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AFTER THE INSURRECTION**

**SWAPAN DASGUPTA ON  
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**SHIVSHANKAR MENON  
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By V Shoba



## LETTER OF THE WEEK

Let the Government do governance ('The Politics of Grievance', January 18th, 2021). The Supreme Court has come up with a way out of the impasse between agitating farmers and the Centre. Several rounds of talks between the Narendra Modi Government and farmers' unions have not been able to resolve the differences so far. And when the apex court steps in, no side loses. Let's see what the Supreme Court-appointed committee suggests. The entire nation is hoping farmers' protests do not turn into a law and order problem. The criticism of the Centre not consulting those who are affected has been denied by the Government, which has clarified the new farm laws were a result of decades of deliberations and intensive engagement with states. It is only building on the work of previous governments. Even as lakhs of cases remain pending at several levels of the judiciary in India, the Supreme Court is trying to play referee in the current deadlock. The process of the resolution ought to be left to the wisdom of the Government. The arms of government should not disrupt the delicate balance of powers and duties.

CK Subramaniam



In the next few months, India will have to up its ante and build bridges with the new administration. India's European Union policy is also in a mess. Our overdependence on the US may become a weakness and we need to balance our strategy. Biden's America may not be about making it great again but will work to be a switch away from Trump's vision. Nations choose leaders but leaders must choose their own course. India will have to ensure that during this American course correction, it remains highly visible to the US.

Ashok Goswami

India should be prepared for a tough dialogue on sensitive issues. Under Biden, India should try to correct its trade balance with the US. A recent analysis by CARE Ratings shows that our trade surplus fell to \$17.3 billion in 2019-2020 from \$21.2 billion in 2017-2018. Trump's attack on skilled visas hurt India the most. Though Trump failed to close that avenue, India must seek permanent institutional resolutions to such issues.

Priyanka Saurabh

## POLITICS OF REGRESS

One needs to understand the frustrations of opposition parties who keep failing to find a way of putting the Modi genie back into the bottle ('The Politics of Grievance', January 18th, 2021). They jump at any issue, irrespective of whether that contradicts their manifestos, want to keep Indians beholden to outmoded worldviews and hoping that Narendra Modi's message of change fails to reach everyone. Their disingenuity makes them worse offenders than China or Pakistan. An industry of grievance has popped up to spin endless yarns of obstruction and obfuscation. But they are not going to get very far with this as the masses will finally see their pattern. 2021 shall see better

sense prevail in India.

Bholey Bhardwaj

## BIDEN'S WORLD

It makes a world of difference to China that Joe Biden's America does not look at it the way Donald Trump did ('The Day of the Wolf Warrior', January 18th, 2021). The incoming US president's regime will be way more broadminded than Trump's tunnel vision in international relations. While Pakistan is sure to be back in favour and will add to India's headaches, India might have a chance here given that Democrats would be on the mend post-Trump. But Biden has serious issues at home to confront first. Trump's tenure saw America and China at daggers drawn for one reason or another.

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By S PRASANARAJAN

## THE AMERICAN UNRAVELLING

**T**HE SECOND IMPEACHMENT of President Donald Trump is the denouement of an American drama in which the individualistic is what strikes us first: the protagonist is larger than the plot. There he is, alone and defiant, abandoned by social media and still adored by his base of the white working class, standing in front of the broken mirror of history, a man suspended between delusion and disgrace. The individualistic is what brought him down, from the glass palace of a Narcissus to the hard terrain of a ruler whose transgressive powers could not turn defeat into victory. Till the last lie, his legions stood by him, resisted facts and endorsed his uplifting fiction, read his gospels in capital letters and exclamation marks, preferred his self-portrait of a persecuted president to the mainstream media's caricature of an unhinged autocrat. In the lonely, final hours of the reckoning, nothing matters except the last residue of a parallel reality. Donald Trump is holding on to it, maybe quietly hoping for the dignity of a tragedy in the moment of retribution.

He is not alone here. Before him, they wore medals and sat on thrones, and loomed large over their subjects as the appointees of God, the only higher sovereign. They stormed the Winter Palace; they legitimised revolutions as the only road to liberation; they established the religion of terror; they built slaughterhouses for the impure; and they saw no difference between the state and the ruler. In the words Frank Dikötter, the author of *How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, the personality cult was the most efficient strategy of the dictator: "The cult debased allies and rivals alike, forcing them to collaborate through common subordination. Most of all, by compelling them to acclaim him before the others, a dictator turned everyone into a liar. When everyone lied, no one knew who was lying, making it more difficult to find accomplices and organise a coup."

The dictatorship of Trump also turned his followers, now a powerful and incendiary constituency in American politics, into carriers of his lies and fantasies. The cult of Trump was built by the most effective manipulator of the social and traditional media. When the liberal broadsheets and television channels declared war on the billionaire insurgent who shattered the Washington idyll, Trump wallowed in adversity and portrayed himself as America's First Victim. Then he tweeted, like a midnight

messiah for America's shirtless, his own mythology, which would become a user's manual for his legions. There were two Trumps, both eagerly accepted and indulged by their respective audience. The one that emerged from the liberal media was a lord of lies, a thug and a con man, a slayer of institutions and an eraser of constitutional traditions. The other Trump, written by the man himself in the style of, allow me a pun, scream of consciousness, was a victim of the elite, a leader disrespected and hunted. Each Trump delegitimised the other. Each one built his own righteous reality. They needed each other for their very survival. Both were mutually dependant exaggerations. Both are here to stay, convicted or not, as dominant, divisive ideas. Trumpism as a ghost story will be equally gripping.

