and go back to the security of older, more familiar economic ways, in which each generation assumed they would earn more and live better than their parents did.

The cultural backlash derived from the same resentment but expressed itself in a different arena: the political denunciation of global trade led to hostility towards foreigners, as more and more people sought the comforts of traditional identity and ways of life. Rage was expressed against what the writer Keerthik Sasidharan called the 'alchemical brew served up in the name of progress—liberal politics, theologies of social emancipation, technocrats, trade agreements, multiculturalism'. Animated often by bitter working-class and lower-middle class resentment of global elites (for the masses have adopted, or been persuaded to adopt, a narrative of their victimhood at the hands of such elites), this translated into a rejection of the entire brew—cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and secularism—in the name of cultural rootedness, religious or ethnic identity and nationalist authenticity.

Political leaders were quick to seize the opportunity to tap

into both kinds of backlash against globalisation. Leaders like Donald Trump, who rose to the presidency of the US on slogans of “America First” and “Make America Great Again”; Boris Johnson, who took his nation out of the European Union (EU) on a wave of xenophobic populism; Russia’s Vladimir Putin, who has presided over the resurgence of Russian nationalism after the shambolic collapse of the Soviet Union; Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Narendra Modi of India, who successfully persuaded their voters that they were more authentic embodiments of their nations than the allegedly rootless secular cosmopolitans they sought to displace; and a host of others—from Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil to Viktor Orbán of Hungary—who combined nationalist fervour with a determined articulation of popular prejudices, all restored nationalism to its place as the default model of national self-definition. (Collectively, they constitute what is oxymoronically seen as a ‘Nationalist International’.)

To be sure, these leaders were challenged by liberal intellectuals who lamented their defiance of the recent consensus that the world was moving ineluctably towards greater integration, where borders were becoming less relevant and sovereignty could be pooled for the benefit of humanity as a whole. But, given the emotional appeal of nationalism to most voters, these internationalists could not win elections as nationalists could.

Worryingly, these trends have only accelerated during the Covid pandemic, with borders becoming more rigid, communities marginalised and the notion of ‘us versus them’ attaining a primary importance, all aspects that I believe clearly demonstrate a certain crisis of leadership that is being experienced across the globe.

It seems increasingly likely that Covid-19 will inaugurate an era of deglobalisation. The signs are mounting that the world may embrace isolationism and protectionism in a far more enthusiastic way than prior to the outbreak, including in India.

The indications are evident. The pandemic has confirmed, for many, that in times of crisis, people rely on their governments to shield them; that global supply chains are vulnerable to disruption and are therefore unsustainable; and that dependence on foreign countries for essential goods (such as pharmaceuticals, or even the ingredients that go into making them) could be fatal. Nations tried aggressively to acquire medicines and corner vaccine supplies for their own people at the expense of each other. There is a rush to reset global

supply chains and raise trade barriers: the demand for more protectionism and ‘self-reliance’ (echoed in Modi’s call for *atma-nirbharta*), for bringing manufacturing and production value chains back home or at least closer to home, is mounting. A suspicion of international co-operation has grown into a rejection of multilateralism.

A typical case in point could be seen early into the pandemic in the attempts that were made to de-legitimise and discredit the World Health Organization (WHO), led by Donald Trump who accused the international organisation of covering up the initial outbreak in Wuhan and then pulled the US out of the body. But the fault was hardly the doing of the world body alone—let’s not forget that when WHO sought to send a team of experts to Wuhan to study the pandemic in the first week of January 2020, they were roundly rebuffed by a belligerent

China, which is exactly the way UN agencies have been set up by the big powers to be run. What happened must be seen as part of a graver crisis within the international system, whose work has been increasingly politicised by major powers that manipulate their actions and strip them of any capacity for independent leadership and autonomous action.

These global bodies were conceived in the hope that they could provide a platform that would bridge our divides and work towards the common good. Instead the crisis of leadership in the international order has been seen elsewhere, including within the EU, where European solidarity took a sharp blow when countries turned on each other in the race to shore up their supply chains (and even suspended the visa-free Schengen arrangement in favour of closing their borders).

The pandemic has undoubtedly served as a catalyst for the de-legitimation of institutions that were supposed to bring us together and has spurred the rise of a divisive brand of global leadership that has locked nations into a zero-sum battle against each other. Instead of strengthening the capacity of our global institutions to cope with a future crisis, the world’s reaction to the virus may well end up destroying the most fundamental feature it has exposed—the idea of our common humanity.

This external trend has been complemented by grave domestic developments in countries headed by strongmen that have used the pandemic as a cover to continue to further their designs of shoring up their own power and control in their respective nations. Notable examples can be found across the

**LEADERSHIP IN A COUNTRY LIKE OURS, AND IN A TIME LIKE THIS, SHOULD BE ANCHORED IN EMPATHY. WHERE THERE IS DISCONTENT, IT WILL BE NECESSARY FOR OUR LEADERS TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PROVOKES IT**



AP

globe: whether in Hungary, where Orbán used the excuse of the coronavirus pandemic to suspend parliament and rule by decree, or of Turkey, where Erdogan has consolidated power over a longer timeframe, alternating as president and prime minister, and rewritten the constitution to his taste.

A similar narrative has emerged in our own country, where the project to fundamentally redefine our democratic foundations has accelerated at a rapid pace during the pandemic. The virus has offered the ruling dispensation a fresh impetus to further dispense with democratic niceties, whether it is federalism, parliamentary oversight, the inalienable rights of individual citizens, the independent functioning of institutions that guard against the overreach of the executive, and the encouragement of a free and courageous media to shed light on the government's failures. All of these have gradually been hollowed out or subsumed by political developments conjured by a Government that deems only itself as capable of defining the national interest.

But as we saw first with widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, and now with the protesting farmers at the gates of the nation's capital, Indian democracy remains capable of fighting for its life, and the nationwide disgruntlement over the appalling treatment of the migrant workers trudging homeward after Modi's no-notice lockdown of 2020 and, more recently, the massive movement by farmers against the contentious new farm bills, have indicated a growing demand for a different kind of leadership altogether.

**A**s our deficiencies in the response to the pandemic have made abundantly clear, despite this movement towards a more fractured and insular global order, it nonetheless remains true that the future of leadership will and must be global. That may seem obvious enough to a former UN official like myself, but in fact it is also true for everyone—and even at a more trivial level. Take for instances the forces of globalisation that are irresistibly transforming the world, and the information technology revolution that brings to our breakfast tables, our living rooms, and increasingly our computers and our mobile phones, snippets of information and glimpses of events from every corner of the globe. These are forces of convergence, which have made the world one village, one market, one audience. Paradoxically, these have been accompanied by forces of divergence and disruption: acts of terrorism, the unmitigated spread of climate change, the cultural and economic backlash against the liberal world order, the assertion of cultural authenticity by populist leaders, civil and political strife, a burgeoning refugee crisis, not to mention a host of divisive developments from Trump to Brexit—all of these are factors that are pulling us away from each other.

Therefore, even as we accept a reality of an interconnected world and the need for leaders in the 21st century who can think beyond a reflexive assertion of national sovereignties, it seems clear to me that we also need leaders who are capable

of operating in a world of contradictory forces. The pandemic has been no respecter of borders, ethnicities, races or religions. It is clear that we can no longer afford the luxury of not thinking about the rest of the planet in anything we do; and that instead of attacking WHO we should have been strengthening it. Let us not forget that 9/11 made clear the old cliché about our global village—for it showed that a fire that starts in a remote dusty cave or tent in one corner of that village can melt the steel girders of the tallest skyscrapers at the other end of our global village. The same message has been echoed by the pandemic. If violence and rampant spread of a virus can be global so must the response be.

In today's world, even those countries that once felt insulated from external dangers—by wealth or strength or distance—now fully realise that the safety of people everywhere depends not only on local security forces, but also on guarding against terrorism; warding off the global spread of pandemic disease, of pollution, of illegal drugs and of weapons of mass destruction; and on promoting human rights, democracy and development. Jobs everywhere depend not only on local firms and factories, but on faraway markets for products and services, on licences and access from foreign governments, on an international environment that allows the free movement of goods and persons, and on international institutions that ensure stability—in short, on the international system. We are all interconnected. As someone once said about water pollution, we all live downstream. And that means we can simply no longer afford to be indifferent about our neighbours, however distant they may appear. Ignorance is not a shield; it is not even, any longer, an excuse. What does that mean for leaders in India?

To begin with, leadership in a country like ours, and in a time like this, should be anchored in empathy. And where there is discontent, it will be necessary for our leaders to understand what provokes it, and to find long-term answers that benefit the maximum number of people. Together we must now move beyond narrow concerns of national security (freedom from terror and attack) to a broader vision of human security (freedom from hunger and hopelessness)—of a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter; where democracy reigns, where people's creative and entrepreneurial energies are freed, where human rights are upheld and the environment is protected.

This also means that leadership in a chaotic democracy such as ours must be able to live with, welcome and embrace diversity. Leadership that emphasises division and difference, communal or caste identity, rather than seeking unity, is always inferior to leadership that seeks common ground and serves to unite people. A true leader builds bridges, not walls. I have long been a votary of Swami Vivekananda's principle of acceptance—not mere 'tolerance'—as the basis for mutual respect that alone guarantees harmonious co-existence.

But this also means that our leaders will need to get comfortable in operating within the innumerable paradoxes of our



society. The old joke about our country is that anything you say about India, the opposite is also true. We like to think of ourselves as an ancient civilisation but we are also a young republic; our IT experts stride confidently into the 21st century but much of our population seems to live in each of the other 20 centuries. Quite often the opposites co-exist quite cheerfully. One of my favourite images of India is from the Kumbha Mela, the big Hindu religious festival, of a naked sadhu, with matted hair, ash-smeared forehead and scraggly beard, *rudraksha mala* around his neck, for all the world a picture of timeless other-worldliness, chatting away on a cellphone.

THE PANDEMIC HAS UNDOUBTEDLY SERVED AS A CATALYST FOR THE DELEGITIMISATION OF INSTITUTIONS SUPPOSED TO BRING US TOGETHER AND SPURRED THE RISE OF A DIVISIVE GLOBAL LEADERSHIP THAT HAS LOCKED NATIONS INTO A ZERO-SUM BATTLE AGAINST EACH OTHER

**T**he brand of leadership is an equally important question to raise. In India today we are confronted nationally between two very different types of leadership: the hero on the white stallion with upraised sword, who says he understands all the problems, knows all the answers and will cut through every Gordian knot in the country for you (and we know how badly that has worked out so far in the last six-and-a-half years), versus a collective, consultative leadership based on building consensus, leveraging the experience, background and interests of very different people in an effort to arrive at a mutually acceptable set of solutions.

Of course, the latter must be careful not to tip over into weakness or indecisiveness either. One is reminded of Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, the 19th-century French politician who became the interior minister in the provisional government that was created in Paris after the Revolution of 1848, who looked out of his window during the tumultuous events of that time and saw a mob rushing past on the street. He promptly headed for the door, saying, “*Je suis leur chef, il fallait bien les suivre* (I am their leader, I should follow them).” That is one kind of leadership, but hardly the most effective or enduring kind. By and large a leader is expected to lead, even if, from time to time, a good leader also knows how to be a good follower.

But doing either blindly is a recipe for disaster. Leadership over a group or a movement also necessitates a capability of managing and rising over the baser instincts of the mob. What can start off as a principled movement can, along the way and at certain points, mean negotiating with the temptations of violence and anarchy, as we witnessed during isolated instances of looting and chaos during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in America. A successful leader must be capable of negotiating and guiding us to rise over these instincts through their own actions.

It is also important to note, however, that not everyone

wants to be a leader. In 2009, the Girl Scouts of America released the results of the largest-ever nationwide survey of young people in America on leadership. The survey, which covered a random sample of more than 4,000 children aged eight to 17, provides a rare in-depth look at how the next generation of voters is thinking about leadership, at least in America. There was good news and bad news. The good news was that four-fifths of those surveyed, of both sexes, said that women and men are equally qualified to lead. The bad news was that the survey confirmed

that a majority of children and youths in the US have little or no interest in attaining leadership roles when they become adults. Instead, they ranked ‘being a leader’ well behind other goals such as ‘fitting in’, ‘making a lot of money’ and ‘helping animals or the environment’.

In that same survey, for instance, the young people who were polled on leadership defined leaders not so much as decisive authority figures but as people who prize collaboration, stand up for their beliefs and values, and try to improve society. This echoes the sentiments first expressed in 6th century BCE by the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu, who wrote:

*Of the best rulers,  
The people only know that they exist;  
The next best they love and praise  
The next they fear;  
And the next they revile...  
But of the best, when their task is accomplished,  
their work done,  
The people all remark, “We have done it ourselves.”*

Co-operative leadership, which grants people not just stakes in but co-ownership of the leader’s triumphs, is, in other words, the name of the game. The most successful leaders, then and now, know that ensuring their objectives matters more than getting credit for fulfilling them, and that the most effective results are those of which the beneficiaries take ownership.

The Indian National Congress had a great slogan towards the latter stages of its 2014 campaign which did not deserve to be jettisoned in the wake of its calamitous failure in that election: ‘*Main nahin, hum*’. It’s not about one individual leader, but about all of us—we the people, in whose name leadership is sought to be exercised. That’s the only kind of leadership the world deserves as we stumble, masked and vaccinated, into the post-Covid world. ■

*Shashi Tharoor is a Member of Parliament and the author, most recently, of The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism*

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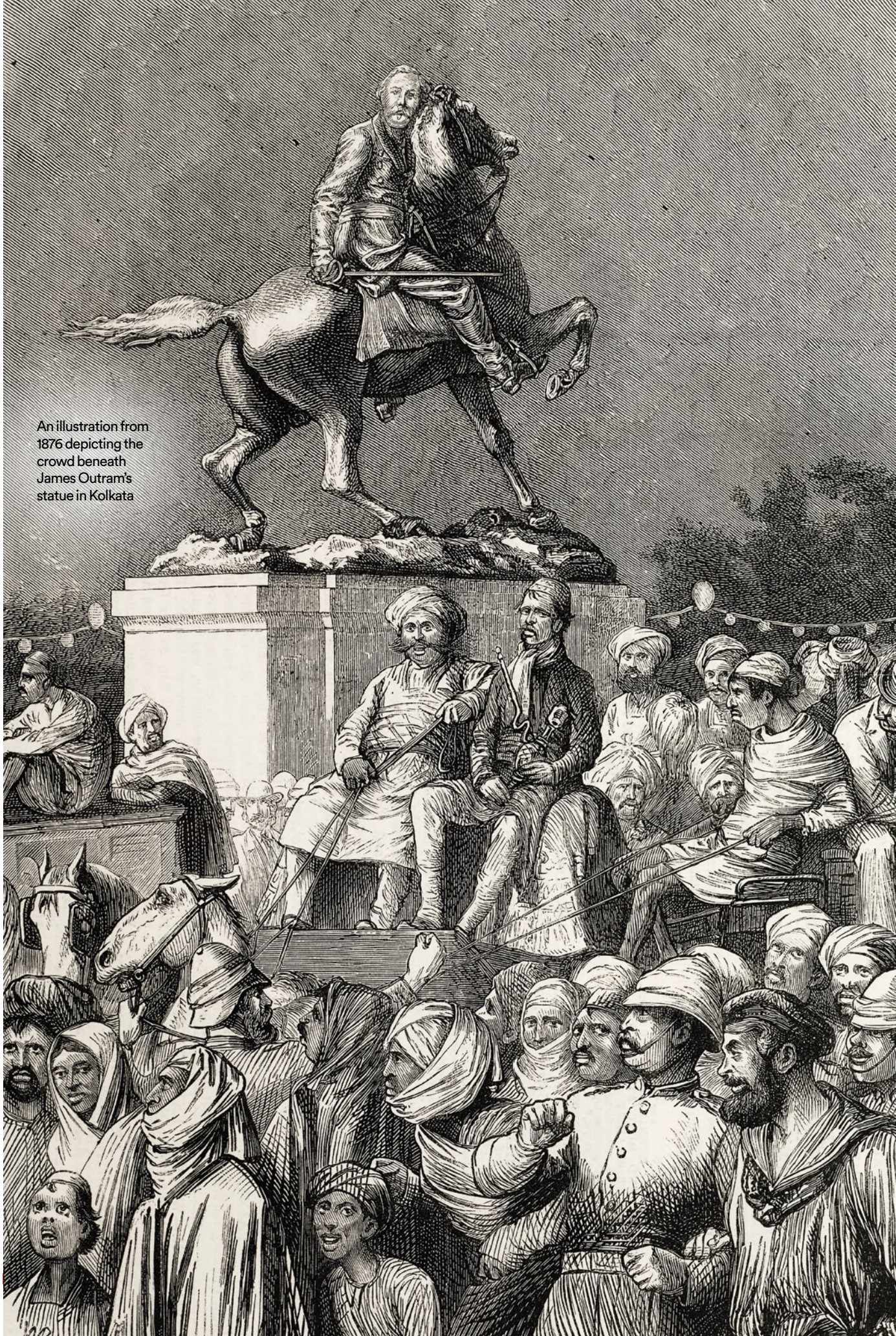
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An illustration from 1876 depicting the crowd beneath James Outram's statue in Kolkata





BY TCA RAGHAVAN



# CONVENIENT HISTORIES

Pandemic or not, the past is prologue

**F**or the past few months, perhaps since earlier, there has been a multiplicity of voices bemoaning or celebrating the erosion of multilateralism. A process initiated by the global financial crisis of 2008 was consolidated by the pandemic. Brexit, 'America First', countries turning inward, all appeared to mark different aspects of this process. Within this larger envelope are other smaller, but reinforcing, sub-processes: the maverick disruptive presidency of Donald Trump, the schisms within Europe, the geopolitical assertion of China, etcetera. The picture is of an epidemic consolidating global centrifugal trends that weaken a liberal international order that came into itself from the late 1980s with the end of the Cold War, reached its climax during the global war on terror and then started losing its momentum with the financial crisis. The subtext of this narrative, of course, is that while the protagonist of the liberal order—that is, the West—was riveted on the global war on terror, a more fundamental churning in the form of the rise of China as an alternative global hegemon passed unnoticed till it became, over the past decade, too large an elephant in the room to miss.

This narrative logic has both supporters and detractors alike. Like all linear narratives, it seeks to restore an explanatory framework on a vast range of random events and processes, greatly aided and abetted by hindsight. As Hegel said, the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk—meaning that wisdom comes

in hindsight, or even that by looking back, it is possible to decipher patterns and rhythms that would otherwise not be visible.

When we look back some years later will the *Zeitgeist*, or defining mood, of our times be this pandemic that currently engulfs us? Will the pandemic, in some distant future, be seen as the time when we reconciled ourselves to smaller closed worlds and universes and when our national borders and national economies acquired new values and meaning? Yet, the pandemic has also exposed a global moment in the true sense of the word. In every country and in every continent, the dominant narrative is singularly informed by the virus—how to keep safe, how to flatten the curve and, finally, when the vaccine will actually be available. A world united in its concerns, even if not in actions, is still a globalised world and possibly it will remain one even when the fog lifts.

Charles Rosenberg, a distinguished American historian of medicine, had once commented, "Disease does not exist until we have agreed that it does—by perceiving, naming and responding to it." If diseases are socially constructed, how do they interface with the rest of our everyday experience? Do they accumulate existing anxieties and sharpen existing conflicts or do they simply coexist, on parallel tracks, with existing realities? There are no easy answers and howsoever tempting it may be to identify it as such, the coronavirus pandemic is by no means the sole factor or agent of our current set of issues. Older faultlines and geopolitical conflicts—the Azeris vs the Armenians, the Greeks vs the Turks, the tensions of South Asia, the cauldron

of the South China Sea, US obsessions with Iran and Russia, amongst others, have continued to surface through the pandemic. In India itself, our portfolio of ‘legacy’ issues or the weight of our history and the consequential debates they generate—from the diet of the Harappans and the advent of the Aryans to the nature of the state in medieval India and the true causes of Mughal decline—stand and fall on their own, unrelated to and not influenced by the rest of our present condition. This is, of course, small consolation for those concerned about the polarisation such debates engender. Consolation, if that is the right word, in fact lies in the recognition that debates about the past are also a true mark of democracy and open societies.

How should we then address those parts of the past that we don’t particularly like? This is a perennial but inevitably inconclusive debate. Engrossed as we are by this debate in India, it is useful also to see such debates in larger contexts and in different times, if for no other reason than to remind ourselves of the temporality of our own times. Two largely unrelated sets of events illustrate this—the first in the US and the second in the UK, but really concerning India.

**I**n the second half of 2019, the *New York Times Magazine* came out with a number of articles that it collectively called ‘The 1619 Project’. The central thesis of this ‘project’ is that US history begins not from 1776, when as a colony it articulated a ‘Declaration of Independence’ from Great Britain, but rather from 1619 when the first batch of slaves arrived in Virginia. This was a change in emphasis and shift of nuance seeking to make slavery and racism the spine of US history: slavery was not just an original sin, the introduction to this series said, ‘it is the country’s very origin’.

Shifts of emphasis are common in history writing and this interpretation in itself could be accepted as such even by those who disagree with the principal contention. The most contentious part of the ‘1619 Project’ was however elsewhere and that was not so much a question of interpretation but of fact, or rather what is perceived as a fact by some and denied by others. The first essay in this series thus posited that in 1776, the Declaration of Independence and the war with Britain that followed—the cluster of events collectively termed the American Revolution—were *not* a battle for freedom from colonial rule. The origins of the demand for independence for the American colonies were because modern America’s founding fathers ‘wanted to protect

ALAMY



HOW THE CIVIL WAR IS REMEMBERED BECAME AN INTRINSIC AS EQUALLY OF THE ANTI-RACISM PROTESTS OF 2020. IN MORE SERIOUS. THUS GENERAL HENRY HAVELOCK

the institution of slavery’. The background to this, the argument went, was that as the abolitionist movement grew stronger in Britain, concerns grew among slave owners in the American colonies and the realisation crystallised that ‘independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue’. Thus the first 10 US presidents were all slaveholders and ‘some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy’. The US War of Independence in 1776 was not a battle for freedom but one of *unfreedom*.





PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

(Clockwise from top left): Statue of General Henry Havelock in Trafalgar Square, London; a toppled statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia, June 2; an engraving depicting the arrival of a Dutch ship with slaves in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619; John Trumbull's 19th century painting of America's Founding Fathers with the Declaration of Independence

debate extended into the national mainstream can be gauged by the fact that President Trump established, on November 2nd, a day before the presidential election, an 'Advisory 1776 Commission' to 'better enable arising generation to understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States in 1776 and, through this, form a more perfect union'. Why this commission is necessary is also spelt out in detail in the presidential order:

*'[I]n recent years, a series of polemics grounded in poor scholarship has vilified our Founders and our founding. Despite the virtues and accomplishments of this Nation, many students are now taught in school to hate their own country, and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes, but rather villains. This radicalized view of American history lacks perspective, obscures virtues, twists motives, ignores or distorts facts, and magnifies flaws, resulting in truth being concealed and history disfigured. Failing to identify, challenge, and correct this distorted perspective could fray and ultimately erase the bonds that knit our country and culture together.'*

The vigorous debate on the '1619 Project' thus went beyond the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* and in 2020 had firmly morphed with all the conflicts associated with the Trump presidency in an election year as equally with street-level protests against everyday racism and Black-white faultlines. These protests saw levels of participation that evoked comparisons with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and of the anti-Vietnam protests of the 1960s and 1970s.

The perceived regressions from a liberal democracy, the catalyst provided by incidents such as the killing of George Floyd by the police, focused also on one particular sensitive area of North American history—the Civil War. How the Civil War is remembered and what its legacy is for the US today became for many an intrinsic part of the debate generated by the '1619 Project' as equally of the anti-racism protests of mid-2020. All these varied issues were animated by the question of statues, monuments and memorials honouring confederate leaders and generals who had led the Southern

## PART OF THE DEBATE GENERATED BY THE '1619 PROJECT' BRITAIN, MYTH-MAKING WAS BOTH MORE SUSTAINED AND HAS MADE A STRONG COMEBACK IN HIS AFTERLIFE

That it was the *New York Times* articulating and standing by this view gave to the '1619 Project' too much gravitas to be dismissed as a loony-fringe thesis. Indeed, the project itself was viewed by its protagonists as a pedagogical instrument for revising the history taught in US schools. Although this thesis came from a journalist, it quickly became also a debate with historians and among historians. The lines consequently drawn give to the outsider an insight into just how divisive an issue race and the history of race relations continue to be in the US. How much this



states in the Civil War so that a slave-based agrarian order could be preserved.

The Southern states were defeated after a long and bloody conflict leading to the emancipation from slavery of African-Americans in the South. The Confederate memorials and statues are, therefore, at first glance an oddity of history—the losing side commemorating its defeat? But reality is more complex, since these statues, plaques and obelisks reflected not so much the Civil War as changed power equations in the century that followed. The Civil War and the defeat of the secessionist Southern states were followed by a brief period termed the ‘Reconstruction’ which was one of a real effort to secure social progress and political rights for the recently freed slaves. The underlying objective reality was the presence of the US army—in effect a victorious army of occupation—but this could only be a finite entity as war exhaustion and fatigue would inevitably take their toll. By 1877, the emancipation period had ended with the withdrawal of the US army and a white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan-led counter-emancipation followed. This is known as the ‘Jim Crow’ phase of American history—repression and segregation of Blacks, denial to them of voting and other political rights. All of these actions were duly backed by Supreme Court rulings based on a ‘separate but equal’ legal doctrine. This Jim Crow phase extended well into the 1950s and was seriously challenged only by the Civil Rights movement.

**T**he Jim Crow phase was the period when many of the monuments and memorials to the Confederate political leaders and generals came up. These were a glorification and romanticisation of the cause for which the war was fought and simultaneously an effort to rewrite its history. The Civil War was thus projected not so much as a defence of slavery but a gallant effort to preserve a different way of life by way of the rights of the constituent states of the US.

These issues have dominated historians’ debates about the causes of the US Civil War since. Statues and monuments, by constructing an alternative narrative of the Civil War, had also as their principal purpose political mobilisation for the intimidation of African-Americans. This ensured that a largely anachronistic system in the Southern states continued in a country in which the narratives of freedom and democracy otherwise made up so much of American self-esteem and occupied so large a space of its external and domestic policy.

In many senses then, 2020 may well look in the future as one long historical moment for the US as a whole—the failure of the most advanced scientific nation in the world to understand a pandemic, a narcissistic and regressive presidency that enjoyed, and still does, considerable support, the anti-racism protests, and a geopolitical churn with many outside wondering about future US capacities for leadership of a liberal international order. To many, the ‘1619 Project’ debate represented the spirit of this moment: it is a vindication of US strength that its

foundation myths can be so strongly questioned and contested; but it is also a symptom of US weakness that it could be so blind for so long to its societal frailties.

In Britain, because it was the greatest imperial power of modern history, myth-making was both more sustained and more serious an exercise than elsewhere. To the first-time visitor Britain may still appear as a vast imperial heritage site of both contestation and celebration. Both motives also suggest, at least to discerning critics, a sense either of bewilderment or of entitlement more about the present than the past.

Thus General Henry Havelock has made a strong comeback in his afterlife, if only because his name had to be effaced. An island named after him in the Andamans chain was renamed by the Government as Swaraj island in December 2018 to recall Subhas Chandra Bose’s liberation of British-held Indian territory in December 1943. Havelock was associated with many of the milestones of British expansion in India in the first half of the 19th century. The Anglo-Burmese War, the Afghan War, the Sikh Wars, all led to rapid career progression but it was the events of 1857 that catapulted Havelock into the imperial myth-making project. The ‘Relief of Lucknow’ made him into the ‘hero of Lucknow’, as a force led by him was able to capture the city but only to be trapped inside it when the Indians counterattacked. He died, not in battle but of dysentery, before the second siege could be broken by superior force, but there was enough drama in the besiegers becoming the besieged for Havelock to pass into history. Alfred Tennyson, possibly Britain’s best-known poet laureate, eulogised Havelock into a statue at London’s Trafalgar Square:

*All on a sudden the garrison utter a jubilant shout,  
Havelock’s glorious Highlanders answer with conquering cheers,  
Sick from the hospital echo them, women and children come out,  
Bless the wholesome white faces of Havelock’s good fusiliers,  
Kissing the war-hardened hand of the Highlander wet with their  
tears!  
Dance to the pibroch!—saved! we are saved!—is it you? is it you?  
Saved by the valour of Havelock, saved by the blessing of Heaven!*

If Havelock’s statue remains largely undisturbed at Trafalgar Square, he has faced more resistance in the London borough of Southall. Here, part of a road named after him, which also has a large Gurudwara, has recently been renamed Guru Nanak Road. This Southall renaming came about because of local pressures from the Indian diaspora that has concentrated itself there for decades. But its larger context is provided by one of the most intense debates about memory, history and myth-making that the Anglo-Saxon world has seen in recent times. This happened, as noted above, primarily in the US amidst a pandemic, amidst a geopolitical churn that questions US supremacy and finally amidst a presidency that has both polarised and also forced the US to introspect deeply. But this debate is worth pausing over in India also, if only to revisit a long forgotten Calcutta controversy.

Tennyson in his ‘The Relief of Lucknow’ had, along with Havelock and the ‘white faces’ of his ‘good fusiliers’, also eulogised and evoked the courage of another popular imperial hero of the time:



(Left) Celebrations in London as the UK left the EU, January 31; US President Donald Trump in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 24

*Hark cannonade, fusillade! is it true  
what was told by the scout,  
Outram and Havelock breaking their  
way through the fell mutineers?  
Surely the pibroch of Europe is ringing  
again in our ears!*

James Outram spent four decades in India with a career that spanned the First Afghan War, the conquest of Sindh and finally the repression of the Indian revolt of 1857. Possibly at one time his empire-wide reputation may have been even greater than Havelock's, for one find roads, towns, *ghats* and parks bearing Outram's name not just in the UK or in India and Pakistan but also in Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. After the events of 1857 and his subsequent retirement, a fine equestrian statue of his was commissioned from John Henry Foley, a leading British sculptor, and was finally erected in Park Street in Calcutta in the mid-1870s.

Post-1947, what was to be done with such statues, and there were hundreds across India, was much debated. These were, of course, deeply symbolic and political questions but there was also a practical aspect. Leaving them in the present locations would mean they would remain targets for desecration—with decolonisation they were without a supportive public narrative.

In 1951, we find the now aged historian Jadunath Sarkar, who in his prime was well known as an admirer of British rule, intervening in this debate after he found 'a Bengali Babu encouraging some Muslim street boys to fling their shoes at the statue of Outram and when there was a hit he clapped his hands and rewarded them with some paisa'. For Sarkar 'this kind of patriotic valour' was 'cheap and so safe at this distance of time'. The larger issue that bothered him was that 'We cannot obliterate the past life story of our people by merely drawing the wet sponge over one page of our history'. But there was also a specific issue in that Outram was a 'test case': He had lived his entire life in India; spent years amongst the Bhils in Khandesh and, by raising a disciplined military contingent from amongst them, given them a new self-esteem; he had objected to the British conquest of Sind as morally unjustifiable; and in many other ways was sympathetic to Indians. Sarkar's point was that while there were British officials in India for whom 'all men

**A PROCESS INITIATED BY THE FINANCIAL CRISIS WAS CONSOLIDATED BY THE PANDEMIC. BREXIT, 'AMERICA FIRST', ALL APPEARED TO MARK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THIS PROCESS. THE PICTURE IS OF AN EPIDEMIC CONSOLIDATING GLOBAL CENTRIFUGAL TRENDS**

would feel repugnance', it is but 'a curious type of patriotism to aver that the statue of all foreigners, merely because they are foreigners, are hateful to the patriotic Indian age'. Thus the statue of a man like Outram should be 'publicly honoured' as a 'noble example held constantly before their children to contemplate and imitate'.

Sarkar was asked to join a government committee to advise on what was to be done with the numerous statues of British officials and soldiers that adorned Calcutta then. He first refused but then agreed to join at the special request of the then chief minister, Bidhan Chandra Roy, to place

before the committee his own point of view that statues being of historical interest should be left as they were. With the passage of time it is possible to see clearly now that Sarkar was using too fine or thin a brush for the broad canvas that was being painted upon in the early years of freedom. Outram's statue, like many others, were relocated to the Victoria Memorial where they remain.

Outram's name, however, continues in many places in India, including in the capital city, as indeed does Havelock's. Their persistence is largely perhaps only on account of inertia but these anachronistic remnants are useful to remind us that we are a product of our past troubles as much as of our present ones, and some traces of these divisions will live on with us. The present moment, when things appear so fragile because of a viral disease still largely without a cure, when the future appears therefore even farther away, even at this moment, the past remains with us. Simple but deeply symbolic acts of renaming and removal, or the contestation of such renaming and removal, are reminders that history becomes what it is not because of what happened once but because that happening continues up to our own times. ■

TCA Raghavan is a former diplomat and currently Director General, Indian Council of World Affairs. His latest book, *History Men: Jadunath Sarkar, G.S. Sardesai, Raghunath Singh and Their Quest for India's Past*, was published earlier this year.

Views are personal





# Women Empowerment Key to UP Govt Policies

**W**omen play a key role in strengthening the dynamism of human civilisation. Uttar Pradesh, as the cradle of Indian civilisation, has had a glorious history of women playing a stellar role in evolution of the spirit of development. That tradition is now being upheld and strengthened by the resolve of the Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath.

Respect for women is the standard on the basis of which civilisations are studied. With this firm belief, the Uttar Pradesh Government has regarded women empowerment as the key to its policies. The urgency and sensibility for women's empowerment is ingrained in the State Government's policies in all fields.

Among the first measures the Government initiated after taking office in 2017 was a state-wide campaign to control eve-teasing in public places. The move gained instant and widespread support from all walks of life. Since then, several steps have been taken to provide support, respect, help and partnership to women in key areas of development.

In October, the State Government launched the ambitious second phase of its women empowerment campaign, termed Mission Shakti. In this phase, the focus is more on enforcement of measures to protect, provide dignity, respect and self-reliance to women. All the departments concerned are working

in a convergence model to ensure their participation and results. The Mission Shakti will continue for the next six months till the 'Chaitra Navratri' in April.

## MISSION MODE REFLECTS URGENCY

The mission mode is an indication of the seriousness of the State Government on this issue. The Mission Shakti became operational on the first day of Navratri in October, in keeping with the traditional obeisance to Mother Goddess during Navratri.

In addition to Government departments, other sections of society such as self-help groups, voluntary



organisations, teachers and other volunteers are participating in Mission Shakti. It is an important step towards the empowerment of women and eradication of crimes against them. The Chief Minister envisions a state where women are treated with respect and the campaign intends to raise awareness among people regarding the problems faced by women in different fields of society. The first stage of Mission Shakti intends to combat challenges that prevent the empowerment and safety of women.

Women symbolise strength and are worshipped in India and their respect is a part of our culture. It is now important is that the new generation is made aware of this aspect of our culture. Creating an environment for women that is free of fear is the objective that propels this Mission.

### **WOMEN HELPDESK IN EVERY POLICE STATION**

As part of the State Government's commitment towards safety, security and honour of women, it has been decided that every police station in

Uttar Pradesh will soon have a separate Women Help Desk to ensure that women do not face any difficulty in getting help in a police station. It is a very strong and effective measure in helping women who find it uncomfortable to visit a police station in case of need. At least two women constables have been deputed on these special desks in all the 1535 police stations in the state.

The Chief Minister has also issued instructions that in addition to the women help desks, women police personnel will also be deployed at the police stations to register complaints of women and assist them.

Police officials have also been told to personally visit the site of any crime against women and children and ensure timely investigation. Besides, women and girls would be educated about self-defence techniques during Mission Shakti, and the district magistrates have been told to ensure that the Mission is effectively implemented.

Some months ago, the State Government had installed Pink Booths on important roads in many cities, and made arrangements to drop single women safely home at night.

### **PINK PATROLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

As part of the 'Safe City' project, 250 female police personnel have been deployed in Lucknow as 'Pink Patrol' inculcating the spirit of empowerment among women in the city. These new officers have been appointed after a rigorous training procedure which has prepared them to tackle various on-ground situations. The Pink Patrol is also authorised with the power to take immediate action on the cases of molestation and crime against women.

In the first phase of this program, about 100 two-wheelers and 10 vans have been put into service in Lucknow. This Pink Patrol will operate in the places that have been identified by Lucknow police as hotspots. Very soon, similar Pink





In order to make the response on '112' more friendly and easily understandable, arrangement has been made to respond in the dialect in which a call is made. For instance, the response on '112' is now available in Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Braj and Bundeli dialects. This has made communication much easier.

Arrangement has been made to provide facility to women for taking them to their destination if they have no one to accompany them in night hours. This service to provide police escort to women was launched in December last, and it is a milestone in the State Government's efforts to create a safe and secure environment for women.

All over the state, as many as 1574 anti-eve teasing squads have been constituted and are operational. These special squads are deputed in public places, near educational institutions, markets and shopping areas. They provide immediate assistance in case of any incident of eve-teasing.

### THE HUMAN FACE

The lockdown period in the state was a time of distress and discomfort for people because of the rising spread of Covid. But this period saw an entirely different and human face of the police force. The police force came to the rescue of people, especially women, who were in need of help of any kind. There were instances when the police reached in right time to the help of lonely, elderly women in need of medical help, food or other essential items. The police also provided help to people who were stuck in different places because of the lockdown.

Police personnel played a role in explaining the need for following the lockdown guidelines, and in many

Patrol units will start operating in other districts such as Kanpur, Agra, Gorakhpur, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Meerut, Noida, Ghaziabad and Moradabad. Women patrolling units can also be deployed at night in case of emergencies.

The force will be directly connected to the nearest police station with the Women Helpline number 1090, and 112, the emergency helpline number. They will further be integrated with control rooms so that additional and assistive police force can be notified and dispatched promptly if required.

A 'Pink' bus service has also been launched especially for women travellers. These buses are equipped with a panic button which can be used by women in case of any complaint. The message will be picked up by the nearest 112 Police Van and help would reach the complainant within a short time.

### FOCUS ON RIGHT POLICING

The response time of the police in case of any complaint by women matters most in ensuring quick action regardless of the place and nature of the complaint. The State Government has gone to great lengths to put in place a system where not only the police respond quickly or within minutes of receiving a call or message about an incident, but to despatch help to the place concerned from the nearest point.

The erstwhile Police emergency number 100 has now been changed to '112' and a large number of vehicles have been put on roads to respond to calls made on this number, especially by women. The number is also meant for Fire Service, Ambulance, and Disaster Relief. In fact, this number proved to be of great help to countless women and men during the recent months of lockdown because of the Covid pandemic.

places, they requested the people to do so, instead of being harsh. Such cases were reported from all over the state and the people expressed their heartfelt gratitude for the police.

The State Government has been giving special attention to training the police force in behaviour, inculcating a helpful attitude, and adopting a helpful approach towards people in distress.

### **PARTICIPATION OF ALL SECTIONS**

As many as 23 government departments are participants in Mission Shakti. These include Police, Women and Child Development, Home, Excise, Basic Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education, MSME, Social Welfare and Information Technology.

Several programmes on women's safety and empowerment have been organised at gram panchayats, schools, colleges and government offices apart from other places. These programmes include screening of short films, street plays, safety pledge, sensitization about women's laws and a public display of inspirational stories of women.

Posters have been put up at different schools, colleges, universities and other training centres and at panchayats, where women's involvement is in large numbers in urban as well as rural areas. Workshops are being organised to make women and children aware of the security measures to keep them safe and to sensitize them to speak out when they are wronged.

In a significant initiative, private cab operators have also been included in the campaign. In a phased programme, they are being sensitised on the need for safety of women.



In order to make women self-reliant, Mission Shakti also incorporates strengthening self-help groups. Such groups have been active in improving the financial condition of women by giving training and other inputs in agriculture, animal husbandry, dairy production and skill development. In many districts, such groups have become agents of change by involving women in different trades such as candle making, stationery items and stitching.

### **POSITIVE RESULTS REFLECT SINCERITY**

The measures taken by the State Government have led to an environment of security and confidence for women. Today, one can see women going to work or returning on public transport, on their own two-wheelers or other vehicles, venturing out for important work without any companion, and getting respect in public places. There has been a reduction in cases of public harassment of women and girl students.

Statistics speak for themselves. According to data collected by Women Powerline, in the nine months of the year 2020, 2.08 lakh complaints were registered there from January to September. Of these, 1.15 lakh complaints have been disposed of. It is significant to note that out of these complaints, 1.33 lakh complaints were related to

bullying or harassment on phone and cyber bullying.

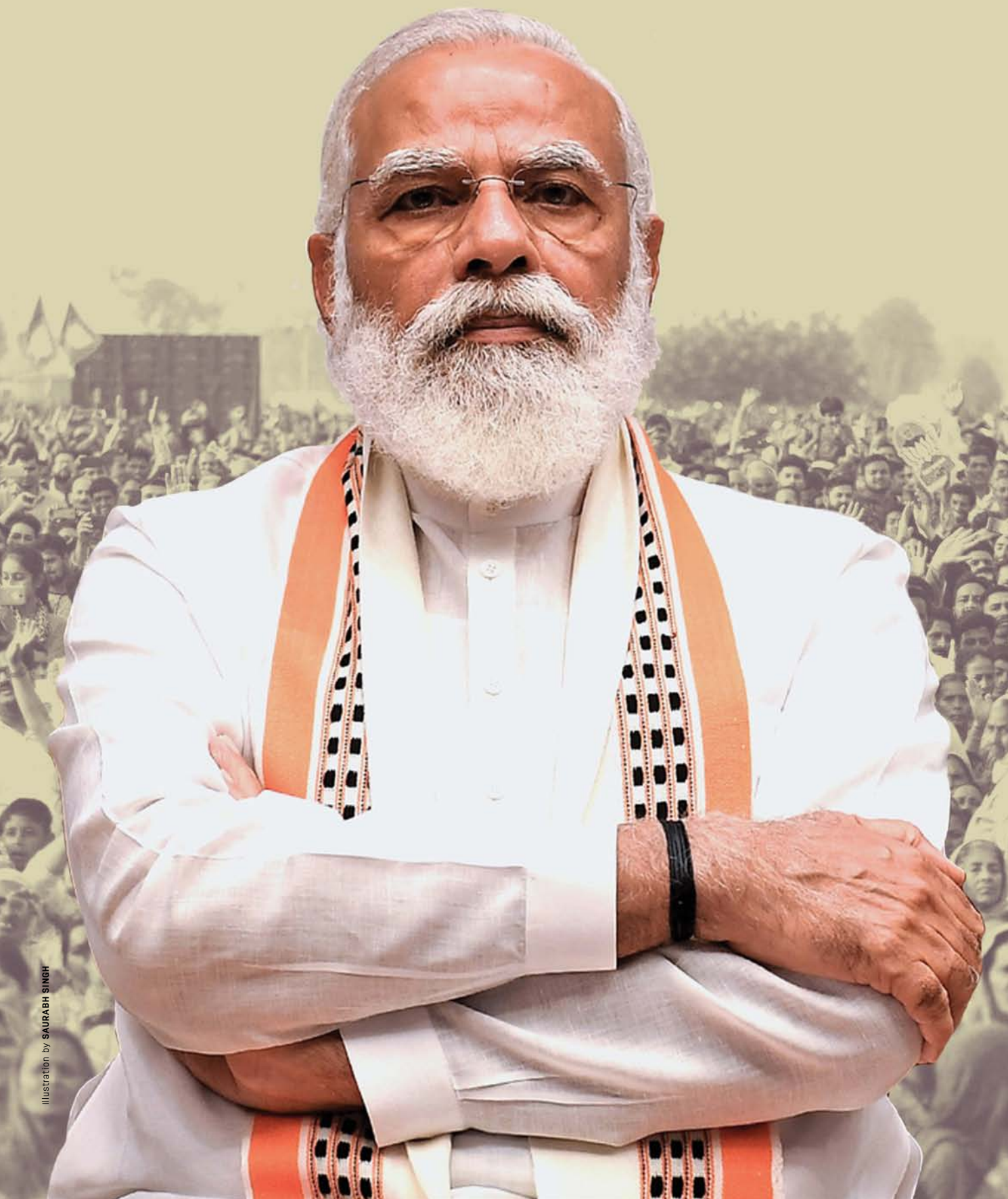
The State Government has launched a scheme to prevent female foeticide by encouraging people to give information about such instances anywhere in the state. Those providing correct information about possible female foeticide by way of conducting illegal sex determination tests and also illegal abortion, are given incentives. As a result of such close monitoring, the gender ratio in the state has been improving steadily.