Which makes the story more than individualistic. The Trump legions that stormed the Capitol, the seat of American democracy, are not going away, even if Trump does in disgrace. Trump came to power on the plank of a great betrayal: a white working class betrayed by the establishment. He played the outsider liberator, which was also the abiding image of the populist insurgent. In 2016, fuelled by his salvation theology that avoided any kind of linguistic or ideological complexity but drew heavily from plain nativism, his legions stormed Washington. That was the first insurrection. The insurgent-in-chief has not stopped ever since. He has not stopped churning the cauldron of grievance; throughout his presidency, he set himself apart from the political class, which was either useful subordinates or enemies of the kingdom. Trump promised his followers a glorious new America. They believed him. They still do. They only need a nod from him and they will storm any citadel for his reinstatement. The lie of a defeat is the only truth they want to hang on to. Four years ago Trump capitalised on a class war that was more latent than manifest. The class today is as strong as 74 million, and too visible to be ignored as a Big Lie. Politics after the pathology of Trump will be swayed by the rage of his legions.

Pessimists may ask: Is the next road to democracy's ruins electoral? The question is relevant only if we are all idealists. Resentment is what keeps the system imperfect and necessary. Demagogues may come and go, and some exits will be as disgraceful and theatrical as Trump's. What's permanent is the politics of resentment, and America once again provides democracy's freest expression, for better or worse. A challenge for the next Tocqueville. ■



# OPEN DIARY

*Swapan Dasgupta*

**T**HERE IS ALWAYS an unnatural hesitation in being less than supportive of Supreme Court judgments.

The first is because public life is too full of simpletons who imagine that the verdicts pronounced by their Lordships constitute the gospel and that anything suggesting otherwise constitutes a grave disrespect to one of the pillars of the Indian Republic. There is also the corresponding risk that a pathologically litigious individual or group will seize on a contrarian comment to file a contempt petition before a court. No doubt this will eventually be thrown out but the process of warding off such attacks is bothersome and could even prove expensive. Despite being in public life, I have steered clear of the law courts and don't intend to break this self-imposed rule.

The second is because my political orientation, being avowedly conservative, tends to be inclined against what is called judicial activism. I believe in the separation of powers and insist that the job of the courts is to resolve disputes arising from either the violation of laws or conflicting interpretations of the law. It is the job of the legislature to formulate laws, the executive to govern keeping in mind such laws and rules and for the judiciary to arbitrate in the event of disputes. It is not the job of the judges to make laws but to interpret them, although some judicial verdicts may end up setting the definitive guidelines. Legislation, I feel, belongs exclusively to the elected legislatures. Judicial review should be, ideally, confined to ensuring that the laws have been made keeping in mind the letter (and, occasionally, spirit) of the Constitution, not to mention natural justice.



My third wariness over seeing judicial pronouncements as sacrosanct—though we must necessarily adhere to them—lies in the fact that judgments invariably have a context. They reflect the values and the overall mood of the times. The strictures against homosexuality in the 1950s seem a terrible travesty when read in the 21st century when the notion of individual choice has acquired a more expansive meaning.

Finally, there is the question of the inclination of the judges themselves. In theory, judges are neutral umpires. In reality, each judge is rooted in a social environment and has imbibed a divergent philosophy of jurisprudence. This may not matter in a trial centred on a murder but becomes highly relevant when social and political matters come up for review. The political debates in the US, for example, frequently veer round to the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court. Who is appointed becomes important not because of the formal qualification of the president's nominee but because everyone is aware that law isn't absolute; it is what the judges say it is.

All these caveats came to mind after the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the new legislation governing Indian agriculture and referred the matter to a com-

mittee. Had the decision of the court been based on the question of legislative competence—does the Centre have the constitutional right to frame an all-India law on agricultural marketing?—it would have been perfectly understandable and a question of law. However, as far my understanding of the decision goes, the judges have chosen to adjudicate on the vexed question of what constitutes the 'public interest'.

This question is a judicial minefield. As far as the Constitution is concerned, the legislature—whose composition changes periodically after public consultation through democratic elections—is the authorised guardian of the public interest. They may read the tea leaves right or get it horribly wrong. If it is the latter, a subsequent legislature has the full right to set it right by either amending the laws or even scrapping them entirely. The judges, if asked, can only deem the process of law-making was flawless and in keeping with the Constitution. They can't determine whether the decision was right or wrong. Democracy allows governments to even take bad decisions for which they can be voted out in the next election.

Apart from this, there is the geography of the protests that have propelled the judges to take the unusual decision of trying to assess public interest. The protests have been confined to well-off farmers in Punjab and Haryana and, maybe, some corners of western Uttar Pradesh. It has left the rest of India unmoved and, indeed, welcoming of new investments in the agrarian economy. Should judicial activism be dictated by proximity to Delhi? In that case, does the Supreme Court of India become the Supreme Court of Delhi? ■



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# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## The Court in the Middle

**I**T IS RARE for the Supreme Court to get caught in political crossfire. Usually, its decisions are hailed or derided on the basis of political affiliations. After the court passed an interim order on a clutch of petitions related to three farm reform laws passed by Parliament, it found itself in the midst of a firestorm. Analysts and commentators of liberal and conservative hues launched a fusillade of criticism at the court. Both sides made one common point: the court had entered a 'political thicket' and did not give any coherent reason why it stayed the implementation of the three laws. But for a change, the court has done well to exercise its authority.

The charges against the court make for interesting reading. On the liberal side, the source of anger is the alleged 'judicial rescue' of the Government. The basis for this claim is that after multiple rounds of 'negotiations' between protestors and the Government, there has been no forward movement. The Government was willing to create a committee to consider farmers' grievances about the laws, a proposal they rejected at the outset. Now the court has done what the Government wanted to: create a four-member committee, allegedly packed with pro-law experts. This, it is felt, will either dilute the farmers' protest or will serve as a dilatory tactic and enable the Government to move ahead with its objectives. It is another matter that within hours of the orders being delivered by a bench led by the Chief Justice of India, SA Bobde, the farmers 'rejected' the committee and said the protest would continue.