According to Health Department statistics, the female / male ratio in the state in 2018-19 was 914/1000, as compared to 867/1000 in 2016-17.

There has been a steady increase in the number of convictions in cases of crime against women. Uttar Pradesh leads other states in terms of convictions of cases of murder, rape, POCSO Act, IT Act and looting that involves women victims. All these measures have made women feel much more confident and secure.

It needs to be remembered that how civilised a culture is, depends on how it treats women. Uttar Pradesh is now on the path of setting up a standard in safety and security of women, and having an establishment that is always responsive to complaints, and ensures speedy justice.







# FORGED IN FIRE

## Leadership lessons from Narendra Modi

**O**n March 24th, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the few heads of government who had announced a stringent nationwide lockdown, for 21 straight days. At a time when India was seething with anger at China for its aggression along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Modi took the decision to direct Indian consulates in China to approach factories that produce RT-PCR kits and load them on aircraft specially dispatched from New Delhi. Over the next several weeks, the prime minister followed a punishing schedule of considered decision-making, determined to win the battle against the spread of Covid-19. It was past midnight sometime in August when he chanced upon a report that showed the rising incidence of influenza-like cases in a remote district of Tripura. Modi dialled Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb in Agartala, without any hesitation about the late hour, and directed him to collect information urgently, hold a meeting with his administration and get back to him (Modi) with a detailed action-planned report by the next afternoon. Modi was relieved when the report that reached him the next day noted that the incidence of flu in the specified area was not uncommon during that time of the year. Deb added that efforts were being made on a war-footing by the local administration to contain its spread. That is a hectic pace that

Modi has kept up through the many weeks of lockdown and the unwavering battle against the spread of the coronavirus and its fatalities.

There's an interesting public health study published by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) on 'Lessons learned from the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic in Minneapolis and St Paul, Minnesota' that resonates, at multiple levels, with the measures taken by the Modi Government in the wake of the Covid pandemic, the biggest in a century. The study outlines in detail the struggles faced by civilians with timely but controversial decisions on public lockdown and mandatory mask usage imposed by medical health experts in both towns to pummel the spread and fatalities. Of particular concern was the reluctance to report infections due to imposed isolation and the larger inclination to focus on positive news during the sensitive time of war. As with Covid infections, there were many unknowns that both the civil administration and the medical fraternity had to battle. With comparatively limited progress in science, there were many imponderables—they believed it was a bacterial outbreak, for starters—to deal with urgently. And city administrators rose heroically and firmly to the task. The Spanish Flu (February 1918 to April 1920) killed more than 50 million people worldwide.

A century later, in India on March 24th, when Modi announced the politically risky decision to impose a country-wide lockdown, not much was known about the nature of



the spread of the virus. Governments of countries reacted with shock and awe initially but had to grudgingly accept later that this was a bold and imperative decision for a nation of over 1.3 billion people. In spite of a heads-up, many nations, including the UK, had not opted for a lockdown and had to pay a high price on public health consequently. Months down the line, India has just crossed the one crore mark in Covid infections, second only to the US in reported cases. But the recovery rate of infected patients is no longer in the red zone and in many states, many public amenities and private businesses have begun to reopen, signalling an upturn in the economy, albeit still with conditionalities and caution. There is a general consensus now—despite the campaign by Modi baiters—that the infections and fatalities could have been worse, many times over, had a stringent decision, however unpopular, not been taken by the head of the Government. This, on locking down public amenities, banning big gatherings and directing mandatory use of masks and physical distancing.

Tried and tested templates for leadership exist only in armchair leadership manuals and management textbooks. Real decisions are actually forged in the rough and tumble of life experiences, in the crucible of challenges, shaped by considered risk-taking, a big leap of faith, boldness and compassion. A case study only emerges as a final product after many improvisations, testing alternative approaches and after key decision-makers switch from one set of solutions to another, experimenting with tailored responses and drawing the most appropriate inferences from constantly unfolding events. The successful solutions eventually adopted are then identified with the decision-maker as his or her model.

In the past, whenever a large crisis hit the nation, the public tended to view the response of those in power and the policies unleashed with more than a little suspicion. Devoid of considered and informed policy initiatives, they either threw money at the problem in the hope that it would go away or drowned out critics and turned up the hallelujahs from acolytes. A noticeable trust deficit in the leadership persisted especially since the key decision-makers were regular shape shifters and breakers of promise. In September 2008, when the fourth-largest investment bank in the US, Lehman Brothers, filed for bankruptcy, the ripples hit several economies hard worldwide. This was a bigger crisis than that of Enron's or WorldCom's and its impact was felt in hundreds of development projects and rendered economies fragile. India's GDP growth took a hit and plunged to 6.2 per cent in 2008-2009 compared to the earlier 9.32 per

cent. ICICI was the bank most affected, thanks mostly to the exposure to Lehman Brothers by its UK arm. Investors and customers panicked in a big way here. Also affected were the State Bank of India (SBI) and the Punjab National Bank (PNB), although to a lesser extent. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor at the time, D Subba Rao, said they used both “conventional and unconventional methods” to minimise the negative impact. The Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR) and Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) were cut, foreign exchange liquidity was eased through liberal norms for External Commercial Borrowing (ECB) and Non-Resident Indian (NRI) inflows and interest rates were cut by an unprecedented 1 per cent. Also, lines of credit were extended to not just banks but mutual funds and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). The package was that of a rattled, clueless Government throwing money in barrels at the problem in the hope that it would go away. A huge waste of public money ensued, ballooning delinquency on the part of borrowers, with no attendant benefits to the people that they were actually meant for. It is entirely another matter that the acolytes the Government nurtured drowned out criticism and intimidated detractors into suspending all disbelief.

**W**ith his decisive end-March nationwide lockdown that came despite widespread misgivings, Modi punctured the concerted attempts by his critics—they mainly pointed to the exodus of distressed migrant workers from cities back to their villages—to showcase him as a populist inclined to edicts, buoyed by a hegemonic political belief. Their mockery of his use of a widely practised religious-cultural gesture (banging *thalis* and clapping hands in honour of medical workers at the forefront of the fight against Covid) to gain wide support for the “self-imposed *janata* curfew” as a trial run on people’s support for the 21-day lockdown that would follow was a key case in point. In the immutable narrative of the so-called progressives,

Modi was an authoritarian leader with strong impulses rooted in his upbringing in the Hindutva ideology of the Sangh Parivar. ‘Disdain drivers’ among Modi baiters had fuelled this narrative to argue that his decisions, whether on battling Covid or with demonetisation, were divorced from the considered public good and alienated from reasoned policy-making.

Modi’s leadership in the fight against the Wuhan-origin virus, however, highlighted how difficult it was to rigidly box the prime minister in the dogmatic constructs of his most strident

**IN RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC, MODI DISPLAYED A FIRM BELIEF IN OPTIMISING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE. NO LEADER PROVED AS ACUTELY AWARE THAT WHEN A NATION IS UP AGAINST A DANGEROUS ENEMY, STRATEGISING CANNOT BE LEFT TO HEALTH WORKERS OR ADMINISTRATORS ALONE**



Residents of a Mumbai locality clap their hands in praise of health workers, March 22

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critics, in both politics and civil society. Contrary to the contrived perception-engineering by his detractors that he heeded solely his own and often uninformed counsel, marginalising expert advice (Modi himself has publicly weighed in on the side of 'hard work' as opposed to Harvard), the prime minister widely consulted experts, public health policy-makers, virologists and medical personnel when the extent of the crisis first became clear, before deciding to ban flights to India. That ban came a whole week before even the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 officially a pandemic. Announcing a nationwide lockdown despite the risk of a tanking popularity rating staring him in the face could not have been easy. Not an easy task, by any means, given the size and demographic complexity of the subcontinent, multiplicity of opinions and a political class opposed to his every move. But Modi prevailed and went ahead with preparing the nation to face the problem despite the fact that a pandemic of this proportion had not been witnessed by the world or India in a century. And that the institutional experience of the country to tackle it was virtually nil. Resources were scarce, facilities were limited and everything, from hospital beds, oxygen cylinders, containment centres, ambulances, medical and paramedical

personnel, hazmat suits, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits, sanitisers, Covid combat literacy, to even face masks, appeared to be in short supply. The logistical challenges alone seemed insurmountable. In opting for a decisive response, the prime minister was ostensibly setting himself up for a Himalayan failure, a political self-goal.

But Modi did not wait. Unlike his counterparts, US President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro (both of whom tested positive for Covid-19 later), he did not shun advice. India was among the first countries to ban international flights, with a 24x7 monitoring system firmly in place. In the initial phase of the battle, he realised it was necessary to slow the spread of infection and did not balk at using innovative and imaginative ways to prepare citizens to face the problem by encouraging a voluntary, people-driven '*janata* lockdown'.

The period was used to fortify logistics and urgently ramp up facilities, PPE kits, ventilators, etcetera. Synchronising the logistics across India in an effort of this proportion, with a virus strain about which information was still nebulous, would be exhausting. In the second phase of governmental action, Modi harnessed trains and flights to methodically and expeditiously address the issue of essential commodity supply for



locked-in citizens, especially from the economically weaker sections. Trains transported grains to the entire country and while existing programmes on the Public Distribution System (PDS) were reinforced, newly tailored ones targeted them aggressively to the needy, even beyond the officially registered poor. Flights were pressed into service to evacuate Indian citizens stranded in other countries: students, business people, pilgrims and tourists. India was among the first to do this, even as desperate Pakistani citizens posted videos on the internet crying for urgent rescue from strict lockdowns in other countries. Further down the road, the Government would tailor programmes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, to help the poor tide over their hardship during the lockdown. Announced in March at a cost of Rs 1.7 lakh crore, it was later extended till November, into the Diwali-Chhat Puja period, at an additional cost of Rs 90,000 crore, to benefit over 80 crore of the poor, with the supply of five kilograms of rice or wheat and one kilogram of pulses for free per month, during the lockdown.

Modi's detractors pegged a bulk of their attacks to his policy-making during the Covid period by hyping the unprecedented exodus of thousands of jobless migrant workers—many, including the old and very young, were on foot or bicycles, braving police action and enforced state government detention and isolation in terrible conditions—from urban centres back home to their villages. Less than four months into the lockdown, Modi launched an employment scheme for migrant workers who returned to villages in their home states. The Rs 50,000 crore job scheme, the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan, was implemented on mission mode in 125 days across 116 districts in six states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha) that received the most number of returning migrant workers. The works covered rural housing for the poor, plantations, drinking water provision through the Jal Jeevan Mission, construction of panchayat *bhavans*, community toilets, rural roads and *mandis*, cattle sheds and Anganwadi Bhavans.

There is a tendency to tar all populist leaders with the same brush, but Modi adopted a course that was divorced from other populist leaders. Choosing to lead by example, he aggressively promoted the use of a face mask in public regularly by appearing fully masked on public television. At some events, he chose to use a *gamchha*, or a locally made cotton towel used all over rural India, to advertise the need for face mask of any sort to protect both oneself and others from Covid. In this, he was distinct from both Trump and Bolsonaro, both of whom had often scoffed at the 'fear mongering' over Covid and even ridiculed

the effectiveness of masks for protection against infection. Unlike them, Modi also chose to take firm control of decision-making centrally, instead of delegating responsibility in an uncoordinated mess to innumerable regional centres. Brazil's Bolsonaro, in studied contrast, had called the pandemic a "little flu" and maintained that the cost of a nationwide lockdown would be worse than the disease itself. In Mexico, where thousands had succumbed to the infection, President Andrés López Obrador was compelled to reactivate the economy even while infections were rapidly rising. In the US, by mid-November, a staggering 250,000 had died of Covid. In comparison, by end-

November, India, with a much bigger population, had only witnessed 1.33 lakh deaths due to Covid.

Thanks to proactive measures, as early as May this year, India had become the second-largest maker of PPE kits for medical and paramedical personnel on the frontlines, next only to China. From a situation of import, the Government quickly pulled out all stops to ensure that from only one lakh PPE kits per day, India moved to making a peak 2.06 lakh PPE kits daily. In January, it was importing 2.7 lakh PPE kits. By May, India was able to create a buffer stock of 16 lakh PPE kits, even exported 23 lakh more to the UK and some African nations. More than 600 companies had been lab-certified to make quality-tested PPE kits. Au-

tomakers were asked to make ventilators and many alcohol producers switched swiftly to making essential alcohol-based sanitisers. Thousands in home isolation, including self-help groups (SHGs), micro ventures and cooperative groups, started making affordable and disposable/non-disposable cloth masks even as it became clear that surgical masks were not imperative. Ventilator production was upped from a mere 2,500 in February to almost 6,000 by March. By August, 60,000 home-produced ventilators were part of government buys. By July, 18,000 ventilators had been supplied to government hospitals across the country. In comparison, the total Indian market for ventilators in 2019 was a mere 8,195.

**M**odi's determination to enable India to triumph in the battle against Covid persisted in the face of derision and attacks. The concerted disdain, harnessing every issue from the economic impact to joblessness to his efforts at earning the cooperation of an embattled citizenry by encouraging them to ring bells and light lamps to honour medical professionals, all of this peaked with the demonising of his motives and questioning of his intentions about the distress of migrant labourers.

**TRAINS TRANSPORTED GRAINS TO THE ENTIRE COUNTRY. FLIGHTS EVACUATED INDIAN CITIZENS STRANDED IN OTHER COUNTRIES. THE GOVERNMENT TAILORED PROGRAMMES, SUCH AS THE PRADHAN MANTRI GARIB KALYAN ANNA YOJANA, TO HELP THE POOR AT A COST OF RS 1.7 LAKH CRORE**

Responding swiftly to each trial thrown up by the war against Covid, Modi displayed a firm belief in optimising social capital and in the power of the collective. No leader of a government proved as acutely aware that when a nation is up against a dangerous enemy of unknown strength, the strategising cannot be left to health workers or administrators alone. It cannot be won without enlisting a majority of the citizenry.

By successfully doing this, he achieved three goals: One, he shored up the morale of the health professionals who were working against heavy odds. Both Italy and Spain faltered in the initial months because of lack of support for health professionals and had to send SOS messages to Cuba, which had beaten back infections significantly, as had Vietnam. Second, he raised their status to the level of soldiers on the border, giving them a central position in a critical national mission. Third, at a time when calls for defunding the police were peaking in the US, he heaped praise on the police for doing their duty in a time of crisis. This, despite widespread reports of police personnel indulging in overzealousness against lockdown violators. Modi knew that valorisation of the police force was imperative to keep law and order from disintegrating. His studied response was to only signal state governments to reopen economies when the danger on both infection count and fatalities was reduced. It was time then to switch the focus from protecting lives to protecting livelihoods. None of these decisions was universally supported or adhered to without question in a country where indifference to ordinary rules and resistance to following protocol were commonplace—and in a prolonged situation of dwindling incomes, job losses, and other attendant forms of distress. None of these was guaranteed to translate into a political super bonus. Yet, Modi persisted.

Among the toughest battles that Modi may have to fight in the context of Covid-19 will be its adverse impact on the economy, which contracted by 23.9 per cent in the first quarter of the fiscal year. Government data showed that all sectors of the economy, with the exception of agriculture, shrank in the first quarter. Economists have projected that India's economy may be among the worst hit by Covid, well up to 2025. Some estimates say that growth could drop to only 5 per cent from the 6 per cent prior to lockdown and over 7 per cent before the global financial crisis. The bad news on this front seemed unending. A Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) survey pegged India's GDP growth at (-)4.5 per cent for FY21, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) pegged that at a 4 per cent contraction and Moody's forecast an 11.5 per cent contraction in India's economic growth in FY21. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted

**WITH THE ECONOMY UNDER STRESS, MODI CHOSE TO TAKE MEASURED STEPS, REJECTING DEMANDS FOR A JUMBO RELIEF PACKAGE. HE PRIORITISED LAND, LABOUR, LIQUIDITY AND LAWS, MSMES, THE WORKING CLASS AND THE MIDDLE CLASS, FOR SPURRING GROWTH**

that GDP will shrink 10.3 per cent in the year till March 2021 as a consequence of the nationwide lockdown freezing all economic activity. A recent HSBC Holdings Plc study projected a 4.5 per cent potential growth over the next five years, lower than the 6.5 per cent before Covid hit the economy. An RBI paper worryingly pointed to a historic technical recession in Asia's third-largest economy.

But there are already indications of the shoots of economic recovery as activities gradually resume and a sharp rebound has been forecast by some economists. Automobile, real estate, horticulture and nurseries, online retail trade and

online education have all begun to show robust growth. None of the doomsaying by economists has, however, deterred Modi. Critics have been aggressively pushing for largescale measures to boost demand. Throwing money at the problem would be an easy, popular option. But the lessons learnt from the 2008 package have prompted Modi to reject these exhortations for jumbo relief measures. With the economy already under stress, Modi has chosen to take measured steps towards boosting recovery and growth and not give in to the loud chorus. He has prioritised focus on land, labour, liquidity and laws besides targeting cottage industries, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the working class and the middle class—in that order—for spurring growth. It is a leap of faith that he is confident will pay off handsomely for India, in terms of growth.

In her book *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times*, business historian Nancy Koehn chronicles the lives of five extraordinary people who found themselves at the centre of a crisis but battled turmoil, long odds and trials by fire to become stellar examples of determination and leadership. Abraham Lincoln, former US president, was shaped by the decisions he was compelled to make to keep the Union together despite the heavy death toll in the Civil War. Rachel Carson, marine biologist and nature writer who empowered the global environmental movement, quietly but firmly took on a powerful pesticide lobby with her path-breaking book *Silent Spring*. Talking about the protagonists and how battling crises shaped them, Koehn said, 'If you read their stories, you realise that part of what fuels each of them...is the mission. The goodness of what they're trying to do gives them the energy to take the next step. It's not like they wake up and are born with the genes of Jesus or that they've been endowed with a prophet's sense of purpose...' Narendra Modi could well fit that bill. In the crucible of his time in New Delhi, the leadership skills of India's prime minister have been forged by fire. ■

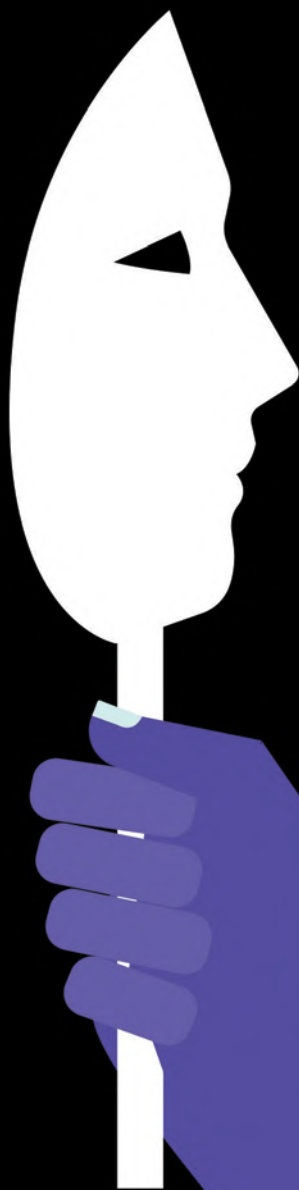


# I OF THE STORM

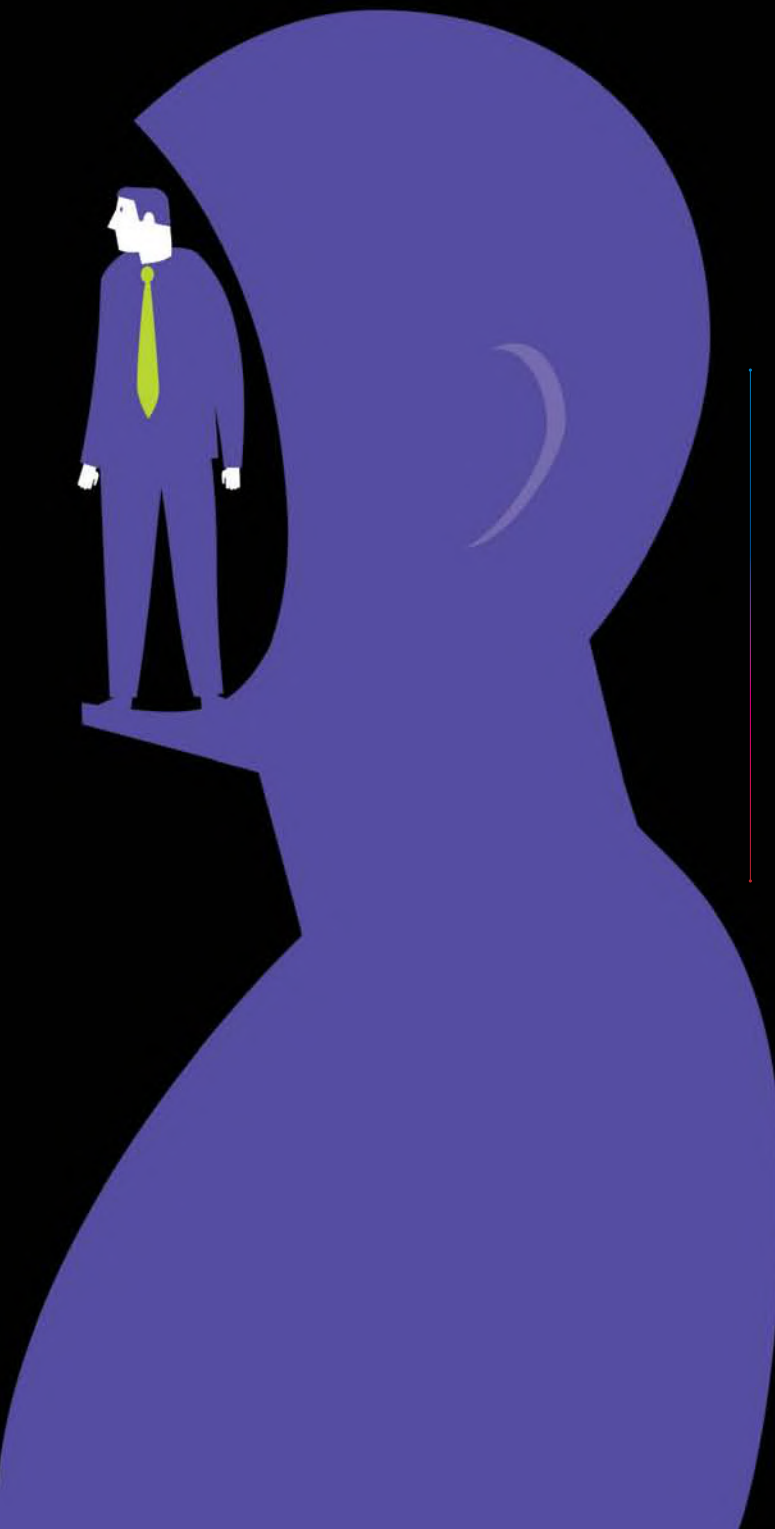
Getting a better view of ourselves, courtesy the coronavirus

**B**ecause the idea of I, or being, is intimately tied to non-existence, or death, which is a primary driver of consciousness in a pandemic, as the one that we are in the middle of, it is self-evident that both must go together. This is as it was since Indian civilisation began to do such ruminations. For instance, as far back as somewhere between 1000 BCE and 500 BCE, in the Katha Upanishad, the entity from whom Nachiketa—the young boy who wants to know the secret of what happens after death—seeks answers, is Yama, or death Himself. His question is whether death ends everything or is there something that follows. And Yama, while free with two earlier boons, is reluctant to share this particular knowledge and does so only after prodding. The answer he provides is not straightforward. Sidestepping whether death is final or not, he goes on an explanation about the nature of the self, or the one supposed to be dying. And rounds in to *Atman*, the super-consciousness pervading everything and which the human consciousness is part of. It is in that realisation that death is overcome. In fact, it is the only thing that is worth striving for because everything else in the material world is taking you away from that realisation. It is, according to Yama, a choice between the pleasant versus the good and whoever chooses the pleasant, the default option, is condemned to be chained to the cycle of suffering and rebirths. The I, Death therefore implies, is actually a Bigger I, and in that knowledge your own I no longer exists to die.

It is a tricky answer. There is really no way to verify it one way or the other. You have to take his word for it. But the Katha Upanishad is illustrative of Indian thought beginning to go into the realm of the spiritual. It is an advance of religion because what precedes the Upanishads, the Vedas, are mostly hymns



BY MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

A large, stylized purple silhouette of a human head in profile, facing left. Inside the head, a smaller silhouette of a man in a dark suit and a bright yellow tie stands on a small platform. The background is black.

asking for favours from gods. Those are straightforward negotiations. You want to win a war. Do a fire sacrifice and chant in precisely the way the Veda instructs. Or, if the pre-Upanishadic Vedic seers were present today, the answer to Covid-19 would be to again seek the intervention of Indra, Varuna, Agni or the myriad deities waiting only for human propitiation to fulfil their needs. It is after the Upanishadic age sets in, that the possibility of there being more to existence than divine bestowments appears. Or even that divine help might be unavailable. That there are ways to find meaning through looking at the internal landscape of our mind. It is in the exploration of the I.

There need not be only one such internal landscape in theory. The Upanishadic age was followed by the new bodies of thought, Jainism, Buddhism, etcetera. Consider how the Buddha framed the solution to the problem and came out with a diametrically opposite view. For in Buddhist thought, as you meditate deeper and deeper into the idea of I, eventually what you will encounter is not a Bigger I, not *Atman* or Brahman. Instead, what will be clear is *amata*, or emptiness. At the core of your I is nothing, says the Buddha, exactly opposite to what Yama averred. But set that quibble away for the moment, a lot seems to be the same. In recognising emptiness, your life is fulfilled. In recognising absolute fullness, your life is fulfilled. The promised end is the same. What is true to both is that the idea of the awareness of I is the starting point, the way out of suffering.

Think of the initial days of the lockdown. What defined your thoughts and actions had a lot to do with the prolonging of life. It is the elemental instinct of creation. The first line of the software code—‘you must live’—from which everything else follows line by line, species to species, generation to generation, until you have the dazzling array of life on earth.



It is what the virus, the progenitor to animate life, half-being-half-thing, somehow arrived at and then evolution took over until at its apogee stands man, resplendent in his achievements, but still as much hostage to that one line as Covid, the latest virus. Both of them combating each other precisely because of that first line. And, as often happens, both triumph. The difference, however, is that the virus does not know the game it is a part of. We are both unwitting in the arena but because human beings became conscious—I know I am—we know we are participants and so we strive to become better in the game and possibly even take it over. It is a wild near-impossible ambition but is there any doubt that the end of all medicine is immortality? Otherwise, why try to cure a disease or death? It is why at this moment in history, no sooner is a new virus in our midst than we are aware of it, than we can

sequence its genome and within a couple of months, have a vaccine ready to test it out. The entire world is put under lock and key to save the lives of a relative few, and that too the aged and the ailing. It is an ambition of the species not spelt out by a ruler or leader but arrived at through long experience at valuing not just life but all human lives as equally important.

**T**he question of how our consciousness meets disease is straightforward. You combat it with the arsenal human ingenuity has developed. However, some diseases remain cunning. When the individual is under threat, it is only him versus the disease. But a pandemic is different in that his safety is tied to the behaviour of everyone else. He is dependent on others to not increase the

WHEN THE INDIVIDUAL IS UNDER THREAT, IT IS ONLY HIM VERSUS THE DISEASE. BUT **A PANDEMIC IS DIFFERENT IN THAT HIS SAFETY IS TIED TO THE BEHAVIOUR OF EVERYONE ELSE**

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A Covid quarantine centre in New Delhi, July 9

danger of contracting the disease. Societies create rules that recognise this. The lockdown is that fallout. But to be tied thus to the rest of humanity also brings the suffering that all dependence entails. Your mental state is now hostage to whether the man who was walking next to you wore a mask correctly. You think the other person is the cause of your suffering. People who train themselves in self-observation by way of meditation are said to soon arrive at the understanding that you have barely any control over your mind, and since mind determines action, even a large part of your physical response is already predetermined. To expect perfect behaviour from the world is therefore impossible. To expect the world to do so only because it is your desire is even more foolish. Designing the perfect environment is an exercise in futility because you have no power over anything. Covid, itself, is an example of that. People have spent all their lives trying to create security and stability, and yet a totally new external force emerges and nothing is as it was in the past. Everything has been up-ended, from loss of livelihood to loss of people who mattered to you. Then what is it that you can at least monitor, if not control? Only yourself.

The pandemic also sabotaged the idea of who you are. Take successful sportsmen. They are constantly on tour, relentlessly competing and training. Their body is kept in peak form and the mind agile. When that is no longer true, what is it that remains? The hope that the present will end and the past equilibrium return. The longer the pandemic continues, the more that hope whittles away. This is not in sportsmen alone. All human beings are defined by a long list of rituals. The mind is a work in progress forever and this list keeps it feeding. In Buddhist thought, human beings should ordinarily have no I. It is created by ignorance of their own true nature, which is to not exist. But till then, the whole world lives in ignorance. The I is replenished every moment by the contents being poured into it. Take some of it away, and replacements are needed. Or the mind's response is to inflict suffering on itself to force you to bring back the earlier state. Take your office and commute away, and add the possibility of an imminent infection, what else can it do but fill with fear? Think of your state of mind in April after the lockdown shocked you into the danger of the disease. What did you feel most?

Once you had a handle on that fear, your mind began to explore. Were you surprised at the intensity with which you took up a new hobby? Or became so conscious about your health that you worked out until your endorphins shot through the roof? Or went on an eating binge that left you the fattest you ever were? Or began to micromanage the behaviour of your

children? Or rebelled against an aspect of your spouse that you found tolerable earlier? You might have been introduced to streaming shows and began to binge watch them. One of the things that became a trend during the lockdown was the baking of sourdough bread. Whoever you were, you built new routines. You had to complete the I that had been emasculated.

**O**ne day during the lockdown, I accidentally chanced upon online chess and played it. It was not a game I had particularly been interested in, but soon I had downloaded multiple apps and was spending hours on it. I began to look up online videos of chess tutorials, book openings and endgames. I was building a ritual. These new ones aren't necessarily salutary. They depend

on the innate character of the person. If one is prone to addictions, then that would be the new centre. If a wife-beater's propensities had been tempered by his other rituals, then the opportunity and inclination both came together for him. Domestic abuse cases went up during the lockdown. As the usual external objects reduce in number, the intensity with which you attach yourself to what is remaining increases. If your neighbour's voice is irritating you, it is probably because you only noticed it now as something discordant. It is something that mars your picture of what you deserve and how you should be. The voice didn't change, you did. If you want peace of mind, don't quarrel with your neighbour, at least appreciate what is happening within you.

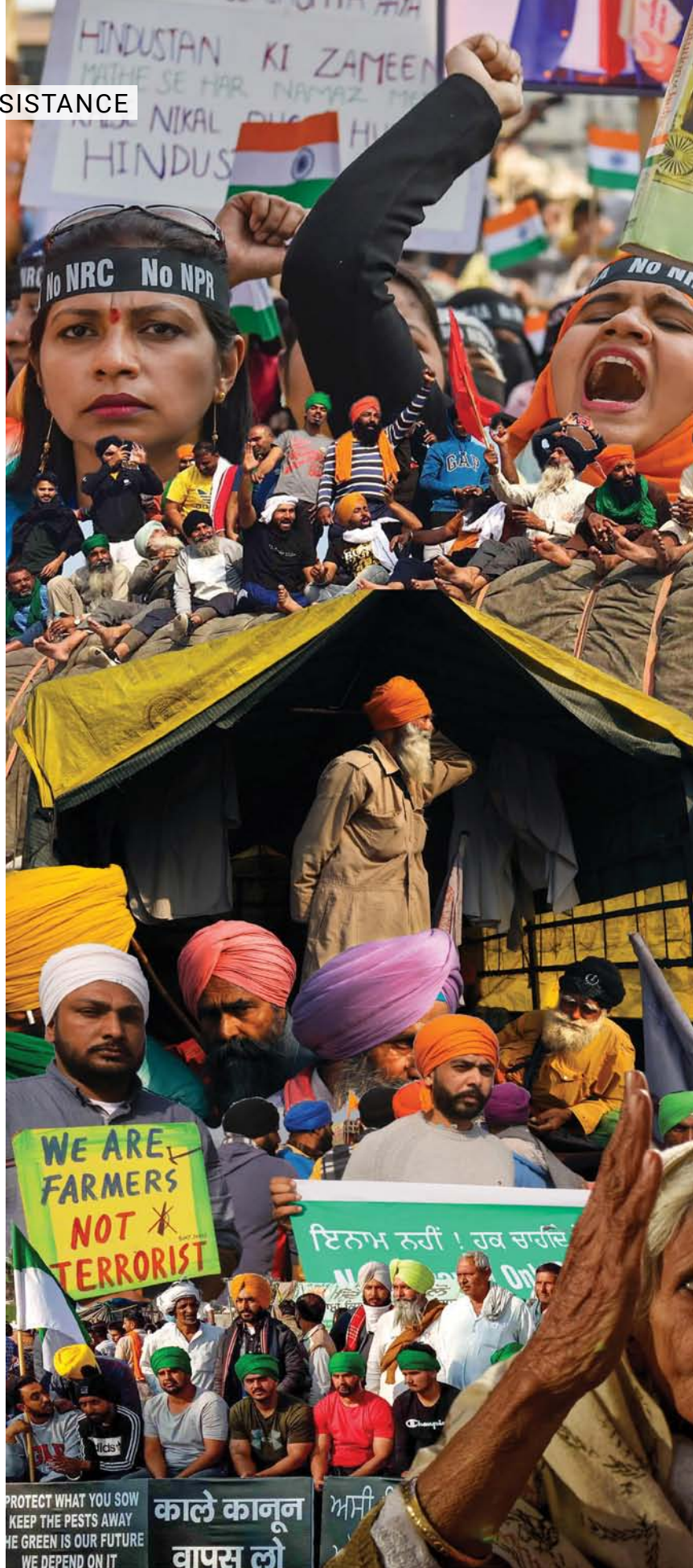
How is one to do so? By cultivating detachment, is one stock answer. Ramana Maharshi, one of the sages of the modern world, had a simple advice to those who asked him how to meditate. He said just go to the source of your thought. If you feel angry, ask who is feeling angry. If joyful, ask where is it emanating from, who is being joyful. It is a relentless 24x7 self-enquiry. It is also clever because it veers the mind away from the object to itself. The promise is that an eventual answer might shine through. You might arrive at the source and find the I you are looking for, emptiness or fullness. He himself suffered severe cancer before his death. It was a disease that was met with equanimity from the accounts of those near him. One of his disciples, SS Cohen, would write in 1949, five months before the Maharshi passed away: 'The body which is stricken by a most malignant disease, hacked on many occasions by the surgeon's knife, burnt by radium, and drugged by all sorts of powerful drugs, bears no trace of the agonising ordeal in the brilliance of its eyes or in the joyful expressions of its face.' If one is not beholden to the idea of I, who after all is feeling the pain? ■

IN RECOGNISING  
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RECOGNISING ABSOLUTE  
FULLNESS, YOUR LIFE IS  
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**PROMISED END IS THE**  
**SAME. WHAT IS TRUE TO**  
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**OF THE AWARENESS OF I IS**  
**THE STARTING POINT, THE**  
**WAY OUT OF SUFFERING**



# A PORTRAIT OF PROTEST

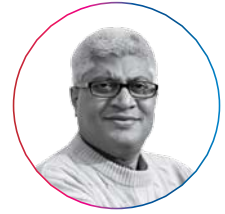
When subversion  
becomes a feature  
of democracy







BY SIDDHARTH SINGH



**I**f there is one feature that marks 2020, it has to be the idea of protest. From Black Lives Matter (BLM) in the US to worldwide attempts to ‘decolonise’ academia, there has been a virtual epidemic of protests globally. The context has varied but everywhere real or imagined grievances have erupted, challenging the established order. But at the end of the year, the ledger is more or less even. ‘Revolutionary instincts’ for all their rage have been halted in their tracks. Perhaps the epidemic played a role or perhaps the political conjuncture permitted only that much of change. India, too, had its share of upheaval.

When three ordinances dealing with agricultural reforms were passed in June, they attracted little notice. The tribe of political watchers made some sundry comments to the effect that the Narendra Modi Government was issuing too many ordinances, but that was about it. At that time there was no sign of the political tumult that was to engulf the National Capital Territory some months later. But when farmers from Punjab marched to Delhi in late November, pundits were quick to draw attention to another protest that had rocked Delhi late last year: the Shaheen Bagh protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that allegedly discriminates against Muslim citizens. By December, analysts were describing the farmers camping on the outskirts of Delhi as “Shaheen Bagh raised to the power n”. Suddenly, the Modi Government was facing the perfect political storm.

The economic aspect of the farmers’ agitation has been discussed threadbare by commentators: it is all about securing the privileges of a very small number of farmers across the country. That is a sufficiently small number to make collective action feasible: most of the farmers are from Punjab, most are Jat Sikhs, and speak the same language. The organisational costs involved in coordination are very low. But there is another, ignored, feature of the situation: this mass gathering of farmers has given an opportunity to activists and political entrepreneurs who have found it hard to do politics in an environment unfavourable to them. If it is a perfect storm for the Government, it is a perfect opportunity for activists and politically sidelined individuals.

Understanding the farmers’ protest and the Shaheen Bagh protest requires that one abandon the ‘reasons’—economic hardship and political discrimination based on religion—peddled by analysts and intellectuals. Economic hardship of



Punjab's farmers is a spurious argument that can be dismissed right away. The real reasons are to be found in the political instruments forged long ago in India and the conjunctures when they are used. Both point to a disquieting conclusion.

One bequest of Gandhian politics is the amorphous set of strategies it made available for action against authority. Forged in the decades of anti-colonial struggle, they are unique in the world for their ability to chip away at rule of law on the basis of 'moral force'. Satyagraha was designed to corner the British. In independent India, it mutated into a clutch of tactics that ranges from fasts geared to persuade the powers that be (*anshan*) all the way to the anarchical edge inherent in Satyagraha: *hartal*, *dharna*, *bandh* and all the combinations possible between them. Whatever be their impact on colonial politics—which is debatable—their effect in independent India was extremely limited in terms of outcomes. There is a good explanation for that. Short of an insurrection involving all constituent parts of Indian society in its caste, regional and religious elements, these tactics could never work at the national level. The organisational effort requires coordination and collective action on a scale that all but rules out this as a mode of political change in a country of sub-continental size. But this has not made the idea unfashionable.

There is, however, a twist, one that is not of Gandhian provenance but a leftist one. This was thought through and put into practice in the 1970s. The weakness of these tactics was not lost on those who thought in terms of 'extreme' methods to dislodge lawfully elected governments. What is possible with these methods is to paralyse the functioning of government by mass strikes, sit-ins on arterial roads and more imaginative tactics. These are lineal descendants of Gandhian non-cooperation. What Modi has been facing for the last one year are 'protests' based on this template. The farmers' 'protest' and the one against the CAA launched at Shaheen Bagh in December 2019 fit this pattern. These are, however, extra-constitutional tactics that have been dignified by the term 'protest'. In reality, they are a very different species of political action.

**S**tructurally, it is possible to envision what is going on from two different perspectives. One is to view the relative political position occupied by these actions in the range that encompasses coups, elections and revolutions. This is an ideological spectrum where coup lies on the extreme right, democracy stands in the centre and revolution rests on the extreme left. One can debate the merit of such labels but, historically, revolutions have mostly been a leftist phenomenon even if there are notable conservative exceptions like the religious revolution of 1979 in Iran. There can be other examples as well. A revolution, generally, is considered a mass affair with the 'people' as a category being its driving force. A coup, in contrast, is usually understood in its very restricted, military, sense of the expression. But if one extracts the kernel of the phenomenon—a sudden power grab—it is not necessarily an exclusively military

affair. It can be based on a variety of devices that paralyse the functioning of a government.

The other conception can be sketched in terms of sheer numbers involved in political change. Here, elections represent the edge with the highest level of mass participation. This is the side of democracy. As one progressively moves towards receding levels of participation, one first encounters revolution and then, finally, coup as forms of political change. Irrespective of the political colour of the change or its ideological hue, theorists of this form of politics—Carl Schmitt, Vladimir Lenin and Edward Luttwak—ruled out queues of people waiting calmly for their turn to deposit pieces of paper in a box.

Where do the farmers' protest and that against the CAA lie in these conceptions? If one parses the statements of the leaders and ideologues of these agitations—and the latter are mostly urban, Delhi and Mumbai-based—they imagine themselves as harbingers of some kind of revolution. Democracy is ruled out as this is a non-electoral mobilisation. One can quibble about the meaning of democracy and these ideologues and their supporters have expended considerable energy in expanding its definition as 'participation and mobilisation between elections'. But that is more or less meaningless as democracy, understood properly, is a method of representation: direct or indirect. Hence, seen from either perspective—in terms of numerical participation or in terms of the political location of what is being attempted—these protests veer closer to the coup corner. In any case, the backers of these protests don't care for labels: those are empty classifications for pettifogging analysts and journalists. What matters is the drive to power. If elections have failed them, let it be something else.

Historically, such methods have severely damaged democracy in India. By legitimising agitation as a means of political change, they have ensured that anarchy remains an ever-present threat in the midst of democracy. This has had pernicious consequences. It has built a constituency that permanently doubts democracy and, over time, has made strong Central governments ideologically acceptable. Those who rue the weakening of India's federal character ought to carefully examine the historical record and results of agitations and the lawlessness that accompanies them. It is erroneous to demonise 'strong leaders' and the Indian electorate when the actual blame ought to lie elsewhere.