An argument that is seemingly more substantial is that the court should have pronounced the constitutionality of the three laws instead of staying their implementation and that by doing so it has transgressed into the domain of Parliament. An even more alarming claim is that by staying these laws without going into their merits, the court has allegedly acquired a veto over anything passed by Parliament.

Both claims are disingenuous. If one goes through the court's

order, issued on January 12th, one can see that a key part of the legal challenge before the court is the validity of the Constitution (Third Amendment) Act, 1954 that added the provision enabling Parliament to pass the three laws. This was entry 33 in the Concurrent List in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution that permits the Union Government to control trade in foodstuff, among other things. This is not a bail matter or some other mundane issue that can be disposed of by the court in a single hearing. One can, of course, argue in that case that the court should not have passed a stay order at all. On the surface, this seems a plausible argument. But if one scratches the surface, its disingenuous nature becomes clear: let the farmers and the Government slug it out. It is the 'judicial rescue' claim worded differently. This is a nakedly political argument that gives vent to the feeling that Narendra Modi and his Government should squirm a bit, never mind the damage the protest is doing to the political fabric of the country. Viewed dispassionately, the 'test constitutionality first' argument is merely nit-picking about timing and not the substance of the case before the court.

The reality is that it is too late to be worried about the court entering a 'political thicket'. That happened a long time ago and was continuously celebrated as judicial activism by liberals and leftists. The years and decades from 1990 onward are

littered with numerous such cases. Examples of the court's expanding power in this regard abound: Holding the decision of a speaker of an Assembly in anti-defection cases to be subject to judicial review; prescribing the procedure for an Assembly on conducting a vote of confidence, and much more. The celebration continued as long as the court and the executive were on opposing sides, for then, according to Indian theorists, democracy and liberalism were safe and rule of law was furthered. Never mind the fact that separation of powers was increasingly blurred and the court was effectively a political veto chamber when it chose to

**After the court passed an interim order on a clutch of petitions related to three farm reform laws passed by Parliament, it found itself in the midst of a firestorm: it had entered a 'political thicket' and did not give any coherent reason why it stayed the implementation of the three laws**





Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

be one. This was the liberal theory of 'limited government' by whittling down the powers of the executive and the legislature. It is faintly amusing to see now that the shoe is on the other foot, Parliament's authority is claimed to be in danger.

At this late stage in the court's history of intervention in political issues, one can make a bold case that there is a class of matters where order and stability and national security are in question. Here, the court does have a narrow room for positive intervention. It is happy to note that the court has shown that it is alive to these realities in the last one-odd year. It is important to emphasise that this is an extremely limited and uncharted arena. This has to be so as it is in response to emergent situations—such as the present one—where the court is responding to events. It is certainly not a well-known or even delineated part of its domain. In this sense, the present time is not very different from the one in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the court entered the sphere of the executive and the legislature. Seen from the court's perspective, there is no difference between then and now: in both instances, it can say that a helping hand is being given to overcome shortcomings of the time. That it should cause heartburn in liberal opinion is understandable. What is baffling is the conservative response to the present case.

The conservative case, too, is based on the claim that the court is interfering in the executive's domain and the latter alone has the power to sort out political issues, including the farmers' protest. Here, as in the liberal reaction, there is fear at work. After decades of fragmented governments and author-

ity, Parliament and the executive regained what originally belonged to them, and the court's intervention allegedly threatens to undo these gains. Usually, conservative positions are marked by pragmatism to solve issues. This time, when the court's intervention is clearly pragmatic, conservative opinion refuses to see it in that light. The fact remains that there is a deadlock between the Government and farmers. There are two ways out of this situation: either the Government uses force to disperse the farmers or it settles down for what will be a battle of wits and attrition that will leave it with little attention to do anything else. The court's intervention is practical and ought not to be seen as encroaching on the rights of Parliament and Government, let alone some kind of a 'judicial rescue' as it has been imagined by others.

There are two remedies for restoring the original separation of powers as it was in 1950 when the Constitution was inaugurated. The more durable, and difficult, one is for different institutions to respect their boundaries and stay within their domains. In a country like India, where these institutions were planted from foreign soil, this is a tough ask. Even if one sets aside this way of looking at things, it is highly unlikely that inter-institutional politics can be ended merely by good wishes. The other option is to put an end to political fragmentation that led to unwieldy coalitions and a weak executive. Once that happens, restoration of institutional balance becomes feasible once again. That is the course India has taken for now. ■

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

IN MEMORIAM • VED MEHTA (1934-2021)

## EXILE AND THE KINGDOM

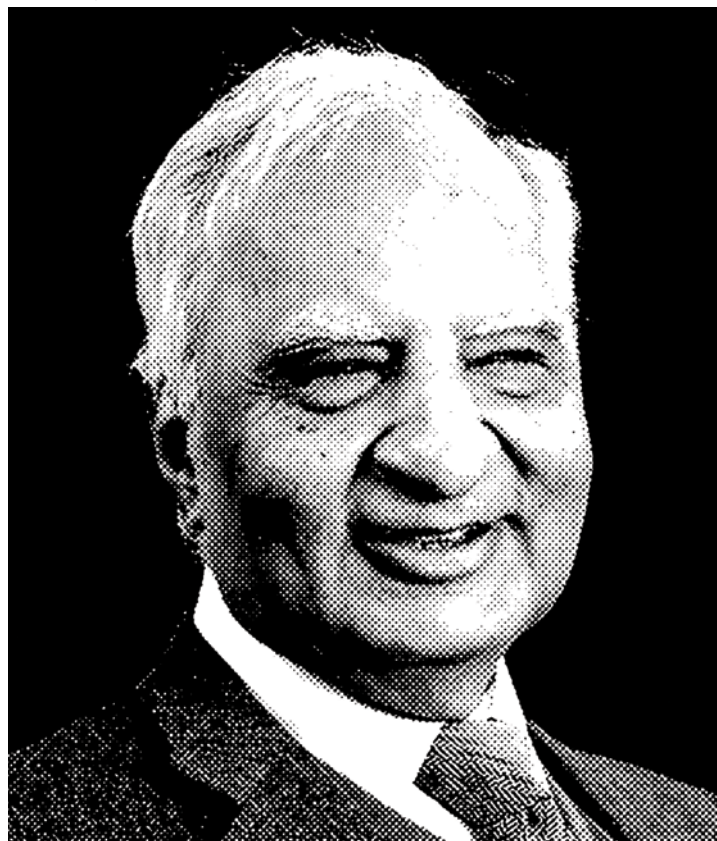
The writer who famously took India to America was his own biggest story