In this context, it is instructive to take a hard look at two agitations in 1974—the Navnirman Andolan and the railway strike—which were couched in terms similar to the farmers' 'protest' and the one against CAA. Both agitations were carried out for securing 'people's interests', and those of students and railwaymen. At that time, too, there was a 'strong' leader who had a commanding majority in Parliament. The opposition then, as now, had lost traction with the Indian masses. A series of economic adversities—crop failure, external shocks, inflation—created the ground for agitations based on interests of groups like students. Thereafter, the political momentum led to a series of mistakes by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, culminating in the suspension of democracy. The historical

debate on the subject is polarised: it is fashionable to fully apportion blame for the destruction of Indian democracy to Indira Gandhi or wholly blame the agitations for the events that led to the proclamation of Emergency. That binary debate need not detain us: what needs to be appreciated is the danger inherent in agitation as a mode of political change.

Since 2014, when Narendra Modi became prime minister, it has been fashionable to speak of the danger he poses to democracy. Some analysts and intellectuals have also deployed the expression 'Emergency' in describing what they 'observe'. But it ought to be noted that, since 2014, Modi has not touched the struts that hold Indian democracy in place. Viewed dispassionately, the loss of institutional and political traction for opposition parties, intellectuals, NGOs ('civil society') has its roots in their own weakness and the changing ideological preferences of Indians. The farmers' protest and that against CAA are now viewed as the ideal opportunity to use agitation to dislodge Modi by paralysis. There is a danger here that these ideologues and leaders don't appreciate. And it is not the possibility of another 'Emergency'.

A direct comparison between Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi is best left to dispassionate and careful historians and there are none to be found in the ranks of those who analyse India. But two major, and vital, differences ought to be noted. One, by 1975, eight years had elapsed since the Congress lost steam at the state-level. Political scientists like Myron Weiner by then had noted the erosion in the party's organisational effectiveness. In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under Modi, Amit Shah and now JP Nadda, is on the ascendant, expanding into those zones where it had no presence before 2014. Politically, the prime minister is not in a weak position in any way. Two, if the hope among those championing the agitation is for Modi to make some political errors and thus give them more space, it is unlikely. Anyone who has bothered to observe his track record will see that he has gone from strength to strength in election after election. Why would he endanger the basis of his success? It is notable that he has won two General Elections back-to-back, forming

governments without the messy compromises that accompany coalition governments. It will defy political rationality that a leader at the peak of his popularity, backed by a well-oiled party machine and widespread ideological acceptability would break the system.

The danger is not another democratic breakdown but anarchy settling in as a feature of democracy in India. This will cloud India's economic and political future. Modi, as a confident leader, can and will—if pushed to a wall—weather this agitation using a strategy of attrition. But if he is unlikely to take steps that weaken democracy, the groundswell in favour of authoritarian government will rise. Unlike 1975 when democracy was felled by the stroke of an individual's

pen, this time the masses may reject it. That is the paradox of this so-called democratic upsurge on the outskirts of Delhi. This danger is not appreciated by the activists and political entrepreneurs who back the farmers. The danger to democracy comes from them and not an allegedly authoritarian leader. It is interesting to note that the meaning of 'Emergency' has now been twisted out of shape to even include the normal exercise of executive authority. It has parallels in the West where Donald Trump was described as a 'fascist' even if that term is meaningless when applied to an individual.

It is difficult to foresee what will happen to the farmers' agitation. There is every likelihood now

that they will continue to lay siege to Delhi in an attempt to paralyse Modi's Government into submission. But as noted earlier, applying agitation as a method to dislodge the Union Government is unlikely to work. It is also hard to see what the Government will do, now that the number of farmers on the outskirts of Delhi is in the thousands. A forcible eviction will be messy and violent. The time for that has passed. At the moment, the Government, its ministers and the BJP's machinery are on a communications drive to convince Indians that they are right politically and economically. This is a message that farmers from Punjab—pampered and made rotten to their core—don't want to listen to. Ultimately, this will be their undoing. And it should be. ■

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and  
Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar



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NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE [DISPATCH

# THE END OF THE AMERICAN SCREAM

A foreign correspondent's journal

US President Donald Trump  
on the White House lawns,  
Washington DC, December 12



BY JAMES ASTILL



**I**n any circumstances, chronicling American politics in 2020 was going to be a wild ride. Ever since his shock election in 2016, Donald Trump's presidency had been building up to his re-election fight. He filed his candidacy papers for the 2024 election before he was even sworn in as president. He began campaigning for it—with his trademark thunderous, thumping rallies—before he had even moved into the White House. Having no serious interest in governing, over the course of the previous three years of his presidency, Trump's every tweet and speech during the first three years of his presidency was aimed at stirring his fan base to boiling point (and getting its members to fill his campaign coffers in the process).

No modern American politician has constructed such a fierce personality cult as he has. The Republican Party has become a fervid Trump cult, bewildering for longtime observers of American politics to see. But of course, because the do-nothing president has mainly instilled this love in his followers by badmouthing his opponents, he stirred up Democrats in equal measure. His inauguration in 2016 may be best remembered for the millions of people who turned out to protest his misogyny—in America's biggest ever street protests at that time—the following day.

And Democrats' determination to “cough up the orange fur ball” that Trump represented to the body politic, in the memorable phrase of a Republican commentator, had only grown during the horror show of his presidency. I have covered dramatic and violent elections in many places, from Congo to West Bengal. But by any measure, America's two political tribes headed into 2020 on a hard collision course.



And yet, quite how hard it would prove to be could not have been imagined. We are all familiar with the sight of a government in meltdown: with the spiralling downward momentum, fed by indiscipline and self-doubt, that turns every slip-up into a raging scandal and ensures that just about everything that can go wrong, does go wrong. Well that was not just the Trump administration, but America in 2020.

Politically, the country has rarely been more turbulent. A year that started with only the third impeachment of a sitting president in 231 years would end with a losing president—for the first time—refusing to accept electoral defeat and seeking to undermine confidence in the very foundations of American democracy. As I write, over a month after the election and in the week that the electoral college met to rubber-stamp Joe Biden's victory, Trump was still claiming victory.

Some of his more deranged supporters, such as his former national security advisor Mike Flynn, a once revered army general, are urging him to declare martial law. Most Republican lawmakers have either urged Trump to fight on or refused to congratulate Biden on his unambiguous win. A legal attempt to overthrow the election results in the decisive battleground states—including Georgia and Pennsylvania—was launched by the Republican attorney-general of Texas and co-signed by 19 other Republican state attorneys-general and 127 Republican members of the House of Representatives. Is the party of Lincoln still committed to democracy? It is at least worth asking.

**A**nd then there was the meta-disaster: Covid-19. It needn't have played into America's political war—except by giving Trump an opportunity to shine, as American leaders generally do when a threat comes from abroad. George W Bush's approval ratings hit 85 per cent as he rallied the country after the 9/11 attacks. That memory has ever since given rise to a popular Washington DC parlour game: 'What would it take to bridge America's partisan divide? Would a war do it?' people ask. 'Would another terrorist extravaganza do?'

Few would have doubted that the death of 300,000 Americans—more than America's deaths in combat during World War II—to a deadly disease would have been sufficient to rally Republicans and Democrats together? But, far from it.

Trump's response to the disease was largely to blame for that. The president has long been known for his tenuous grip on reality—for his lies and conspiracy theories and insistence on spinning every loss as a big, big win. He also has a history of disputing medical science; as in his sometime support for the 'anti-vaxxer' conspiracy theory that blames autism on childhood vaccines. He was never going to rise to the challenge that Covid-19 represented.

It took him weeks to acknowledge the seriousness of the virus in public. Fearing it would spook the stock market, he claimed to have it locked down. He then claimed it was a Democratic "hoax". As it then proceeded to rip through New York,

bringing the city's ill-prepared healthcare system to its knees, the president briefly experimented with a more serious tone. But within a couple of weeks, he was back to playing politics with the disease—lambasting Democratic governors in the most stricken states; and offering his own deranged ideas on how to deal with it.

He proposed injecting Covid patients with disinfectant, mocked his public health experts and suggested mask-wearing was a waste of time. This had a predictably dreadful result. Surveys have consistently shown that Republican voters are much less likely than Democrats to wear face masks and maintain social distancing; many doubt that Covid-19 is a deadly virus. Had Trump behaved otherwise, this would surely not have happened, and thousands more Americans would then be alive today.

Beyond the dizzying effect the virus has had on American politics, it also turned upside down my own means of covering it. Offices in Washington DC, including my own, abruptly emptied in early March, and mostly remain empty still. Joe Biden's campaign—to stress its scrupulous adherence to scientific advice—largely consigned its elderly candidate to the safety of his basement, at home in Delaware. It also disavowed in-person campaigning. The contrast between the intensity of the political battle and its remoteness—playing out on cable TV, focus groups and polls numbers, far from America's suburbs and streets—was strange and disorientating.

For the most part, I therefore covered America throughout this momentous year from my home in a leafy Maryland suburb. At least I tried to do so when not struggling to log my three children into their Zoom classes. Most American public schools, including those my three sons attend, have been closed since the virus hit. My wife, also a journalist, has been in the same predicament. We are of course lucky to have been able to make this adjustment to our working lives as easily as we did—unlike the millions of Americans with less portable jobs. Such as the healthcare workers for whom American suburbanites gathered through the summer on appointed evenings to clap and cheer.

Or like the postal workers labouring long hours due to a combination of Trump administration cuts and the added burden of delivering millions of postal ballots. Or, for that matter, like the many construction workers occupied on a building site next door to our house. Working in close proximity, usually unmasked, they ran an obvious daily risk of infection. The site foreman once assured me no man had come down with the virus. I wondered if that were true.



GETTY IMAGES



US President-elect Joe Biden on the campaign trail in Hebron, Kentucky, October 12

But at least the builders still had jobs. As the economy was locked down in March, millions of workers were sent home. America's unemployment rate promptly rose by 15 per cent: the highest rise recorded since the Great Depression. And yet, here was something America's politicians got uncharacteristically right. The country's recovery from the 2008 recession was stymied by the resistance of Republican opposition to a big fiscal stimulus. This time round, with the Democrats providing more constructive opposition, Trump's Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, was able to negotiate a series of massive and timely stimulus bills, pumping three trillion dollars into the economy just as the wheels were coming off it. It is testament to the enormity of the economic crisis that the effect of this bailout was fairly shortlived. By June, as its supplementary unemployment benefits began to wear out, the poverty rate began to climb. It has since risen by a quarter—by far the fastest increase in a quarter of a century.

**P**overty and the virus were mutually reinforcing—especially among African-Americans. Just as the virus lifted a lens to America's political dysfunctionality, so it magnified their historic grievances. The virus plays upon weakness, not only old age, but hypertension, obesity, diabetes. These are ailments that Black Americans, inheritors of generations of poverty, ill health and poor healthcare

provision, suffer from disproportionately.

In Washington DC, a city starkly divided between its largely poor and Black eastern districts and fast encroaching white suburbs, African-Americans are more than six times as likely to die of a Covid-19 infection as whites. This tragedy was the context for the explosion of racial justice protests that America witnessed in May and June.

The spark was the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis. The sometime DJ had been accused of using a counterfeit banknote when apprehended by the police in Minneapolis. Well-built but mentally fragile, he panicked as they tried to manhandle him into a squad car. Whimpering, he slid into the gutter, where three police officers pinned him down. One forced a knee into the unresisting African-American's neck for eight minutes, forty-six seconds—killing him. Within a few days, Minneapolis was seeing nightly battles between protestors and police, and racial justice demonstrations were breaking out across the country.

A handful were also violent; in Washington DC, a few shops were burned, for example. Portland, Oregon, a city with a history of violence between rival white nationalist and radical left-wing thugs, saw more sustained vandalism. But the vast majority of the protests were peaceful; including one, outside the White House, that riot police attacked with tear gas and clubs in order to clear a space for Trump to parade outside a nearby church with a Bible.



I wandered among those still-dazed, bruised and sometimes sobbing protestors shortly afterwards. At least half were white—a distinctive feature of these protests, which made them quite unlike, for example, the race riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. By the end of the summer, almost 30 million people were estimated to have marched for Floyd and for the activist group, which is also a slogan, most associated with his death: Black Lives Matter. These were by some measure the biggest protests in American history; in 2020, how could it have been otherwise?

And meanwhile much bigger fires were burning out west. Wildfires, started by lightning strikes or arson have been a growing calamity there this century. A prolonged drought, related to climate change, has combined with years of overzealous wildfire suppression, to leave the vast pine forests of Alaska, California, Montana, Oregon and Washington state a tangled mass of dead trees and brittle brush. Fanned by dry, gusty winds, many of this year's fires exploded and combined, forming a series of record-breaking infernos, known as megafires. Over 8.2 million acres were consumed by the blazes, which tens of thousands of firefighters battled to try to contain. While America's politicians argue over basic climate change (Trump doesn't believe in it), the great American outdoors is already being transformed by it.

America was viral, divided and inflamed—both literally and politically. In the late summer, after a blissful holiday break in the backwoods of Maine, I returned to the campaign trail. Preferring not to fly (it was the chances of infection in the scrimmage for the plane that I feared, not the well air-conditioned planes), I drove from my Maryland base to several battleground states.

I first returned to the same unionised construction sites in Youngstown, Ohio, that I had toured in 2016. Their mainly white and formerly Democrat-voting workers had liked the look of Trump back then. Now they revered him. And never mind that most of the claims they made for his administration—that Trump had built his promised border wall, that he had sorted out the North Koreans, for example—were untrue. The conservative channels they watched were 24-hour Trump propaganda now. But even if they could have seen through its lies, they would probably have backed the president anyway. They considered the Democrats—the party of cosmopolitanism and diversity—threatening, condescending and remote. They saw in Trump, with his brash style and pounding of women, foreigners, immigrants, one of their own, a champion and protector. The Democrats were hoping that Biden, himself a son of white working-class stock, in hardscrabble Pennsylvania, would wean some of these voters back to their party. I saw little to suggest that was a realistic prospect.

Long road trips to Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina revealed much the same story. Most of the voters I encountered, on the doorstep with Republican canvassers, or in the long queues for early voting that formed a month before election-day, seemed highly wrought and deeply dug in. Of the hundreds I spoke with, hardly any were persuadable by, or even remotely civil about, the other side. “Trump campaign? You keep walking!” Republican canvassers were directed by Democratic voters. Finding some of their own voters, they would then enjoy a good gossip on the doorstep about Biden being “basically a communist”. The crises of the previous months seemed hardly to have influenced any voter. Democrats considered Trump incompetent and unconscionable—and his handling of the pandemic indicative of that. Republicans said he was patriotic, tough and much maligned—and that the flak he was getting over the pandemic encapsulated that.

The election results mostly reflected what I had seen and

AP



An anti-Trump protest in Los Angeles, November 9, 2016

heard on the trail. The huge lead Biden had had in the pre-election polling was largely based on a perceived swing of working-class whites from Trump to him. In reality, there was no such movement. Mustering a record-breaking turnout in aggregate, both candidates largely maxed out their most reliable supporters: white working-class whites for Trump; non-whites and college-educated whites for Biden. There were a couple of important exceptions; Trump did well enough with Cuban Americans to ensure he won Florida, for example. But they were rare enough to prove the rule. Most Americans voted on the basis of their cultural identity, not the dramas and disasters of the previous nine months.

That does not bode well for America's prospects of fixing the vulnerabilities that 2020 laid bare. If voters are not responsive to political failures, politicians have little incentive to correct them. But before pausing on that gloomy thought, consider the enormous potential America still has—as 2020 also underlined.

The federal government's response to Covid-19 was mostly terrible. Yet, America's decentralised system mitigated a lot of the damage. State governors were largely responsible for managing healthcare systems and issuing lockdown rules and, with some glaring exceptions, most did so pretty well. Excellent American pharma companies—including Pfizer, the US multinational that developed the vaccine that is now being administered to healthcare workers—did even better. (And how I look forward to getting my family and myself inoculated!)

Even Congress, despite its customary torpor, rose to one of its biggest 2020 challenges. The size and timeliness of the first stimulus bills explains why America's economy is now recovering much faster than those of European countries with comparable infection and death rates.

**D**eeply depressing though America's persistent racism is, the size and multi-racial character of this year's racial demonstration protests were also somehow uplifting. It speaks to a society that is becoming inexorably more liberal, diverse and colour-blind—no matter what the reactionaries of the Trump right might wish to say about those qualities. It will be hard to reform the country's highly fragmented police forces as the protestors demanded. Yet, by their mere presence, they are remaking the country to be less tolerant of the systemic racism generations of Black Americans have faced.

It is even harder to be upbeat about the climate crisis America has sleepwalked into. Yet, the size and dynamism of its economy puts it in a far stronger position to adapt to global warming than any other large country. And in Biden it will shortly have a president who not only understands climate change, but also one who has pledged to try to slow and manage its negative effects far more aggressively than any predecessor. Nothing in the incoming Democratic administration's in-tray will be more important.

The big question, perhaps unsurprisingly, is whether America's failing political system, gridlocked by inter-partisan loathing, will permit it to make much legislative progress. Democrats' (and some Republicans') great hope before the elec-

**AS TRUMP IS NOW DEMONSTRATING, WITH HIS CRAZY ELECTION REVISIONISM, HE HAS EMERGED AS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY'S SINGLE BIGGEST POLITICAL PROBLEM. IT IS NOT HARD TO IMAGINE THE DAMAGE ANOTHER FOUR YEARS OF HIM WOULD HAVE DONE TO AMERICA'S ALLIANCES AND DOMESTIC COHESION**

tion was that it would deal a sufficiently thumping defeat to Trump to make his party retreat from the partisan fray; or at least pick its battles more selectively. But the electorate's verdict was too close for that to be the case. Sober Republicans look on the fact that their party retained control of the Senate (at least until two run-off races are held in Georgia on January 5th) and that it picked up seats in the House of Representatives as a success. Other Republicans actually believe Trump's claim to have actually won the election. That is more than an acceptance of—it is a positive endorsement—his mud-wrestling approach to politics and 'America First' agenda.

And even if the prospect of a serious Republican repudiation of that Trumpist agenda seemed more likely than I

believe it is, there is the man himself to consider. He is likely to remain the *de facto* leader of his party even after his ejection from the White House. He is also said to be planning to run again in 2024; Senate Republicans certainly expect him to. Tweeting in the wings, while fulminating on Fox News, Trump might be expected to rail against Republicans making any proposed legislative compromise with the Democrats—even on such relatively anodyne matters as infrastructure investment.

He has already amply displayed his willingness to put political tactics before the national interest. Currently, over 3,000 Americans are dying every day of Covid-19; more than died when the Twin Towers came down on 9/11. Yet, Trump, maddened by his electoral defeat, has not stooped to make any serious comment on the pandemic in weeks. If Republican lawmakers will not take a stand against the soon-to-be-former president, they will not be able to work with the Democrats on any important new legislation. In which case, there will not be any.

The irony is that voters' dissatisfaction with partisan gridlock in Washington helped create the conditions for Trump's rise—railing against the elites—in the first place.

After such a year as this has been, it is not hard to be downbeat about America's chances of fixing its dysfunctional politics. It may be too easy, however. As Trump is now demonstrating, with his crazy election revisionism, he has emerged as American democracy's single biggest political problem. It is correspondingly not hard to imagine the damage another four years of him would have done to America's alliances and domestic cohesion. But just enough voters—around 4,000 in Arizona, Georgia and Wisconsin, to be precise—were against that prospect. So Trump will soon be gone, at least for a while. And America's prospects will instantly look far rosier as a result. ■

*James Astill is the Washington bureau chief and Lexington columnist for The Economist. He is a contributor to Open*



BY ARSHIA SATTAR



# EXILE AND KINGDOM

Returning to the epics to find pandemic metaphors not in war but in acts of generosity and kindness





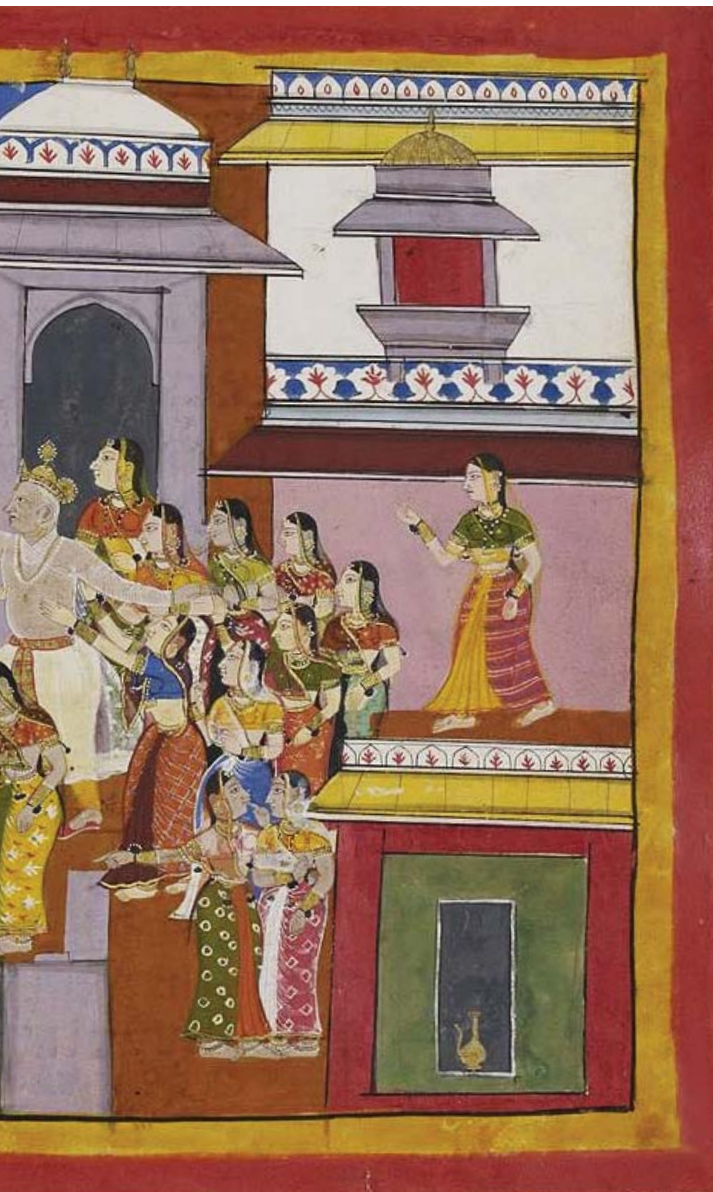
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For me, one of the most disturbing revelations of this year-like-no-other-in-living-memory has been the seamless and easy militarisation of our vocabulary when we speak about the coronavirus. Words such as 'battle', 'attack', 'frontlines' and 'warriors' have become the signposts and milestones of our pandemic landscape, altering the way we think about this crisis that threatens to change our modes of interaction for years to come. If our modified behaviour is here to stay, one thing that should concern us is what we are doing to ourselves and to our perception of the world around us when we choose the words of war to describe our successes and failures in our encounter with the virus.

We often use metaphors to describe an extreme and frightening situation. We use them especially to talk about things that threaten us, for occurrences that we do not fully understand nor can adequately protect ourselves from. Susan Sontag's example was 'illness as metaphor' which became a crucial component in the public discourse about the HIV epidemic which struck a few years after her book was published. But in the decades between then and now, our preferred metaphor to describe our *zeitgeist* has become war. We have the 'war on drugs', the 'war on terror' (rather than terrorists) and so on.

As we borrow words and pictures from arenas of actual armed conflict, we begin to think of ourselves as 'under siege' and 'embattled'. Our sense of safety and community shrink and we believe the people who tell us this is a war and that the enemy is everywhere. But war has not always been a metaphor, a set of images and comparisons carefully manipulated to teach us suspicion and distrust and hatred, to persuade us to fear the very things that we once knew and loved. We create narratives with the vocabulary of war and claim that they best address and explain our latest collective discomfort and fear. In doing so, we propel the somewhat unnerving process of domesticating war by bringing it closer to ourselves, out of its real and very brutal context. With this appropriated vocabulary, real wars and the incredible devastation they unleash become even more remote, aestheticised almost to the point of erasure.

Every narrative of war, however, is not a stand-in for something else. Like in many other cultures, our beloved stories from the past almost always feature war, sometimes as the central event, as in the Mahabharata, and sometimes as a means to an end, as in the Ramayana. Whichever culture they come from, these stories typically present the war they are describing as a conflict between good and evil. Hence, for one side in the conflict, the war is righteous and therefore, justifiable. But even when the war is righteous, texts such as the Mahabharata and the Iliad, for example, do not glorify war. In characters such as Achilles and Yudhishtira, we see a turning away from battle, a disgust with the spoils of war, a crippling sadness at the futile deaths of heroic young men. Even Arjuna, the greatest warrior of them all, comes to a moment of crisis when he realises that



Courtesy BRITISH LIBRARY

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana leaving for 14 years of exile from Ayodhya by Sahib Din



he is required to take up arms against his elders and his teachers. It's a good idea to return to these stories every now and then, just to remember the truth about war and what it does, not only to the defeated but to the victorious as well.

The heroes of our epics, Rama and Yudhishtira, are Kshatriyas. They are born to fight, war is not only their destiny, it is their duty. War makes them who they are. They are trained physically, emotionally and spiritually to be warriors even more than they are trained to be kings. They mature into a naturalised code of conduct, Kshatriya dharma, the rules by which a warrior lives and dies. A Kshatriya carries with himself, as a necessary companion, the possibility of violence. A warrior's life gains meaning on the battlefield, it is here that he is truly tested and proves himself in the only way that matters.

It should not surprise us that both Rama and Yudhishtira must fight a great war before he can claim the throne that is rightfully his. Epics are about warriors and we should not be surprised when our heroes display their prowess on the battlefield. What can surprise us is that Rama and Yudhishtira spend more than a decade in exile, in a forest, where they experience a life radically different from their own and which leaves a deep impression on them.

I was working with the Mahabharata during the early days of the lockdown and as I tried, like so many others, to realign my expectations of what was possible, I wondered how the characters in the epics felt when they were in exile, when everything that they knew, all the comfort and ease of the routine and the quotidian had been stripped away. For the first time in my long relationship with these texts, I began to glimpse the existential terror of what it might mean for a life's orientation to disappear such that the present seems alien, to have no way of understanding what is appropriate or required in the moment, to be incapable of imagining what could lie ahead.

Life in the forest is an enormous rupture in the lives of Rama and Yudhishtira, they are driven away from all that is familiar and manageable into a liminal zone where neither time nor space functioned as they should. Amidst the many confusions of displacement and dislocation, the princes meet ascetics and sages, forest dwellers who are peaceful and undisturbed. The lives of the sages, so alien to the ones that these royal warriors have been brought up to lead, force Rama and Yudhishtira to consider other ways of thinking and being.

Yudhishtira, his brothers and his wife are exiled to the forest for 12 years as part of the final bet in the catastrophic game of dice in which Yudhishtira loses everything. They settle in the forest, their lives bound by a frugal simplicity that irks Draupadi and unsettles the brothers. Arjuna spends much time away, collecting divine weapons and making political alliances through mar-

riage. Bhima's purpose is to protect the family while the twins are involved with their own concerns. Yudhishtira, always contemplative and unwilling to act before thinking, spends his time talking to sages. With them, he discusses the things that bother him but more than that, he listens to the stories they tell, stories that seem to be directed at the circumstances of his life. Yudhishtira hears about Nala who gambled everything away and lost his wife, about Rama whose wife was abducted and who had to fight a great war to win her back before he returned to his kingdom. Slowly, Yudhishtira begins to see himself in the stories that he is hearing, more and more, they become mirrors which aid his self-reflection.

But below the surface of these easy conversations and storytelling sessions which begin a journey to self-knowledge, there is also something else going on. Yudhishtira is starting to appreciate the lives of the sages, the lack of fuss and ceremony, the time to talk and listen, their vast fund of knowledge, the possibility of living gently and quietly. He realises that one can live a life that is not predicated on violence, as a Kshatriya's necessarily

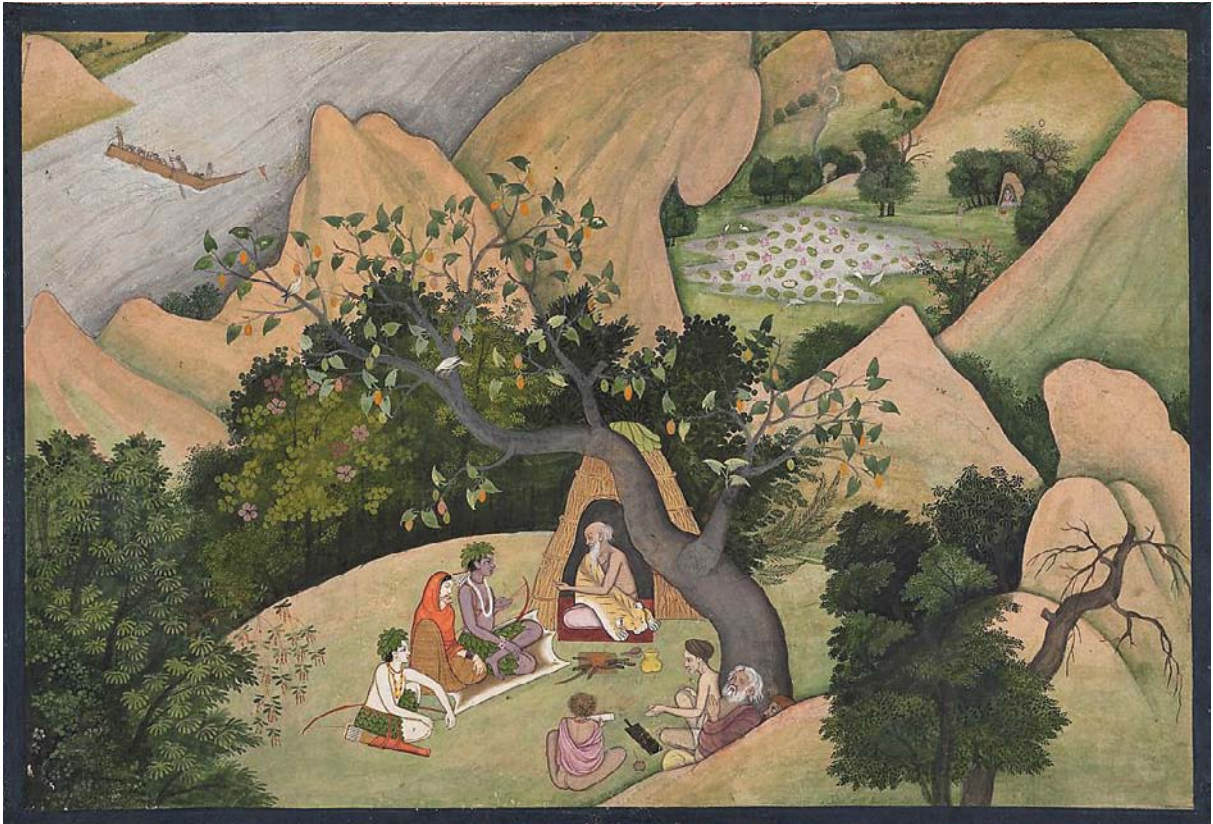
is. Of all the Pandavas, it is Yudhishtira who has consistently opposed war with his cousins. His persistence in seeking a peaceful solution has made his brothers impatient and their wife angry, but the time in the forest and with the sages convinces Yudhishtira that war cannot be the solution to everything, that another way of life is not only possible, it is desirable.

Rama, too, is sent into exile in the forest. His loyal brother and loving wife decide to go with him. Before they enter the dark and dangerous Dandaka forest, where they are beset by danger and from where Sita is abducted, the princes and Sita had lived peacefully in Chitrakuta, with forest-dwelling sages and ascetics. Their lives were calm and they enjoyed

the company of the wise men and their wives. It would appear that Rama was particularly taken with the quietude of these people who had left the city behind and whose days were now filled with serene contemplation and punctuated only by the performance of various rituals. The women of these forest communities treated Sita as they would a daughter and Sita, too, was moved by the simplicity of their lives. The idyll ends when Rama is asked by the sages to move away as his presence agitates the *rakshasas* and endangers their fragile communities.

In his time with the sages, Rama, like Yudhishtira, has been shown another way to be, a way that does not encompass violence, that does not need conflict or aggression to be fulfilling. Already disturbed by the consequences of Kaikeyi's ambition and by his father's weakness in relation to his young wife's whims, Rama is moved by the possibility of a simpler life, one with fewer obligations and demands on the individual.

**LIFE IN THE FOREST IS AN ENORMOUS RUPTURE IN THE LIVES OF RAMA AND YUDHISHTIRA, THEY ARE DRIVEN AWAY FROM ALL THAT IS FAMILIAR AND MANAGEABLE INTO A LIMINAL ZONE WHERE NEITHER TIME NOR SPACE FUNCTIONED AS THEY SHOULD**



Rama, Sita and Lakshmana at the hermitage of Bharadvaja, folio from a dispersed Ramayana series, c 1780

At the end of the Valmiki Ramayana, Rama, too, recognises himself in a story that he hears in the form of a beautiful poem recited by two young bards at his sacrifice. The boys had been telling the story for days and Rama had listened, apparently unaware that he was hearing the story of his own life. But when the boys mention Sita's banishment, Rama is moved to ask, 'Whose story is this?' Surely Rama had anticipated the answer. In any case, he calls for Sita and asks her to prove to his citizens that she was, indeed, pure.

How wonderful that a story can teach you something not only about the world but also about yourself. How poignant that a story can carry such significance when it reaches you at a time when you are seeking the questions that make sense, if not answers. Rama hears his own story, like Yudhishtira, at a moment of disabling stasis in his life. He has returned from exile, triumphant, having won back his wife. But he is compelled to send her away when his people criticise her. Rama is devastated by her departure and by the fact that his sense of kingship made it impossible for him to do otherwise. Rama had surrounded himself with sages when he returned to Ayodhya and spent his time listening to the stories they told him. Perhaps his own story was the one he was waiting for, the one that would prove that he could, in fact, bring Sita back.

Rama and Yudhishtira cope with the seismic shift in their lives by listening to stories. They are soothed by conversations

that go beyond the immediate and point to things hitherto unseen and unconsidered. It is also true that they seek out these conversations with people with whom they did not ordinarily engage. As such, Rama and Yudhishtira are able to look at how they had lived thus far from another perspective. Perhaps they were even persuaded to examine themselves and their actions in the context of a larger dharma which encompassed more than their individual lives.

**I**t is not easy to give up what one has been brought up with, the thoughts and behaviours that we have been naturalised into, the ones that create order and meaning in our worlds. And so it is with Rama and Yudhishtira when they are attracted to another way of life. Despite the fact that they strip themselves of their royal clothes and ornaments when they go into exile, they take their weapons with them. Even in the forest, their bows and arrows, their swords and shields are polished, sharpened and worshipped as they would be in the daily life of any warrior. It is Sita who gently says to Rama that it is not appropriate to behave like a Kshatriya in the forest. She has heard Rama denounce Kshatriya dharma on more than one occasion, in response to something that is presented to him as the way a Kshatriya could behave (for example, imprisoning his father who had just exiled him or,



reclaiming the throne once his father had died). But Sita worries that in the forest, Rama's proximity to weapons will lead him to violence, that he could be tempted to use them against the innocent and the defenceless. And so, she speaks to him such that Rama is reminded of his own discomfort with a dharma predicated on the constant readiness for armed aggression.

In his early rejection of Kshatriya dharma, Rama is like Yudhishtira. Even before they reach the forest, both men are unconvinced about a life based on the primacy of violence. Time and conversations with sages and ascetics only confirms their belief that even though they are Kshatriyas who will soon rule their ancestral lands and people, they can consider rejecting violence as a necessary aspect of their kingship. As it turns out, neither of them is able to prevent the war that awaits him and neither is happy with his victory. Yudhishtira never comes to terms with a war that destroyed his family and left him a kingdom of widows and orphans. He is eager to give up the kingdom and return to the forest. Rama remains detached from the celebrations when he returns triumphant to Ayodhya. After he settles into a life without Sita, he makes a golden statue of her as a reminder to himself and his people of what he has sacrificed to be king.

The forest placed Rama and Yudhishtira in extreme circumstances that demanded they give up older ways of seeing and behaving and both men responded to that call for change. Perhaps they had heard the call as a whisper before and the forest merely amplified what they had not made time to listen to earlier. Significantly, however, they carried their new insights back to the city and tried to integrate the newer understanding of themselves and their place in the world into the lives they had previously lived.

As 2021 dawns after our own unprecedented rupture, we will try and piece our lives back together, as Rama and Yudhishtira did when they returned from their exile and after the wars they fought. For both of them, the return to 'normalcy' and the familiar was not simple. They remained uneasy with what they had lost and what they had gained. Like them, we can be sure that the pieces we gather of our fragmented lives will now form a different picture of ourselves and our world. Some pieces will have changed in shape or colour, some will have disappeared, we might add entirely new ones or ones that we hadn't considered important before. How will we accommodate this year, however 'cancelled,' into the new jigsaw that we will be compelled to create? If we have remained healthy and financially secure, we might give thanks for our good fortune and turn our thoughts to those that have not been protected by individual privilege or by public policy. If we have been in company, like Rama and Yudhishtira were during

their interrupted lives, our jigsaw might include the stories we listened to and the conversations that helped us think about ourselves and our world differently. If we have been alone, we might have become aware of all that we do not need to keep our lives rich and full.

Equally important to the jigsaw we are assembling (a process rather than a circumscribed event) will be what we choose to carry forward from the life we used to know. What will we consider valuable enough to bring with us into this incompletely charted and not-fully-imagined time and space? Will we revive the memory that unrestricted contact with other people is a fundamental human pleasure? Will we recall that the truths of relationships are more clearly felt in person than they are through a mediating screen? Will we resurrect the idea that the greatest good has compassion, love and justice as its foundation and not hatred and suspicion? If we do, we will see that our militarised vocabulary is corrosive to our souls and detrimental to the species on our planet. If we read ancient stories not only for the religious truths they might contain but also for

human ones, we will see that we have a chance, through our own volition, to overcome what threatens us. We will be free to speak of those who are at the forefront of the encounter with the virus as healers instead of warriors. We will find our metaphors not in war but in acts of generosity and kindness, courage, faith and solidarity.

A familiar story from the Ramayana became a revelation a few nights ago during a conversation with a friend. In order to reach the island of Lanka where Sita was held captive, Rama's army of monkeys and bears had to build a bridge across the waters. They took to their task with joy, singing and laughing and

jumping in and out of the waves on the shore. Even a little squirrel did his bit by ferrying bits of grass for the wattle which would hold together the stones and boulders and tree trunks that the larger animals gathered. The bridge brought an unlikely collection of forest animals who carried no weapons to the gates of a heavily protected citadel, bristling with mighty warriors armed to the teeth. Even more than the actual battle with the magical animals, it was the building of the bridge that signalled Ravana's doom, the end of his reign. Constructed by a solidarity of ordinary creatures who had come together across differences that resonate with those of caste, creed and persuasion, this bridge can be the metaphor for our times. For we, too, have demons in our midst that we must overcome. ■

*Arshia Sattar has recently published Maryada: Searching for Dharma in the Ramayana and The Mahabharata for Children*

**IF WE READ ANCIENT STORIES NOT ONLY FOR THE RELIGIOUS TRUTHS THEY MIGHT CONTAIN BUT ALSO FOR HUMAN ONES, WE WILL SEE THAT WE HAVE A CHANCE, THROUGH OUR OWN VOLITION, TO OVERCOME WHAT THREATENS US**



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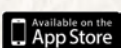
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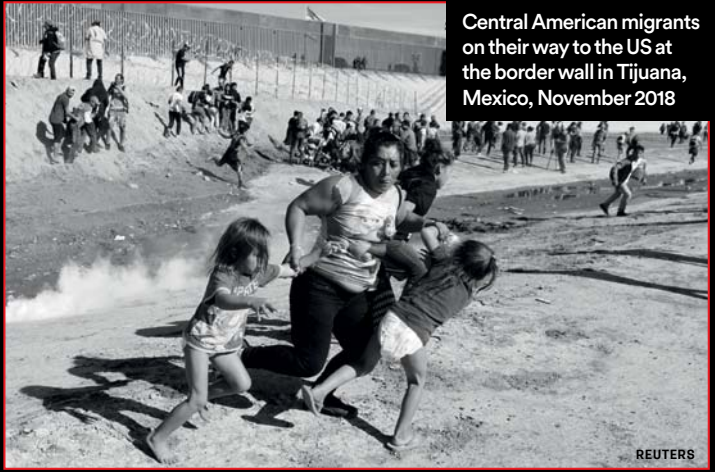


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An Iraqi child in a detention camp for migrants in Gevgelija, Greece, September 2015



Central American migrants on their way to the US at the border wall in Tijuana, Mexico, November 2018

REUTERS

# DISTANCE IS DESTINY



A boat carrying migrants rescued by the Italian navy in the Sicilian Strait, May 2016



## A passage to home

Refugees displaced by India's Partition, 1947



Photos GETTY IMAGES

BY NIKITA DOVAL



**D**ecember is the time for holiday movies, a genre singlehandedly catapulted into the blockbuster category by online streaming platforms. Central to the plots of almost all of these clichéd but

guilty pleasures are small towns or villages where everyone has a song on their lips and a spring in their step. There is the baker and the friendly neighbourhood coffee shop and people themselves, who have probably never had a bad day in their life. It is the kind of place which the protagonist, always a city dweller armed with condescension, will find themselves in, much against their will, over the holiday season, only to be eventually won over by the innate goodness of the people who have lived there their entire lives. No one ever migrates from a holiday movie town/village because why would they? It is after all utopian. It is also unintentionally ironic because the man of the season whom these movies celebrate did not really live in a utopian setting, far from it. He was born while his parents were on the run to avoid persecution. The plight of a Syrian family trying to make their way to Europe across choppy waters today would have more resonance with the tale of Christ than all the holiday movies put together.

To be human is to move; mankind is defined by migration. 80,000 years ago the first *Homo sapiens* started moving out of Africa, making their way to Asia, Europe and eventually Australia. Since then, the history of the world has been dictated by our peripatetic nature, be it the search for new worlds to conquer or trade with. Migration is how ideas travelled, as did diseases like syphilis and chicken pox. It is migration that has made the butter chicken as ubiquitous as hummus, no matter which corner of the world you are in. It is how nations have evolved as was the case for America with the great Atlantic migration. Migration is also how some of the biggest cities of the world—Mumbai, Dubai, New York—have come to be. It is how the bedrock of modern societies was laid down though not



always with the consent of those involved. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, for instance, is widely considered to be one of the largest forced migrations in human history.

Migration is how India's story has been defined much before there was the concept of a nation-state and it continues to be a key factor. Be it Mehrgarh in Balochistan, Pakistan, believed to be the subcontinent's oldest agricultural settlement, or the latest UN *World Migration Report* that once again identifies India as the largest country of origin of international migrants. We are followed by Mexico but their number of 11.8 million people, living abroad, is way behind our 17.5 million. India's epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, had exile and return as the central themes,

ens were forced out of Africa because of changing climate conditions that transformed the continent from a wet land to a dry land, floods and famines in the 18th and 19th centuries played a key role in changing the demographics and social constructs of several regions in India because of internal migration.

"From midnight tonight... the entire country, please listen carefully, the entire country shall go under complete lockdown." Many of us were huddled in front of our television and computer screens on March 24th listening to Prime Minister Narendra Modi announce what was eventually going to be one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. Uncertainty was one of the principal emotions that was soon replaced by befuddlement and help-

lessness: the migrants were walking home. According to the 2011 Census, India has 45.36 crore internal migrants. A big chunk of the population in the big cities is made up of daily wagers, a mix of both interstate as well as intrastate migrants. Migration is directly linked with an improvement in the standard of living. Most big-city migrants retain strong ties with their homes, returning annually for religious and family gatherings. Home is where we feel safe, cocooned in childhood smells and sounds. Across the country, as the middle class slammed its doors, shuttered its windows and hunkered down with their loved ones, why were we so taken aback by when migrant labourers desired the same? As more than a crore migrants, according to the Ministry of Labour and Employment, started walking back, it brought us face to face with ethical questions about privilege, equality and basic humanity.

This wasn't the first time though. In 1942, as the Japanese made their way into Burma, the British beat a hasty retreat. The Indian community in Burma by this time was over 10-lakh strong and influential. As nationalism took hold among the Burmese with the advance of the Japanese, more and more Indians found themselves trying to make their way back to British India. But a lax administration coupled with racist attitudes of the Raj meant that Indians were not sold tickets on outbound ships and then the ports were shut all together.

'[S]ubsequent closure of different sea routes prompted most evacuees to trek almost 1000 kilometers north towards the Indian border,' Tumble writes in *India Moving*. We still don't have a clear estimate of how many people died in their attempt to get back home. The migration from Burma is in itself a watershed event in modern history. But then there was another one that changed the subcontinent forever: Partition. The upheaval led to one of the largest migrations in modern history with more than 1.5 crore people displaced. The photographs of people atop trains, roads crowded with laden carts as families left behind everything they had

Migrant workers on a highway in Ghaziabad after the announcement of the national lockdown, March 29



REUTERS

**THE PANDEMIC WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME. IN 1942, AS THE BRITISH BEAT A RETREAT, INDIANS IN BURMA HAD TO MAKE THEIR WAY BACK TO BRITISH INDIA. PARTITION IN 1947 LED TO ONE OF THE LARGEST MIGRATIONS IN MODERN HISTORY**

conveying the circularity of migration', as Chinmay Tumble writes in *India Moving: A History of Migration* (2018). Migration is why Indian physicians were found in Baghdad; Indian traders in Afghanistan; and Sikhs, who as part of the British Indian Army made their way to Canada, eventually became a politically influential community there.

Survival has always been at the heart of the human impulse to move. The incentives of a better life are very much a 20th-century construct aided by class considerations. If the earliest *Homo sapi-*

**THE BIGGEST DRIVER OF MIGRATION IN THE WORLD TODAY IS THE SYRIAN CRISIS: 5.6 MILLION HAVE FLED THE COUNTRY. AS THE NUMBER OF MIGRANTS MAKING THEIR WAY TO EUROPE HAS INCREASED, SO HAS THE BACKLASH**



GETTY IMAGES

A scuffle between police and migrants on the border between Greece and Macedonia, December 2015

ever known are seared in public memory. It directly led to the downfall of industries, be it in the Punjab region or Assam, and further set the stage for more bloodshed and migration in 1971 when Bangladesh was formed.

**A**s nations have become more interconnected, migration, from developing nations to developed countries, has gone up rapidly. Migrants are pivotal to the economies of their adopted homelands as well as the ones they leave behind. There was indeed a time when countries such as Germany welcomed ‘guest workers’ from Turkey to come and help with their building projects on the condition that they return. Those who did not return transformed cities such as Berlin. But since 2015 a new sort of conversation has evolved around migrants focusing on those fleeing oppressive conditions back home. This was the year when 600 people died in the Mediterranean in one night as the boat they were travelling in capsized. The boat was on its way to Italy from Libya. This was also the year that Austrian authorities discovered 71 bodies of migrants in an abandoned refrigerated truck near the country’s border with Hungary. We may not remember these and many other incidents but

few would forget the 2015 photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi lying face down on the beach near Bodrum, Turkey. Kurdi’s family was trying to get to Kos in Greece, from where they intended to make their way to Canada. It was the year when German Chancellor Angela Merkel uttered the three words that might define her legacy—“*Wir schaffen Das*” (We will cope)—when asked about Germany’s plan to take in refugees. The country went on to accommodate more than a million people.

Today, ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are often used interchangeably even though that is not always the case. The former typically denotes those who travel voluntarily whereas the latter are often fleeing for their life. The biggest driver of migration in the world today is the Syrian crisis: an estimated 5.6 million have fled the country, often making their way to Turkey and from there to Europe. Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Sudan are some of the other countries from which migrants are fleeing violence, oppressive regimes and death. Human smugglers, harsh weather conditions, dangerous waters and patrolling squads—the path to a safer country is fraught with grave risks and the journey is the easier part. As the number of migrants making their way to Europe has increased, so has the backlash from citizens. Rightwing political groups across the continent have been increasingly vocal about migrants.

There are language constraints and unemployment remains high even as ideological clashes, exemplified by the beheading of a schoolteacher by a refugee in France in October, increase. Donald Trump spent his presidency promising to build a wall. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is a vocal proponent of the ‘Europe for Europeans’ idea, a vision which, if practised even a century ago, would not have led to the globalised world as we know it to be today.

The question whether rich nations need to step up to help citizens of countries destabilised, often, by their foreign policies remains unanswered. The pandemic has only compounded the problem as governments seek to protect their citizens by shutting borders.

Apart from economic uncertainties, rising average global temperatures are going to force more and more people to move to safer places. Going at least as far back as the 16th century, the concept of the nation-state crystallised in the 18th–19th centuries. Today, globalisation and international business networks ensure near uniformity of life experiences for those of us privileged enough to have access to such lives. But even then we carry a small part of where we come from, a bit of which we leave wherever we go. To move is to stay human, whatever our motivations. To be human is to be a migrant. ■



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# GIVE YOUR FINANCES A BOOST IN

**N**o one expected 2020 to happen this way... And yet, it did and taught us a lot of things. The New Year 2021 is almost round the corner. While we hope the year turns out to be better than 2020, we can do and take care of a few financial aspects to make it better.

**Here are some financial lessons that you can take from 2020 to have a better 2021.**

## **Invest in Gold**

The year 2020 taught us the importance of having a diversified investment portfolio. A diversified portfolio with investments in different asset classes such as equity, debt and gold can help to minimize the risk associated with investing. Different assets give different returns under the same conditions.

We have seen that as the pandemic raged across the globe, the price of gold shot up and the equity markets

tumbled. It was because many investors consider gold as a safe haven investment.

So, having some exposure in gold can help you safeguard your portfolio returns. However, buying gold ornaments is not always the right option as the making charges of the ornament lowers its resale value. Gold ETFs, gold mutual funds offered by fund houses and Government of India's Sovereign Gold Bonds are a few good options to take exposure in gold. However, keep in mind that these instruments track the performance of pure gold in the commodity market and you don't receive the equivalent quantity of gold in a physical form on redemption.

Fulfil Your Dreams with Gold Loan

As many businesses had a hard time staying afloat in 2020, it taught us the importance of having an emergency fund to tide over unexpected situations. Moreover, it showed us the dangers of relying on a single source of income.

Many Indian households have a lot of gold lying idle in the cupboards or lockers. We can put it to a good use through gold loans. Gold Loan is a loan against gold ornaments and coins that you can take during emergencies or to fund your business requirements. Instead of pledging your assets like property to secure a business loan or a high interest personal loan, gold loans can be a cheaper and a better option to live your dreams.

## **Get adequate insurance cover**

The current scenario has shown us that life insurance and health insurance are important for everyone. Life insurance safeguards the life of the policyholder. In case of untimely demise of a policyholder, the family members of the policyholder will benefit from insurance cover. Similarly, health insurance provides financial help during hospitalization, and it can also cover pre-hospitalization and post hospitalization expenses.



# 2021

Situations like death and hospitalization are stressful events, and taking adequate insurance cover can help you safeguard yourself from financial stress. There are different types of life and health insurance. Based on your financial needs, you can select the best option for you.

### **Use Credit Card wisely**

There are multiple benefits of credit cards. Besides offers, if used properly, credit cards can help you to build your credit score. A good credit score can help you to avail credit products like loans and other credit cards easily.

### **Buying a House**

In 2020, we spent a lot of time indoors and work-from-home became mainstream. Many individuals are still working from their home and many companies have gone ahead with their work-from-home policies. This has shown us the importance of having a

home to call our own.

However, it is better to check the pros and cons of buying a house and living in a rented house.

Home loans from banks and other financial institutions has made it easier for many people to secure a home loan. There are many advantages of buying a home. You can generate an asset when you buy a house. When you pay EMI for your home loans, in addition to providing a one month's of shelter, your proportional ownership in the house also increases.

### **Invest in Mutual Funds**

Mutual Fund is one of the easiest investment options that individual investors can invest to achieve their financial goals. There are different types of mutual funds that you can select as per your risk tolerance and investment horizon. Expert fund managers manage mutual funds and track their performance daily.

Equity mutual funds can be an excellent option to fulfil long-term financial goals while debt funds like liquid funds can help you save money for emergencies and short-term goals. Open-ended funds don't have any maturity date and you can invest till you reach your financial goals.

Systematic Investment Plan (SIP) is a facility to invest in a mutual fund by investing a pre-determined sum of money on a regular basis. It is an excellent tool for salaried individuals with regular income. Investing through SIPs is extremely pocket-friendly, as investors can start with Rs.500 per month.

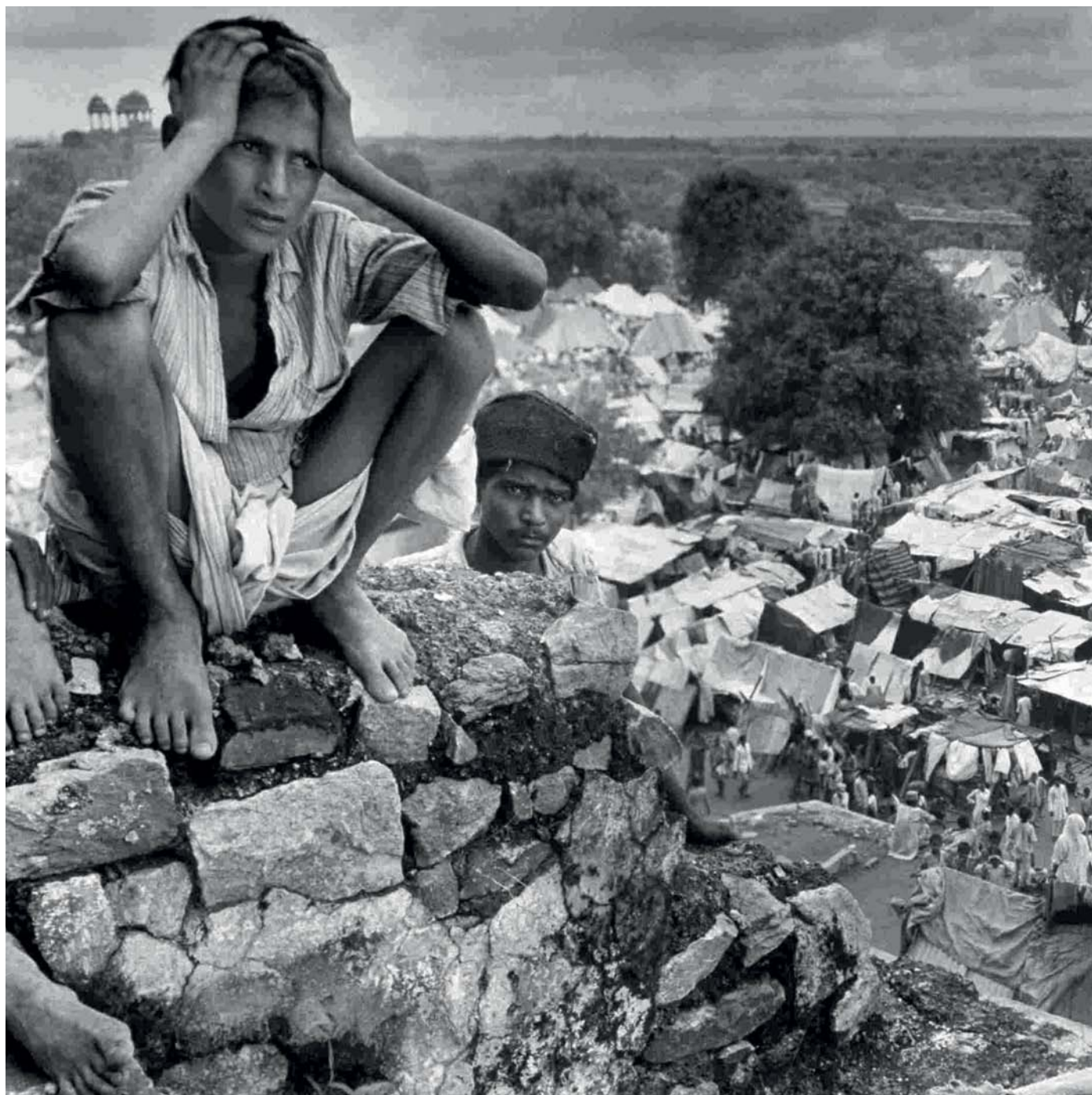
### **Conclusion**

The end of 2020 is here, and it's the time to welcome the new year 2021. The year 2020 taught us a lot of things. It would be unwise to forget these lessons. Therefore, in this coming year, make your life and finances sparkle with these simple tips. ■



# TENETS OF TRAUMA

Narrative treatments



Photos GETTY IMAGES

BY SUDEEP PAUL



## of three 20th century catastrophes



A camp for refugees of Partition in Delhi, 1947

**T**he father wakes up and rushes his son as the family readies to abandon their little village in eastern Bengal that had just become East Pakistan. The boy is slow on his feet, stopping to stare out the window. He imagines the trees speaking to him, asking where would, or could, he go, leaving them behind, severing a few lifetimes' worth of ties. The son's hesitation, his as-yet unformed sense of uncertainty (and perhaps a nascent fear of the unknown), are a perfect counterpoint to the father's impatience and conviction that what awaits them is better. What was there to see in this marshy hell? Where they were going, their *newland*, their *own* country, was the real deal. What's more, the boy would ride a train for the first time!

Achintya Kumar Sengupta's (1903-1976) poem '*Udbastu*' (the refugees or the evicted, and there's a brilliant recitation by Kazi Sabyasachi) reversed the roles. The young son's regret and sense of a loss he already suspects would be irreparable. The father in denial, blustering. The shorthand for the older generation's affliction—having coursed through the hands of poets, novelists, artists, photographers and filmmakers for four decades—could be summed up in a sentence, as in Nabyendu Chatterjee's mid-1980s film *Chopper*, when the adult, surviving son, Rajat, asks his father what's his greatest regret and the father replies: "The day India was divided in two."

Living and working through a pandemic, on a scale not seen since 1918, has been traumatic and revelatory. That understatement should do. No resident on this side of the subcontinental border with familial roots on the other side could help but be shaped by an inherited loss and the trauma still shared in the blood. Partition became the ur-narrative even when you were not there. A second-hand pain that had eclipsed other, older stories of origin (as Ardeshir Cowasjee had complained of the Pakistani mullah: for this lot, the world began in 1947). Since then, there have been wars and natural disasters, epidemics and assassinations, economic crises and changes in weather. But the high watermark remains Partition, against which every catastrophe must be weighed, however unfairly. Thus the measure of the Covid-19 pandemic; qualitative differences in fundamentals and non-sequiturs



in particulars notwithstanding.

Trauma theory is still rather new, with trauma studies ‘agreed’ to have begun in the US in the early 1980s when the American Psychiatric Association categorised war trauma under the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although the clinical study of trauma had begun in Europe in the 1860s. Trauma narrative, however, is as old as narrative itself and trauma theory has been liberally applied retrospectively. Laterally, it has also been extended to victims of violent crime, sexual abuse, racial discrimination, etcetera. Whichever way its scope expanded, Holocaust survivors and our own Partition displaced came under its ambit. Jeffrey C Alexander’s controversial *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012) looked across time and space—the Holocaust, Partition in the subcontinent, Maoist China—and concluded that trauma is not confined to the psychological predicament of the individual but is, often at the same time, a collective experience. That’s one reason societies or nations remain obsessed with the past.

Now, the idea of trauma as a collective experience is not new. Jews running from pogroms in the Pale looked back even as they arrived on Ellis Island and remembered that what bound them together was *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*: they were a community, a race linked by fate. It was a link of memory. And it harked back to an even older (and collective) trauma. The trouble with coming to terms with the past begins closer home and with the question: Should you come to terms with the past at all? And even if an individual reconciled with trauma, closure for the victim or absolution for the perpetrator could still elude the collective. They could forget and move on, but that did not mean it would go away. More likely, denial helps a society survive while the individual remains trapped in the memory. Literary trauma, at least, would not be the same otherwise. Consider the suicides of Dr Selwyn and Paul Bereyter in WG Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1992, trans. 1996) and juxtapose their failures to come to terms with the past against Max Ferber’s narrative of what the Holocaust did to his family. (When Primo Levi threw himself from his third-storey landing in 1987, Ellie Wiesel had told *La Stampa*: “Levi died at Auschwitz 40 years later.” Wiesel himself would live to be 87.)

To stay with Sebald, one of the greatest literary talents of the last century whose life was unnecessarily cut short, the complexities of coming to terms with the past or even attempting to grasp it is a mined landscape in Jacques Austerlitz’s story told over 30 years. Yet, as *Austerlitz* (2001, published a month before Sebald died) shows, memory is a bigger entity than trauma and resides in the collective—including museums and libraries—and the individual, so often, has to retrieve that memory from the collective and then decide if it has the answers. And when that collective, archived memory does not exist, or cannot be accessed, or has been erased, we have Anna Akhmatova’s lament:

*I’d like to call you all by name*

(Left) The arrival of Jews from Hungary at Auschwitz-Birkenau, June 1944; Aftermath of Operation Gomorrah, the Allied fire-bombing of Hamburg, in July-August 1943



## DISTASTEFUL AS IT MIGHT SOUND, SOME TRAUMA, TWEAK THE FACTS OF 2020 IN 2021,

*But they’ve removed the list  
And there’s nowhere else to look*

Trauma is quite often internalised and lived, paradoxically as the mind shuts out what cannot be lived with. Aaron Reichenbach (Maximilian Schell) in Fons Rademakers’ *Der Rosengarten* (1989) will not/ cannot speak German (once his tongue) at his trial for attacking a former Nazi at the Frankfurt airport. Reichenbach had survived the Holocaust as a child (and now lives in Argentina) but his sister Ruth had not. When the prosecutor mocks him for refusing to speak the language of Goethe and Schiller, Reichenbach’s public defender Gabriele Schlüter-Freund (Liv Ullmann) retorts that it’s also “the language of Hitler, Himmler, Göring, Eichmann!” So how could the German state expect him to speak it? Reichenbach’s personal verdict on history is total: he has unlearned his language. But that doesn’t mean he has come to terms with the past.

Partition in this part of the world and the Holocaust in human history are our benchmarks for measuring collective suffering. Distasteful as that might sound—comparative pain—some collective experiences are bigger than others. As we look back at our own collective experience of a year’s lived trauma, tweak the facts of 2020 in 2021, and a new pandemic fiction takes shape, it would be important to remember that. And, perhaps more importantly, not to lose sight of another fact: that trauma itself is not truth, rather the colouring taken on by truth on reflection. Kirby Farrell, who had examined trauma ‘both as a clinical concept and as a cultural trope that has met many different needs,’ argued that ‘as an interpretation of the past, trauma is a kind of history. Like other histories, it attempts to square the present with its origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent or remote: an artifact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation’ (*Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*, 1998, emphasis added).



## COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES ARE BIGGER THAN OTHERS. AS WE LOOK BACK AT A YEAR'S LIVED AND A NEW PANDEMIC FICTION TAKES SHAPE, IT WOULD BE IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT

**I**f Austerlitz, for example, in the exploration of individual and collective archived memory tools, is witness to, and the reliving, of the trauma of a Europe that no longer exists (the Europe that, along with other things, disappeared with Paul Celan's 'your golden hair Margarete/ your ashen hair Shulamit') through the story of an individual who himself had fled to the UK on *Kindertransport*, Peter Matthiessen's *In Paradise* (2014, again, published the year he died) is an experiment about a rather uncanny experiment. Based partly on Matthiessen's own retreats in Auschwitz, the plot brings together a handful of characters from extremely diverse backgrounds in a former death camp in Poland. They are expected to observe, understand and bear witness. On the ground of the slaughter, they understand less about the Holocaust than they are forced to look into their own selves. Their reactions thus are not what each might have expected even of himself or herself, but they all react. No reconciliation among themselves or with the past, but the present and future seem changed.

In Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* (1978, trans. 1980), the would-be victims are not given any hint of their fate. As observed by Philip Roth: 'There's no news from the public realm that might serve as a warning to an Appelfeld victim, nor is the victim's impending doom presented as part of a European catastrophe. The historical focus is supplied by the reader, who understands, as the victims cannot, the magnitude of the enveloping evil' (*Shop Talk*, 2001). Appelfeld's genius as a writer was his reticence. And Jewish naïveté before and after the Nazis came to power was not counterfactual. In one of the most infamous clichés post-Holocaust, it was also blamed for their predicament. Yet, the signs were there all along. As Bernard Wasserstein writes in *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War* (2012): 'In the 1920s the European Jews had presented the appearance of a vibrant, dynamic, and flourishing people. For the first time in their history they were recognized as citizens in every country in which they lived. Especially in western Europe and the Soviet Union, an ambitious, meritocratic middle class

was rapidly climbing the social ladder. The best-educated ethnic group in Europe, Jews shone in all fields of science, dazzled in the theatre and literature, and constituted the beating heart of musical life.' And then: 'Within the short space of two decades a dramatic change transformed the Jewish position. By 1939, two years before the Nazi decision to commit genocide, European Jewry was close to terminal collapse.'

Jews in Europe were already living a collective trauma before the Final Solution was activated. But their imagination could not countenance the evil about to be unleashed. After the Holocaust, the idea and reality of suffering had changed. The road to analysing the pre-Wannsee communal experience would of course lead through the slaughter. If world Jewry, Holocaust survivors included, had no choice but to confront the past, what about the society that was collectively the perpetrator? Germans refused to look at the present. Even when the war had turned and they, too, were its victims.

In *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999, trans. 2003), reworking his lectures on literature and WWII air raids, Sebald says: '...it is true that of the 131 towns and cities attacked...many were almost entirely flattened, that about 600,000 German civilians fell victim to the air raids, and...three and a half million homes were destroyed, while at the end of the war seven and a half million people were left homeless...' And yet, 'The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. *It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected...*' (emphasis added). Sebald cites Alfred Döblin: 'People walked "down the street and past the dreadful ruins as if nothing had happened, and...the town had always looked like that."' The state, society and the writer came together in a pact: 'There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described.' This refusal was the reason for the failure of



the very German task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* post-war, because of the 'extraordinary faculty for self-anesthesia shown by a community that seemed to have emerged from a war of annihilation without any signs of psychological impairment.' (emphasis added).

Nevertheless, there were shafts of light in the rubble of post-war German letters. If Hans Fallada's *Alone in Berlin* (or *Every Man Dies Alone*, 1947, trans. 2009), made into the movie starring Emma Thompson, Brendan Gleeson and Daniel Brühl in 2016, was an exception (the novel's timeline ends in 1942 and was ignored in the Anglophone world for six decades for lack of a translation), another

example of a notable exception would be Heinz Rein's *Berlin Finale* (1947, trans. 1952, 2015 and 2019), which was one of the first bestsellers of the post-war period of rebuilding and an exemplar, and yet outlier, in the *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature). Sebald is justifiably dismissive of the larger body of the 'rubble literature' and Rein's work is marred by his then commitment to a socialist worldview, but it is as close as Germans could have come in fiction to seeing things for what they were in the last days of the war.

On the whole, the failure to come to terms with the present was the reason for the failure to come to terms with the past. From the mid-1970s, the advent of *Väterliteratur* attempted to alter the narrative, looking into the culpability of the older generation, the parents, who had successfully eluded moral responsibility through silence. Assumption of responsibility and understanding their role as perpetrators was essential for Germans to earn the right to see themselves as victims. For the first two decades at least, helped by the economic magic, West Germans could remain in denial and, soon, it was too late. In the East, communist totalitarianism had made Germans conveniently attribute the atrocities of the past to Nazi totalitarianism and thus absolve themselves.

**A**nne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004), in studying Pat Barker, Toni Morrison, Sebald, among others, brought together trauma theory and the literary text in ways that still remain enlightening and expandable. Trauma affects both content and form, but perhaps her most significant pronouncement pertains to what trauma studies do beyond medical practice (and in that, bring in the role of literature): 'trauma studies work against medical reductionism by exhorting practitioners to attend to a voice which is not fully known or knowable, and to *bear witness*' (emphasis added). Without that need and purpose, there would be no trauma fiction. Of course, one of the first things trauma studies grasped was where Freud had left off—recanted and subverted what could have been a good thing—and demonstrated that even in speak-

**TRAUMA ITSELF IS NOT TRUTH, RATHER A COLOURING TAKEN ON BY TRUTH. IT IS AN INTERPRETATION OF THE PAST. A KIND OF HISTORY. TO STUDY IT IS TO BEAR WITNESS: TO ONESELF AND TO OTHERS. TO SEE HOW WE COME TO TERMS WITH THE PAST**

ing out and about trauma, in the collective remembering and attempts at reconciliation, there was always someone left out, someone privileged over others. Thus the prolonged collective trauma of Blacks in the US, of women universally at all times, of the further marginalised within the circle of victimhood.

Correcting the gendered and racial omissions in the remembrance of trauma in trauma narratives is a work-in-progress. Accepting the great danger in reductive applications of our contemporary worldview to the past—when we go smashing every statue in sight—it nevertheless is more than a matter of curiosity to ask, say, how does the most

important work of Depression Era literature, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1936, with photographs by Walker Evans) stand the test of time? This book, above all—because it is a masterpiece of journalism and one of the most humane products of literature in an inhumane century.

Partition narratives were the original candidate for post-colonial trauma theory. One of Partition's most poignant narrative treatments, Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), layers the collective trauma with the more excruciating but silenced gendered trauma within that and then leaves us with an utterance that first became a legend and then a joke: "*Dada, aami baanchte chai* (Brother, I want to live)". Now, that says less about the narrative than about us.

The pandemic will leave us one day but it will leave us with a question: How will we find the words to remember this trauma of our time for those to come after us? And another: How will we find the right words to remember this trauma for ourselves? Perhaps we have already said too much. 2020 or 2021 is not 1945 or 1947 or even 1999. The pandemic has been global in a way even World War II was not. But there cannot be any real comparison when bombs don't fall on us and our cities are not reduced to rubble or we are not put on a train to the extermination camp. We got instant information from almost every corner of the map. The daily updates of the global death toll or even the total number of cases had long ago overwhelmed us and we came to live with it. And yet, we have understood little of our suffering and that of others qualitatively. What has made each story is an individual tale of grief. But no home is a stranger to death and disease and thus to the grief of death, including by disease.

The individual's story has been traumatic because of our collective trauma, elevating it beyond everyday disease and death. But those smaller stories within the big story are already fading. What will be told this time next year and beyond will only be those that find new voices. And they will be only interpretations of the past, or alternative histories. Like all of humanity's great plague literature. ■

# Education scenario in 2021



**W**hat schooling will look like in 2021 is still bleak, but it is certain that the education scenario is likely to undergo a huge transformation.

Gone are the days when education was limited to a blackboard and chalk to complete the syllabus. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, many new modes of learning, perspectives and trends have emerged. A greater global collaboration between students, academia & industry is likely to happen. Faculty will have to redesign course content to meet the current and future needs, they will have to move away from traditional pedagogies. The demand for quality educators will shape the way higher education moves forward from this crisis. It has become imperative for teachers to move away from teaching just the curriculum for years to inculcating new knowledge and skills.

The education landscape is becoming more student-centred, and classroom designs are becoming more flexible to promote more collaborative learning. With the advancement in technology, teaching methods are also relying more on digital knowledge than just textbooks. The role of teachers will see a massive shift from being disseminators to merely facilitators.

With increasing technology intervention



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in education, the Indian online education market is set to grow 8x and reach USD 1.96 billion in 2021, a study revealed. The penetration of online education in the K-12 sector has paved the way for improved learning outcomes, increased adoption of Learning Management Systems will provide an environment conducive to increased student engagement and improved teacher performance. Digital content being interactive in nature, would help students retain concepts better.

Digital learning is the answer to India's growing need to dispense education at all levels across regions and local barriers and increasing accessibility to learning resources. Dependencies on brick and mortar model will reduce and Massive Open Online Courses(MOOCs), online learning portals, webinars, etc. will gain popularity. Online examinations will continue to proliferate in the foreseeable future with increased security features and new technology developments.

With the implementation of NEP 2020 beginning in 2021, we can expect top foreign universities operating in India. This will in turn increase the standards of our Indian counterparts- in terms of teaching, learning and research. This is a remarkable opportunity for India to enhance its capacities and offer quality education at par with global standards. Not only will this expedite the process of transforming our archaic education system, but will also help us retain the best faculty in India. ■

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*Ms Preethaa Ganesh is a young and dynamic management professional with a vision to redefine Indian education to globally acclaimed standards and make India a knowledge power by making premium education affordable to all segments of the society.*



NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE [ PERSONAL HISTORY

BY SUMANA ROY



# THE SMELL OF RICE

My existential fragrance



*The astonishing smell of rice in the night sky.  
It seems that some still cook rice,  
Still serve it, still eat it.*

*And we are awake, all night.  
With the astonishing smell of rice,  
In supplication, all night.*

**I** read this poem, ‘*Ascharjyo Bhaater Gandho*’ (The Astonishing Smell of Rice) by Birendra Chattopadhyay, in Supriya Chaudhuri’s translation, on September 2nd. It was his 100th birth anniversary, possibly the reason she’d shared it on Facebook. But I read it thinking of the people from the cities who had walked back home to their towns and villages in India in the summer of this year. Birendra Chattopadhyay had written this poem during the food riots of 1965. Coming from a family that had lost many to the Bengal Famine of 1943, I felt haunted by it. It is one thing to say that a poem has a haunting quality and quite another to feel that it is haunted by a history of hunger. It was a poem by a hungry people—and I say this not only because of the ‘we’ in the second stanza. The poem is about two neighbourhoods: of those who are cooking and eating rice and those that will stay hungry all night. That difference is emphasised by the number of verbs the rice eaters are given—‘cook’, ‘serve’, ‘eat’—and the only one the hungry are allowed: ‘awake’. ‘Smell’ is a noun that comes to the hungry; ‘smell’ as verb would be giving them too much ‘allowance’. When I read the poem with my students in September, we spoke about the use of ‘night’—it occurs thrice in a six-line poem. The night is long, saying it thrice makes it longer, but the regime of hunger is even longer. Eating rice ends the day in a culture like ours, brings it to a naturalised close, said a student; to be deprived of that doesn’t allow the rice eater to sleep, the day doesn’t end because the hunger doesn’t end.

‘Ascharjyo’, the word that Supriya Chaudhuri translates as ‘astonishing’, is a *rasa*, the *adbhuta rasa*, the *rasa* of wonder. Invoking it for the most familiar smell of rice leaves the reader homeless, without the support of certainty, just as the people have been left deprived of the certainty of rice to seal the day. The word ‘*bhaat*’, meaning rice, extends to the idiomatic—Bengalis often use it interchangeably with ‘lunch’ and ‘dinner’: ‘*bhaat khaoa*’; Hindu marriage rituals include what is called ‘*bhaat-kaapor*’ (rice and clothes), a responsibility that husbands promise their wives; there’s the rice ceremony of infants, to inaugurate their rice-eating career; most religious rituals are incomplete without it. What might it mean to have the life’s staple, its smell taken away from us?

**T**hat the cost of an internet connection on the phone could be cheaper than a day’s meal of rice and vegetables would perhaps have never crossed my mind, given how pampered we are by inexpensive WiFi.

‘Most of us had bought a year’s subscription on our phones, Didi,’ Shibu told me.

When he and his friends began walking from Noida towards their villages in Bengal’s Dinajpur districts, they bought whatever they could with the money they had—*muri*, biscuits, *bhujia*, candies, sugar, onions and chillies. They were not thinking of food, he said. Something would be found on the way. One thing they were not sure of was the availability of electric power to charge their phones. So they decided to use only one phone at a time. They were a group of six. They were also convinced that they would reach home by the seventh day. It was in the ‘*shastras*’, he said—even the exiled is allowed to return in the seventh year.

They walked for days, but home didn’t come. After the third day, they felt crippled by their hunger for rice.

‘If they’d asked us to choose between reaching home and eating a *thhala* of rice, we’d definitely have chosen the rice, Didi,’ he said.

By the time they reached Odisha, they found people distributing food to workers returning home. They were grateful for everything, including the soap and Dettol, but there was no rice. And then it struck one of his friends...

For the rest of the journey, charging their phones whenever they had the opportunity, they began watching videos of rice being cooked on YouTube. No matter what it was that they were eating—*muri*, *chanachur*, biscuits or sometimes just water—they ate while watching rice cooking on a stove somewhere. Then they switched off their phones.

‘It helped us survive, Didi,’ he said, turning to look away from me, hiding his tears. ‘We told ourselves that Covid caused people to lose their sense of smell. Though we did not have corona, our situation was similar to theirs... We could see the rice on YouTube, but not smell it. That kept us walking—the longing for the smell of rice...’

**I**t was after lunch on a Thursday, when he hadn’t been able to smell the Tulaipanji rice, that my brother finally decided to get tested for Covid. He’d been suffering from fever and headache, but was, like everyone else now, putting it to a seasonal fever and allergy. It was Covid.

Self-isolation of a family member brings in a new protocol of living, but also a heightened awareness of one’s body, of the senses. His children, nine and two years old, shouted their own versions of ‘Good night Baba’ to him from the first floor. I noticed that everyone at home had suddenly begun speaking louder. The water they drank now was also warmer. They seemed to notice things that they hadn’t before—kites and crows in the sky, blackheads on my father’s dry cheeks, nail marks on walls that they couldn’t remember making. Hearing, seeing, touch—they



were being serviced in a manner I hadn't noticed before. About one of the senses they kept quiet: smell. It was a kind of unspoken solidarity. Not my mother, who drinks tea by inhaling it first, not even my nephew, who complains about the smell of fish frying in a distant neighbour's kitchen.

I watched my sister-in-law cut fat sweet limes into wedges and carry them upstairs to where my brother was. She left it outside the door. The smell of citrus took over the house. No one spoke about it at all. I mention this, because such is the nature of citrus—it makes the tongue run, into saliva and words; its nature is overindulgence. After 10 days, though, I began texting my brother, 'Could you smell the sweet lime, *bhai*?'

It began to seem that the answer to that would never change: 'No'; 'No'; 'No'.

I stopped asking.

My mother called me in the afternoon one day. She was uncharacteristically joyous. My brother had enquired whether it was Lakshmi puja from the smell of *khichuri* being cooked somewhere—the rice and lentils cooked for the gods as *bhog*.

'He must have smelt the *gobindobhog* rice,' she said.

**I**n a story, versions of which came to me both from the Birbal series and the Bengali Gopalbhar's, Birbal (and Gopalbhar in the Bangla version) tells Akbar that the poor will do anything for money. The king disagrees, but Birbal soon finds a poor man who spends a night inside a freezing lake. When Akbar asks the man how he managed to do this, the man says that the warmth of a distant lamp kept him alive. The king considers this to be an act of cheating, and refuses to give the promised reward to the man. Soon enough, to show the king the fallacy of his reasoning, Birbal begins cooking *khichdi* on a fire that is five feet above the cooking pot. The king realises his mistake and gives the promised reward to the man immediately.

This is the kind of story that pursues one throughout one's life. It transforms into different things at different moments. When we transferred little sums of money to various organisations working for people affected by the Amphan cyclone that devastated southern Bengal in May this year, we were often given an account of how the money had been spent. Rice, red lentils, cartons of milk and baby food, packets of biscuits, sanitary napkins for women, salt, sugar, cooking oil, often a set of clothes, the essentials. I had seen similar lists in my childhood—my father, actively involved in the bank trade union movement until his retirement, would get together with his colleagues and go to Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts in the monsoon, where there were floods nearly every year. What surprised me, therefore, was the request of one such non-governmental organisation—could I help to pay for the kerosene oil and stoves to cook the rice and lentils that had been given to the people left homeless by the cyclone?

Rimi, the person who had got in touch with me, sent me a short video of rice being cooked later. A kerosene stove had been bought and oil arranged for. Rimi's video showed a wom-

an behind the stove, her two children, both their heads shaved, playing behind her. The younger one—who looked like a boy to my eyes—began running towards the woman after some time. The mother turned to look at the child—he couldn't have been more than six years old—and said, '*Bhaater gandho peli, baba?*' (Did you get the smell of rice, *baba*?)

**I**n the middle of November, on the first day of the month of Aagrahayan in the Bengali calendar, my father's family in Balurghat eats a meal together. Balurghat is a small town near the Indo-Bangladesh border, and many of my father's siblings have settled there after moving out of Hili, the tiny border town where my grandparents built a home—and their life—after walking from Bangladesh in the first week of August 1947. My grandfather came from a family of farmers, but having no land in this new country, he had to find a new profession—a goldsmith's apprentice. He complained about the darkness of the antechamber in this new life, even when he had earned enough to own a tiny store himself—it was the light on the fields he missed. The fire he blew into metal to give it form—'*roop*'—was no comparison for the early morning sun in the fields. He was certain that it was that light that gave fragrance to the crops, to fruits and flowers. He was no scientist, and these speculations might have come from a sense of deprivation. This was the difference between gold and rice, he said often—the metal felt the same everywhere; rice, however, was another thing: the soil and the light and the water in which it was raised gave it a distinct aroma. Home, for him, was the aroma of rice being cooked.

In the village where he lived for the rest of his life, raising seven sons and five daughters, a space so self-sufficient that he did not feel the urge to travel outside it, he continued with a ritual of his ancestors. It was the *nabanna*—*naba*: new; *anna*: rice, or grain. A celebration of the harvest season, its rituals are joyous—one shows gratitude to the earth and its generosity through ingestion, eating the new rice with the seasonal produce. I remember one such day in my father's village. The four of us, my parents, my brother and I, had taken a bus from Siliguri, about 300 km away, to Hili. My brother and I had motion sickness, and we'd struggled all through the journey. By late afternoon, just as the bus, blue from outside but almost colourless inside, was about to enter the village, we met a smell.

It was the smell of rice being cooked. The aroma of rice—its different kinds of preparations—hung like a halo around the village. It was hard for us to imagine this—every kitchen in the village was cooking almost the same thing.

When my uncles and aunts and cousins meet on Nabanna every year, they try to remember a smell that was dear to their father, one last connection with his abandoned childhood that he had tried to recreate. When they meet at Buro Kaku's house—he's the fifth son of the family—they cook the same food that was cooked in the village. The courtyard of the village house is gone—Dadu, my grandfather, sat in the centre, his sons and



Threshing, a linocut by Chittaprosad

Courtesy PRINSEPS, FROM THE 2019 RARE PRINTS AUCTION

**THIS WAS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOLD AND RICE, MY GRANDFATHER SAID OFTEN—GOLD FELT THE SAME EVERYWHERE; RICE, HOWEVER, WAS ANOTHER THING: THE SOIL AND THE LIGHT AND THE WATER IN WHICH IT WAS RAISED GAVE IT A DISTINCT AROMA. HOME, FOR HIM, WAS THE AROMA OF RICE BEING COOKED**

grandchildren around him in a longish circle, banana leaves in front of them. They asked for permission to eat, thrice, all of them individually, and to all of them Dadu said “Yes.”

Now there is his photograph, and they still ask him for permission. Buro-kaku goes to the village to the same rice-selling family from whom my grandfather bought sacks of rice. It is not the length of the grain he inspects but its smell, touching palmfuls of rice to his nose.

This year—last month—Buro Kaku and his family cooked the same rice. We watched his wife cook the same food on Google Meet from our homes in different towns and cities. Some didn't speak, still shy to this new manner of sharing. Some

spoke more than usual, recounting details of Nabanna from more than three decades ago.

Before they were about to say bye to each other on the video call, Buro Kaku asked, “Can you smell the rice?”

**Y**esterday, I read about a farmer from Uttar Pradesh, one of the many thousands protesting in Delhi, telling a reporter, “*Aap ja ke Modiji se keh do ki yeh digital India se sab nahi chalega. Google se roti download nahi hoti, uske liye to kisan ki hi zarurat hai*” (“Tell Modiji that digital India cannot make everything work. You cannot download roti from Google; for that you need a farmer”).

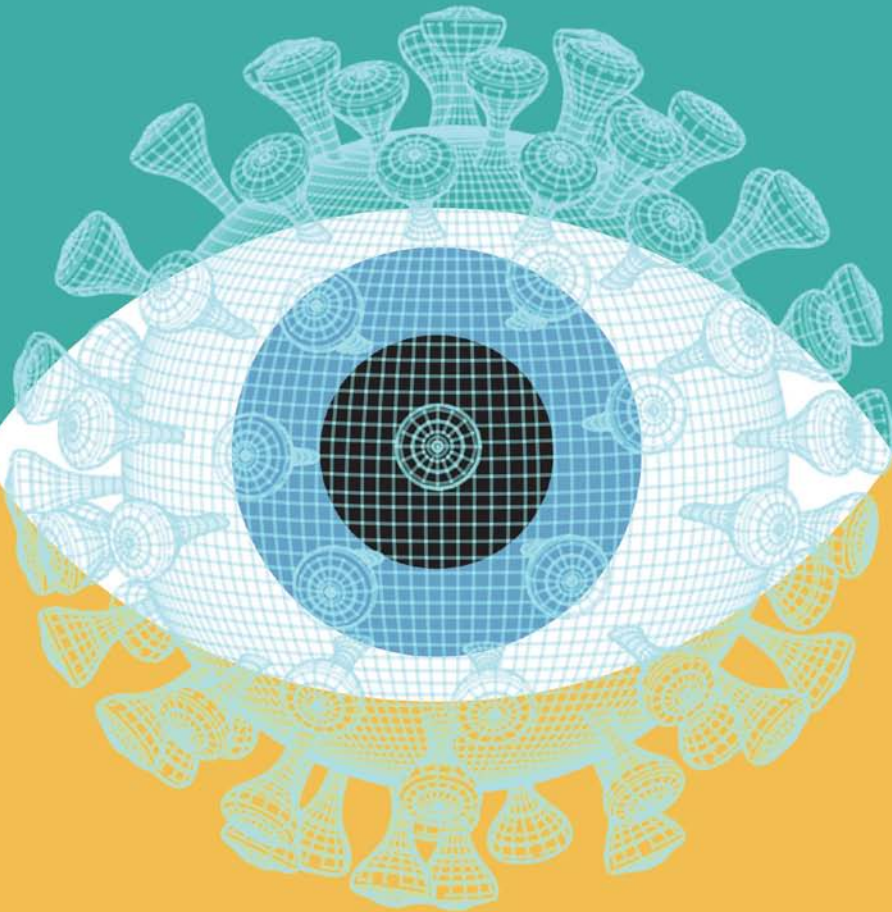
A compulsive rice eater, I found roti becoming rice in my head subconsciously. I thought of my two-year-old niece, who touches the food she sees us ordering on Zomato and ‘feeds’ it to us. Once she kissed the phone when I was ordering prawn fried rice. My nephew, slightly older, scolded her: “Can't you see that this fried rice has no smell?”