**WE BEGIN TO SEE** when we can no longer see. That's more of a truism than learning to hear after we lose our hearing. Yet, to be robbed of one of the senses is to experience all the others sharpened. Why else would history abound with blind seers? Ved Mehta, who died in New York on January 9th at 86, had been blind almost his whole life, having lost his eyesight in early childhood. Born to a fairly affluent family in Lahore, he could travel continents. And become an expatriate at an early age and subsequently an exile. Although 'exile' comes straight off the title of his autobiography series published over three decades, one is uncomfortable using the word as label for a man who felt at home everywhere and nowhere.

So what was Mehta in exile from? Perhaps the answer that comes nearest the mark is: himself. And perhaps for that very reason, he remained his most important subject, no matter what and where he wrote. That is not to commit sacrilege by taking anything away from Mehta's gamut of works about his country—or countries—and the world around him. In fact, the finest wonder of his writing is his descriptive acumen. More precisely, its ability to consistently describe what only an excellent pair of eyes could see and a sharp mind observe, preserve and process.

It was in many ways a matter of chance. Mehta became known as the writer who took India to the Americans because of his three-decade-plus career as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, a position he could not have landed and held without William Shawn. Shawn is on record for pronouncing

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



one of the best-known clichés about his protégé's skill: Mehta "writes about serious matters without solemnity, about scholarly matters without pedantry, about abstruse matters without obscurity."

Mehta travelled, and he wrote. His most cited efforts would be his navigations through the history of India as it had happened and continued to happen. He wrote about walking Indian streets, Gandhi and whatever lay in his path and whoever caught his fancy. Thus he built a reputation as a profiler. His sharpness as an interviewer added to his growing weight at the *New Yorker*. But as usually happens when a disability lies, or is perceived to lie, at the heart of brilliance—or when brilliance is despite the disability or even the result of it—that subjectivity conditioned the world according to Mehta. His blindness remained his profoundest study.

The controversies—and the fall from grace—engulfed both matters of intellect and character. In many ways, Mehta had perfected, for himself and others, the art of journalistic writing. Elegant but informal. Lucid and sinewy. You could lose your way in the prose but as a compliment to its creator. Yet, not everybody believed he should have trodden everywhere he did. *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (1962) was built on and expanded from his interviews with Oxford philosophers published in 1961. The response to the exercise, back in Oxford, was bloodlust. Isaiah Berlin was polite enough when he wrote to the author about the reaction of his colleagues: 'outraged or indignant'. It was ultimately blamed on, or excused as, the *New Yorker's* penchant for satire. It was at the *New Yorker* that Mehta would be attacked and taken to task. By the late 1980s, his colleagues openly questioned the merit of his writing. More serious were the allegations of misogyny. And he was shown the door finally.

*Continents of Exile*, the collective title of his autobiographical works, is more than an individual's story. It is, of course, the story of everything he had seen without his eyes. Depending on readers, reading on Braille at a time when too few works were available on it, dictating his oral compositions to his assistants, and doing it all over a long life, needed a special kind of strength. Add to that the fact that Mehta never liked a stranger to pity him or a friend or stranger to assist him—physically. The no-walking-stick-no-guide-dog legend of Ved Mehta was actually a clue to his inner workings. Perhaps he became a writer out of defiance. Just as with his descriptions of a world he could not see. ■

By SUDEEP PAUL



ANGLE

## AN ABSOLUTE RIGHT TO CANCEL



**Social media companies have turned an authoritarian corner after the Capitol Hill riots**

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**WITTER CEO Jack Dorsey came out with a statement on January 13th in which he said that the platform was not proud of permanently removing US President Donald Trump. While arguing that what they did was correct, he said it set a dangerous precedent. The short answer to that is if you know the precedent being set is dangerous, don't set it. Because, while the shock of the attack on Capitol Hill might have allowed them to get away with it, the enormity of what has been done is inescapable. A private company has decided to make an elected head of state an outcast and have got away with it. Other social media companies have also taken similar actions against Trump.

This might seem acceptable because of his character but it is good to remember some things. The social media companies themselves are not going to remain as they are today. Their CEOs will change. Their ideologies could change. And, hence, the people who they deem fit not to be present on their platforms will change. It could all go in the other direction. You might have a moment far in the future when some ultra-right-wing billionaire could take control of companies like Twitter or Facebook and then precisely these precedents will be used to deplatform liberals. By then, the idea that deplatforming is ethically questionable for a private company would not be tenable.

Dorsey claims to recognise this but he has been saying this for a long time and, meanwhile, Twitter has continued to heavily censor opinions of the right wing. Because it is backed by virtue

signalling and the reasons themselves are deceptively noble (promoting violence, racism, etcetera), it also leads to herd mentality with companies like Facebook, which are more commercially driven, following suit. In the latest round, even Apple and Google have participated, and that only makes such actions even further worrisome.