**I will remember 2020 as the year I learnt not to take the smell of rice for granted. ■**

*Sumana Roy is an author. Her most recent book is My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*



# EYE TO EYE



Seeing is believing.  
So look



**L**ast month, in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, actress and wife of Prince Harry, Meghan Markle, summed up a lot of what people all over the world were feeling. ‘We are adjusting to a new normal where faces are concealed by masks, but it’s forcing us to look into one another’s eyes—sometimes filled with warmth, other times with tears. For the first time, in a long time, as human beings, we are really seeing one another.’

Not merely physically but also perhaps spiritually, as the Na’vi meant in James Cameron’s mythical Pandora in *Avatar* (2009), when they said I see you. For the first time in a lifetime, the pandemic brought us back to the most fundamental of human connect—not touch, not smell, but sight. With social distancing becoming the norm and faces being masked, several things happened. Eye contact was back, as was the longing look to suggest romance, as touch became severely rationed. Eye makeup sales were on the rise as lipstick wearing declined. Ophthalmologists got repeated requests about correct posture, right device, and even the appropriate seating for children taking online classes. There were the odd cases, too, of temporary loss of vision as in the case

of independent communications consultant Nidhi Verma. She experienced loss of eyesight during the pandemic which was diagnosed as optic neuritis. “For three months, I was terrified. It was only after the use of steroids, as prescribed, that I was able to avoid permanent harm,” she says.

Stress, anxiety, overwork, all of it had an effect on the eyes. In popular culture, the eyes had it again. Susanne Bier’s blockbuster mini-series for HBO, *The Undoing*, focused on Nicole Kidman’s eyes to show her interior conflict as she struggled with the knowledge that her charming husband could be a

ruthless killer while Peacock’s *Brave New World*, a reread of Aldous Huxley’s novel, used the optic scan (and a few pills) as the filter for a new world where everyone is happy.

At the level of the collective, surveillance and scanning became a way of life, with the state accessing more information about us, in sickness and in health. Protection for our own good is something the state spent many years trying to make citizens understand—it took a pandemic to bring home the idea with great force. Closed-circuit television (CCTV), drones, mobile phone usage data and biometric tracker bracelets were used to track population movements, with mobile applications that allow for Covid-19 tracking being the most used across nations, as citizens weighed the twin options—disease versus privacy.

Trapped in our homes during the extended lockdown, as we burrowed deeper into our phone screens, for entertainment and enlightenment, the eyes became the key doorways to our minds, more than ever before. The world shrank into our minds via our eyes, leaving us with a

**PERHAPS COVID WILL INSPIRE A NEW BURST OF POETRY IN PRAISE OF THE EYES. IT HAS INCREASED VISITS TO OPHTHALMOLOGISTS WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT FAILING EYESIGHT. IT HAS ALSO CHANGED THE BEAUTY GAME, WITH EYE MAKEUP SALES UP 204 PER CENT YEAR-ON-YEAR FOR THE THREE-MONTH PERIOD ENDING IN JUNE**

plethora of imagery on overdrive, almost as the Surrealists had painted us, like Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s eye under the knife in the 1929 *Un Chien Andalou*, or even Dalí’s 1944 *Métronomie*, with the eyelids painfully wide open. For Dalí, the eye was the instrument for showing invisible things, the double image, suggesting a paranoid dystopia which is all too true now.

Our eyes worked harder. Professionals realised this most emphatically when they saw they had just their eyes to rely on. Abhishek Banerjee, casting director turned actor (last seen



in this year's sleeper hit series *Paatal Lok*, was mostly wearing a mask onscreen when he shot his episode in Amazon Prime's collection of Covid-inspired short films, *Unpaused*. Says he, of the experience: "For an actor the eyes are everything. It's a mirror to your soul and so it's the mirror to the character you are performing on-screen; we actors can learn to lie in various ways but we can't lie through our eyes. It's very important to get immersed in the character, if we don't feel it, it will show; there's no cheat code to that."

This was the year of rediscovering the third eye and using it, as Lord Shiva did, to look within ourselves. It was the year that forced us to re-examine our lives, to see what was necessary and what was not, in material things, emotions, even in our thoughts. Legend has it that Shiva's right eye represents the sun and the left eye the moon. It is said that once when he was meditating, Parvati playfully cupped his eyes with her

THE WORLD SHRANK INTO OUR MINDS VIA OUR EYES, LEAVING US WITH A PLETHORA OF IMAGERY ON OVERDRIVE. LIKE SALVADOR DALÍ'S 1944 *MÉTRONOME*, WITH THE EYELIDS PAINFULLY WIDE OPEN. FOR DALÍ, THE EYE WAS THE INSTRUMENT FOR SHOWING INVISIBLE THINGS



hands, causing darkness throughout the universe. Shiva then created a third eye in the centre of his forehead. Fire spouted from this eye and the universe once again had light. This fire can destroy the universe as well, as much as it can nourish it. Former bureaucrat and scholar of myths, Parvez Dewan, recalls the mythical moment when Kamadeva, the Hindu deity of love and lust, shot an arrow at Shiva's heart, shattering his meditative state. He opened his third eye, spewed fire and reduced Kamadeva to ashes.

**D**ewan, founder of *Indpaedia.com*, is now working on the oneness of all religions, and says: "The third eye is accepted by at least one school, normally a mystical sect, each in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and is mainstream in the Eastern religions, including Taoism, which did not originate in India." In all religions, Semitic as well as Eastern, he says, it is used to look within oneself and leads to spiritual discovery. Even in Kabbalah, the Jewish system of mysticism, the third eye means intuition and wisdom. The consequences of opening up one's third eye in Kabbalah, except with divine permission, are as dire as the opening of Shiva's third eye in Hinduism.

Which is why lack of sight, or blindness, is such a powerful metaphor. In José Saramago's *Blindness*, it is used as a parable about society and the cultural hegemony, as one critic has put it, of the sighted world. Ditto in the movie adaptation where a city struggles to come to terms with the contagious white sickness, an epidemic of blindness. Those familiar with Indian epics know well what Dhritarashtra's blindness represents, but what of Gandhari, who willingly wears a blindfold? Scholars have long wondered why Gandhari did that—was it a passive aggressive act or an act of devotion by a dutiful wife? And wasn't it her blind curse that ended forever the possibility of Krishna's children being born, quietly accepted by the great god, perhaps to forever end the cycle of vicious violence.

That is mythology teaching us the power of seeing, something the modern world has increasingly forgotten. It took a pandemic of Covid-19 proportions for humanity to really see what damage it had done to itself, to the material world, and to the natural world. The long lines of migrants walking home, clutching their meagre belongings, carrying their memories of abandonment in their heads. The pile-up of bodies at crematoriums. The hoarding of food and essentials by those who could afford to. The empty trains, buses, streets, schools, offices, bazaars. And then there was what could not be seen and yet was so potent, a virus 1/10,000th the size of the period at the end of this sentence which had reduced all of the world's living to a voluntary quarantine. Perhaps in the end we were like TS Eliot's Tiresias, the blind prophet, seeing everything and yet nothing.

Is it surprising then that in some cultures the evil eye is such a recognisable way of warding off the inevitable awful? In India, it is the *nazar*, the word for sight, often warded off by



**STRESS, ANXIETY, OVERWORK, ALL OF IT HAD AN EFFECT ON THE EYES. IN POPULAR CULTURE, THE EYES HAD IT AGAIN. SUSANNE BIER'S *THE UNDOING* FOCUSED ON NICOLE KIDMAN'S EYES TO SHOW HER INTERIOR CONFLICT**

a combination of *nimbu* and *mirch* (lemon and chilli) which a self-confident nation now feels quite at home in hanging on the frame of a Rafale. Whether it is in the bazaars of Istanbul or on the wrist of Kim Kardashian, the cobalt-blue eye is a charm that works even in cultures where superstition doesn't rule. According to the Greek philosopher Plutarch, the human eye had the power of releasing invisible rays of energy that were in some cases powerful enough to kill children or small animals. Cue Medusa's gaze. Any one who looked into her eyes was turned into stone.

**I**n the performing arts, though, the most damage the eyes could do was to convey strong emotions. Bharatnatyam dancer Rama Vaidyanathan says: "We knew this as dancers, but during the pandemic when we had to cover our faces showing only our eyes, we realised even more, the pride of position that the eyes occupy on our faces. With a mask worn a smile or a frown needs to be communicated solely through the eyes, since we do not have the

luxury of the lips to help us do the job. In fact, one of my students showed the whole *nava rasas* just through her eyes, with her face in a mask." A great exercise in *abhinaya*. It's something actor Divyenndu, last seen and celebrated in *Mirzapur*, agrees with. As an actor, he says, it is always harder to portray silences. "If you're not true to the character or the narrative, the camera will catch out the lie."

The eyes have a special place in Urdu poetry, celebrated by poets from Jigar Moradabadi to Jan Nisar Akhtar. Look at popular songs. Gulzar can write about the eyes that ask personal questions in '*Kajra Re*' from *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005) and people can pound the dance floor to it across countries without fully appreciating the beauty of the verse (*Aankhein bhi kamal karti hain/Personalise sawal karti hain/Palko ko uthati bhi nahi/Parde ka khayal karti hain*). But go back into the past and the eyes are everywhere, from '*Aankhon hi aankhon mein ishaara ho gaya, baithe baithe jeene ka sahaara ho gaya*' by the soulful Geeta Dutt

in *CID* (1956) to '*Jaaneman, jaaneman, tere do nayan*' by Yesudas in *Choti Si Baat* (1976).

Perhaps Covid-19 will inspire a new burst of poetry in praise of the eyes. It has certainly increased visits to ophthalmologists with questions about failing eyesight. A recent report from a global PC market leader indicated that 91 per cent of respondents in India agree that they have increased laptop usage during this pandemic, even more than the global average of 85 per cent. It has also changed the beauty game, with eye makeup sales up 204 per cent year-on-year for the three-month period ending in June. From how-to guides for bold eyes and tips for how to apply mask makeup, beauty influencers on YouTube and TikTok acquired new following.

Nine years after *Blindness* (1995), Saramago published *Seeing*, about the same city being afflicted by a plague of blank ballots, where citizens refuse to exercise their rights as voters. There is a delicious possibility there and a lesson for leaders in a post-pandemic world. The people will simply refuse to see them, to recognise them. That will be a contagion of another kind. ■



BY ULLEKH NP



# TO THE EDGE OF SORROW

The evolution of grief

**M**y first experiences with grief were from the stories of my grandmother. For an old and benign woman of sunny disposition, she

had a penchant for narrating the grimmest of stories with us children huddled around her in rapt attention, taut in fear of her delivering a shocking finale in those early evening sessions. They were either related to relatives or picked up cleverly from the Puranas. Her favourite was about the plight of Sita, who, hoping to escape from an unjust world, returns to the womb of her mother, the earth, which splits open to save her from her difficult life as a woman spurned and exiled to the forest by her husband, Lord Rama, over an apparently frivolous reason.

Another was about the beheading of Drona, the royal guru of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, when he laid down arms in the battlefield due to unfathomable sorrow after he was tricked into believing that his son Ashwatthama was killed in the battle of Kurukshetra. These experiences were from my pre-school days and, as it happens, still have the power to create a tinge of anguish and loss.

The later experience was more personal, a sudden death that many people are experiencing with greater frequency thanks to Covid-19—or is it that there is more shock about the pandemic that has taken lives in a way nobody expected any disease to do in these modern times? Covid-19 has, without





Relatives  
prepare for the  
cremation of a  
Covid victim in  
Guwahati,  
September 28

Photo AP



doubt, unleashed a wave of torment, a mental fatigue, across the world that is unlikely to be healed easily.

When I hear of parents or siblings of friends and even friends who never had any health conditions passing away after contracting the coronavirus, I am anxious for my own loved ones and, very often, reminded of my father's premature death at the age of 41 when I was just five years old. His death didn't generate immediate angst or suffering because it was a death well mourned with people coming and going in an unending stream of familiar and strange and new faces. True, grief was all around with people giving vent to their sadness in a variety of ways: wails, cries, tight hugs. But as a little child, this hubbub is precisely what insulated me: to children, people milling and leaving as if in some mysterious cadence tends to appear like a mild celebration. It was only later when the crowds left, and maybe years later, that the grief began to set in.

The late Swiss-American psychiatrist Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has talked famously about the stages of grief. For a child of four or five, these stages don't follow their usual order. Grief doesn't start with denial or end with acceptance—at least in my case it didn't. But I feel for my friends and even strangers who had to mourn and grieve their near and dear in this unforgettable year and hope that those stages come sequentially because that is what helps you cope and overcome: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Everyone seeks a closure for their grief, but sometimes they try to underestimate the scale of scars inside. It has happened with the Jews who migrated to the US looking for a new beginning after escaping persecution and death in Hitler's concentrations camps in Nazi Germany and neighbouring countries. Tales of their parents and grandparents attempting to start over and failing have been documented by hundreds of writers over the past 75-odd years. Research into post-traumatic psychiatric morbidity has revealed that their suffering is no different from soldiers in long and intermittent wars, a condition generally described as 'soldier's heart' or Da Costa's syndrome whose symptoms include fatigue from exercise, chest pain, palpitations, sweating and shortness of breath. It is named after Jacob Mendes Da Costa who investigated into such disorders among participants of the American Civil War.

Psychiatrists Yoram Barak and Henry Szor have examined Holocaust survivors and World War II veterans. They found that rather than starting afresh, the majority of them had post-traumatic stress disorder '[persisting] into old age' although age at the time of trauma is a crucial factor ('Lifelong Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Evidence from Aging Holocaust Survivors', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, March 2000). They concluded that for those survivors who turned psychotic, memory remained a burden for long. Many of them paid for being in denial for too long.

People who have been through unexpected losses and

therefore prolonged grief naturally find ways to cope, although like Holocaust survivors and soldiers back from extended wars, there are chances of them being at a disadvantage of ignoring their inner demons. Viktor Frankl has written about this in his deeply moving *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). Laura Hillenbrand's powerful biography of World War II survivor Louis Zamperini, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (2014), too, acknowledges this part of his life.

**P** sychologists and psychiatrists note that for those who end up in such conditions due to bereavement, recovery is easier when they believe they have done what they could to make the departed happy in life. Regret is an unsparing burden. Also, those who have a lasting sense of purpose to do something worthwhile to commemorate the dead—and this includes taking up a social cause after the untimely death of a loved one—are able to come to terms with their loss quicker. In this context, experts believe that rituals, religious or otherwise, performed to honour the dead also play a role in healing as one feels, thanks to faith and conviction, that one is reverential of those who have gone from their lives.

## IN INDIA, IT IS MEDICAL INDIFFERENCE THAT IS PROVING COVID-19 HAS FALLEN UPON US THIS YEAR LIKE AN CATASTROPHES, THOUGH, COVID-19 IS ALSO LIKELY TO

What, from a practical point of view, assuages the minds of mourning families is the idea of being together. Here comes the role of customs in paying respect to the dead—in societies I am familiar with in India, irrespective of religion, there are elaborate post-cremation and post-burial ceremonies and functions that more or less announce the closure of someone passing. In Kerala, according to Thiruvananthapuram-based trained priest and expert in Vedic and Tantric rites Jayakrishnan Nair, the *Garudapurana* is the ultimate text for death rituals among Hindus. While these customs were passed on to other communities from the Brahmins of the state over a long period, 41 days of observance is key even though, thanks to life in the fast lane, people have reduced the number of days of mourning at least by half. Another Vedic scholar from Kannur, K Sanil Kumar, who has contrarian views on the subject, points out that Santhigiri Ashram founded by Karunakara Guru, which follows Ayurvedic and Siddha practices, advocates burial to cremation even though the latter is not frowned upon. "The rituals are meant for a much broader purpose, but observing them offers solace to individuals and families and helps them cope with tragedies," he avers. Elaborate rites for the dead are not unheard of in many parts of India as well as the world. Communities the world over take pride in their rituals.

However, in India, some of the rites performed are not only for close relatives or friends or even humans but also for anything and everything that exists on earth, animate or inanimate.

Grief pushes some to pursue painful missions. People, such as Delhi-based Neelam Katara, who fought a court battle against her son Nitish's well-connected and powerful killers. More than 14 years after his brutal honour-killing by the kin of his former girlfriend, the Supreme Court awarded the two relatives and a hired assassin 25 years' imprisonment without remission. The accused had earlier used their political connections to get frequent bails. Helen Todd's iconic lawsuit against an Indonesian general responsible for the killing of her 20-year-old son Kamal Bamadhaj in 1991 along with close to 300 others in the notorious Dili massacre in East Timor attracted global attention to the cause of the people of that region, which became an independent nation and separated from Indonesia in 1999. For Stan Marsden, a father who lost his son to drug overdose in Alaska, liberation from trauma came from carving and building what became the 'Healing Heart totem pole'. It even helped some Vietnam War veterans to recover from alcoholism. The lesson from these stories is that a sense of purpose and a feeling of community uplift people on the brink.

William Genovese, a Vietnam War veteran who lost both

who had shifted to India from the US to live with her parents some years ago as her brother too lived abroad, was worried what the isolation would do to her gregarious mother. Doctors then reported that Vasundhara had suffered brain damage. Her confinement in the ICU stretched to a month. Her daughter took to prayer and begged alternative therapists and spiritually inclined friends to send her mother "healing energy". When Vasundhara finally passed away, alone in a cold hospital ward, what her daughter found most devastating was that a woman so full of life and love had not been able to see any of her family before she passed; she had last met her son years ago.

Her experience is being played out on a larger scale across India even as the coronavirus is mutating around the world. Human-rights activist Harsh Mander shared his Covid-19 experience in a public hospital ward and how the isolation, indifference and alleged medical negligence by the authorities left him with brain injury and nearly cost him his life. The unpreparedness of the medical fraternity in India in the face of such a devastating pandemic is only exacerbating the emotional trauma that victims and their families have to face. It is therefore most likely that we are underestimating the collective trauma caused by the viral disease, which has till date claimed more than 1.4 lakh

## TO BE THE SILENT, UNNOTICED KILLER. LIKE WARS OR NATURAL CATASTROPHES, UNEXPECTED VISITOR OUT TO SHOCK THE HUMAN RACE. UNLIKE WARS OR NATURAL LEAVE IN ITS WAKE MORE INSIDIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF ENORMOUS GRIEF

his legs, felt less aggrieved due to his own trauma and more owing to his sister's murder when he was barely 16, an event that altered his life. The name of Kitty Genovese became synonymous with 'bystander apathy' due to a *New York Times* report in 1964 that none of the 38 witnesses outside her flat in Queens, New York did anything as she was stabbed to death by her attacker. However, in a documentary about Kitty's murder titled *The Witness* by James D Solomon, William Genovese goes on to uncover the truth and nail the media lie 50 years after his sister's death. Williams found, and was relieved, that there were people who did help her and that she died in the arms of her friend—and that more than the apathy of the bystander, it was the police that was indifferent.

In India in the time of Covid, it is medical indifference that is proving to be the silent, unnoticed killer. Take Vasundhara Khanna (named changed on request), a 70-year-old Gurugram resident whose friends admired her for her "jolly" nature, childlike laughter and "positive" outlook in the face of adversities, which were too many in her life. She got a cold in September and soon tested positive for Covid-19. While her husband recovered, Vasundhara had to be admitted to a prestigious hospital nearby in the ICU after her breathing became laboured. Visitors were disallowed. Her 36-year-old daughter,

Indians and over 17 lakh worldwide and has long surpassed the fatalities of the Vietnam War or, for that matter, the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war, or the Siege of Leningrad or the death toll in Auschwitz. The disease continues to wreak havoc.

By the time the pandemic is under control, most of us would have a friend, a relative or an acquaintance who died from Covid-19 or is gravely impacted by it or living with its after-effects. Like wars or natural catastrophes, Covid has fallen upon us this year like an unexpected visitor out to shock the human race, irrespective of social or other statuses—or even the economic prowess of a country. Unlike wars or natural catastrophes, though, Covid-19 is also likely to leave in its wake more insidious consequences of enormous grief. For many of us who took pride (false, in hindsight) in the advances of 21st-century medical science and technology and had begun contemplating living long, healthy lives and had even daydreamed about immortality (thanks to major leaps in regenerative medicine), Covid-19 has left a rude message: like its bounty, never underestimate the implacable ways of nature. All this has resulted in people taking a new look at life, a closer one, in which we are unlearning and re-learning our approaches to life and death. Perhaps as much as we hope for a medical or scientific revolution, a human revolution is also in order. ■





# LAUGH OUT LOUD

Suddenly the joke is on us



# W

**hy did the doctor break into a bout of laughter? He ran out of jokes.**

It was 6 pm on a Friday evening when I cagily accepted Dr Madan Kataria's

Zoom invite. I had been advised to expect no comedy and great peals of laughter, but nothing could have prepared me for page after page of scenes from around the world, ringing with cacophonous laughs, deliberate and gratuitous. These quivering portraits, set in plain living rooms, a Latvian hair salon, a library in Nashik with colour-coded shelves, a geriatric bedroom, an art studio in Greece, a teen's study, were answering a desperate call for joy and laughter in response to the vagaries of life. Clearly, the German sociologist Norbert Elias was wrong to propose that laughter had come to be civilised over the years and lost much of its demonic edge. The mirthless, manic laughter emanating from my screen was demonic because it seemed to echo the true chaos of actual events. Surely the young Latvian hairstylist had had a lean year, even if she was now masked up and curling a customer's hair while laughing and miming at her Zoom window. The Punjabi septuagenarian in a hand-knit sweater who was throwing her hands up in the air, likely spent a lonely summer indoors. Why, we could all use a laugh. And laughter by preternaturally smart comic would so hit the spot at a time when formulaic jokes no longer seem kosher, nor does the rash generality of ethnic slurs on Sardars who are out on the streets protesting the farm bills.

Being po-faced is just not an option for some people. "We are not leaving laughter to chance," says Dr Kataria, founder of the 'laughter yoga' movement, a breathing exercise-based wellness programme that turns the Hobbesian edict of laughter being an infirmity of human nature on its head. Science has shown that laughter—the body doesn't seem to care if it is real or simulated—indeed releases endorphins and serotonin and has an anti-inflammatory effect on the heart and the lungs. "Naturally induced laughter barely lasts three-four seconds. You need to laugh heartily for much longer to reap the benefits. You need to tire yourself out," Dr Kataria tells me. For 25 years now—starting with a laughter club in a park in Lokhandwala, Mumbai—he has manufactured laughter to 'heal' people, and he has done it by separating the event of laughter from the cause. That laughter acquires a life of its own, like a reptilian tail that continues to wiggle after being detached from the

body. If you have never had a close encounter with the delusive optimism of a neighbourhood laughter club, you haven't experienced middle-class India. "Humour can turn negative. Simulated laughter is a physical exercise—and you can practise it to keep your spirits high when there is nothing to laugh about." In 2020, in particular, when it was okay to go sappy, to share playlists, to embrace 'self-care' trends, and to meditate on meditation, laughter was another leap of faith—a harmless contagion to mitigate the one that was in the air. Friedrich Nietzsche, in all his tragic wisdom, would have ROFL'd through the year. "Over 2.5 lakh people in India laugh in public parks, beaches, health clubs and fitness centres—and now on Zoom. The best kind of laughter originates in the body and repairs the mind. This is also the essence of the tradition of *ananda* in Indian culture, where joy and laughter stem mostly from celebrating togetherness with song and dance. Indian laughter comes from the body, not from the mind," Dr Kataria offers.

The Indian idea of laughter is more diverse, complex and twisted than that. Consider these lines from a cryptic hymn to frogs we find in the Rig Veda, wedged between weighty odes to the gods:

*They who lay quiet for a year, the Brahmins who fulfil their vows,  
The frogs have lifted up their voice, the voice Parjanya hath  
inspired...*

*As the Brahmins, sitting round the brimful vessel talk at the Soma  
rite of Atiratra,  
So, frogs, ye gather round the pool to honour this day of all the year,  
the first of rain-time.*

The parody on the unceasing chanting of Brahmins momentarily redistributes power by equating the highest echelons of society with pond-dwelling creatures, and may well have got ancient Indians croaking with laughter. A standard comic trope in Sanskrit drama of an exchange of souls between a Brahmin and a courtesan achieves the same effect, while Valmiki's viciously funny description of Surpanakha as 'the abominable one', too ugly, fat and old to desire Rama, reinforces power relations and plumbs the depths of body-shaming. However, more than the laughter of superiority—Plato's *schadenfreude*—it is laughter that sees through deceptions which rings through Indian literature. The chicanery



of holy men and the facade of dignity surrounding royalty are exposed by court jesters who spare no one, least of all the king. In a chapter titled 'Laughter' in her book *Time Pieces*, historian Nayanjot Lahiri cites an episode from Kalidasa's *Abhijnana-sakuntalam*, where the much-married King Dushyanta falls headlong in love with Shakuntala, a hermit's daughter. Madhavya, the *vidushaka* (court jester), tells him: 'For a man who has overdosed on dates, the sourness of the tamarind has its attractions—and you, having gorged yourself on beautiful women, want this girl.' It is one of many beautiful taunts that serve as comic relief in a heavily sentimental work. If the Ramayana, that most tragic of Indian epics, employs the antics of the monkey army as comic relief, the Mahabharata abounds in ludicrous improprieties—from a cross-dressing Arjuna pretend-struggling with his weapons to the braggart prince Uttara who claims he will decimate the Kaurava army all by himself, only to attempt to flee the scene of battle later. "For me, *hasya* or *samatkara*, is like punctuation, a pause in the serious action of art, perhaps a technique to humanise the divine creative act. Or in modern parlance, a way to 'keep it real' and not take yourself too seriously," says Sanskrit and Telugu scholar and musician Srinivas Reddy.

**C**omics served as Indian society's truth tellers and came in all shapes and colours: they were satirists and mystics, mythic pranksters, village idiots—"You must have one, just as you must have a well. You cannot be a self-respecting village without one," writes American novelist Lee Siegel in his 1987 book *Laughing Matters*, where he explores the comic tradition in India—and most commonly, court jesters who hid their wisdom behind their deformities and used the sotto voce of comedy to point out the vice and folly of rulers the way 'one inserts a needle into a plantain'. The most popular rulers could laugh at themselves and at the deeply flawed society they had built. A beloved act from the Sanskrit tradition of the *prahasana*—a farcical drama—is the Pallava king Mahendravarman I's *Mattavilasa* (the sport of drunkards), a commentary on the 'degenerate' religious sects of 7th century CE that rings true to this day. The equivalent today would be a witty press conference of the sort Vladimir Putin pulled off in 2014, unleashing joke after joke, including, when a journalist asked about billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky wanting to run for president, replying, dead pan, "Of what country?" Irony died a wintry death as the king of meme nation and a muzzler of creative freedoms flaunted his funny bone.

At the heart of Indian comedy is an incongruous disregard for the most powerful beings, including kings and gods. In Sanskrit literature, Shiva, with his immense laughter (*attahasa*), is like Democritus, the 'laughing philosopher' who first proposed a theory of atoms and was irrepressibly bemused 'at the useless seriousness of human beings'. And yet, the same Shiva, whose laughter birthed Ganesha, himself becomes a comic victim of Kama; and in a Tamil song by Papavinasu Mudaliar, is imagined as a cripple hobbling about on one foot. Thus levity, the handmaiden of reverence, renders the divine human in the Bhakti-era paradigm of the *ninda-stuti*—praise in the form of censure.

When Bharata, in the *Natyasastra*, deemed the comic sentiment to be 'primarily the prerogative of women and low-class people', he was being disingenuous. Lord Shiva's raucous laughter continues to echo through the Indian comedy scene, or at least it did until the coronavirus shut down our clubs and our sense of humour. "Indians tend to laugh loudly," says stand-up comic Anuvab Pal, 45, who has come to acknowledge the magic of live performance after 10 months of talking to virtual audiences. The best laughter is the kind that comes from a sense of belonging—when we are laughing with someone, and usually at someone. Any number of Netflix specials and OTT shows—Pal wrote a divorce comedy for Amazon Prime during the lockdown, called *Wakalat from Home*—cannot

SCIENCE HAS SHOWN THAT LAUGHTER—THE BODY DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE IF IT IS REAL OR SIMULATED—INDEED RELEASES ENDORPHINS AND SEROTONIN AND HAS AN ANTI-INFLAMMATORY EFFECT ON THE HEART AND THE LUNGS. BUT IN 2020, LAUGHTER WAS ANOTHER LEAP OF FAITH



Dr Madan Kataria (centre) and his laughter club in Mumbai

replace it. “In March and April, there was panic in my voice. I didn’t know what would happen to storytelling. I was defeatist—who would want comedy at a time like this? And yet, I have conducted two comedy workshops, besides doing Zoom shows, podcasts and collaborations with other creators,” Pal says. “In the early days of the pandemic, we had to request people to keep their cameras on. By now, I have looked into more Indian homes than I care to. There is a lovely level of disrespect that has kept me grounded. Once, there was a man who ate a whole chicken while watching the show, and another who had the TV on while I was a side act he glanced at every now and then.” Pal says he is not a sentimental person, yet, when people reached out on social media to thank him for providing a service and making a bad year better, he felt like he had “fulfilled a kind of responsibility”. Like Bob Hope entertaining American soldiers in World War II, I venture, except Hope sidled up to the establishment and stood disconnected from reality. “This year has been a wake-up call for Indian comics. We have only seen peacetime and we are a lazy, disgusting, spoilt generation—at least I knew a pre-liberalisation India when it was hard to get a Fiat car,” Pal says. If humour is all about the element of surprise—an involuntary cry against automatism—the coronavirus crisis has scored one back on comics. They, in turn, have recovered from the initial shock and made it part of their repertoire, for no humour works as well as hypercontextualised humour and the universe, for the first time in ages, has the same context.

The lives of singles in 2020 would make great fodder for *akam* (love) poetry. In Tamil literature, while humour may not be the main *rasa*—the twin pillars of *sringaram* (beauty) and *veeram* (courage) find pride of place—it is like water that makes all the other dishes palatable, says S Raghuraman, a scholar of Tamil literature and dance. “In Sangam poetry, humour is an important faculty of conversation between lovers. Without it, romance would be all longing and lament,” he says. *Tholkappiam*, the Sangam-era treatise on grammar and poetry, cites four reasons for laughter: *ellal* (ridicule), *ilamai* (youthful mirth), *pedhamai* (superiority) and *madam* (stupidity). But like Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy, much of this remains in the realm of literary theory, with the real humour spilling into the streets in the form of folk theatre (*therukoothu*),

Adiyogi statue of Shiva at Coimbatore



**IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE, SHIVA, WITH HIS IMMENSE LAUGHTER (ATTAHASA), IS LIKE DEMOCRITUS, THE ‘LAUGHING PHILOSOPHER’ WHO WAS BEMUSED ‘AT THE USELESS SERIOUSNESS OF HUMAN BEINGS’. AND YET, THE SAME SHIVA, WHOSE LAUGHTER BIRTHED GANESHA, HIMSELF BECOMES A COMIC VICTIM OF KAMA**

wandering poets like Kalamegha Pulavar (15th century CE) whose snark knew no bounds, devotional poetry that was meant to be recited, and hilarious *pallavis* that lit a spark in the most prim of classical music halls. The spontaneity that is so important to humour resides in an 8th-century poem by the Tamil saint Sundarar about how Shiva, whom he addresses as a friend, betrays him in his dalliance with a farmer’s daughter he is then forced to marry; it is the sharp tongue of Kalamegham who, when pressed to compose a poem after being offered a much-needed drink of buttermilk, sings of the origin of water and likens it to the dilute concoction. Latter-day literature and art have largely forsaken humour and refused to celebrate the imperfect human being.

“As children, we laugh about 140 times a day and as adults, it falls to about 15. In a hospital, it is almost zero,” says Rohini Rau, a 34-year-old doctor at the Department of Internal Medicine, Kauvery Hospital, Chennai. Rau is the force behind the hospital clowning project of The Little Theatre group, and as the name suggests, makes it her business to make patients at government hospital wards laugh. “Laughter is not the main goal.

The goal is to get control back to the patient, who often tends to feel like he or she is at the beck and call of doctors and nurses. Clowning breaks the status quo between doctors, nurses and patients. It gives them something other than their troubles to talk about,” says Dr Rau, whose troupe of 13 is the only one in India trained in a three-level module that includes CPR training, entertainment techniques and understanding the pulse of a hospital ward. “We go in knowing that it is not a cooperative audience. We can’t impose on them, but we can play to the child in everyone using techniques like magic, jokes, singing, dancing and theatre. We go in pairs, without expecting reactions, and if someone doesn’t want to participate, we play in the corridor by ourselves.” The Government Children’s Hospital in Egmore, Chennai, had been hosting the troupe once or twice a week until Covid-19 struck. Ironically, at a time when patients most crave laughter, the wards are out of bounds for hospital clowns. Dr Rau misses the secret handshake they shared with the security guards, and the children miss the imaginary ball rolling down the crowded ward. It is said that there is no laughter without a victim. Laughter itself is the victim in this joke that has been played on mankind. ■



BY AMITA SHAH



# LIPSTICK ON YOUR MASK

The power of the hidden

**O**n a muggy September morning in the early 1980s, my mother dressed my nine-year-old brother as a Malabar Muslim woman, draping him in a white saree, tucking his hair under a head cover, putting on several golden ear clips and lightly applying *kajal* (kohl) with the tip of her ring finger in his eyes, for a school fancy dress parade. She then gave him a betel leaf, saying women often chewed it to stain their lips red. That was the final touch.

It was around the same time that a friend gifted me Robert Edwin Herzstein's *The Nazis*, which gave a glimpse into Hitler's private life with his companion Eva Braun, at the Berghof, his Alpine retreat near the Austrian border. 'To ensure the Führer's privacy, the entire complex was fenced and patrolled day and night by the SS. Hitler himself added to the regimentation, establishing stringent house rules for Eva, their guests and the permanent staff: no smoking, no whistling, no dancing, no heavy makeup or nail polish, no letter writing or diary keeping—and absolutely no political discussion.' The chapter had an image of Eva powdering her face 'defying Hitler's orders'.

The dictator was known to have detested red lipstick, in particular. Braun's devotion to Hitler, reflected in a letter to him, in which she says, 'you know my whole life is loving you,' did not keep her from treasuring a red lipstick. In 2016, her silver lipstick case engraved with 'EB', with a tiny mirror inside, sold for £360 at the Philip Serrell auction house in Malvern, UK.

What was it about a three-inch tube filled with creamy colour that had the entire universe dancing around it, from ancient times till the world came to a standstill, paused by a virus which masked the lips? The lipstick, the last stroke of makeup on the face, at times the masterstroke, for the first time, slipped

into oblivion, hidden or omitted. Sitting before the mirror, even the diehard lipstick wearer would think twice before colouring the lips. The lipstick will be invisible, it may smudge, it could leave an ugly stain on the mask. The lips, her most sensuous feature, the one giving expression to her intimacy, sexuality and love, remain hidden. She may as well focus on adorning the eyes, the only other feature, arguably as expressive, visible over the mask, or just altogether ignore her appearance.

Beauty experts say it is not as simple. After an initial compliance with the unprecedented changes that the life-threatening pandemic brought into the world, the forfeiting of lipstick being counted among the least of the cardinal ones, there has been an innate longing to return to 'normalcy'. The lipstick is no exception. For a while, the focus turned to dramatic eye makeup—kohl, mascara, liner, eye shadow. Women are again exploring options to stain their lips, a formula that could survive the mask. They are not giving up. They are trying to defy the mask. After all, the lipstick has been about rebellion through its history across the world.

In the 1930s, just as World War II began, the lipstick was getting more popular in the US and Europe. The Nazis' disdain for it only made women in the Allied forces flaunt it. Though ingredients used in it, like petroleum and castor oil, were diverted for the war making them scarce, in the UK, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ensured there was no rationing of lipstick, to keep the morale high. By the early 1940s, as more American women stepped out to work and even joined the service, Elizabeth Arden created the 'Montezuma Red' lipstick, named after a line in the Marines' Hymn. An advertisement for Montezuma Red showing a black-and-white image of a woman in uniform with only the lips, scarf and hat chord in deep red, read: 'Inspired by the brave, true red of the hat chord, scarf and

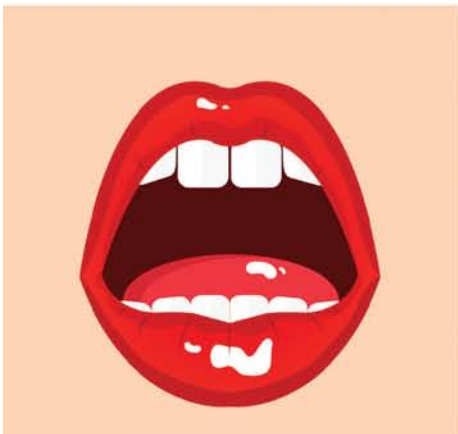
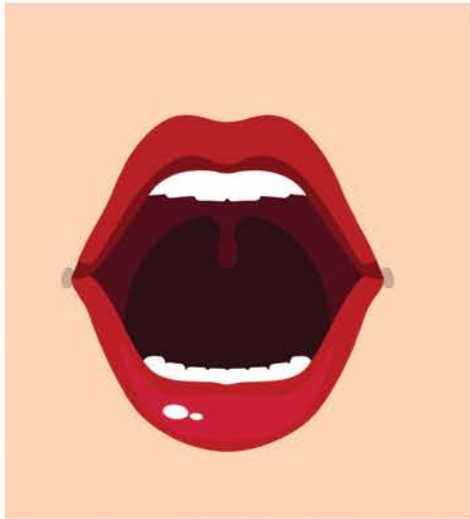


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



chevrons of the Women in the Marines. A vivid red to wear with white, grey, beige, navy and tweeds. A tribute to some of the bravest men and women in the world.' It symbolised hope, confidence and patriotism. Along with it was also Montezuma rouge and red nail polish. Arden then came out with 'Victory Red' lipstick for the general public. Nearly three decades before that, in New York outside her Red Door parlour, she gave out classic red-coloured lipsticks to women as 15,000 suffragettes marched demanding the right to vote. The red lipstick stood for liberation.

In another part of the world, it was still outside the realm of ceremoniousness. But, when it comes to lipstick, women have always found a way to defy the patriarchal frown, which deepens if the colour is red. If it was Marilyn Monroe, who had said 'put on some red lipstick and live a little' in Hollywood, in India, it was Madhubala who dared to wear the bold red lipstick. Their smiling images, almost devoid of makeup, barring the cupid-shaped red swipe on their parted lips, inspired women who were torn between emulating the look and giving in to the conservative scorn for it. It left the men squirming in their hypocritical gaze, which desired and detested it, finding it seductive and repulsive.



MADHUBALA IN A PHOTOSHOOT FOR LIFE MAGAZINE

**IF IT WAS MARILYN MONROE, WHO HAD SAID 'PUT ON SOME RED LIPSTICK AND LIVE A LITTLE' IN HOLLYWOOD, IN INDIA, IT WAS MADHUBALA WHO DARED TO WEAR THE BOLD RED LIPSTICK. THEIR SMILING IMAGES INSPIRED WOMEN WHO WERE TORN BETWEEN EMULATING THE LOOK AND GIVING IN TO THE CONSERVATIVE SCORN FOR IT**

**T**he more it was forbidden, the more lipstick became a symbol of defiance. The more women were morose, the more they soaked their lips in colour to lift their spirits. The pandemic brought in a foreboding of uncertainty; a fear of the unknown and ambiguity about the future. It was about living each day as it came, cherishing the moment. The mask was non-negotiable. Gradually, the dreary blue surgical masks got replaced with the colourful ones. The lips, sealed with a mask, at least till the vaccine frees them from it, gasped for a non-transferable formula. For a woman who has revelled in the effulgence of the lipstick, leaving it bare psychologically accentuates the blues. Embellishing the lips is a way of feeling optimistic in the darkness, empowering her to face the new way of life. The mask prescribed a new benchmark—to look beautiful in a woman's own eyes.

Celebrity makeup artist Arti Nayar says the mask does not deter women from wearing lipstick. "One would think that with the mask, women don't wear lipstick. The only difference is they may prefer a matte one. If you are working from home, you feel 'let me get ready', like on any normal day. It's about a semblance of normalcy to keep your sanity intact."

One of the online searches on lipstick in India filled up the screen with a series of Indian pornographic sites revolving around 'red lipstick'. Yet, there was the other side. In images of Hindu goddesses, the lips appeared redder than their natural colour. The lipstick survived its dichotomy, but remained ensnared in it. India needed an Arden. An activist herself, she had said: "I don't sell cosmetics, I sell hope." Years later, another American businessman, Peter Nivio Zarlenga, the author of *The Orator*, said, "In our factory, we make lipstick. In our advertising, we sell hope." A Max Factor advertisement for three shades of 'Clear Red', an 'alluring lipstick strategy', in the 1950s, featuring actress Elizabeth Taylor, captures its symbolism—'bold, singing, daring, dramatic.' A *Vogue* cover saying 'International Good Looks' in 1958, had a sketch of a chiselled visage of a woman with bright red lipstick. Makeup moguls in the West eulogised the lipstick, taking it beyond its association with prostitutes and witchcraft or being restricted to actors and the nobility.

"The pandemic seems to have changed some habits for a few of us, as most of us are either working from home or wearing masks the moment we step out. I do believe women working from home are, particularly now, turning back towards their favourite lipsticks, especially for their Zoom meetings. And, if stepping out, women will, by and large, continue to carry a lip colour, just in case they are caught off guard. So if you are a lipstick woman you are always going to find a way to get some colour back into your life, mask or no mask," says celebrity makeup artist Puneet B

Saini. Known for her work in Bollywood films like *Bombay Velvet*, *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* and *PK*, she rarely uses a single product and mixes colours and textures to create one in the moment. According to her, the act of wearing lipstick will always be an alluring one. “It is to either reflect or change our moods or to share a part of our personality with the rest of the world. I have known quite a few women don a bright coral or red just to make the day seem better and some to never steer away from their one personal favourite, no matter what the occasion.”

In India, staining the lips red goes back to mythology and ancient history, figuring in texts like Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra* and Kalidas’ *Kumarasambhavam*, which mention ‘*Alaktaka*’, a red resin of a plant used to colour lips. Kunda B Patkar writes in *Herbal Cosmetics in Ancient India* that the ancient science of cosmetology is believed to have originated in Egypt and India, with evidence of use of cosmetics by men and women, and oral hygiene in the form of care of teeth, mouth deodorants and colouring of lips being daily chores to be religiously pursued. “Significantly, the use of cosmetics was directed not only towards developing an outwardly pleasant and attractive personality, but towards achieving merit, longevity and happiness.” Patkar, tracing the first existence of cosmetic substances to the Indus Valley Civilisation between 2500 and 1550 BCE, said the earliest reference to a beautician was from the Mahabharata, when Draupadi worked for the queen of Virata as a *sairandhri*, an attendant in the women’s section of the palace, carrying a *prasad-hana petika*, a vanity case.

“Women everywhere love lipstick. It makes a woman a head-turner. She does not fade into the background. It makes her feel bold and confident, the same reasons why men hate it. In India, men have always had a problem with fire engine red lipstick,” says makeup artist and hair stylist Ambika Pillai. In her career of 34 years, she says, it took three decades to see women in India wearing bright lipsticks.

A part of everyday life for many women, who never imagined life without it, the pandemic was the first time that they were at odds with themselves when it came to lipstick. Pillai says lips were always behind the mask in yesteryears. “It took years to change. The images of goddesses may have red lips and voluptuous figures. But, that’s the ideal, not the everyday woman.” According to her, Indian women stuck to the “staid and boring” browns because it was more muted on their skin tones and men did not have a problem with that. More than a decade ago, Pillai had come out with her own range of lipsticks, of which ‘Red Hot’, a fresh bright red, she says, is actor Sushmita Sen’s all-time favourite.

Over its 5,000-year history, the world over, the story of makeup for a woman’s most erotic feature has taken several twists and turns—adorning lips of queens, facing religious denunciation in the Middle Ages, suffering blame for sorcery,

standing for sheer grit, emerging as a status symbol, getting smeared for evoking carnal desire and drawing admiration for its erotic appeal. It was sacrilege and sublime.

“Desire, like lipstick, is supposed to be secretive. It was never associated with the Sati-Savitri image of an Indian woman. Yet, I have seen all my aunts wear lipstick. It has undergone a transformation. It’s a form of rebellion,” says Ratna Pathak Shah, who was lauded for her role as a woman in her fifties wanting to learn to swim and give expression to her secret desires, in the Hindi film *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. Alankrita Shrivastava, the writer and director of the film, which tells the story of four women of different age groups trying to break free, says she never thought about the film without its title. “For me, lipstick symbolises the idea of women owning their bodies and desires because that is something prohibitive in a patriarchal milieu. The scene where all four women are getting ready to go for a *mela* denotes hope. It’s like they are putting on warrior paint,” she says.

The paint, hidden under the mask, slipped from the list of makeup favourites, and eye makeup sales went up. According to the spokesperson for Nykaa, an Indian retail seller of beauty

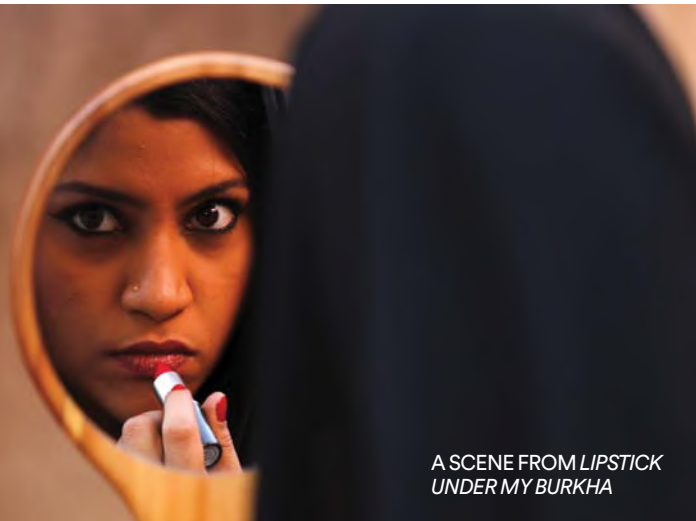
## WHAT WAS IT ABOUT A THREE-INCH TUBE FILLED WITH CREAMY COLOUR THAT HAD THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE DANCING AROUND IT, FROM ANCIENT TIMES TILL THE WORLD CAME TO A STANDSTILL, PAUSED BY A VIRUS WHICH MASKED THE LIPS?

and wellness products, initial phases of the lockdown did see a shift in certain preferences with an increased focus on skincare or personal care. It also showed a rise in demand in makeup for the eye. Nykaa claims it continued to see a steady demand in lipsticks, the difference being that consumers asked for more long-lasting and comfortable formulations. Since the onset of the festive season, makeup sales grew exceeding pre-Covid levels consistently since September, and have shown a growth within all sub-categories—lips, eyes as well as face.

One could argue whether poets have romanticised the lips more, or the eyes. ‘*Mir un nim-baz ankhon mein, saarimasti sharab ki si hai* (Mir in those half-closed eyes, there was intoxication just like wine),’ wrote Meer Taqi Meer, the famous 18th century poet called the *Khudala-e-Sukhan*, the God of Writing. When it came to lips, he has compared their sensuousness with things red in colour. ‘*Nazuki us ke lab ki kya Kahiye, pankhudi ik gulab ki si hai* (What can one say about the tenderness of her lips. It’s like a petal of rose),’ or ‘*lab tire laal-e-naam hain donon, par tamami itaab hain donon* (your two lips are clear rubies, but they completely reflect your anger),’ he wrote.

If the Kohl-lined, half-closed eyes could make an admirer feel heady, quivering or half-parted reddish lips signalled sexuality. The lipstick was stamped on love letters. The ancient





A SCENE FROM *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA*

limestone bust of Nefertiti, seen as an epitome of female beauty with her long neck and chiselled face, has deep red lips. The 14th century BCE wife of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, Nefertiti belonged to a civilisation where cosmetics were an elaborate ritual, deepening the mysterious and seductive charm of its women.

**D**ark (even black) to nude, fiery red to the natural MLBB (my lips but better), the lipstick has waded through an amaranthine palette. Dazzling, bold lipstick—orange, red, pink, purple, green, blue—is making a statement, regardless of judgement on its aesthetics or rectitude. It is a matter of choice. It may be about feeling empowered, or just looking good, or both. As Shrivastava, who herself does not wear lipstick, puts it, “we look at beauty as men see it. But if a woman wants to wear a lipstick, whatever shade it might be, she should be able to.”

Nayar, the makeup artist for stars like Katrina Kaif, Sara Ali Khan and Sonam Kapoor Ahuja, started liking lipstick more as she started growing up. It gives confidence. It completes a look. She says women didn’t experiment with colours as much earlier. Access to social media has opened up the acceptance for bright colours. It has changed the game. It’s not just the lipstick which has undergone a change. The idea of beautiful lips itself has altered from thin lips and a small, delicate mouth to full, luscious and even bee-stung lips. Women are increasingly going in for lip-enhancing procedures, amplifying its erotic appeal. The desire for a sexy pout flooded the market with lipsticks claiming to plump up lips. The lipstick was no longer just about colour.

According to Saini, now one is either a lipstick person or not. There are numerous women who would rather balm or gloss their lips instead of using a solid colour on them. “However, for those who always turn to their lipstick to add a bit of glam or drama, I would think that lipstick has and always, like perfume,

been a very personal choice, though like all beauty and fashion, it continues to go through trends like the weather.”

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, chairman of Estée Lauder, Leonard Lauder, came out with the term ‘Lipstick Index’, claiming that lipstick sales had improved during the early 2000s recession, but this indicator was contested as sales of lipstick went up during an economic upturn. For New York-based television journalist-turned director GERALYN LUCAS, whose memoirs *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy*, on her struggle with breast cancer at 27, a bright red lipstick stood for strength. Recalling the first time she wore red lipstick, which she got as a free gift while she was in college, she wrote, “When I looked in the mirror I was confused. I definitely did not look like Marilyn Monroe, but there was something about myself I didn’t recognise. Some sort of confidence was on my lips staring back at me, daring me to live up to this fierce red lipstick I had just applied.”

Vani Tripathi Tikoo, member of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), actor and former BJP national secretary, says in cinema something as beautiful as the lipstick can stand for the ugliness and the disturbing image of violence against women if it is smudged across the mouth, but it is the context and intention of the filmmaker that matters. A regular lipstick wearer, she says, “When I picked up a lipstick to get ready for my virtual calls during the pandemic, it felt a bit unreal. But it did feel good. I also bought a lipstick online. I think post-pandemic there’s going to be another change and women are going to make up for what may have become redundant for a while.”

Incidentally, it was Elizabeth Taylor, whose fondness for lipstick is lucid in her famous quote, “Pour yourself a drink, put on some lipstick, and pull yourself together.” Taylor played the role of Cleopatra, the Hollywood film named after the Egyptian queen known to have made lip colour using carmine beetles, flowers, red ochre, crushed ants and fish scales. In Europe, the Middle Ages cast their shadow on colouring the lips, adding it to the list of sins. Even that did not stop women from wearing lip salve, made at home with alkanet root and essential oils. But, in 16th-century England, Queen Elizabeth loved red lips against a white face. It was only in 1884 that the first commercial lipstick was made from castor oil, deer tallow and beeswax. Guerlain, a French perfume company, began manufacturing lipsticks towards the end of the 19th century. By the 20th century, that lipstick started gaining acceptance in England. Queen Elizabeth II, who generally wears pink-toned lipsticks, has also worn a deep red matching her rubies. She had commissioned her own red-blue shade to match her coronation robes in 1952. It was named ‘The Balmoral Lipstick’.

The lipstick stands liberated. From the 1959 hit ‘Lipstick on Your Collar’ sung by Connie Francis to the lipstick under the mask, it has earned its place. The beauty of it lies no longer in the eyes of the beholder. The mask only adds to the mystery—hidden, yet powerful. It does not matter if it evokes carnal desires, scorn or admiration. Because only she knows what shade she is wearing, unless she decides to reveal it. ■

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NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE [ ESSAY

# TOGETHER IN AN



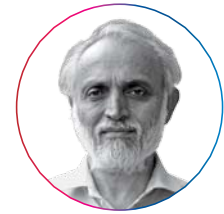
Yama and Nachiketa



# ALIEN UNIVERSE

Reading the Upanishads in the time of a pandemic

BY PARSA VENKATESHWAR RAO JR



**T**

here is the Bhagavad Gita for MBAs, the Mahabharata for diplomats. Can the Upanishads, which occupy the pride of place in the Hindu imagination, be shown to

perform a similar good deed? Can they be made relevant for our times? More importantly, can the Upanishads provide solace in these bleak Covid-19 times, in the 2020s? It is a fair question to ask but we must be prepared to accept the unexpected answer. It seems that the Upanishads are not the inspirational texts that many of us would like to believe them to be.

The question remains as to why we should look at the Upanishads if they serve no purpose, especially in the hour of our need. The honest answer is that we should study them out of sheer curiosity and the tremendous intellectual delight they offer. And these texts are of great value because they fulfil no utilitarian need. That is why we do not find the Upanishads being referred to in any serious discussion, not in the epics, not in the Puranas, not even in the vast religious literature of ancient India. They are ensconced at a height, and no one really looks up to them.

Two examples from ancient India, without trying to fix the elusive dates, show what it was like. We have the story of Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu and the heir of Pandavas. When he is cursed by the son of an ascetic for placing a dead snake around his father's neck to die of snakebite in seven days, the king wants to know the best way of preparing for

death. Vyasa's son, Shuka, tells him that he should listen to the stories of Vishnu and he narrates the stories starting with the death of Krishna, and this is the Bhagavata Purana. Earlier in the Mahabharata, in the 'Vana Parva' where the Pandavas were spending the 12-year exile after Yudhishtira lost his kingdom, brothers and wife in a game of dice, three stories are narrated: one about Nala and Damayanti by Brihadashva; and the other two by sage Markandeya, of Rama and Sita, and of Savitri and Satyavan. The stories are told to Yudhishtira. The first one when he bemoans the fact that he was the accursed one after both Draupadi and Bhima give him a tongue-lashing for his follies and his refusal to plot revenge in a Kshatriya way. In the second and the third instances, Yudhishtira agonises over Draupadi, the daughter of the king of Panchala, subjected to hardship and humiliation. We learn from this what stories fill the slot for solace.

Come down to 19th century Germany, many, many centuries later and we get the declaration of the supreme pessimist of modern Western philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer,

**THERE IS NO YAMA AROUND US TO ANSWER THE QUESTION AS HE DID TO NACHIKETA IN THE KATHA UPANISHAD, NOR IS THERE A SIDURI FOR US AS SHE WAS THERE FOR GILGAMESH. WHAT MATTERS MORE IS HOW HUMAN BEINGS IN A FAR-OFF TIME STRUGGLED WITH THE QUESTION OF DEATH AND THE DIFFERENT ANSWERS THEY GOT**



about the Upanishads, 'In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life. It will be the solace of my death.' Modern Indians have been deriving much solace from the German's—a lonely intellectual giant in the land of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche—paean to the Upanishads. The exhilarating intellectual cosmopolitanism of the era allowed Schopenhauer to reach out across continents, cultures, centuries to appreciate the bracing metaphysics of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Today, in a globalised world that is apparently at the end of its tether, Asia or Europe, recorded history's prime contestants for power and domination, does not enjoy the freedom that Schopenhauer had of admiring Upanishads without losing caste. Not much attention has been paid to global cultural politics where influences from elsewhere are closed. The only exception is technology. Ideas from beyond the tribal boundaries spell suspicion and hostility. Along with trade barriers, cultural barricades too are getting erected. So, in the global pandemic, people in distress and despair cannot hope to reach out to the common cultural roots of humankind, whether it is the Upanishads, Gilgamesh, the Babylonian epic, Homer and Plato, the Book of Job and the Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Suras, Al-Fateha, Al-Baqara, Al-Yasin in the Quran and Prophet Mohammad's farewell speech from Mount Arafat, the less familiar Confucian and Taoist traditions. The transcultural linkages would be crucial now, and in the future, to keep the global dialogue alive because there does not seem to be any way of keeping ourselves ignorant of the other.

These texts are all caught in the crossfire of yours-and-mine. British Victorian poet Matthew Arnold's idea of culture in his polemic against philistinism as 'the best which has been thought and said' should have been the ideal, and it was the ideal in some places such as Germany, in times like that of the German Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This was so in India too when an English-educated Indian intelligentsia emerged, much to the dismay of the British colonial rulers, to lay claim to Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Goethe and Hugo and the humanism that bound them all. But the cosmo-

politanism soon degenerated into lazy syncretism where there was a mindless attempt to reduce everything to dead sameness. In the latter part of the 20th century, the cultural and intellectual inheritance was abandoned as dead wood.

Humanism, the triumphant ideology of our times, based on Greek thinker, Protagoras' "Man is the measure of all things", had become the battlecry, from the 1500s to the 2000s. Though Nicolaus Copernicus was credited with replacing the geocentric cosmology of Aristotle and the Bible with the heliocentric, an unnoticed fallout of the triumph of human reasoning was that anthropocentrism became the foundation stone of modern thinking and it lay behind the breakthroughs in the sciences and the humanities. The underlying folly of the moderns has been that they believed that human beings are the only intelligent folk in this vast expanse of dark, meaningless universe of eternal stardust. We forgot that human beings are not the sole monarchs of all they survey, that we must contend with other elements such as the viruses, which seem to count in the million and that they precede the humans by more than a few thousands of million years.

**OUR LOT IS TO WRESTLE WITH THE UNIVERSE AS JACOB DID WITH THE ANGEL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT! WE READ THE UPANISHADS OR GILGAMESH THOUGH THEY MAY NOT OFFER ANY SOLACE AS PART OF OUR STRUGGLE TO MAKE SENSE OF LIFE AND DEATH, AND OF THE UNIVERSE AS WELL**



Siduri and Gilgamesh

ALAMY

THE EXHILARATING INTELLECTUAL  
COSMOPOLITANISM OF HIS ERA ALLOWED  
ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER TO REACH OUT ACROSS  
CONTINENTS, CULTURES, CENTURIES TO  
APPRECIATE THE BRACING METAPHYSICS OF THE  
VEDAS AND THE UPANISHADS



GETTY IMAGES

Covid-19 has caused a tear in the veil of humanism, bringing in the blasts of the cold unknown and intimations of death. There have been greater catastrophes than this pandemic. There have been brutal wars which got frozen in the iconic mushroom cloud of atomic bomb explosions over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, the famines and civil wars of Biafra in the 1960s and Somalia in the 1990s, the war against communism in Vietnam in the 1960s and against Islamic inquisition of the Taliban in Afghanistan at the turn of this century after the terrorist attack in New York and Washington by Islamic kamikaze in 2001. Covid-19 will take its due place in the ranks of the destructive forces which put optimistic and progressive humanity on the backfoot from time to time, even in this last 120 years. The pandemic is sure to recede, but it has for the moment shaken the confidence of people that there are not too many problems which we cannot solve nor too many dangers which we cannot overcome, though, ultimately, we are going to survive. That is why we are looking back, and looking around, for comforting signposts, mostly from the past.

**I**t is not possible to trek back to the ancient beginnings. To use an anthropic metaphor, we have burnt our bridges with the past. But even in terms of the laws of physics that hold up the external world, there is no turning back. The arrow of time is unidirectional. It is not a two-way path. So, the remains of the past, like the religious, philosophical and literary texts, are kind of archaeological remains that we can contemplate, reconstruct in our minds its fullness and speculate as Hamlet did in the Shakespearean play holding the skull.

What is bothering people during this pandemic is the question of death. Though death was on the rampage through the countless wars, we were so engrossed in the passions that drove us to fight, we did not have the time to sit back and think what death is all about. The restrictions that the pandemic has imposed on us, and the deaths occurring around us, have brought us face-to-face with the inexplicable, imminent end.

In the Katha Upanisad, Nachiketa the boy asks the God of Death, Yama, the truth about death. Nachiketa tells Yama that some people say that death is the end, and that there are others who say that there is life beyond death. Yama confesses that it is a difficult matter, and that even the gods are puzzled by it:

‘On this point, even the gods have doubted formerly.’ And he traces the path back to the origin: ‘Beyond the senses there are the objects, beyond the objects there is the mind, beyond the mind there is the intellect, the Great Self is beyond the intellect. Beyond the Great there is the Undeveloped, beyond the Undeveloped there is the Person [Purusha]. Beyond the Person there is nothing—this is the goal, the highest road’ (translated by Max Müller). This may not be the goal, and this may not be the highest road. Yama expresses a viewpoint. Because there is another one, expressed by Siduri, the woman who makes wine on the seashore. She tells Gilgamesh mourning for his friend Enkidu who dies of sickness because of a curse of the goddess after 12 days of sickness: ‘When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man’ (translated by NK Sanders, [bit.ly/3reKO3S](http://bit.ly/3reKO3S)). The two texts belong to the same era, somewhere between 1000 BCE and 800 BCE.

It is possible to argue that the Katha Upanisad is superior to the Epic of Gilgamesh in philosophical terms. It could very well be, but it is of no use because there is no Yama around us to answer the question as he did to Nachiketa, nor is there a Siduri for us as she was there for Gilgamesh. What matters more is how human beings in a far-off time struggled with the question and the different answers they got. A peep into the world beyond is far more contemplative and gentler in the Katha Upanisad, while the Babylonian epic prefigures the tragic notes that echo in Homer and Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The pandemic has taught us that we are all thrown together, and we belong to each other however different we may be, and however much we may dislike each other. And the broken mirror of humanism has further taught us that we are living in an alien universe. The universe belongs to us in a limited sense, but the universe owns us without a thought for us. Our lot is to wrestle with the universe as Jacob did with the angel in the Old Testament! We read the Upanishads or Gilgamesh though they may not offer any solace as part of our struggle to make sense of life and death, and of the universe as well. ■

*Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr is the author of, among other titles, The Upanishads: An Introduction*



BY LHENDUP G BHUTIA



# VIRAL SEXUALITY

Remote romance and other dampeners

**L**ike any other businessman whose product depends on the smooth functioning of vast global supply chains, when the news of the Covid-19 virus outbreak in China first emerged, Samir Saraiya was a worried man. As the founder of one of India's largest companies that deals in what is euphemistically called adult wellness products, it was of direct concern to Saraiya. Like many other products, China is also the factory to the world's sex toys. According to some estimates, around 70 per cent of all sex toys are manufactured in China.

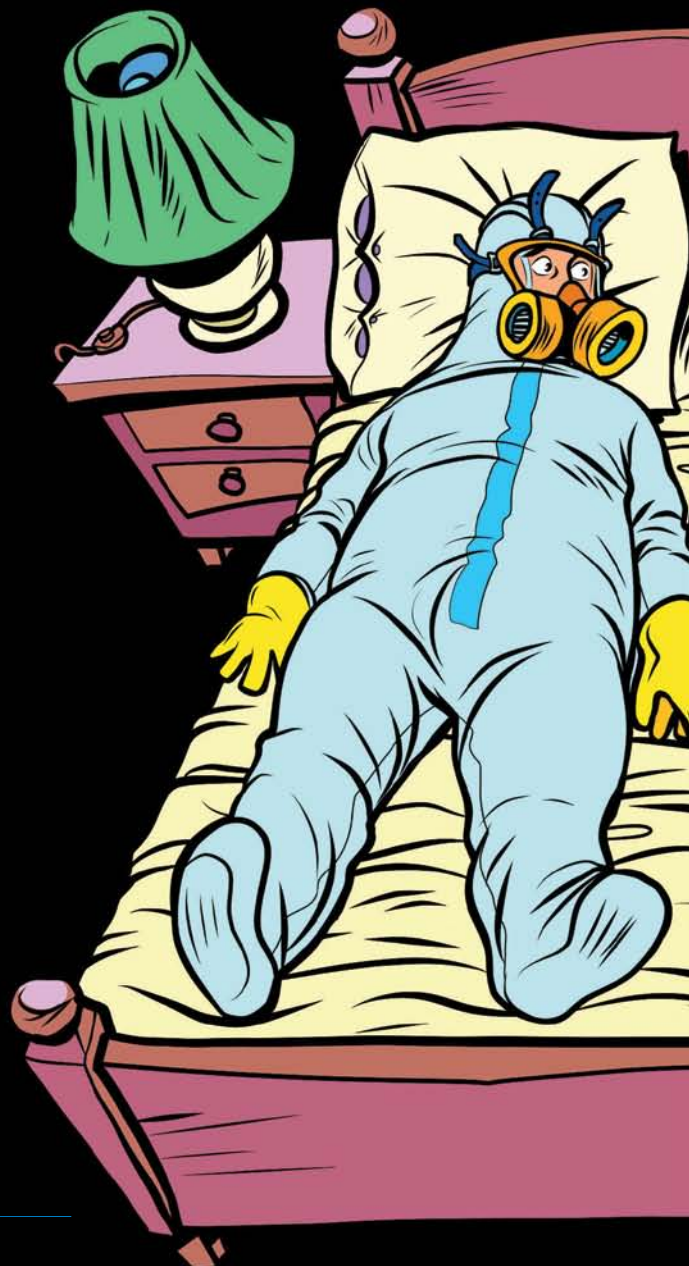
"We were scared, to be honest," Saraiya says. "My fear was we may run out of products in a few months' time."

Saraiya's fears were unfounded. The supply chains of sex toys more than held up. But something no one quite expected lay before him in just a few months' time. The sale of his sex toys went through the roof.

Sales of these products over the years had been on the rise in India. But this was nothing like what was being witnessed once the lockdown was enforced. According to Saraiya, there was at least a 65 per cent jump and it has held up even now. "At some point, we all know, a plateau is coming. But we haven't hit one yet," he says.

During the pandemic, businesses across sectors went through major disruptions. The sudden change in human behaviour and the value they attached to products overhauled the traditional world of markets. Some of it, like the hoarding of toilet paper rolls, was irrational. But many others, like the crazed buying of foodgrains or packaged food products, was understandable.

Now, before Saraiya, lay a new truth. At a time of devastating sickness and financial ruin, where people had stopped



stepping out and begun stockpiling on essentials as though a war loomed, individuals were logging in on Saraiya's website to place record orders for vibrators, fantasy costumes, male pumps, oils, lubricants, and a vast array of adult products too embarrassing to print here.

It wasn't hard for Saraiya to figure out what was happening. Such spikes were being reported by companies elsewhere in the world too.

"Covid-19 opened people up sexually," he says, and offers examples of the record number of Indian visitors to the porn website *Pornhub*, and the way people have begun to sext. "There was just so much time in people's hands. You couldn't go for a movie. There was hardly any sport on TV. Everyone was just

stuck at home. Sex toys, for instance, became a harmless way of enjoying themselves."

What will happen when the world returns to some semblance of normalcy, perhaps with the arrival of vaccines? "There is a famous saying by Alexander Giebel [who owns a lubricant company called *pjur*] which goes, 'People can eat toast without butter. But the minute you give butter for their toast, from that moment they only want butter on their toast,'" says Saraiya.

At various points, Covid-19 has appeared to be a virus that does not merely infect our respiratory system and organs, but also one that strikes at love. The nuts-and-bolts of penetrative sex by itself may not be a conduit for the virus, but everything that leads to sex and makes it meaningful is. You cannot kiss each other. You may transmit the virus. You should not touch or caress or cuddle or hug because every such expression may be contaminated. We should preferably only pleasure ourselves, as countless government and health advisories have told us, and when sex becomes unavoidable, wear face masks or assume postures that don't bring us face-to-face. At one point, in the UK, it even became unlawful to have sex with anyone he or she did not live with. And what of the toll all this anxiety and stress exert on us? Have we become more amorous, as Saraiya suggests, or is something more complicated going on?

It is instructive to remember that this is neither the first pandemic, nor the first time sexuality has come under such burden. A US-based website, *My Heritage*, digging up newspaper archives during the period of the Spanish Flu, found several local anti-kissing ordinances and condemnations of the act both across the US and in some other parts of the world. In one instance, mentioned in *Cosmopolitan*, a man in Madrid was even arrested for kissing his wife in the street. Some people got around the fears of contagion by kissing through handkerchiefs, and at one point, even an antiseptic 'kissing screen' through which couples could kiss became available in the market.

There is no evidence to tell us what exactly transpired in people's bedrooms during that pandemic. But in this one, the anxiety and the free time—at least in some—have appeared to unlock the doors to our libidinousness. That far from fearing sex, or becoming overwhelmed by anxiety and fear, the virus has unleashed a torrent of desire.

The pandemic's impact on sex, whatever it may be, is understandable. Desire does not rest in our pants. The impulse of sex is located in our minds. And if we know anything from the last nine months, it is that this is a pandemic that equally wrecks our minds.

What Saraiya suggests is an attractive idea. The notion that the virus is ushering in a sexual awakening. And while we must guard against the impulse of extending corporate balance sheets to a permanent change in bedroom habits—people after all are known to respond to stress differently—you can notice that the virus has had an effect on sex. Pornography sites like *Pornhub* claim there has been a 95 per cent spike in traffic





from India, and the most watched shows on OTT platforms throughout the lockdown have constantly shown, apart from a few much-talked-about releases, those with adult content. (One of Netflix's breakout global hits this year, including in India, was the terrible Polish erotic film *365 Days*, awarded with a 0 per cent rating on Rotten Tomatoes, where a mob boss kidnaps a woman for a year in the hope that she will love him back). Even agony aunt columns in magazines and newspapers were taken over by questions about sex and the virus. And internet message boards, especially Quora, were filled with questions and answers of Indians navigating their sexual lives around the pandemic.

**S**ome, it appears, got plenty; and some got none. Some were locked in, and some locked out. For some, the anxiety of the pandemic crushed any ounce of desire; in others, the same stressor events had the opposite effect. Some ordered adult toys and pushed their sexual boundaries; others climaxed alone in front of a computer screen. Some lost complete interest in sex. Others experienced a burst in desire. And in some couples, both occurred, leading to a discrepancy in desire. All relationships between those that didn't live together, effectively, became a long-distance one. Many had the urge, but no access to a partner. In some, too much access became the problem and came in the way of sex.



**“COVID-19 OPENED PEOPLE UP SEXUALLY. THERE WAS JUST SO MUCH TIME IN PEOPLE’S HANDS. YOU COULDN’T GO FOR A MOVIE. THERE WAS HARDLY ANY SPORT ON TV. EVERYONE WAS JUST STUCK AT HOME. SEX TOYS, FOR INSTANCE, BECAME A HARMLESS WAY OF ENJOYING THEMSELVES”**  
 Samir Saraiya, CEO, ThatsPersonal.com

An office to go to every day or a busy career after all can be an excellent way of impeding the complications of a marriage or relationship from surfacing. But now with work from home, the distracting pleasures of a holiday or movie together taken away, individuals gazed upon their partners in a new light. For some, this could have been good for their marriages. But for a vast many, one suspects, this brought little pleasure.

There were new relationships and breakups, both done and undone online. Some fell in love anew. Others fell out. Couples living away from one another had to explore alternative means of staying intimately and sexually connected; others, whose marriages were going through difficulties, now had to contend with two crises: one raging outside their windows, another in-

side. One post on *Quora* states ‘we [she and her husband] are fucking like rabbits.’ Another says, she and her husband have had no privacy, and on those few occasions when they managed to carve out some private moments, it felt as though they were running late to catch a train. One couple in their late 40s and early 50s tells Dr Mahinder Watsa, in the ‘Ask The Sexpert’ section in *Mumbai Mirror*, that they have begun to have sex after a decade, and that the wife now finds herself pregnant. Another, much younger, respondent asks him, if masturbation can increase immunity and if eating onions helps improve sperm count (the answer: ‘Not that I know of. Onions, while improving your general health, will also lead to some breath issues which might cause all that sperm going waste.’) One married woman in a *Times of India* relationship Q&A column worries about returning to the office once everyone is called back because of all the flirting she has indulged in while working from home with a male colleague. Another suspects her husband is in touch with an ex-girlfriend. Reading anonymous posts online and responses to agony aunt columns, of course, can be akin to believing the fantasies schoolboys scribble in toilets. But they provide a snapshot, even though a bit unreliable, of the kind of relationship churn wrought by the pandemic.

A study conducted early on during the lockdown and published in *Leisure Sciences*, which relied on the responses of 1,559 adults in an anonymous online survey, found that a majority of individuals (43.5 per cent) reported a decline in the quality of

their sex life, with the remainder reporting that it either stayed the same (42.8 per cent) or improved (13.6 per cent). While many had engaged in mutual masturbation, oral sex and vaginal intercourse in the past year, large numbers (41-61 per cent) had not engaged in any of these behaviours since the pandemic began. A small number of participants also reported increases in sexual behaviour. Approximately, one in five participants (20.3 per cent) reported making a new addition to their

sex life since the pandemic began.

The most common new additions included trying new sexual positions, sexting, sending nude photos, sharing sexual fantasies, watching pornography, searching for sex-related information online, having cybersex, and filming oneself masturbating. ‘The widespread social restrictions put in place... appear to have significantly disrupted sexual routines and the overall quality of people’s sex lives. However, even in the face of these drastic changes, it is apparent that many adults are finding creative ways to adapt their sexual lives, including in the pursuit of sex for leisure,’ the researchers write.

Dr Rajan Bhonsle, the honorary professor and head of department of sexual medicine at Mumbai’s KEM Hospital

and GS Medical College, says the pandemic has affected the sex lives of people differently. Sexual desire, he explains, does not occur spontaneously. It does not just pop out in our consciousness demanding instant attention. Desire arrives from many different underlying motivations and it unfolds in a response to sexual cues. An event, such as a pandemic, muffles or heightens these sexual cues, and even when it leads to desire, the other aspect of the pandemic, the unavailability of a private moment, comes in the way of sex. "In some couples, you find the pressures of managing a house, children and work, and the stress of living through the pandemic has led to a complete falling apart of their sex lives. While for others, this has been a great opportunity. I had patients who wanted to have sex, but never found the time or were always tired. These patients say this period has been such a boon for their personal lives," he says.

There is also a group of people, Bhonsle says, for whom the anxiety of the pandemic has made them more sexual. "It's the case of how some men get an erection while watching a horror movie. Or adolescent boys finding themselves being aroused when a teacher they aren't necessarily attracted to yells at them... Sexuality is quite complicated and a source of stress. It can lead to an unexplained surge in desire in some individuals," he says. "Something like that is happening with a small section of people during this period."

But as exacting—and exhilarating—as the pandemic has been on our sexual lives, it has entirely overturned our conventional notions of romance. I have heard more than one millennial use the term 'slow dating'. But people of a slightly older generation will recall this as simply old-fashioned romance. Sex is now presumably off the table. Necking, kissing is out too. Prospective lovers now want to know each other better. They want to forge real meaningful relationships with whom they can share their innermost feelings. They now write (texts) to each other for months, and when they finally meet, they meet usually at a public place, walk at a measured distance, enquiring graciously about the health of their families.

Snehil Khanor, the CEO of the dating website *TrulyMadly*, believes casual hook-ups and one-night stands could become a thing of the past. People are looking for more meaningful relationships, he says, and are taking more time to get to know each other before meeting in real life. Before the pandemic, out of every 100 profiles a girl saw on his platform, she would like around 10, he says, and probably begin talking to about five of them. "Out of every 32 men she talked to, she would meet just one of them (on a date)," he says. "Now, she meets just one out

of every 50 to 60 men she talks to."

While the pandemic has made dating difficult and fraught with risk, dating websites, however, are reporting a huge surge in online activity. These platforms have tried to help their users navigate the changed romantic landscape by rolling out a range of features that help them meet and conduct their relationships online, from games one can play with each other to introducing video chats. A Tinder spokesperson claims that most people logging in on the platform in India do not necessarily do so to meet a romantic interest. "Tinder as a product does not make you define your intent (when you join the platform). You get

**“BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, OUT OF EVERY 100 PROFILES A GIRL SAW ON MY PLATFORM, SHE WOULD LIKE AROUND 10, AND PROBABLY BEGIN TALKING TO ABOUT FIVE OF THEM. OUT OF EVERY 32 MEN SHE TALKED TO, SHE WOULD MEET JUST ONE OF THEM ON A DATE. NOW, SHE MEETS JUST ONE OUT OF EVERY 50 TO 60 MEN SHE TALKS TO”**  
Snehil Khanor, CEO, TrulyMadly.com



to decide what you want from it...We get people joining for a diverse range of reasons. Over 60 per cent are looking to just make a connection. And only about 30 per cent is really looking for love," she says.

A lot of modern romance had been moving online long before the pandemic struck. "The pandemic has simply expedited it," Khanor says. Just like the acceptance around how work can be done remotely, there is also a growing realisation that romance too can be performed remotely.

Aashi Shrivastava, a 21-year-old media student, began to use Tinder when she returned to her house in Bhopal once her college in Mumbai shut down. She didn't want to rush into a relationship, she says. So she took her time. "For a lot of us, what we want from relationships has changed...We have realised the importance of a more meaningful relationship instead of just rushing into things," she says.

There were both more and fewer options for Shrivastava. The pool of people on Tinder, now that more people had joined the platform, was wider. Yet, there was no real option of meeting them on a physical date.

There was an instant spark, she says, with one individual. Over a month of constant chatting transpired before the two decided to date. When they finally met, both wore masks and maintained a distance from one another, she says. They met a few more times, but their relationship eventually fizzled out.

What happened?

"Both of us got bored eventually, I think." ■

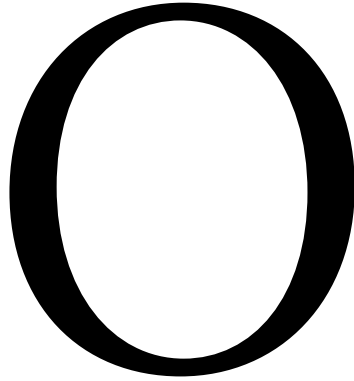


# DHARMA FOREST



BY KEERTHIK ŞAŞIDHARAN





**On the day of his departure from Indraprastha, as a penance for his mind and a purgative** for his heart, Arjuna looked for Draupadi. But she was nowhere to be found. Before long, so vast were the teeming masses, it seemed that the whole city had come out to bid him farewell, and in that crowd which, like a flower reaching for the sun, sought to touch him, as if Arjuna's hands were the cure to scrofula and gout, opened itself to embrace him, to get a glimpse of their great hero-renunciate, Arjuna once again scanned for her presence. But there was no sign of her. As he was about to walk out of the north-eastern gate, after praying to Ishaana, the guardian deity, Bhima walked up to him, hugged him, and then lifted him in his arms as he used to in their childhood. And then, finally, before bidding him goodbye, he said, 'She has given you this. Asked you to tie it around your neck'. It was a small pendant with a cover. Inside was a pinch of vermilion that in the years ahead would slowly smear over his chest as the pendant cover wore down and released its contents. He smiled as he accepted the token from Bhima. There was nothing to be said from one brother to another, except perhaps Bhima's strident dismay about this fever of self-punishment that had come over Arjuna. But all that was the past and they were here then. In silence the brothers acknowledged that while they shared a wife, they didn't share the same kind of love.

As he walked away, Bhima shouted at him, 'Come back soon, you silly bastard. Don't make me come find you!' Arjuna smiled, and hollered back affectionately, 'You'll be an old man by then!' With that Arjuna left Indraprastha on a 12-year journey to see Bharatavarsha, to follow the path of pilgrims and the penitential, to wander and see this vast quadrilateral land that lay bestride like some resplendent god resting after a night full of amorous exertions.

**T**hree months later, two days before the full moon, Arjuna's first letter for Draupadi arrived on a hot afternoon. The courier claimed that some of the leaves on which the mail was inscribed were lost in the rain. She didn't get angry at him for being careless, but was grateful that it had finally reached her, that Arjuna had even bothered to write to her as he had promised. But this missive had no mention of her name, but there was a faint reference to her, a possible location from where it was written. But the fragmentary nature of the scribblings left her wondering about the entirety of the text that was now lost for all time. Irrespective, she read this missive time and again to glean for Arjuna's voice. But she was never sure what to make of it.



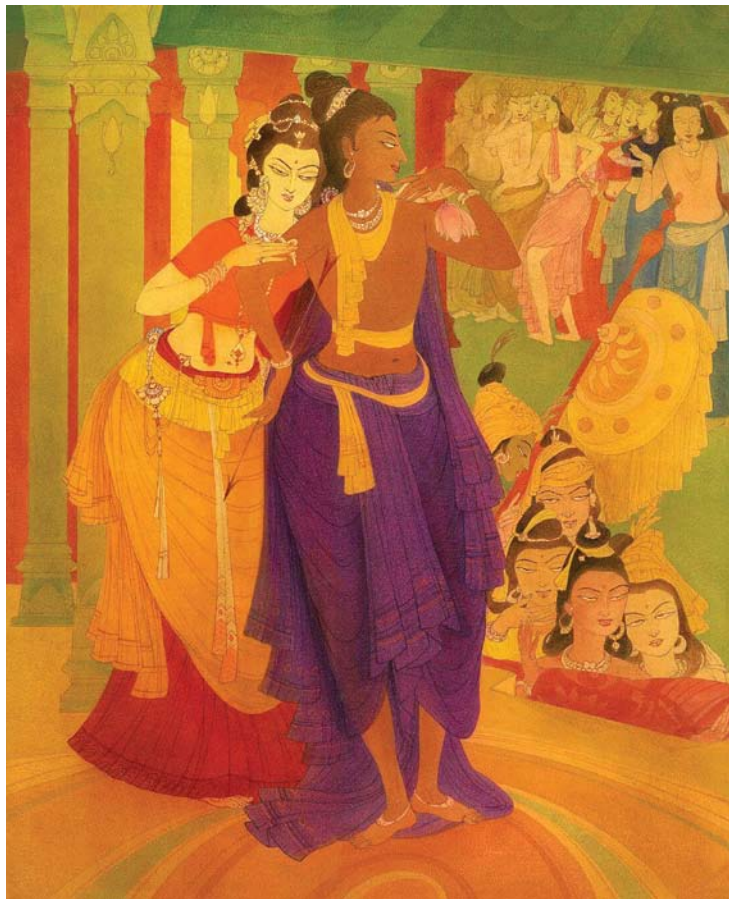
*‘... in the Lichchavi kingdom, there is a nightly shower of comets. It is so commonplace that the natives no longer gasp in surprise, in the presence of this spectral explosion. Surrounded by forests darker than your eyes, here night falls like a leaf in autumn. Unassumingly. Without rancour. Evening light sways in and out, giving one the impression that night is here, the night is not here. No one knows at what time night truly arrives. So, the natives divine their future entirely from the comets. If the largest visible comet at night is the shape of a lute, they believe the Gods want them to play music. If instead the comet resembles a horse’s tail, it is a portent that the Gods expect them to sacrifice a horse. I have heard some comets look like the privates of a woman—how I long to feel your breath on my neck—in which case, they allow their women a fortnight to sleep with any man of their choosing. At the end, the women return to their husbands and shave their heads. There is thus no deception here. At the end of this strange custom, women who wear their hair long are then seen as either virgins or those who were of little interest to men. Both evoke a condescending and knowing laughter from the bald-headed women. Any girl child born out of this adventure is to be named on the ninth day of her birth, while a male child receives his name on the twelfth day. For all else, the children are named on the first full moon in their sixth...’*

The words trailed and Draupadi spent days wondering if it was the sixth ‘month’, ‘year’, or ‘fortnight’.

For a few months thereafter, there were no letters from Arjuna. Slowly, she began to give up hope of ever hearing from him again. Then, unexpectedly, in the Year of the Flood, another rider appeared, carrying with him a sheaf of palm leaves with etchings. It seemed like a collection of thoughts written over a period of time, from places across his journeys. She wanted to ask the courier if he had met the writer of the letters, but the rider had already left after entrusting the inscribed leaves to the palace guards on the eastern gates. No one seemed to know from which kingdom he came. For days, she wondered whether to read them or not. Then, she noticed that the rains and humidity had begun to eat away the ends of a few leaves. The edges curdled up, and the wrinkled sheaves had begun to resemble some leprous excrudescence. She began to suspect that he no longer remembered her, even as his letters lay there unopened. She herself had difficulty remembering with clarity his face, its sallow ridges on the side, his whiskers that drooped low like some tree’s branch. Finally, unable to stand the sight of his unheard words, she decided to read it. If she couldn’t remember him intensively, she would use his words to reconstruct him in her mind. This letter too, like all before, began in the middle of a thought that contained an extraordinary statement that could only be but the truth.

*‘... three suns, that is what I saw the day before yesterday here. My eyes couldn’t believe that such places could exist where nights too contain a celestial orb, with a luminous corona and*

Courtesy ABDUR RAHMAN CHUGTAI



Arjuna by Abdur Rahman Chughtai

*a dark interior, hanging alongside with the moon of four skies. I asked the good people of this land, and they laughed at me and simply dismissed this phenomenon as a “nocturnal sun”. It was not new to them. But I wondered, could a dark sun really exist? The soothsayers of this land, about whom I have written in my previous letters—do you receive them? do you not think of me? or have you given up on me?—insist that this dark sun had broken free from the heavens. In the years ahead, twenty-seven to be precise, they said it would vanish. Children born at night—when the dark sun flares up, creating a ripple in the night-sky—are to be feared. I can’t agree with them, for children are children after all. Or is this yet another case of misplaced zeal that afflicts men who think themselves superior. Here, mothers refuse to suckle their children at night when the dark sun is out, even if the little ones cry. I tried to suggest otherwise but was told, in no uncertain terms, that my residency here was contingent on not disturbing their ways of life. But then again, it is not my place to question what has worked for them for centuries. Or perhaps not. Either way, the rituals of this wondrous place that we know only as...’*

And there his words, like a suicidal leap from the heights, ended suddenly. Draupadi reread him trying to infer clues that she could present to the spy masters of the realm, who would no doubt know of such wondrous places. But that was the first of the eight fragments that had arrived. The second one was a list of peoples who lived in regions near and beyond the Dandakaranya forests. Reading it, Draupadi was in two minds. Could such people really exist? Or was Arjuna merely writing to entertain her, to wean her from her loneliness? She once tried to ask Bhima obliquely, without revealing her source, if he had heard of such people without telling him how or why the thought had come to her.