Both Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store summarily removed Parler, a fast-growing Twitter alternative for the right wing, after the riots. But the worst of all was Amazon removing Parler from their servers without giving them any time to shift to another provider. That effectively took Parler offline. In this, these private companies turned another corner of authoritarianism. They are not just regulating free speech but also preventing opposing opinions from being voiced anywhere else. What is being enforced is total silence.

It is possible, as Dorsey tweeted, that this was done because of the circumstance that confronted them—'I believe this was the right decision for Twitter. We faced an extraordinary and untenable circumstance, forcing us to focus all of our actions on public safety.' But these are undefinable general terms. Anything can be 'extraordinary' or 'untenable'. They can be used against anyone at any point of time. It shouldn't have mattered when these companies were startups, but now they are effective monopolies of online discourse. These platforms should never have been playing judge, jury and executioner of speech, but these roles are here to stay. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

### HYPOCRISY

The recently held Test match in Sydney has brought the issue of racism in cricket to the forefront. The match was held up briefly as those who had shouted racist slurs were evicted from the stands. Indian cricketers and administrators, and fans back home expressed their annoyance; BCCI Secretary Jay Shah put out a statement that said such acts of discrimination wouldn't be tolerated while the Australian cricket board and former Australian cricketers apologised profusely. But there is more than an element of hypocrisy in all this. Racism is hardly restricted to Australian grounds. Cricket grounds in India can be racist cesspits on occasions, visible, for instance, when some fans abused Andrew Symonds in 2007. And the BCCI showed none of the alacrity when Darren Sammy revealed last year that an Indian player used a racist slur when they played for an IPL team. Not to forget that incredulous defence the Indian team came up with to protect Harbhajan Singh for what he had told Symonds in a cricket match. ■

WORD'S WORTH

**'Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins'**

**RALPH WALDO EMERSON**  
AMERICAN POET AND ESSAYIST



By Bibek Debroy

# The Enigma of Krishna

## The origins and message of the Pandava Gita

I AM NOT GOING to use Devanagari. There is a *shloka* that goes, 'Janaami dharmam na cha me pravritti, janaami paapam na cha me nivritti.' This is often quoted by various people and was spoken by Duryodhana. The second part of the *shloka* is also familiar, though not quoted that often. 'Kenaapi devena hridisthitena yathaa niyuktosmi tathaa karomi'. I have often been asked, where in the Mahabharata did Duryodhana say this? The answer is, nowhere. This *shloka* is not from the Mahabharata. It is from a text known as the Pandava Gita or the Prapanna Gita. It is called a Gita and it is not a text that is part of the Mahabharata. But it is a text that generally has protagonists from the Mahabharata, singing chants about Krishna's greatness. It is permeated with *bhakti*. Therefore, though not a part of the Mahabharata, it has strong links with the Mahabharata. Among the protagonists, the most important are the Pandavas. Hence, it is known as the Pandava Gita, though it is really about what the Pandavas and others chanted. The word '*prapanna*' means 'to seek refuge in'. Since this is about seeking refuge with Krishna, it is also known as the Prapanna Gita. No one knows who compiled this collation and when. Some of the *shlokas* are indeed from the Mahabharata, others from various Puranas. Though anonymous, it is a popular and Mahabharata-related Gita. Depending on which edition you use, there will be a single chapter, with around 83 *shlokas*. I have not seen an edition with a translation in English. But translations in Indian languages exist.

The most famous *shloka* is undoubtedly the quote ascribed to Duryodhana. Actually, there are two *shlokas* in Duryodhana's quote and only the first is generally familiar. Therefore, let me give a translation of both *shlokas*. Duryodhana said, 'I know dharma, but do not practise it. I know sin, but do not refrain from it. There is a divinity who is established in my heart. I do whatever he engages me in. O Madhusudana! I am only a machine. Please pacify my sins. I am the machine, you are the one who controls the machine. Please do not blame me for my sins.'

As I said, *shlokas* from other places have been used to compile the Pandava Gita. Most people will have heard of

the following: 'Tvameva maataa cha pitaa tvameva, tvameva bandhushcha sakhaa tvameva, tvameva vidyaa dravinam tvameva, tvameva sarvam mama deva deva.' In the Pandava Gita, Gandhari says this. It is translated as: 'You are the mother and you are the father. You are the relative and you are the friend. You are knowledge and you are wealth. O lord of the gods! You are everything to me.' 'Yatra yogeshvarah krishno yatra partho dhanurdharah.' Who does not know that one? It is the concluding verse of the Bhagavat Gita, spoken by Sanjaya. In the Pandava Gita, it is spoken by Vaishampayana. It is translated as, 'Wherever Krishna, lord of yoga, and Partha, the wielder of the bow, exist, it is my view that wealth, victory, prosperity and good policy certainly exist.'

To give you a flavour of the Pandava Gita, let me give you some other examples.

Brahma said, 'There are men who know about the supreme and are devoid of attachment. They always remember Narayana, the guru of the gods. Through this *dhyana*, they destroy all sins in their minds. They do not drink the mother's milk again.' (That is, they are not born again.) Indra said, 'The man named Narayana is famously spoken about among men on earth as a thief. As soon as he is remembered, he steals away all the accumulated sins earned over many births.'

Yudhishtira said, 'His complexion is like that of a dark cloud. He is attired in a yellow silken garment. Because of Kaustubha, his body is radiant. He associates with the virtuous. His large eyes resemble a lotus. I worship Vishnu, who is alone the lord of all the worlds.' Bhimasena said, 'The earth, with all its mobile and immobile objects, was submerged in the flood of water and the one whose form is the universe assumed the form of a *varaha* [boar] to raise her up on his snout. May that illustrious Svayambhu show me his favours.' Arjuna said, 'I seek refuge with Hari, the destination for great-souled ones. He cannot be thought of. He is not manifest. He is infinite. He is the lord without decay. He is the lord who thinks of the creation of the universe. He is the one who thinks about the extension of the three worlds.' Nakula said, 'Bound by the noose of

destiny, if I descend downwards [into hell] or am born in an ignoble lineage or as a bird or insect or have hundreds of births as a worm, let my inner *atman* meditate on Keshava. Let him be in my heart and let me have singleminded devotion towards him alone.' Sahadeva said, 'There are those who prostrate themselves before the infinitely energetic Vishnu, in the form of a Yajna Varaha. I bow down before them repeatedly.' Karna said, 'I do not speak of anyone else, hear of anyone else, think of anyone else, remember anyone else, worship anyone else or seek refuge with anyone else. O Shri Shrinivasa! O Purushottama! Devotedly and lovingly, I seek your lotus feet. Please make me your servant.'

Kunti said, 'O Hrishikesh! Determined by the fruits of my own karma, whichever birth I proceed towards, in that form, let my devotion towards you be firm.' Madri said, 'There are those who are devoted to Krishna. They remember Krishna in the night and also remember Krishna when they wake up. Like oblations aided by *mantras* enter the fire, in other bodies, they enter Krishna.' Draupadi said, 'O Keshava! Wherever I am born, as an insect, bird, animal, reptile, *rakshasa*, *pishacha* or as a human, through your favours, let me behave in such a way that my devotion towards you does not waver.' Subhadra said, 'Prostrating oneself before Krishna alone is the equal of performing *avabhrittha* after ten horse sacrifices. However, there is rebirth after ten horse sacrifices. After prostrating oneself before Krishna, there is no rebirth.' (*Avabhrittha* is the most important final component of a sacrifice, characterised by the taking of a bath.) Dhritarashtra said, 'I repeatedly prostrate myself before the cause behind *vamana*, the infinitely valorous Narayana. I prostrate myself before Purushottama, who wields the Shri Sharnga bow, the *chakra*, the sword and the mace.'

Uddhava said, 'If a person forsakes Vasudeva and worships another *deva*, he is like an evilminded and thirsty man who digs a well along the banks of the Jahnavi.' (Jahnavi is the river Ganga.) Dhaumya (the family priest of the Pandavas) said, 'There may be good deeds I have performed near the water, while lying down, while seated,

during the day, or at night. Let Janardana be satisfied with what I have done.' Sanjaya said, 'There are those who are afflicted, distressed, limp and scared, with terrors like tigers and other things present. As soon as they chant Narayana's name, from that very sound, they are freed from their miseries and become happy.' Akrura said, 'I am Narayana's servant, the servant of his servant, the servant of the servant of his servant. Indeed, in this world, there is no other lord for men. Therefore, I am the most blessed in this world.'

Shalya said, 'His complexion is like that of the *atasi* flower. He is attired in yellow garments. Those who prostrate themselves before Govinda have nothing to fear.' Virata said,

'There are those who are Vasudeva's devotees, serene, with their minds only on him. From one birth to another birth, let me the servant of their servants.' Virata also said, 'I prostrate myself before the divinity of Brahmanas, who ensure the welfare of cattle and Brahmanas. I repeatedly prostrate myself before Krishna Govinda, who ensures the welfare of the universe.' (This is also a famous *shloka*, though few identify it with the Pandava Gita.) Bhishma said, 'O Krishna! O one who is affectionate towards those who seek refuge! When destiny is adverse and relatives dwindle away, please show your compassion and save me.' Drona said, 'Janardana is the lord of the three worlds. The wielder of the *chakra* has killed *daityas* and lords among men. But they have gone to Vishnu's city. Therefore, the divinity's rage is equal to a boon.' Kripacharya said, 'O one who removed the burden of Madhu and Kaitabha! O lord of the worlds! As a result of my birth, I pray for only this fruit. Please show me your favours and remember me. I want to be the attendant of your servant's servant, the servant of the servant of your servant.'

Krishna himself said, 'O Krishna! 'O Krishna! 'O Krishna! If a person always remembers me

in this way, like raising a lotus out of water, I raise him up from hell.' 'O men! I raise up my arms and always say that if a being performs *japa* every day, at the time of death, or in the field of battle, addressing me as Mukunda, Narasimha and Janardana, I will grant him his wishes, even if he is like a block of stone or a piece of wood. ■



IN THE PANDAVA GITA,  
KRISHNA HIMSELF SAID,  
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## PAWAR POINT

**N**ationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar made a low-key visit to Delhi recently and met CPM leader Sitaram Yechury and CPI's D Raja separately. Why? If the grapevine is to be believed, Pawar is in constant touch with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as he wants her to return to power in the state by trouncing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming Assembly election. So he told opposition party leaders like Yechury and Raja not to take any steps that could help BJP. It could even pave the way for a united opposition in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The speculation is that after the death of Congress leader Ahmed Patel, Pawar could be made United Progressive Alliance convenor. He now plans to go to Kolkata along with other opposition leaders to campaign for Banerjee. Doesn't it undermine the roles of the already vociferous state Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and the Left's Sujan Chakraborty, known for their tirades against Banerjee?

## SPIRITUAL CONNECT

**A**ctor Kangana Ranaut has become a devotee of Swami Vivekananda. This year, on his birth centenary, Ranaut tweeted: 'When I was lost, you found me. When I had nowhere to go, you held my hand. When I was disillusioned by the world and had no hope, you gave me purpose. There is no being, no God higher than you, my Guru. You own every bit of my being...' Now, the gossip is Ranaut will be joining BJP and before the Bengal election, she's playing the Swami Vivekananda card, an evergreen emotive issue in the state. Or, is she leaning on Swamiji to inspire other women?