He smiled at her and said, 'What has Arjuna now written to you?'

She laughed at how transparent her curiosities were to Bhima. Together they read his letter.

*'... the Urdhvabhangha people live inside giant anthills, out of which they come to hunt only at night and return back into*

**FINALLY, UNABLE TO STAND THE SIGHT OF HIS UNHEARD WORDS, DRAUPADI DECIDED TO READ HIS LETTERS. IF SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER HIM INTENSIVELY, SHE WOULD USE HIS WORDS TO RECONSTRUCT HIM IN HER MIND**

*their huts before the sun rises. They refer to each other by the name of the last kill. So, he who killed a jackal last evening and thus goes by the name jackal-killer could, by the next night, be called the rabbit-killer. They juggle names, and in this manner, at a man's funeral, the life of a man is recounted by all the names he had accrued. Women, among them, have no names. The Srutha tribes live on trees and do not have a language and sound like baboons, whom they mimic expertly. Of all the people in the forest I met, they are the ones who scared me. Their willingness to live in silence...  
... the Ururus live amid the tall grasslands that form the middle of the forested areas, where leopards and lions live. They neither know fear nor the anxiety of being eaten by a wild beast. Perhaps because their lives are short, they sleep together with each other and change partners every night. When children are born, no one knows who the father is. In this manner, the child belongs to all and none. Gothrahrus do not have heads on their shoulders but a beak that emerges from their belly. They make for a strange looking people but they are easy to recognize, even from a distance, by their voices which is as sweet as the best courtesan in Indraprastha. In the western edges of the forests outside Pushpapura, there is a group of people who have no name*

*for themselves. So, I decided to call them the Swarnim, for the golden hair they possess. Their women are adventurous and often carry men on their backs, much like Bhima carried us on various occasions.*

*They do not eat any meat and believe that in flesh live their ancestors. They can run faster than any horse in Indraprastha and so their women choose their husbands by picking the fastest runners. But, once they are married, the men lose their sheen, become fat, and therefore women take it upon themselves to fend for the family. Their men are great storytellers, who have fantastic tales of how the Gods fought among themselves. I have begun to understand their language, although they consider my stories of Indraprastha, of you, of my brothers, of the villains Duryodhana and Dushasana as too silly to be true. Why would anyone want what is another man's? they ask. I have no answers to such simple questions.*

*By the edges of the great city of Vaishali live families of men and women, who are light skinned but are smaller than a goat. Villages full of such miniature beings. Uncles, aunts, nephews, mothers, wives, daughters, fathers. They didn't seem to notice they were different than others. I stood outside their village and watched their going abouts on my way to Kamarupa. The world is a wondrous place. As strangely wonderful as the first time I saw you...'*

Draupadi's reading came to an end. 'That is it. The palm leaf breaks after that and the words go brittle...'. She didn't tell Bhima about other palm leaves with his writings.

Bhima nodded and said, 'No man would make such stories up. Far less, someone like Arjuna who is a stickler and a sceptic. But the world out there is a forest with mists rushing in. In that fog of reality, it is hard to tell where stories begin, which facts lure and what febrile fevers rise. Once, when travelling with Hidimbaa—a rakshasa woman I knew from Ekachakra days...'

'Tell me more...' Draupadi said with a naughty glint in her eyes.

Bhima said melancholically, 'No perhaps, some other time. I know you have more letters to read and want to be left.' She smiled and he left her on his own accord.

Arjuna's writings continued:

*'... forests, forests! My beloved, you who are daughter of the Fires, on my journeys, I have seen nothing more than trees. If someone were to say the world is full of leaves and barks, I would have laughed. For so self-involved are we in our lives in Indraprastha, or Magadha, or Hastinapura, or Kashi, or even in the smallest huts on the beaches of Prabhasa. We quibble and fight over kingdoms and villages, but the earth itself could neither care nor worry about our fates. There are regions further south of Pataliputra where every seventy-two hours the ocean submerges land and then, like an exhausted lover, withdraws to reveal what lies below. Even those who*



make do on those lands, or should we call them the seas, fail to see beyond their immediate exertions. The world, like some mischievous woman, provokes and man falls for this provocation. But beyond this realm of our interests lies the vast imperium of forests and trees. Bharata Varsha is the land of banyan trees, who resist both winds and rains, who stand so stoically, so immense in their gravitas, that sometimes I am reminded of Grandfather Bhishma. In some of them, the branches have drooped so low they enter into the earth as trees of their own. There are forests all over Aryavarta, beyond the region where only the wildest animals roam and the Ganga flows majestically. To those who venture in there, passers-by warn that it is prone to earthquake. The reason for these quakes is not traceable to the anger of the Gods or the serpents in the underworld making love, but more simply that the earths tremble when the roots of these gigantic trees run into each other. The branches of these banyans are civilisations of their own—beavers, ants, eagles, deer, snakes, squirrels—with each squatting in their portions and jealously guarding them. If trees are generous and wise, animals are like humans—capable of great cruelty. Perhaps this is why the Gods reward some of these trees with eternal life. So much so that when lightning strikes and topples these behemoths, some of them raise themselves up. I do not know how they do it, but some trees simply get up, dust themselves and continue to stand in their splendid solitudes. Then, there are trees in Vanga, where flowers that fall onto the grounds are continuously replaced. Spontaneously. The forest people here refuse to call that tree by any name for that would mean turning these magical trees into something recognisable, something commonplace. So, I too have followed their custom, and refuse to call it by any name. But in my mind, because these flowers with black petals and an orange-red inside remind me of you, I refer to them as Krishmaa. Let that be between us. Once when I was near Kalinga—where the salty flavours of ocean waves is ever present on skin and tongue—I came across priests who study flowers and trees. They claim that some of the plants can help with leprous disfigurements and boils, burns and horrendous disfigurements from the pox. I invited these wise doctors to come to Indraprastha, but they say that their knowledge is incomplete and they would be of no use to us without these trees. Rarely have I seen such humility—one that is not an affectation. Perhaps it is the air of these forests, the throbbing life every which way one looks. One can never delude oneself to have known the forest in its entirety. In there, no one can think of themselves as supreme and eternal. There is death, decay and regeneration everywhere. From my walk from Vanga to Manipura, through the ancient city of Pragjyotishapura where the great demon Naraka lived till our dear Krishna sent him away to the other worlds, I did not step on the earth. No, I have not learnt the art of flying, like the Siddhas, or even darling little Ghatotkacha. But instead, the forest grounds are filled with leaf and flower droppings and the hardened brown earth is no longer visible. Surely, snakes

and others poisonous insects live here, but they go about their lives in accordance with their needs. Humans don't figure in their calculus. I walked for hours, and then days, when I finally reached Manipura. So exhausted was my body that I fell asleep on the outskirts of the city for days, till one evening. There, I met her, Chitrangada...'

Arjuna's words broke away. The palm leaf that followed was missing. An unknown anxiety arose in Draupadi. She had never heard of Manipura, but she knew that not only was it far from Indraprastha, rules of life in foreign lands made one's husband, familiar faces, and permanent lovers, into something unrecognisable. Ask any wife whose husband or lover is in a garrison far removed from the capital. They return to each other as strangers. Reading Arjuna's letters,

## AN UNKNOWN ANXIETY AROSE IN DRAUPADI. SHE HAD NEVER HEARD OF MANIPURA, BUT SHE KNEW THAT NOT ONLY WAS IT FAR FROM INDRAPRASTHA, RULES OF LIFE IN FOREIGN LANDS MADE ONE'S HUSBAND, FAMILIAR FACES, AND PERMANENT LOVERS, INTO SOMETHING UNRECOGNISABLE

despite being in Indraprastha, the epicentre of the known world inside Aryavarta, she felt as if she were a citizen of the peripheries. A provincial fool who pretended to be queen. He had become a window into the world; his letters were becoming a narcotic to which she was slowly addicted. But like a traveller awaiting his turn to get on a boat by the riverbanks, she was forced to wait, patiently, often without any sign of the fact that he was even thinking of her. Suddenly, an epiphanic recognition flooded her: this is what her husbands probably go through when she leaves one of them for the other at the end of any year. They become adrift and await her return. And then, an obvious question—one that she had avoided asking herself all this while—clattered out, like some poltergeist, from the well of her subconscious and stared at her with melancholy and posed itself: who is Chitrangada? ■



This is an edited excerpt from *The Dharma Forest*, by Keerthik Sasidharan (Penguin Press; 400 pages; Rs 499), released in December 2020. It is the first novel in a trilogy



“ The beauty of the written word;  
a story well told.

The luxury of immersing myself in  
myriad lives; journeying to faraway  
lands.

I am obsessed. And the Reviews in  
Open help me discover the best.

A quiet corner. An interesting book.  
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Sanjay Malik, Dubai

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NEW YEAR DOUBLE ISSUE [ APPRECIATION

# LOSS AND LONGING

*Three actors and a love story*



Rishi Kapoor in  
*Kapoor & Sons*



Soumitra Chatterjee and  
Sharmila Tagore in *Apur Sansar*



Irrfan Khan in  
*The Lunchbox*



BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA



**L**osing a beloved actor is at times akin to losing a friend. Over time, we grow accustomed to their expressions and gestures. The best performers convince us of even more. We come to feel we know how they think. Unlike the people we see in real life, stars sometimes seem far more open to scrutiny. It might well be hard to fully mourn the deaths of those we have never met, but in 2020, a year defined by loss, I found myself oddly devastated by the passing of three actors I adore: Irrfan Khan, Rishi Kapoor and Soumitra Chatterjee. For me, their films often enriched more than they entertained.

Irrfan Khan was 53 when he passed away on April 29th. Rishi Kapoor was 67 when he died a day later. Wanting to explain my sorrow to myself, I decided to watch *The Lunchbox* (2013) and *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) again. My private tribute soon turned into catharsis. I found myself tearing up often. In *Lunchbox*, Khan's character is on the cusp of retirement. Khan had died before he could even reach Saajan Fernandes' age. Similarly, Kapoor plays a spirited 89-year-old grandfather, Dadu, in *Kapoor & Sons*. I wondered if these two roles had inadvertently helped the actors satisfy their appetite for life.

Even at 85, Soumitra Chatterjee was more prolific than both Kapoor and Khan. I, however, best knew him as Apu, the hero of my favourite film, *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959). Even though I had seen this third instalment of Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy countless times, I felt compelled to repeat my newfound ritual. Watching the film in November, a few days after Chatterjee had died, I thought it was no less contemporary than *Lunchbox* and *Kapoor & Sons*. Significantly, I thought all three films were informing our present crises. They could together help us cope with 2020.

Actors such as Khan, Kapoor and Chatterjee make it easy to map your life against those of characters such as Saajan, Dadu and Apu. Seeing them inhabit so comfortably the skin of another person, it becomes easier for audiences to place themselves in the shoes of those they invent. My immersion is mostly unhindered when I watch these stars perform. They remove their personhood so completely from their performances, I start taking the grief and joy of their characters personally. I want to solve their problems, I want to cheer their victories, and most importantly, I want the world to be kinder to them.

Apu, Saajan and Dadu all belong to different generations, but like us, they are all seen grappling with an outside that is sometimes hard to understand and always impossible to control. When faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, they display an everyday heroism which we ought to emulate today. As 2020 leaves everything upturned, films such as *Apur Sansar*, *Lunchbox* and *Kapoor & Sons* can help improve our mood, yes, but if watched closely, they can also be tools we could use to better ourselves.



**L**etters of recommendation are often things of joy. They are, of course, proof of accomplishments, of faith someone is putting in you, but for the hopeful and unemployed, these letters are made precious by the possibilities they afford, not the weight of sentimentality. *Apur Sansar* opens with Apu reading one such letter a professor has written for him. Apu, we are told, is 'sensitive, conscientious and diligent'. The professor is demonstrably fond of Apu. He wants him to graduate, but Apu, perched precariously between paucity and poverty, says he does not have the money to pay the fee colleges demand. The professor asks him to keep writing. Apu's talent, we learn, is somewhat obvious.

There are holes in Apu's curtain and undershirt. He lives in a Calcutta tenement; a room Delhiites would identify as a *barsati*. He pawns his books to pay rent. He is either overqualified for work that is available, or not qualified enough. Watching the doors of schools and factories close on Apu, those who have lost their jobs to the pandemic might well think of him as familiar, but Apu is also doubly dispossessed. He has neither savings nor family. His father died when he was 10 and his mother passed when he was 17. Strangely, however, Apu never panders to our pity. He delights in the rain. He plays the flute. A story he wrote will soon be published by a literary journal. He keeps that letter of acceptance close, peeking at it when riding the tram. His loneliness seems more like solitude.

As Apu pushes away despair, he upsets our newfound 2020 formulae that invariably equate adversity and tragedy. When Pulu, Apu's best friend, interrupts his isolation by treating him to a restaurant meal and a play, Apu feels elated. Rather than moan to Pulu about his problems, Apu says his struggle, like his imagination and education, has become a means for him to shed his backwardness. Small things, he adds, have the ability to move him. He doesn't want to escape. He wants to live. Rather than become a clerk, Apu says he'd much rather follow in the footsteps of Goethe, Dickens and Dostoevsky.

There's something altogether infectious about Apu's youthful optimism. It almost convinces you that the comforts of art and literature can guard one against the worst of misfortunes. When Pulu takes him to his village in Khulna, now in Bangladesh, Apu gives him his novel's manuscript to read. Writers need readers, and seeing Apu fiddle and fidget while waiting for feedback, one feels he is looking for both approval and understanding. Apu might be sufficient despite his scarcity, but the glee on his face when Pulu extends his hand to congratulate him is proof of an obvious truth: Happiness feels better when shared.

Things take a strange turn in Khulna. Pulu's cousin, Aparna,

is left stranded at the altar after it turns out that her groom is mentally unstable. When Apu steps in to take his place, he feels he is doing something grand, something great, but once the headiness of heroism has passed, the realisation of his penury hits home. Aparna puts him at ease by telling him that they will suffer and survive together.

Both Apu and Aparna are migrants. Having moved from rural Bengal to Calcutta, they have exchanged networks of community for a life where ends are often hard to meet. They now only have each other. Seeing Apu longingly gaze at Aparna while playing with her hairpin, we instantly understand that their relationship has exceeded the confines of duty and responsibility. They are a couple in love. Even though they continue to live in Apu's tenement, the house comes to feel larger after Aparna has made it home. The door now has a nameplate. The torn curtain has been replaced by a floral one. She smacks his bum early in the morning. They fan each other when they eat. He teaches her the English alphabet.

In a year when homes became workplaces, when family substituted colleagues, Apu and Aparna's domestic life is, effectively, a template. Their companionship is underpinned by an abiding affection and their togetherness defined by genuine playfulness. They don't yearn for more space. They find satisfaction in the abundance of their marriage. When a pregnant Aparna leaves for Khulna, she leaves Apu with several instructions. The anxiety of separation manifests on his face the way trauma would.

Apu is inconsolable when he learns that Aparna has died during childbirth. The suddenness of loss amplifies its magnitude. The pandemic has shown us that deaths without farewells are harder to process, and for Apu, Aparna's passing,

too, is somewhat abstract. The only thing tangible is the finality of her absence. Grief, for him, is quicksand. He is catatonic when he waits for a train to run him over. With Aparna, Apu no longer had reason to feel alone. Without her, he has to confront orphanhood all over again. Her death is something he must atone. He leaves Calcutta and throws away his manuscript.

Apu blames his son, Kajal, for Aparna's death. It takes him five years to forgive the child. When he finally returns to Khulna, he is met with a boy whose mischief borders on menace. The scene where he is finally able to lure Kajal to come away with him is now the stuff of cinematic lore and legend, but in 2020, this conciliation underscores the importance of reciprocity. Watching Apu walk into the distance with Kajal on his shoulders, the both of them smiling heartily for the first time

**APU (SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE IN APUR SANSAR), SAAJAN (IRRFAN KHAN IN THE LUNCHBOX) AND DADU (RISHI KAPOOR IN KAPOOR & SONS) BELONG TO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, BUT LIKE US, THEY GRAPPLE WITH AN OUTSIDE THAT IS SOMETIMES HARD TO UNDERSTAND AND ALWAYS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTROL**

SUDEEP SEN



## REVELATION DIPTYCH

**i.e. [THAT IS]***i.e.*

*because you hear—  
the sound  
of a lone rustling leaf—  
you hear the sea.*

*i.e.*

*because I consider  
the sea silent—  
you hear its silence  
in my studio.*

*i.e.*

*& because of that—  
the silence will not empty  
the sea  
of its leaves.*

**LENTICULAR**

*clouds suck themselves  
invisibly*

*vacuuming inward—  
inverted cones*

*like tornado columns  
arrested mid-flight*

*in their tracks—  
orographic,*

*lens-shaped—trying  
to maintain form*

*and structure's algorithm.  
Dreamscapes*

*melt and mould—  
flying-saucer-like,*

*evanescent concentric  
layers—peel, unpeel—*

*swoop up as smoke  
and slow-melting snow.*

*Secrets stored  
in these barreling*

*swirls and wisps  
remain—a mystery.*

*Chameleon  
clouds, change*

*colour striations  
with the sun's mood—*

*molecular magic,  
chromatic DNA—*

*unveiled only  
for the chosen few.*

(From a forthcoming book, Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation)

in years, one is reminded that it's only in the arms of those we love that the pain of our wounds might start to dull.

When Aparna is in Khulna, she writes Apu a letter every week. He reads and rereads them every time he finds a moment of quiet. Letters come to fill the vacuum of Aparna's absence. Much like sudden texts that interrupt our social isolation, they are affirmations of affection, reminders that love is a constant. In Ritesh Batra's *Lunchbox*, letters do something strange. They are not the effects of affinity; they are, instead, its cause. Once she realises the food she prepares for her husband is being delivered to someone else, Ila, a housewife, starts writing letters to the man who is eating lunch that wasn't cooked for him. The first letters

he writes back are terse, but the lunchbox he returns is empty.

Saajan Fernandes is a bit of a crotchety grump. He often scolds the children who play outside his Bandra home. Though he has been pushing files in a government office for 35 years, he never speaks to his colleagues. Having opted for an early retirement, he is asked to hand over his responsibilities to a junior colleague, but he actively avoids this enthusiastic apprentice. When he tells him his wife is dead, he does so without sentiment. Saajan eats lunch by himself. He orders his dinners in. He fiercely protects his aloneness. Ila's letters challenge the isolation he invents. Her candour warrants response.

The lockdown has perhaps been hardest for people such as



Ila, those who live with little love or levity. Ila's husband is having an affair. He comes home late from work and barely notices her desire or her despair. Any proximity only seems to widen the distance between them. When Ila begins to articulate her loneliness in the letters she writes to Saajan, he is never dismissive. He gives her advice. He tells her stories. He makes her laugh. Of all the pleasures Covid-19 has stolen, the comfort of strangers is perhaps the least documented. As the circumference of our social circles has narrowed, we are often always in the company of those who judge us by our past actions. Saajan and Ila are free from history.

Darkness is invariably subterranean. In these past 10 months, for instance, only a few news stories have scratched the surface to measure the astounding loss and devastation that the pandemic has brought about. In *Lunchbox*, however, suffering underlines subtext. Ila's brother, we find out, had died by suicide after failing an exam. When Saajan hears that a young woman has jumped off a building with her daughter, his anxiety is palpable. In the letter Ila writes him that day, she imagines how difficult it must have been for the woman to throw herself off the ledge. 'Doesn't it take courage to jump off buildings?' she asks Saajan. He offers relief to Ila and us, too: 'Things are never as bad as they seem.'

At one point we see Saajan binge-watch 1980s TV comedies his wife used to love. He tells Ila that he had never understood how the same jokes could make his wife laugh over and over again. His regret—'I wish I had kept looking at her laugh'—feels all too poignant in a year when so many of us have unexpectedly lost partners, parents and friends we loved. For Saajan, his correspondence with Ila is more vital than it is novel. He has opened himself up to influence. When Ila tells him of her father's struggle with lung cancer, reminding him that every cigarette he smokes will scrape off a few minutes from his life, he resists the urge to smoke after dinner. He now has reason to preserve himself.

Wanting to escape the anguish of her loveless marriage, Ila dreams of an elsewhere. Convinced that she will find joy in a country which measures its prosperity through the prism of a Gross National Happiness register, she tells Saajan she wants to move to Bhutan with her daughter. When he asks if he can come with her, they decide it is best to meet. On the day he is meant to meet Ila, however, Saajan steps into his bathroom and realises it smells the same as it did after his grandfather had used the shower. 'No one buys a used lottery ticket,' he writes to Ila, explaining why he never showed up.

For Saajan Fernandes' generation, the pandemic has made immediate fears of mortality. Saajan's correspondence with Ila is, of course, a demonstration of his innate empathy, but it also indicates the kind of possibility that someone in their sixties can lay claim to. Seeing Ila wait for him in a café, Saajan is struck by the limits of age, but his encounter with an elderly, wrinkled retiree has an opposite effect. He sees clearly the gulf that separates him from a self that he was imagining himself to be. *Lunchbox* doesn't tell us if Saajan and Ila make it to Bhutan, but it leaves us with the realisation that our isolation is ours to defeat.

**A**s the coronavirus made old age more fragile, it brought into sharp focus the value of every breath. Watching the opening scene of Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons*, one is struck by the spunk of 89-year-old Amarjeet Kapoor, or Dadu, as he is affectionately called. The pleasure with which he feeds his dog is conspicuous. For days, we hear, Dadu has been 'practising' to die. He pretends to drop dead on the breakfast table. He lies in the lawn, wanting his family to believe that the ketchup on his shirt is actually blood. No one takes him seriously, not until he has a real heart attack. Though the playacting is funny, it does reveal a preoccupation with dying. For Dadu, however, everything, even morbidity, can be occasion for levity.

By the time his grandsons, Rahul and Arjun, travel home from London and New Jersey respectively, Dadu is making life hell for the hospital's nurses. He wants Arjun to give him chocolate and take him for a spin on his wheelchair. His humour is bawdy. He dreams of visiting a Hawaiian nude beach, and he wants Rahul to show him pornography on the iPad he has brought. Dadu wants to be home for his 90th birthday, but most of all, he wants a photograph with his entire family by his side. The affection that Rahul and Arjun have for their grandfather will perhaps seem familiar to us all, but the concern they have for his health seems particularly identifiable at a time all our grandparents need protection.

From March this year, the family again became the primary support system for many of us, but as *Kapoor & Sons* shows, that same family can trigger trauma, too. Rahul, for instance, is gay, but secrets come tumbling out of his family's closet faster than he can. Sunita, his mother, it turns out, had given him the idea for a novel Arjun was saving for his debut. His father, Harsh, he learns, is not just bankrupt, but is also adulterous. As these tensions collide against each other, their pitch soon reaches a crescendo. Dadu tries intervening when he sees these conflicts become public knowledge, but he quickly realises the turbulence of his family has spun out of control.

On the surface, *Apur Sansar*, *The Lunchbox* and *Kapoor & Sons* are wholly dissimilar films. Apu, for instance, doesn't even have Rs 7 to pay for rent. At one point, Saajan says he feels he has spent his entire life standing in buses and trains. He and Ila both belong to the middle class. Dadu's son, on the other hand, calculates his debts in lakhs. Despite the economic disparity, however, the characters of all three films seem equally affected by love and loss, by death and despair. Moreover, Soumitra Chatterjee, Irrfan Khan and Rishi Kapoor help distract us from the crippling specificity of our identities. They help us analyse ourselves through the filter of Apu, Saajan and Dadu. Much like 2020, they together show us that despite differences in age and affluence, there's only one path to delight—love. ■

Shreevatsa Nevatia is the author of *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia*

## RENGA SERIES

*In March 2020, when France went into lockdown, Marilyn Hacker invited Karthika Nair to join her in a renga series.*

*The renga is syllabic, made up of 'tanka' of units of lines of 5/7/5 7/7 syllables, usually either two or three such. Poets collaborate by taking an element, a word or phrase, from the last line of their partner's (though often the group would be more than two, so in that case the preceding person's) tanka and begin a new one with that. The origin is Japanese, of course—though there's something similar in Mandarin, called Running Dragons.*

*Across the months, these poems developed into chronicles of life around Hacker and Nair in Paris as well as accounts of the world ricocheting into their homes through friends and family in Lebanon, India, the US and Belgium.*

MARILYN HACKER



*The grey-green eyes of  
the floundered revolutions,  
hers and his and hers,*

*wolves' eyes in a dream fading  
to a blurred image of hills,*

*apricot orchards,  
Beka'a valley vineyards I  
never visited. —*

*Bukra fil-meshmesh, these years'  
harvests of gone tomorrows.*

19 July, 2020

KARTHIKA NAIR



*Tomorrow has gone,  
I learn, for Hasdeo Arand —  
forest in central*

*India, haven for Gond  
tribes, eighty-odd species of*

*trees, scrubs (thirty-eight),  
herbs (nineteen), birds  
(one-one-one)...  
sloth bears, elephants,*

*leopards: larynx of a land.  
Coal mines emerge. Through  
lockdown.*

*Standing committees  
lie down, governments traffic  
reserve forests and*

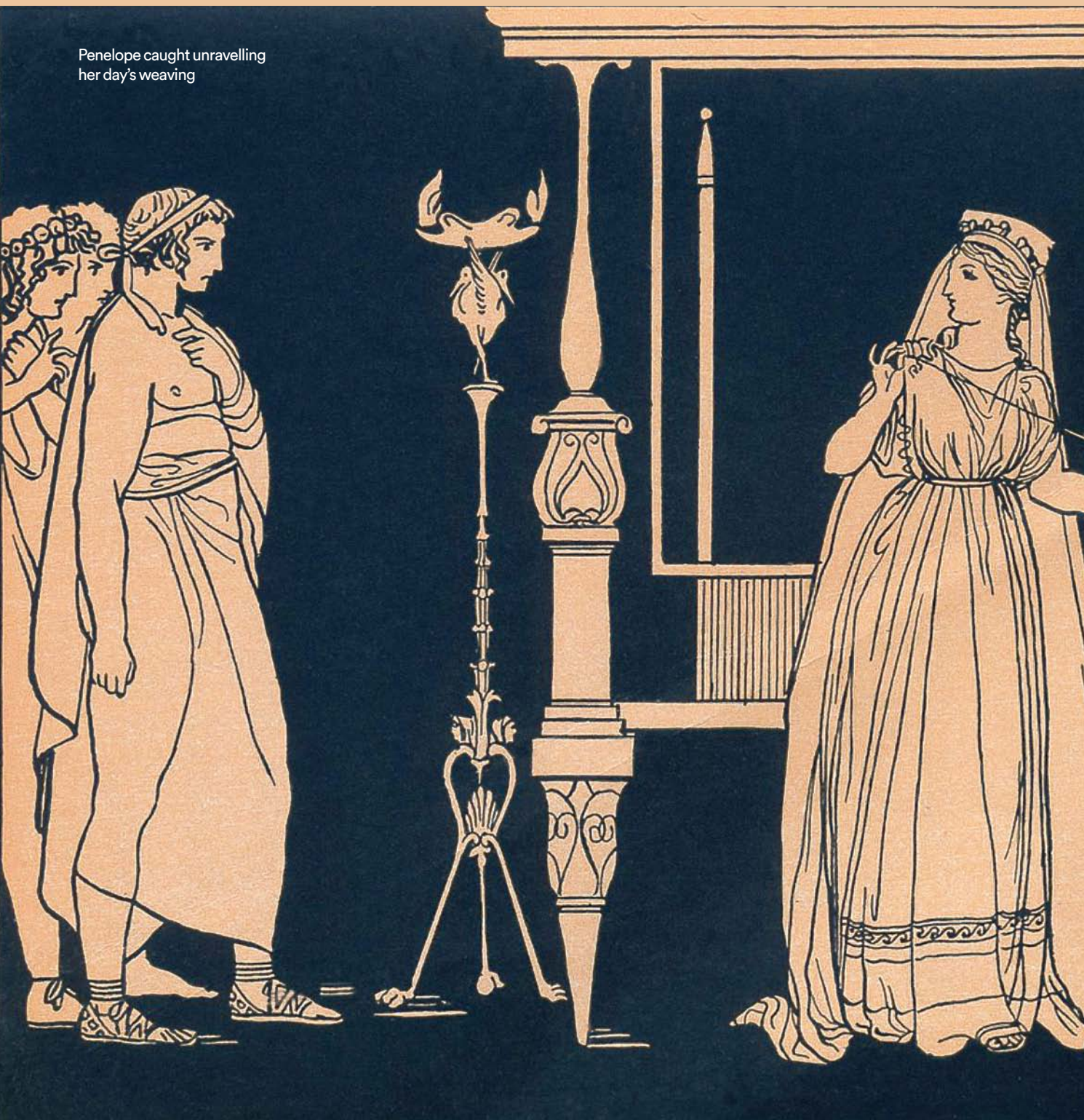
*Adani makes hay while a  
virus shines — blinding nations.*

20 July, 2020



# PENELOPE TIME

Penelope caught unravelling  
her day's weaving







## The ecstasy of turning learning into a habit



ALAMY

# A

**ll it took was a single,** decisive tug. Before my eyes the penultimate round of my 38-cm crochet doily began to unwind. As my fingers made their peace

with the gesture, I settled into my chair, poising myself in the warm glow of the mid-afternoon autumn sun at Krokodil, my favourite bar in Kaltern in the Italian Alps. Soon enough the owner's partner came by with my drink. As I swirled the straw around the glass I had the premonition that this would be the year's last 'Hugo'. I discovered the cocktail in early July, soon after moving to South Tyrol to live with my partner and his family. I fell instantly for the unique sour-sweet flavour of Elderberry flowersyrup—the key ingredient. As an aperitivo, it appealed to my tastes more naturally than an Aperol spritz. The effervescence of the Prosecco and the tarty sweetness of the syrup ensured a breezy high while the torn mint leaf and the wheel of lime uplift the palette. It made settling in slightly easier. I liked not having to over-think when a waiter asked what I wanted to drink.

I returned to unspooling more than two or three hours' worth of labour. It wasn't an easy decision given that I had technically completed the doily I had begun mid-September on the train from Bozen to Graz, in Austria. Only an expert with a trained eye would have been able to discern the small miscalculation I had made somewhere along the circumference of round 24 that perpetuated its way into the final round, assuming the form of a mistake. *I* knew, though. And I couldn't shake off my knowledge of the error. I didn't want to erase it so much as allow myself to learn from it.

A moment of inattention was responsible for this imperceptible asymmetry. I had got tangled up in my thoughts and lost count and had breathlessly continued without pause, causing a glitch in the pattern. Since crochet is a forgiving craft, allowing for easy undoing, unlike embroidery, I decided to return to the scene of my mistake, thus going back



in time. The unfurling revealed how the mercerised yarn had already assumed the form it was assigned through my single and double stitches. I was suddenly releasing it from the tense entanglements within which it had been framed. The unspooled thread piled on the table like a heap of crimped noodles. I had to pause between my tugging to wind the yarn against its source ball so it didn't yield to the temptation to knot itself. In this back and forth, in this returning to source only to later re-draw, I had a sudden flashback to a scene from the film *Cinema Paradiso* which I saw when I was 18—a mother figure walking towards a door, the string from her knitted yarn mistakenly in tow, the yarn subsequently unfastening. More than the cinematic specifics I remember grasping a conceptual feeling of the word umbilical.

Learning to crochet was my way of being with my mother, trying to inhabit the gestures I'd seen her make while in the throes of needlework. Her craft of choice was embroidery, but in the days preceding lockdown in Delhi, a 2.5mm crochet needle and a ball of yarn was all I could manage to string together. Craft items didn't constitute essential commodities. Meanwhile my parents were in Mumbai. We were engulfed by distance. It was difficult to process how visiting them could be detrimental to their lives. Meanwhile I had, back in February, made the decision to vacate my rented apartment of eight years since I had to return to Italy by June, at the latest, to honour the conditions of my stay permit. Meanwhile, I decided not to take on new assignments. Instead, I threw myself into full-time learning. I asked my partner to teach me two things—his strength training workout and his language. When I wasn't wrestling with these, or needed a break from packing, I watched YouTube tutorials on crochet.

Except, the paucity of yarn prevented me from actively making anything. I was compelled to make-unmake; make-unmake; make-unmake, as if on a loop. This was surprisingly not frustrating. In fact, I liked having room to make mistakes, since I knew I would in any case be unravelling and re-beginning. My stitches acquired a consistent tautness. After much trial and error I learned I had misunderstood what it meant to go into a stitch. I had been exclusively working front loops. Eventually it became easier to recognise and count stitches, especially as I allowed myself to accrue rows. I began to feel an almost pleasure in building and then dismantling; allowing for materiality to surface before facilitating the disappearance of the texture. On April 2nd, I crocheted my first flower. Before I could undo it, I made a picture which I later posted on Instagram, declaring how the minor achievement

was momentous because we are living in Penelope time. 'And so it is fitting to knot and unravel, knot-unravel as she did and experience the uncertainty of 'waiting for deliverance', as she did, weaving her shroud by day, undoing it at night, labouring to bide time and exert agency over the unknowable.'

**I** was referring to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, her feminist retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* through the person whose primary role in the original was to perform as a loyal woman-in-waiting. Atwood allows us a speculative glimpse into her subjectivity. 'The shroud itself became a story almost instantly. 'Penelope's web' it was called; people used to say that of any task that remained mysteriously unfinished. I did not appreciate the term web. If the shroud was a web, then I was the spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies; on the contrary, I'd merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself,' Penelope says. Through the wild embrace of learning as method, learning as end in itself, I had begun to gradually gain access into the in-between-ness of what I decided to call Penelope Time. By spending more than six hours of the day subjecting myself to being taught, thus assuming the necessary humility of one who seeks to evolve new muscle memories, I was enabling the making and unmaking of my self. I was mirroring a process I began during therapy at the end of 2019 of picking apart narratives I had solidified to either explain, rationalise or defend various events that seemed to have 'happened' to me in the hope of locating, however retrospectively, where my agency lay.

Simultaneous to my adaptive response towards my self-composed lockdown syllabus of core training, hula hooping, cooking techniques, crochet and German ran my ongoing efforts to reconfigure how I experienced my emotions through the insightful suggestions from my therapist. In early January, during what felt initially like a tacky Catholic marriage preparation course, I was inadvertently exposed to a brilliant though aggressively delivered set of guidelines meant to help couples negotiate their differences amicably, respectfully, and without feeling like they were compromising. It was called the 'win-win' method of conflict resolution.

I was among 80 couples who had to suffer the indignity of being lectured on love and marriage by the Catholic church over the second weekend of January. I had always despised the hierarchical, shame-based method of religious pedagogy that I had been subjected to from my childhood as a member of the Archdiocese of Mumbai. My partner and I would have

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WITH MY MOTHER,  
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MANAGE TO STRING  
TOGETHER**

been happy not to have a church wedding. But my mother had emotionally manipulated me into agreeing to set a date at our parish church in Goa. We were meant to marry in November. The two-day course was the Catholic way of bullying couples into undergoing a pedantic process at the end of which they received a certificate without which it is impossible to marry within the church. We had been given two books to read beforehand; a text called 'Creative Love' and a tract on the subject written by Pope Francis. My more open-minded partner, a lapsed Catholic, like me, spent some portion of last December browsing through both books. Like teenagers we laughed at some of the diagrams meant to illustrate the Church's anti-contraceptive stance.

Days after the course my partner and I continued to unpack what we had learned. We concluded the most valuable lesson was the 'win-win' method of conflict resolution. I had never been taught how to fight from a space of empowerment. Under patriarchal conditioning, I had only internalised defensiveness. When triggered, it was my default passive-aggressive response. But a trained, abrasive psychologist forced a volunteer couple into having a mock fight in front of the class about a subject she assigned to them—the man seemingly prefers to spend time with his friends to the dismay of the woman. Judy kept interrupting their fight to tell them and us how they weren't doing it right. 'How does it make you feel?' she badgered the girl. 'I feel that...' she began to answer. 'That is not a feeling. Name the feeling, name the feeling,' Judy obsessively pursued her. 'I feel sad!' the girl finally declared, looking somewhat defeated. 'That's it! That's a feeling! Well done!' a smug Judy exclaimed.

This breakthrough lay at the crux of conflict management, in her unbridled opinion. If one functions from an attuned understanding of one's emotion in a moment of conflict, then one is able to assume responsibility for one's feelings without assigning blame and without triggering your partner's defensive mechanisms. Instead of pointing a finger at someone and suggesting that they make you feel a certain way, you rephrase the sentence to begin with the feeling aroused within you when a specific gesture or action is made by the other person. Doing so elevates our consciousness

about whether the feeling in question has to do with the person with whom you are presently relating or whether it is invariably linked to one's own psychological history or whether it is systemic.

The method is particularly illuminating for those of us who have suffered forms of emotional or physical abuse. It helps unentangle where our agency may lie within a given situation. Feelings can be a navigational tool in pursuing new relationships and re-aligning old ones. This counsel came close on the heels of my therapist's suggestion that I learn to feel my emotions rather than intellectualising them. The consequence of this unintended learning about how to be better present in any situation so as to be able to always gauge one's feeling through the course of any interaction necessitated a conscious undoing of stubborn and established patterns of behaviour. Judy maintained that kindness was crucial. 'The best thing to do when you're angry is nothing.' This extended from lessons I had imbibed from my therapist, about how kindness towards others became easier once one had begun to regularly practise kindness towards oneself. I felt privileged to have been able to arrive at these insights. Humility comes more easily once one accepts that at the crux of learning lies unlearning.

In early May, while immersed in research around the historical silencing and erasure of female subjectivity by relegating it within the domain of the exclusively non-public, I began retreating further into the inner realms of domesticity. It was ironic that I was inhabiting my apartment while simultaneously stripping it off its 'it-ness', emptying it out, packing away my library, sifting through my kitchen things, preparing to un-belong. Practising restraint in my movements by sheltering in place, or refraining from commenting on social

media helped me access an interiority. I was suddenly more productive, but not in a capitalist, output-centric way, rather in a sweaty, qualitative sense. I wanted to synthesise my experience of the lockdown as a fine-tuning of my very corporeal encounter with muscular memory.

As an adult, to embrace the spirit of learning meant functioning outside of one's comfort zone, beyond the safety of what one already knows. It involved being child-like and acquiring new movements, thus expanding the range of one's vocabulary.

A crochet doily made by the writer



**BY SPENDING MORE THAN SIX HOURS OF THE DAY SUBJECTING MYSELF TO BEING TAUGHT, THUS ASSUMING THE NECESSARY HUMILITY OF ONE WHO SEEKS TO EVOLVE NEW MUSCLE MEMORIES, I WAS ENABLING THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF MY SELF**



**M**id-way through unwinding round 24, I had to pause to make diary entries. I had been reflecting on the phonetic similitude between the English ‘failure’ and the German ‘*fehler*,’ which meant error or mistake. I repeated them under my breath to study the assonance, “Failure—*Fehler*, Failure—*Fehler*.” The two words had begun to epitomise an empowering philosophy. A few days after I formally relinquished my right to admission to the PhD programme to which I had been accepted at the University of East Anglia because I didn’t receive the funding I had hoped for and couldn’t afford to finance the endeavour myself, a native Hebrew speaker, the brother-in-law of one of my dearest friends in South Tyrol offered me pithy advice for accelerating the pace of my immersion in German. ‘You have to make mistakes,’ he said. It resonated with something I’d read online in the aftermath of another meltdown I’d had while still in Delhi during my German class with my partner. A polyglot was asked how best to approach a language. ‘By using it,’ he suggested. This involved not waiting until one arrived at a moment in time when one felt certain one ‘knew’ a language. It meant speaking the language while learning it. As a trained linguist, my partner was the perfect teacher. But it was really after I moved to South Tyrol that I truly fell into the deep end. I was frequently overwhelmed. However, after I was able to reorient my response to being frequently corrected, to not perceive it as insulting, I began to find the experience pleasurable. It is a form of vital surrender, being graceful about receiving linguistic intervention.

When I had visited Kaltern in late July or early August, my partner had accompanied me to Schmidl, a family-run establishment. It would be the first time I would engage in intense conversation with a salesperson in order to get the right sized yarn that would work with the 2.5mm needle I had borrowed from his aunts, that belonged, originally, to his grandmother. The person manning the counter was exceptionally patient with me. Even though it would have been easier to ask my partner to serve as intermediary, I chose to frame my sentences myself, even if my grammar would manifest as skewed. She appreciated the effort. She helped me complete sentences. So it was immensely validating when she expressed her admiration at the progress I’d made earlier that October afternoon, when I visited the shop on my way to Krokodil.

‘*Keine fehler*’ she had remarked twice. First in relation to my crocheted doily, then in reference to my German. ‘Every day I belong a little more and a little better,’ I had written in my diary two days before, while making a note of the word one of my best friends, Partho, had used in our WhatsApp conversation as a counter to displacement. ‘Emplacement: a putting into position.’ I wondered if such a term which has a militaristic connotation (‘a prepared position for weapons or military equipment’) could be appropriated and re-shaped to engender a feminist sentiment.

Three weeks later I would marry in a 12th century Roman-

ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA



## from “LOCKDOWN GARDEN”

*The bark is smooth, flaky,  
the trunk hollow;  
midway, black-edged, is a hole  
big enough to put your hand in  
or the whole arm. From two  
sides, branches come out, whip-  
thin, green-tipped. The tree  
is otherwise bare. Too tall to be  
a stump, the crepe myrtle  
is preparing to flower.*

esque chapel with the service conducted entirely in German. I was genuinely elated by my ability to understand everything.

In transforming learning into a habit I have arrived at *jouissance*—physical or intellectual pleasure, delight or ecstasy. In relinquishing defensiveness as a de facto response to being questioned or challenged, I’m uncovering profound opportunities for personal growth. In committing to being a lifelong disciple of learning, I have found ways of dislodging the false certitude that marks the ‘I’ and disclaiming the arrogance that accompanies scholarly assurance. By befriending failure, by dwelling in agnosia I have exorcised the debilitating ghost of self-doubt that has haunted me since adolescence. I now lay claim to only this—I neither know nor think that I know. In this dictum for what might constitute wisdom I find the courage to regularly re-affirm my willingness to learn and unlearn as an act of daring resistance against being subjectified. I exercise agency in allowing my self to be made and re-made in an endless, ecstatic loop. ■

*Rosalyn D’Mello is the author of A Handbook for My Lover*

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# LOVE IN THE

When our writer discovered that

**I**t was May 25th, 2020. After a three-month closure, the skies were finally open for domestic travel. Between March 15th and May 25th, I had bought five flight and one train ticket, all from a single point of departure, all to the same destination. Delhi to Pune. I had briefly even found a prospective travel companion who needed to get from Delhi to Alibag, where her family was stranded. Every night, we'd speak to each other, conjuring routes and mediums of transport. We'd only met once before through a common friend, but adversity made us comrades. We conjured elaborate cab routes from Delhi to Mumbai. We discussed lockdown travel rules and epasses and hotels and homestays late into the night. While we spoke about our prospective road trip, we knew we'd fly given the first opportunity. These conversations gave us a sense of agency, we *felt* we were doing something at a time when we were stuck, and felt crippled by the state and its machinations. On May 25th, we were on the first flights out of the capital.