## Outsider Status

**A**s the West Bengal Assembly election approaches, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is out to appease the common man, even those from outside the state. Owing to Covid restrictions, though the Kolkata International Book Fair went virtual this year, Banerjee ensured the Ganga Sagar Mela didn't. Each year, the mela is held on the occasion of Makar Sankranti at a location where the river Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal. And a lot of outsiders throng Kolkata's Babughat to attend the mela. Despite Covid, the state government made canopies for those coming in from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as Banerjee did her rounds and even gave a speech in Hindi. It seems she's on a mission to prove that she's not against 'outsiders', but maybe only against the cultural invasion of Bengal.

## Vaccine Eloquent

**E**xternal Affairs Minister S Jaishankar is a busy man. Both Health Minister Harsh Vardhan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are counting on him for Covid 'diplomacy'. It really cuts both ways. One, overseeing the arrival of vaccines from outside that can be gauged by Jaishankar's frequent travels and negotiations abroad. Two, the foreign minister is also involved in finalising the timetable for India's vaccine outgo to other countries, like Brazil and Bangladesh.

## Envoy Vacancy

**K**enneth Juster, who has been the US Ambassador to India since 2017, has just delivered his farewell speech and all eyes are now on who's replacing him. There is gossip that the Biden era might pitchfork Alyssa Ayres, senior fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia at the New York-headquartered Council on Foreign Relations, to the post. In 2013, Ayres was even assistant secretary of state for South Asia. Her husband, Sadanand Dhume, is an author and journalist of Indian origin. Obviously, the Indian diaspora in the US is actively lobbying for Ayres. Back home, the Prime Minister's Office says that the choice of the next US ambassador to India rests squarely with the Americans.

## Goan Adventure

**W**ith the Goa Assembly election slated to be held next year, Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Admi Party (AAP) National Convenor Arvind Kejriwal has announced the setting up of a Konkani Academy in Delhi. However, the national capital doesn't boast a formidable Konkani population. We learn that this is Kejriwal's strategy to kickstart his Goa campaign, particularly when AAP hasn't fared so well in Punjab and Haryana in the past.



## Return Ticket?

Former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje has always been a headache for BJP's central leadership. In the latest development, supporters of Raje in Jaipur have launched a 'Vasundhara Raje Samarthak Manch', which is being seen as a move to resurrect her as BJP's chief ministerial candidate in the 2023 state election. Apparently, this has upset the BJP brass as well as RSS leaders in Nagpur. But Raje remains unfazed and claims the Manch was launched out of people's enthusiasm.

## CABINET GOSSIP

**T**he media is always abuzz with news of a Cabinet reshuffle around Makar Sankranti, but that has come to naught this year. The talk of inducting BJP MP Jyotiraditya Scindia to the Cabinet seems to be dying out too as a clutch of state elections are lined up this year. Perhaps, after the elections then? Maybe. But a section of BJP was heard speculating about a change in Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's post recently. Again, the Budget is around the corner. Perhaps, after the Budget then? Only Modi holds the key to the 'real' Cabinet reshuffle.



By SWAPAN DASGUPTA

# BJP'S DOUBLE HELIX

*A historical insight into the Vajpayee-Advani jugalbandi*

IN THE GENERAL Election of 1991, riding on the back of the Ayodhya movement, BJP emerged as the principal challenger to the Congress. Since then, scholars have agonised over what they believed was an unexpected saffron surge, producing scores of studies on the party and the wider phenomenon of Hindu nationalism. Most of the works by academics were hostile and born out of anxiety that India was heading towards an intolerant majoritarian dispensation that, unless checked, would demolish the basis on which the study of Indian politics rested. The common thread of the studies published between 1991 and today was that BJP could not and should not be assessed as yet another political party. Instead, it should be viewed as a cluster of devilishly clever fanatics with a singleminded desire to reinvent India along the lines of a new Hindu fascism. Every twist and turn of the party was minutely assessed and dissected on the principle that it was important to know the enemy thoroughly in order to destroy it. In every respect, Vinay Sitapati's study of BJP in the decades preceding the famous victory of Narendra Modi in 2014 is markedly different (*Jugalbandi: The BJP before Modi*; Viking; 409 pages; Rs 799).

First, the author deviates from the turgid academic style of writing and successfully tries to make a history more accessible to the non-specialist reader. This is done without compromising the nuances of the political narrative. The storytelling is deftly blended with analysis.

Second, unlike many academics, the author does not bank exclusively on newspapers as the primary source. In fact, his dependence on written sources is a bit too casual. He bases a significant part of his narrative history on recollections of those who had a ringside view of events. They include journalists and those, like me, who combined association with the movement with a presence in the media. Predictably, this has meant that the sections on BJP are far stronger than the narrative centred on the Jana Sangh.

Third, although the history covers many individuals who played a prominent part in the evolution of the Jana Sangh and BJP, it focuses principally on two individuals: Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani—their long partnership and their *jugalbandi*. The writer has attempted—quite successfully, I may add—in bringing out the essence of their personalities, including their private lives, without being judgemental. He has also avoided exaggerated adulation. Thus, while the hidden ruthlessness behind the genial exterior of Vajpayee comes to the fore, so do the hesitations and tentativeness of Advani. Vajpayee was always the dominant player after the death of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya in 1967 and Advani invariably deferred to him. At the same time, from 1990 to 1996, Advani was thrust into the limelight and it appeared that Vajpayee had been relegated to the background. The hesitations and awkwardness involving the two men has been well captured by Sitapati on the strength of anecdotes.