The pandemic has ground the brakes on so much of life. Travel on a whim, is now travel on a hope and a prayer. We no longer merely meet friends and family, we machinate, and

calculate costs to benefits. Restaurant visits are now restaurant reconnaissance. We consider wind-flow patterns, scout for hidden enemies, and strategise to stay clear of crowds—in malls and theatres, airports and markets. Professional trajectories have careened to a stop or fallen off the cliff.

But in this global slowing, there has also been an acceleration. Too many of us have waited, for too long, to have our ducks in a row. With 2020 having shooed all the ducks out of the water, there is a now-or-never edge to it all. The globe is waiting to see the end of this year, but this year has also pushed so many of us to commit to decisions that we've stalled over for lifetimes. A friend has bid farewell to a Delhi life of 15 years and signed a lease for a house in a Goa village. A couple have finally committed to buying a Portuguese villa for their dream homestay project. Another couple who've been engaged for years, realise now is the best time to get married. I moved cities in the time of a pandemic to be with my partner.

The pandemic has enforced a focusing of attention and effort. We've all had to create our own bio-bubbles. To stay secure we are mandated to keep the outside world out. I knew who I wanted in my bio-bubble and anything less, anything else, was pointless.

BY NANDINI NAIR



# TIME OF COVID

loneliness is caused by the lack of intimacy

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

The national lockdown of March and April impaled hardships on all of us of varying time and severity. For the first time, I admit, in my life I actually felt alone. For 35-plus years I have always revelled in the ‘strong independent woman’ tag. I have always tried to ensure that my relationship status (or lack thereof) has not defined me. Long committed to ideas of ‘space’ and ‘freedom’, long-distance relationships, or interactions of convenience had suited me well enough. But now, suddenly, living alone, I couldn’t meet friends and family as and when I wanted. Without Ubers or autos or the metro, I was quite literally islanded.

I’ve found not just solace, but kinship, in authors like Olivia Laing. In her meditation on art and the city *The Lonely City* (2016) I chose to identify loneliness as a wellspring, a human trait rather than a travail, common to most people, and independent of relationship status. The loneliest people are often those in unhappy relationships. I had the support system of family and friends who I loved and felt nourished by. Life was always busy enough, happy enough, good enough. I wasn’t in neediness, and far from wanting.

But two years after Laing published *The Lonely City* she was

getting married. A friend who knew of my affinity for Laing sent me her article published in *The Sunday Times* to which I did not have access with the headline, ‘Olivia Laing, the acclaimed author of *The Lonely City*, on loneliness, marrying the poet Ian Patterson and the challenge of intimacy’. The personal lives of authors and actors, seldom, if ever, affect me. But for the first time, I felt betrayed. She had committed to the single life, she had written an entire book on it, and she too had strayed from the path. Why was it that eventually everyone succumbed, I thought in July 2018.

But a few months later, like Laing, I too would succumb. In my eyes, our path seemed oddly similar. She had embraced the unattached life, and then, when least expected, she had been hit by love.

I met A in September 2018. For the first time, someone showed me that ‘happy enough’ was a compromise. For the first time, I felt that thanks to simple dumb luck I had been fortunate enough to find ‘my person’. Someone who is so unlike me, yet someone with whom I feel the joy of giggles and the deep sigh of contentment. A friend calls me ‘BNG’ (Buoyant and Giggly) given my sudden uptick in optimism. I say that



finding love in one's late 30s, can have that effect!

Our relationship had hardly been conventional from the start. We met online (during my first week of Tindering ever!), we lived in different cities, he often spent months posted at the Indian station in the Antarctic or Arctic or some other remote corner of the planet. Our relationship started to grow legs when he was posted at the Antarctic station in winter 2018.

Divorced from daily urbane distractions, his routine had the clarity of snowflakes. Suddenly everything became more elemental. Dependent on a diet of pre-packaged food, a highlight of his stay was finding a 'fresh' apple at the back of the freezer. It was cut into 22 pieces, and shared with the team. With water restrictions, baths could be had only once a week. Occasionally I found myself more appreciative of the bite of a crisp fruit, and the shower above my head.

It was summer in the Antarctic, and I'd get photos of daytime and night time sunlit skies. Thanks to the glories of WhatsApp video calls, and the trajectory of satellites over the poles, we would see each other every day. He had his favourite chair near the window of a large common area. His vantage point became mine. Sitting in Delhi, or Chennai, or Kerala, or wherever I might have been at the time, he'd tell me about the melting ice, approaching water, and penguin sightings. Alien words now became part of my vocabulary, as he would point out the passing ice floes and describe the snow petrel he'd seen earlier in the day. I could now tell the difference between an Adelie penguin (with its signature ring around its eye) and the Emperor penguin.

He'd send me videos of his solo wanderings into the White South. I'd watch these videos on loop, not only to hear him, but for reprieve. In the din of the city, here was silence; in the congestion of an urban sprawl here was rare isolation; in the miasma of Delhi, here was pristine wilderness.

I'd always felt like an onion, as if to reveal a layer was to become spent, and to leave one exposed to disappointment. Social media, its demand to overshare, and people's willingness to do so, often surprised me. I saw myself in Sally Rooney's line in *Conversation with Friends*; 'I thought about all things I had never told Nick about myself, and I started to feel better then, as if my privacy extended all around me like a barrier protecting my body.' In previous relationships, I'd always used privacy as a shield. Privacy was essential! With A, I felt that sharing wasn't depletion, it was addition. He knew, and I felt lighter, not less.

Unable still to trust my own intuition, I tried to figure out why I liked him so much. It is little surprise that I found the answer in a book on writing. In *First You Write a Sentence* Joe Moran, writes, 'People who love sentences love verbs.'

And there it is. I could see it now.

Moran continues, 'Nouns, because they name something permanent, have just one form. Of all parts of speech they are the most self-sufficient and singularly resonant. But verbs take many forms, often irregular, depending on what role they play in the sentence. They are useless by themselves, and rarely as euphonious as nouns or adjectives. But put them next to other words and they are as life-giving to the sentence as light and air to the world.'

That paragraph stole my breath.

I could now make sense of this new relationship by seeing us as parts of a sentence. He is the verb. And I am the noun. It fit. We fit. I'd always fancied myself as autonomous, self-sufficient, an entity which did not need an other to be complete. But here he was, all do, do, do, and done; he'd infused brio and breeze into my days and nights. He is the verb, he is movement.

Partner him next to the right noun, and he will animate it, just as a noun must earth him. Together we made a sentence, a foundational unit that is complete in itself.

During the lockdown, I realised the wisdom of Laing's words, 'Loneliness is caused by the lack of intimacy.' By March 2020, he was back in Pune, we still had WhatsApp and video but that did not allow for connection. Words were misheard, moods misread, and silences misunderstood. Annoyed at our inability to meet, and clueless about when and how we could be together again, we grew irritated with each other. I wondered if it had all been a mere mirage from the start, just another melting iceberg.

In pre-pandemic times, one took for granted weekend visits and quick getaways. But now—denied the mellow glow of community time and activities—I yearned for my partner in a manner that left my stomach in knots. The pandemic has slimmed and sliced life down. Days now doesn't dissipate in a haze of busy-ness. Spending time apart now did not seem like a 'two-body problem' or just the natural consequence of two adults seriously pursuing their professions. It simply felt like a bloody waste of time. And I was done with that.

Long-distance relationships are akin to transit hotels, a space for loiter and not for longevity. It satisfies only in small measures. To be with a partner is to move around each other in the daily-ness and to grow together. I recall Pico Iyer's words, absorption is the closest one can come to happiness. Long distance seldom allows for absorption. And the online medium operates on the premise of distraction. To be together in person, in the same place, is to be absorbed in one another. To be in the same bio-bubble allows for attention and tending. It is happiness. ■

**I COULD NOW MAKE SENSE OF THIS NEW RELATIONSHIP BY SEEING US AS PARTS OF A SENTENCE. HE IS THE VERB. AND I AM THE NOUN. IT FIT. WE FIT. I'D ALWAYS FANCIED MYSELF AS AUTONOMOUS, SELF-SUFFICIENT, AN ENTITY WHICH DID NOT NEED AN OTHER TO BE COMPLETE. BUT HERE HE WAS, ALL DO, DO, DO, AND DONE**

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM



## STAY UNNAMED

*This is the vegetal hour—*

*time to listen  
like a plant,*

*learning to combust  
into an origami*

*of green  
watchfulness,*

*remembering  
there will be time*

*for leaves  
to turn*

*into a million emerald parrots  
in a lather of cloud.*

*But not yet.  
This is the time for roots—*

*the stolid,  
weather-beaten*

*innocence  
of roots.*

*This is the time to stay unnamed.*

\*

*This is the octopus hour,*

*time  
to attend*

*to that ancient mollusk,  
the heart,*

*parentless,  
shell-less,*

*learning  
to live*

*without armour,  
without ancestry,*

*not wetly  
curious,*

*not expanding—  
not just yet—*

*into a wild federation  
of tentacles.*

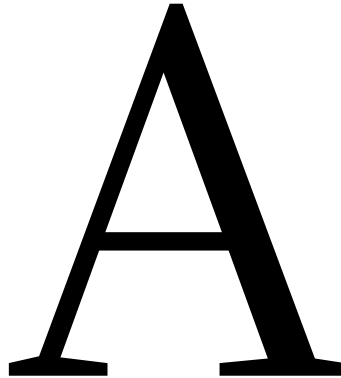
*This is the time to stay unnamed.*



# The Colonials

By Shehan Karunatilaka





**n Englishman, a Dutchman and a Portuguese man walked into a bar. They ordered** two arracks and a beer, and sat at the end of a terrace, far from everyone who was yet to arrive.

The bar was at The Galle Face Hotel, constructed in 1861, not that long before this meeting took place. The terrace overlooked the Indian Ocean as it does today, and was uncrowded, save for these three, dressed in the garb of merchants and smiling as widely as those who do not trust the other are wont to.

“Tavern looks agreeable,” remarked the Dutchman, surveying the bottles of rum hanging from the counter. “In the hill country we have pleasant taverns, but none as decorated.”

It was two in the afternoon, a good three hours before the hotel guests, the colonials and the native elites, came down to watch the sun set on empires.

“We could’ve met at the club,” said the Englishman. “I even suggested it to Fonseka.”

“Not a good idea,” said the man from Portugal. “Your face is known at Club. And mine too, I fear.”

“Edgar Walker,” said the Englishman, extending his hand. “Bank of England. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Pieter van Cuylenburg,” replied the Dutchman. “VC Plantations. A pleasure.”

“Patience please gentlemen. I will introduce you appropriately when drinks arrive,” said the Portuguese. “They say this place has the best waiters in Ceylon.”

“So we’ll get our drinks in 45 minutes then?” said Walker and they all laughed.

The floor was chequered like a chessboard and descended in ledges onto a lawn with palm trees. The sun sat behind a cloud and the sea sang to the crows on the parapet. Behind the bar, Queen Victoria looked out from a painting, above an insignia with a lion and a unicorn fighting over her. The Englishman sat with his back to the painting.

“I will judge you not, Van Cuylenburg. Though you swill the local beer. Forgive me, but the stuff is beastly.”

The Dutchman grinned, “I have a taste for native delights.” His eyes twinkle. “As have you, I believe.”

The Englishman sparked a beedi the size of a cigar.

“I have grown accustomed to the arrack” said Edgar Walker. “It is whisky mixed with rum and is unpalatable straight. Though it has a subtlety when combined with citrus.”

“A fine description sir,” said Lorenzo Fonseka from Portugal.

“As long as it doesn’t taste like the so-called sweets they served me at the estate...” said Pieter making the face of a revolted child.



“My servant gave me local plum wine,” said Lorenzo. “It was like Pinot from Naples...”

“Surely you jest?” said Walker.

“... had been served to a cow... whose piss I was consuming.”

They all laughed and the drinks arrived and the waiter poured and grinned, despite not hearing the joke.

“Pray tell. Señor Lozenzo, are you still seafaring these days?”

“Indeed. But the oceans have grown savage. Pirates hit my fleet near Java. Though nothing was stolen.”

“Remarkable! How so?”

“It is wise to have a bigger cutlass than the pirate.”

There was less laughter this time and the Englishman puffed on his beedi and Lorenzo Fonseka gulped his arrack sour like a sea monster swallowing a ship.

“Now let us do this properly gentlemen. Sir Edgar Wallace, I introduce you to Pieter van Cuylenburg, the finest planter of the Dutch East India Company.”

“Hang on old chap. Ole Queenie hasn’t knighted me yet.”

The Dutchman signalled for another beer. He had been preparing his speech all week and had forgotten the first line. He fidgeted with his coat and wondered whether taking it off would be disrespectful. The capital was hot and muggy, unlike the cool hills to which he was accustomed.

“Surely Sir, it is but a matter of time before Her Majesty...”

He glanced at the portrait of Victoria and the barman below it. The Englishman made a gesture with his hand that said thank you, enough and let us move on.

“I am honoured that you granted me this audience sir,” says Van Cuylenberg.

“Edgar Walker has served as governor of the Bank of England in Siam, Kowloon and now Ceylon.”

“I am aware of Sir Edgar’s reputation.”

“And yet I am unaware of yours,” said the yet-to-be-knighted banker.

Lorenzo sprayed lemonade into another glass of arrack. He had learnt to drink it while running spices from Kerala to Kampuchea, long before he owned a fleet and dared to invest in cutlasses.

“Pieter van Cuylenburg owns the finest estate south of Hatton.”

“Tea?”

“Not quite Sir.”

“Coconut?”

“Perhaps Pieter will explain.”

The Dutchman shuffled on the mahogany seat, took off his gloves and then began.

**T**hey say that wind brought the Portuguese, and greed brought the Dutch. Fear is what brought me to Ceylon twenty years ago. My father was a man of power in Rotterdam, he ran the breweries for Adriaan Heineken. But the cult of that heathen Marx reached our factories and my father became a union man, and a friend of the Sicilians. By the time I was 15, he was smothered in lawsuits and stifled by debt. I tell you this, so you know that I am not a silver-spooned nobleman, merely an honest toiler of some diligence.

On my 18th birthday, I was visited upon by seven Sicilians who told me that as his only heir, I would inherit my father’s dues and should he not survive the debtor’s prison, the burden would be mine to settle.

Before that month had expired, my mother’s uncle had procured me a job with the Dutch East India Company and I was aboard the Batavia, bound for Port Louis, Goa, Ceylon and Singapore, stealing away like that proverbial night thief.

Unlike Señor Lorenzo, I am no sailor, and the journey made me bring up bile, and from my sickbed I cursed the ocean, my father and my creator. I arrived at these coconut shores one sunrise after a terrifying storm and knew on first sight that Ceylon would be my home. Years later, when I set eyes on those hills

behind Mawanella, I knew that departing these shores was no longer a possibility.

I joined the Plantations Division of the East India Company and served my apprenticeship in Badulla and Ella amidst teascapes that mirrored my visions of heaven. Where not long before, Dutchmen like myself had planted coffee and parted with fortunes. For by 1870, a dastardly leaf disease had wiped out every coffee plantation in these fair hills, and turned princes to paupers.

I rose up the ranks at a steady pace and was managing four estates by the time I was 30. I paid all debts to my father’s swarthy creditors and won him his freedom though he expressed paltry gratitude. Thus, with some indignance and much relief, I settled into my planting life.

I savoured the sunsets in the hills, the meals at the club and the evenings with dusky maidens. I gambled seldom and fell to the amber nectar hardly, and so saved most of my generous stipend. And then I made the folly that has ruined many free men and will continue to ruin more for as long as

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SKIES ARE BLUE. I TOOK  
MYSELF A WIFE**



**MY HEAD GARDENER THIRANJEEVAN HAD WORMED HIS WAY INTO MY WIFE'S TRUST. A RODENT OF A FELLOW, HE DABBLED IN CRUDE SORCERY AND MADE LUCK CHARMS FOR THE NATIVES. EVERY CURSED DAY, HE WOULD READ MY WIFE'S HOROSCOPE AND INSTRUCT HER ON AUSPICIOUS TIMES AND HOW TO AVOID THE EVIL EYE**

skies are blue. I took myself a wife.

No, not among the dusky maidens of the tea fields. Perish the notion. Having endured my father's disgrace, scandal is a plague I can no longer tolerate. I procured myself a respectable bride from my mother's village of Giethoorn. Up till then, I had considered myself a moderate success in life and had been pleased with my humble accomplishments. Up till the moment I brought Geertje from Gierthoorn to the Maskeliya hills.

Geertje did not approve of my manners or my quarters or the planter's club or how familiar I was with the servants or that I was beholden to the Company.

"A true gentleman manages his own lands," she said, while dragging rakes over my lawns and brooms across my floors and planting her complaints between my ears.

Over the next forty-eight months, she had extracted three children from my loins and persuaded me to pour every shilling I had into the magic soil behind the hills of Mawanella, where, on the advice of my darling wife, I grew not tea nor cinnamon nor coconut nor rubber. No gentlemen, I grew the crop that had suffered that ignoble death on these very hills a few decades previous. I grew coffee.

Geertje bore me two daughters and a son, but mostly proved a matriarch to the coolies who worked on our plantation. While forbidding me familiarity with the help, she would sit on the floor with the kitchen staff and gobble rice and curry and gossip, listening to the ailments of the womenfolk, while ordering the men to do repairs around the house. While I spent the monsoon season galloping across 50 acres on my Kashmiri steed, trying to convince the traders in Kandy that Ceylon coffee was making a comeback.

One man in particular, my head gardener Thiranjeevan, had wormed his way into my wife's trust. A rodent of a fellow, he dabbled in crude sorcery and made luck charms for the natives. Every cursed day, he would read my wife's horoscope and instruct her on auspicious times and how to avoid the evil eye. Without my knowledge, he planted charms along my perimeter allegedly to bless my crop and ward off evil. Furious, I demanded he remove each one and he complied like a petulant child, though I suspected that he replaced them with curses.

Gentlemen, I did not like the influence this coolie brought to my good Christian household, and while I laid in the arms of my plantation concubine, I plotted on ways to be rid of this pestilence. And then against all logic and science, his charms began to work. Ceylon Coffee outsold Lipton Tea for two years in a row, our returns tripled, and my wife's melancholia evaporated.

I had spies watching Thiranjeevan, lest he attempt to inveigle his way into my wife's bedroom. But when talk emerged of him building a shrine next to our bungalow, matters had to be escalated. I instructed three of my concubines to accuse him of lewd behaviour and unwanted affections,



though these ripples and rumours failed to elicit the scandal I required. When the estates' earnings went missing from the main office and were found under Thiranjeevan's bed, I had all I needed to be rid of the menace.

My wife was inconsolable and barked at me for weeks. Gentlemen, I should've foreseen what followed but so relieved was I to be rid of this vermin that my good judgement was suspended.

A week after I dismissed him, the heavens imploded. Two of my children got the pox, spots appeared on my coffee leaves, my workers began complaining of strange noises at night, and the Disawa of Kandy, who had loaned me half the acreage of the estate, informed me that he was calling in his debt before next month's Vesak festival.

My wife is taking the children to Gierthoorn and I am left with a cursed estate, angry workers and a debt I cannot pay. I was engaged in a cost-benefit analysis on the pros and cons of throwing myself off those cursed hills before Señor Lorenzo agreed to hear my woes. He consoled me and presented me with a solution that could save my estate and make one fortuitous investor very wealthy.

I present this plan to you Sir Edgar, despite my initial misgivings. I am but a humble planter, unversed in the letters of the law. But I do know that if done with legitimacy, even a criminal act can cease to be viewed that way, especially when done out of view.

**A few more patrons had arrived at the Galle Face Terrace.** A rotund man in a plain suit was sitting with a fetching lass in a palm tree's shadow. He glanced around several times before taking a seat with his back to the room.

"That's Tommy Maitland. What in Hades is he wearing?" Edgar Walker was on his second arrack and third beedi. He nodded at Van Cuylenburg who looked relieved to have finished his plea.

"That is Sir Thomas?" asked Lorenzo Fonseka, glancing at the girl arching her back and stroking her long black hair.

"That must be the dancer. Her name is Lovina. My wife is an incorrigible gossip. Apparently, old Tommy is quite smitten."

"That will end badly," said Van Cuylenburg, folding his arms.

To their right was a view of Galle Face Green, where horses used to race twice a year. A few local children were flying kites and chasing each other across its patchy grass.

"I have seen Pieter's land. He should thank his fine wife for making him buy it. It is of soil that I have never seen on any of my voyages," said Fonseka. "The dirt is cool and moist and the colour of cocoa and oak. It will nurture any seed that falls upon it."

"And yet my coffee leaves look like a leper's face."

"Patience Pieter. I will find men. We will dig up these curses. We will deal with your witch doctor man. I too have encountered the native magic, it is not something to be sneered at. He is still in the village?"

Van Cuylenburg nodded.

"Then that is the easiest part of your issue. Once we have unearthed every piece of sorcery, we will plant again. But not coffee. That was your wife's one foolishness. We will quadruple your investment by planting something else."

It was all part of an act and Lorenzo was a natural actor. A group of locals arrived at the bar, wearing finer clothing than anyone present. Their faces betrayed a diffidence and uncertainty that they carried with them into the room. They examined the menu, took glances at the wealthy foreigners and slunk off towards the lobby.

"If the locals unite, they will be unstoppable," said Edgar Walker. "But that will not happen in our lifetimes."

"Their army is weaker than their beer," said the Dutchman taking a sip, but this time none of them laughed.

"I am perplexed Señor Lorenzo," said Walker. "Are you suggesting I invest with the Bank of England or privately?"

"The investment I am about to suggest cannot go through your country's bank."

"Splendid," said Walker. "As long as we're clear."

**Sir Edgar, you know me as a pirate. Let us not** mince words. The oceans are vast and filled with monsters and that is where I have plied my trade these many years. Thankfully I have made more friends than enemies, and if I have a talent, it is knowing which cargo to carry and which to conceal.

The sea has taught me everything. You do not need to believe in ghosts to fear them. I started taking spices up and down the silk route, before the waves got crowded with scoundrels and racketeers. I could not run my fleet at the mercies of Lisbon or London or Amsterdam and the prices they set.

For there was only one industry that I could see growing from Kampuchea to Indochina to Manila to Ceylon. The industry of war. Cutlasses, armaments, bullets. The demand was constant, the price was agreeable. It is a treacherous business, but if not me, some Dutchman or Englishman or, worse, some Indian or Chinaman will take my place with glee.

Because of my many friends and my few enemies, I now have transport across the country and in useful places across the orient. Among my clients I have kings and kingpins, so my shipments receive safe passage from anywhere to anywhere. I have spoken already to the *disawa* of the Kandyan kingdom and I believe he will accept the terms we present.

But once we have dug up the land and expunged all curses, we remain with the conundrum of what to grow. Forget coffee, Pieter. This is not 1848. Forget tea, that ship has long sailed. Instead, I present you with a crop that is easier than tobacco to grow and harvest and is twice as lucrative. A crop that is in demand across the indies and the orient and even closer to all our homes.

It is consumed by gurus and rishis across India, by the Gurkha and Malay soldiers and their fiery wives, it is pre-

scribed by doctors in the far east and even enjoyed in this very city. I have inquired at this establishment and they have granted me permission to do what I wish to. Sir Edgar, may I trouble you for a light?

**“Put that away man!” snapped Edgar Walker** in a hiss that made Van Cuylenburg jump. “Tommy Maitland is there with his whore. And you mean to make a spectacle of us?”

Lorenzo shrugged and passed the pipe to Pieter who furrowed his brow in confusion. Did he puff on it and complete the pitch, and offend the investor?

“The smoking of hashish is not against the law sir. Neither is the cultivating of hemp. It is as natural as the tobacco leaf, though not as bewitching or destructive.”

“I... I take issue with the word bewitch. This juniper smoke enchants and calms like no other. But it does not enslave the senses.”

Pieter delivers his line and Lorenzo nods with approval.

The children on the green abandoned their kites for cricket bats as more members of the local elite occupied the bar to light their cigars. No one paid heed to the table at the corner of the terrace or the smoke from an ornately curved pipe as it curled upwards to be sucked up by a fan.

“Many believe ganja to be a civilising agent. This very hotel has a private menu for guests. I am told that Anton Chekov stayed here with two mistresses and ordered pipes of Afghan cream and king coconut on the hour. Andrew Carnegie stopped here to meet investors from Shanghai. And he left Lanka with a disdain for its entrepreneurs but an appreciation of its sweet green leaf. And it is not to tea that I refer,” Lorenzo Fonseka smiled and passed the pipe to the Dutchman.

Edgar Walker lit two beedis, puffed on one and let the other smoulder in the ashtray, a foul-smelling incense to mask the musky scent of the devil’s weed.

“I am pleased to see that you have thought this through,” he says shaking his head. “But I am neither coolie nor reprobate. I am a businessman.”

“This was growing wild on my estate sir...” Van Cuylenburg places the pipe by the ashtray. “If I fill my acreage with it, it will deliver a margin of profit four or five times that of tea.”

Edgar Walker put on a pair of black leather gloves and handled the pipe as if it were the tail of a scorpion. He took one puff on it and raised an eyebrow. Then he returned it to Lorenzo and went back to his beedi.

“It is the finest I have tasted. But they say a rat dressed in Saville Row tweed is still a rat.”

“Sir, I do not follow.”

Walker took a look at the natives at the bar and shook his head.

“Those two at the bar are local surgeons. I considered taking my wife’s sister to one of them for her goitre. Don’t look now man. But the stocky one was educated in Cambridge and his father owns rubber factories along the coast. In the end, I waited until they sent me a house surgeon from Sheffield.”

Lorenzo took another puff. The discussion was not proceeding as he anticipated, but the Mawanella smoke was too exquisite to waste, and the afternoon sky too pretty to ignore. If this British toff wished to climb on his horse, Lorenzo would walk and it would be Britannia’s loss.

“The locals may one day run this country for sport. And they will run it into the ground. I will not let one of them take a knife to a relative of mine, even one whom I despise as much as my sister-in-law, no matter which school their daddy sent them to. Van Cuylenburg, your misfortune is not your wife’s fault. It is yours. Never let the locals beyond your veranda.”

Lorenzo shook his head.

“Forgive me, sir. But these thoughts belong to another century,” he says. “We have all had our way with this island. Maybe it is the turn of the locals now.”

This got the biggest laugh of them all.

Edgar ordered a last round of drinks and the bill. “I had hoped the

Chinese or the Indians would step up and take this burden off our hands. But the Chinese are gamblers and the Indians are drunks. We remain Ceylon’s only hope.”

Van Cuylenburg had abandoned his beer. He poured the arrack from the bottle and topped it with ice. His hand shook.

“I too was sceptical, Sir Edgar. A Dutchman growing hemp is as hackneyed as a Dutchman who flies. But the figures cannot be ignored.”

“You probably think me to be a man of prejudice. But it is not me that is a racist, it is mother nature. She is the bigot. It is she who endowed the European races with intellect and spirit, while leaving the lush lands to the simpler browner tribes.”

“I take it you are not interested in our proposition.”

“On the contrary, I am interested in visiting this Eden in the hills. But I will not invest in marijuana. It is beneath me and more importantly, it is beneath my profit measure.”

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The Portuguese and the Dutchman exchanged a glance. “But what I do have, gentlemen, is a counter proposal.”

**I do not wish to bore you gentlemen with my** biography. Suffice to say I benefitted from that lottery of birth that made me an Englishman born to a family of means. You both may believe in God and destiny but I know both to be imposters. I occupy the space I am in through astute decisions and benevolent fortune.

But firstly, may I ascertain this much. Lorenzo Fonseka, you have a secure route from here to Shanghai, Beijing and Taiwan? I do not mean channels like those malaria-infested canals that the Dutch run spices through, no offence Pieter.

Good. I will rely upon the great Portuguese mariner’s repute. I can make sure you remain untroubled by authorities as far as Singapore, but after that your risk is your own.

I fear I am not long for this part of the world. One day, the East India Company will be bigger than any sovereign nation on the earth. Some would argue that the day is already upon us. The locals are getting restless, the Buddhists are emerging from their slumber, thanks to the Bohemian ideas of that looney Henry Olcott. They are growing weary of the white man’s rule and the Chinese have the cunning and the Indians have the gab to be their masters.

We can no longer run this world from Amsterdam, Lisbon or London and we should stop pretending we can. Our time is passing serenely but with haste and if you mean for me to throw more dice before I depart, then I need some guarantee that I will roll a six.

You are misinformed as to the legality of *Cannabis sativa*. The law is clear on the subject and the penalties for smuggling a narcotic do not distinguish between stimulant and poison. If we are to risk the gallows, why do it for a paltry three-score rise?

My proposal is you grow a crop that will deliver returns of exponential proportions. That can be harvested for a few hundred rupees and sold for a few thousand pounds. If the land you possess is as fruitful and as discreet as you say, then buying you out from a local *disawa* would be child’s play.

Do not shake your head Lorenzo Fonseka. You may think you know what I am to suggest, but you may not. It is a crop both the East India Company and the British government would fund by proxy, we have already fought two wars with the China over it. The market for opium grows in the west among gentlemen like yourselves. But it is in the orient where the demand outstrips the supply.

I am weary of this continent and these paradises filled with

thieves. A whore ceases to have allure once she has submitted to you a thousand times. None of us are Andrew Carnegie, and I doubt any of us dream of concert halls. It is no longer 1869 gentlemen. Let us plant our poppies while we can.

**T here was shocked silence, followed by the** settlement of bills. The bar was now crowded with tourists and locals. Thomas Maitland and his companion had long departed. Pipes had been put away though no hands had been shaken.

“I trust neither of you will see the need to discuss my proposal with your masters,” stated Edgar Walker as a matter of fact. The other men shook their heads.

“There are no masters, Sir Edgar. Only us.”

“We all have our masters, Fonseka. But very well.”

“I would like to discuss the implications with Senor Lorenzo, if I am to be permitted,” said Pieter van Cuylenburg. “May I give you my answer by tomorrow?”

“That would be agreeable,” said Walker and hands were finally shaken.

They walk to the entrance of the Galle Face Hotel and watch the kids with kites, the teenagers with bats and the couples under umbrellas. Pieter hails a Bajaj three-wheeler, Lorenzo walks to his Toyota and Walker departs in a chauffeur-driven Benz paid for by the Company. The planter waves from his tuk-tuk to the shipping

magnate who bids farewell to the gentleman from the bank.

“Is it true you are to be knighted Eddie?” asked the Portuguese before they departed.

“I bloody well should be,” replied the Englishman.

Moments later in the back seat of his Benz, Edgar Walker texts his PA and sets up meetings for the next day. On the radio, two DJs are attempting comedy by mimicking British accents. One speaks like Noel Coward, the other like a character from a novel by Dickens. They banter for minutes and are neither funny nor accurate.

We don’t speak like that anymore, thinks the Englishman. If you cannot learn to mimic us properly, how will you rule yourselves?

His chauffeur pulls out of Galle Face Hotel into Colombo traffic. Edgar Walker looks at the colonial buildings sharing space with skyscrapers and dials a number. Somewhere in Beijing, a telephone rings. ■



Shehan Karunatilaka is a Sri Lankan author. His most recent novel is *Chats with the Dead*

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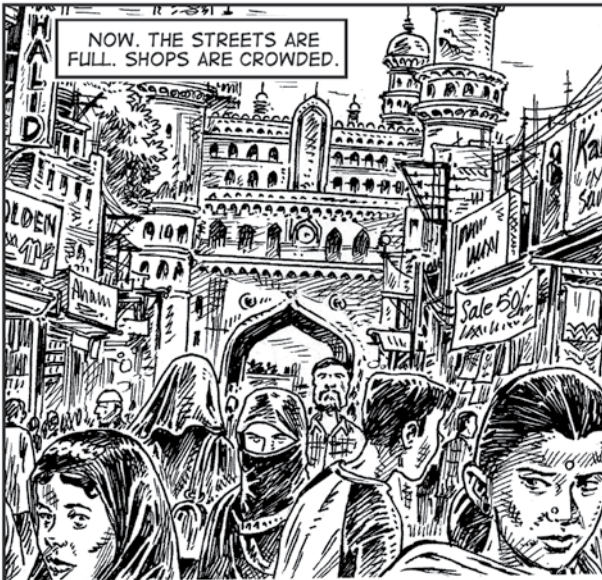
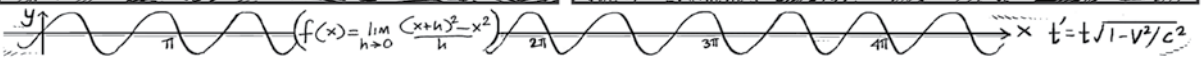
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# AFTER THE END

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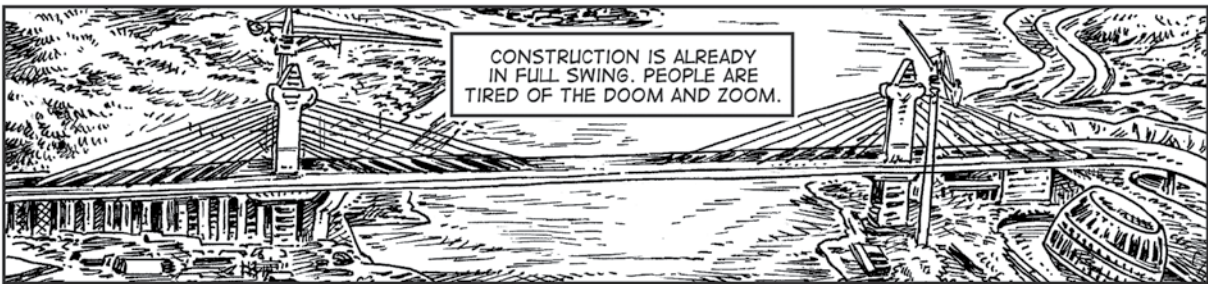
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THE LOCKDOWN IS A RECEDING MEMORY.  
THE DEATHMARCHES WERE IN VAIN.



CONSTRUCTION IS ALREADY  
IN FULL SWING. PEOPLE ARE  
TIRED OF THE DOOM AND ZOOM.



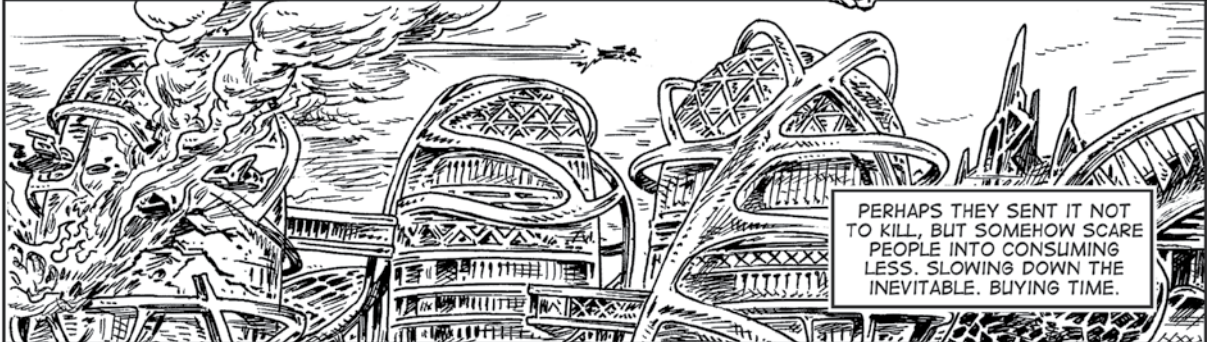
YET THERE IS A FEAR IN THE AIR,  
NO MATTER HOW MUCH PEOPLE  
CAN PRETEND IT DOESN'T EXIST...

"THE WORD APOCALYPSE ORIGINALLY SIGNIFIED AN UNCOVERING, AN UNVEILING. A REVELATION. AN X-RAY, A SCAN, A STRESS-TEST OF US."



"WHAT DID THE PANDEMIC YEAR REVEAL OF OURSELVES?"







BY RAJEEV MASAND



## A Turbulent Year

2020 wasn't a particularly good year for most people, but it was especially hard on **Ranbir Kapoor** and his family. In April, the 38-year-old actor lost his father **Rishi Kapoor** after a prolonged battle with cancer. It's a loss he is still processing, he tells me. "It hasn't fully seeped in yet." Ranbir remembers his father as a "very passionate man, a family man". His head is filled with memories of the time they spent together over the last two years, much of it in New York where his father was undergoing treatment. "Walking with him from the hotel to the hospital to get his chemotherapy, just walking in silence. Or simply being around him. Everything has gone so fast," he says. "I don't know if I've found the words yet to explain the impact he's had on me both personally and professionally, but I do know it's the largest impact any human being has had in my life so far."

The pandemic meant that Ranbir's marriage to his girlfriend **Alia Bhatt**, which was planned to take place in December, was postponed. Remind him that years ago he had said that he would like to be married and have at least one

child before he turned 34, and Ranbir jokes that he missed the deadline. "But I would've got closer to that goal if the pandemic hadn't hit our lives," he says. Ask if it might happen soon and he weighs his words carefully: "I don't want to jinx it by saying anything, but I do want to tick-mark that goal very soon in my life."

Just two weeks ago, his mother Neetu Singh tested positive for Covid-19 while shooting in Chandigarh for *Jug Jugg Jeeyo* with **Anil Kapoor**, **Varun Dhawan** and **Kiara Advani**. Ranbir reportedly made arrangements for her to fly back home immediately and quarantine under the supervision of trusted medical professionals. "She's recovered and back on set now," he says.

Unlike many others who took online classes to learn new skills during the lockdown, Ranbir says he spent the early months of the pandemic dealing with "the health crisis". Later, he did revisit some of his favourite '80s and '90s films such as *Braveheart* and *Rain Man*, and he caught up on "some terrific Indian shows like *Paatal Lok* and *Scam 1992*". But not much by way of personal growth, he admits. "My girlfriend Alia is an overachiever. She took everything from guitar classes to screenwriting classes. Compared to her, I constantly feel like I haven't achieved anything." He did take a 10-day course learning golf in Dubai a few weeks ago, "but that's about all".

More than anything else, he says he missed being on the set. "I hope I haven't forgotten how to act," he jokes, then adds, "but they do say it's a lot like riding a bicycle. Once you learn it, it doesn't go away." With *Brahmastra* and *Shamsher*, both completed—finally!—he's looking forward to begin shooting **Luv Ranjan**'s next with **Shraddha Kapoor** in Ghaziabad from early January, and then **Kabir Singh** director **Sandeep Vanga Reddy**'s next from mid-2021. "I'm in the mood to do light films that can be completed quickly. I don't want to do these big films that take so long to make—not right now anyway."

## Comfort Project

Having won accolades and a National Award for her tour de force performance as the legendary actress Savitri in *Mahanati* in 2018, **Keerthy Suresh**, the 28-year-old star who divides her time among Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films, being chased by Bollywood was only a matter of time.





**Boney Kapoor** succeeded in signing up the actress to appear opposite **Ajay Devgn** in *Maidaan*, the period sport film he's producing with *Badhaai Ho* director **Amit Sharma** at the helm.

However, a few months after the announcement came the news that the actress was not doing the film anymore. The parting was amicable, inside sources say. And while Keerthy and Boney have both put it down to "date issues", it appears that the actress was advised against making her Bollywood debut in a film where she wasn't the central character—especially given that she was coming off a film such as *Mahanati*. Plus her advisors suggested it would be unwise to debut in a new industry playing the mother of a young child when she was only in her twenties.

But now it seems like Keerthy may have found her 'comfort project'. There is a strong buzz that she will play Sita in *Tanhaji* director **Om Raut's** Ramayana-based *Adipurush*. *Baahubali* star **Prabhas** is set to play Ram and *Saif Ali Khan* will play Ravan. The film has been pitched as "a pan-India film" and will be released in five Indian languages: Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. The project is expected to go on the floor in March and will be readied for a 2022 release.

My sources reveal that negotiations with Keerthy are still on. Her dates will need to be adjusted, and her compensation is also being worked out by the film's producer **Bhushan Kumar** whose T-Series banner will bankroll the ambitious project. The film was in the eye of a storm recently when Saif gave an interview in which he said the makers will 'humanise' the character of Ravan and justify his kidnapping of Sita. The actor apologised for making these statements and withdrew them after he was trolled and found himself in legal trouble.

## The Influencer Influence

Bollywood is fast recognising the benefits of co-opting social media influencers and popular YouTubers into their projects. Previously marketing teams relied on influencers and creators to come up with clever concept-based promotions before a film's release. But in 2020, the film industry has discovered that some of the top YouTubers have bigger fan following than many Bollywood stars.

Never one to miss an opportunity, film folk have quickly begun recruiting popular digital creators to appear in their films. Instagram star **Mallika Dua** had a key role as the protagonist's best friend in the recent Kiara Advani-starrer *Indoo Ki Jawani*.

Meanwhile, **Karan Johar's** Dharma Productions quickly snapped up YouTube sensation **Prajakta Koli** for a role in their Anil Kapoor-Varun Dhawan starrer *Jug Jugg Jeeyo*.

But it's Ajay Devgn who may have pulled off what is possibly the biggest coup in signing Gen-X gamer and YouTuber **Ajeay Nagar**, better known as **Carry Minati**, for a role in his next directorial project starring **Amitabh Bachchan** and himself. A 21-year-old from Faridabad, Ajeay's angry-rant videos have stirred as much controversy as they have added to his legend. He boasts over 2.7 crore subscribers on his YouTube channel and has expanded his profile to add rapping to his talents. Devgn is likely aware that Minati's presence in the film will help woo a younger audience, while Minati, it turns out, is feeling 'starstruck' about appearing on screen with his childhood idols.

## Screen Time

**Hrithik Roshan** is making the most of his break from the set. The actor was spotted at a multiplex earlier this week where a special screening of *Wonder Woman 1984* had been especially arranged for him and his guests. Hrithik posted a photograph on social media of himself, his two sons and his ex-wife **Suzanne** sitting in the same row but each separated by a seat. He captioned the photograph: 'Home is where the heart is. My wonderland. Cinemas are back, and so am I.'

The previous day he put out a post saluting

**Dimple Kapadia** for her performance in

**Christopher Nolan's** *Tenet*, which he said

he'd just watched. Sharing a picture of Dimple with the film's leading man **John David Washington**, Hrithik wrote: 'Hers is unmistakably one of the best performances by an Indian actor in an international film. Just brilliant! The charm, the power, the poise, the seductive eyes, Dimple aunty you are something else! Go see *Tenet* for HER.'

Ironically, Dimple wasn't especially keen on auditioning for the part when talent manager **Purvi Lavangia Vats** came to her with it. The actress was hesitant about doing the film at all. After Vats sent the filmmaker a showreel of scenes from Dimple's earlier films, Nolan was especially keen that Dimple go on tape. It was after Vats convinced her to meet Nolan and the film's casting director during a recce in Mumbai that Dimple agreed to go on tape. The rest, as they say, is history. ■



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