The divergent positions taken by Vajpayee and Advani on the Ayodhya issue that dominated national politics from 1988 have been handled with dexterity by the author. Whereas one view of the divergent positions would have us believe that Vajpayee was 'secular' whereas Advani was 'communal', Sitapati has located the differences in electoral strategies. Vajpayee believed that BJP had located its anti-Congressism in a coalition culture. In effect, this meant that while BJP was loosely a Hindu party, it should simultaneously underplay the more polarising aspects of its politics. Advani—backed by a significant section of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—felt that the disastrous election results of 1984 held very different lessons. They suggested that BJP should aim





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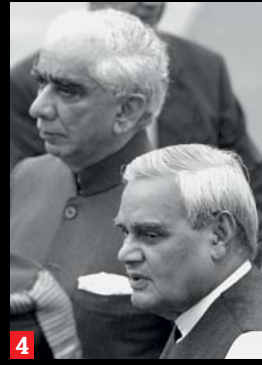


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1. Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, 1996  
 2. Advani, Vajpayee and RSS leader KS Sudarshan in Bengaluru, 2005  
 3. Advani during the *rath yatra*, 1990  
 4. Prime Minister Vajpayee and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in New Delhi, 2001



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**UNLIKE HIS PEER GROUP WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN UNDER PRESSURE TO AVOID CONVEYING THE IMPRESSION OF BEING EVEN REMOTELY SYMPATHETIC TO BJP AND ITS BELIEF SYSTEMS, VINAY SITAPATI HAS ATTEMPTED TO PRESENT BJP AS A NORMAL POLITICAL PARTY WITH AN EYE ON OPTIMISING ITS RETURNS FROM ELECTIONS**



to be aggressively Hindu and develop a distinct and assertive Hindu constituency. The *rath yatra* from Somnath to Ayodhya in 1990 was part of this approach, as were Advani's tirades against 'pseudosecularism'—a term that became embedded in the vocabulary of Indian politics after Rajiv Gandhi's reversal of the Supreme Court's Shah Bano judgment.

My own recollections of the 1991 General Election campaign prompt the conclusion that Vajpayee was out of sync with the heady mood inside BJP. He genuinely felt that the divisions in the anti-Congress vote would only benefit Rajiv Gandhi and lead to BJP getting stuck at the 50-seat level. Advani, on the other hand, felt that the Ayodhya movement had acquired sufficient momentum to make BJP an alternative pole of Indian politics.

Advani turned out to be right as BJP won 121 seats in 1991. Its tally may have touched 150 had Rajiv Gandhi not been assassinated just before the third and final phase of polling. However, Vajpayee had the last laugh after Advani—without any prompting from RSS—realised, shortly before the 1996 General Election, that the incremental push BJP needed to overtake Congress could happen only if the genial Vajpayee was projected as the leader. Always apologetic at having upstaged Vajpayee during

the Ayodhya mobilisation, Advani was in fact relieved that he had found a way to restore Vajpayee's supremacy in the party. This position would remain unchallenged till 2004.

Finally, Sitapati's work is a major departure from the bulk of academic and quasi-academic studies of the saffron phenomenon. Unlike his peer group which has always been under pressure to avoid conveying the impression of being even remotely sympathetic to BJP and its belief systems, Sitapati has attempted to present BJP as a normal political party with an eye on optimising its returns from elections. The author is fully aware of the rich literature on the subject that paints the Jana Sangh-BJP as a band of hardnosed rightwing, neofascist revolutionaries. Mercifully, the influence of this ideological overload on the larger tale is patchy. I guess it will be for precisely this reason that the importance of *Jugalbandi* will be discounted in the academic study of Indian politics.

For any chronicler of Hindu nationalism, the delicate and undefined relationship between RSS and BJP poses a formidable challenge. It is, of course, easy to fall back on the belief that BJP is nothing but an extension of RSS, the political arm of a sinister and secretive organisation based in Nagpur. The reality, as

Sitapati, has rightly noted, is more complex. The author takes note of Guruji Golwalkar's deep disdain for politics and RSS' strong belief that Hindu unity is better served through social interventions than divisive electoral politics. The story, however, does not end here. The quantum of RSS involvement in BJP has, in reality, depended quite significantly on the approaches of individual *sarsanghchalaks*. Balasaheb Deoras, for example, left the handling of the Jana Sangh-BJP to his brother Bhaurao who, in turn, was instrumental in linking the entire Sangh Parivar to the movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan. Subsequently, Rajendra Singh reposed inordinate faith in the leadership of Vajpayee and Advani and accorded BJP an exceptional measure of functional autonomy. His successor, KS Sudarshan, on the other hand was noted for his over-intrusiveness in all matters ranging from high policy to the appointment of ministers and officials. It was on Sudarshan's intervention, for example, that Vajpayee was forced to shelve the appointment of Jaswant Singh as finance minister in 1998.

There were profound tensions in the relationship between RSS and BJP during Vajpayee's tenure as prime minister. The disagreements were replicated in public spats involving the Prime Minister's Office and senior functionaries of the Sangh, such as Ashok Singhal (Vishva Hindu Parishad) and Dattopant Thengadi (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh). The tensions also affected Advani who once told me that it was unbecoming of the RSS chief to be so minutely involved in government decision-making. The breakdown in the RSS-BJP equilibrium was a factor in the defeat of BJP in the 2004 General Election. Since then, a new normal has seen RSS establish its organisational primacy in BJP. At the same time, after 2014, RSS' relationship with the Narendra Modi Government has been free of any outward tension suggesting that the terms of engagement between the two bodies are one of constant evolution.

A facet of this relationship that is relatively under-explored in Sitapati's work centres on economic policy. Unlike the right in Europe and North America that is distinguished from the rest on the strength of their commitment to private enterprise and a minimal state, the Jana Sangh-BJP, influenced to a large part by RSS, has put culture above economics and nationalism over globalisation.

The early tensions over economics surfaced during Indira Gandhi's post-1969 socialist turn when the Jana Sangh cosied up to the free-market Swatantra Party and Congress(O) which had strong links with India's big business. While the vagaries of politics and a determination to fight the growing influence of the Communist Party of India in Indira Gandhi's Government prompted the Jana Sangh to join the 'Grand Alliance', Balraj Madhok sought to deepen the relationship by attempting to unite all the disparate right elements in a new party. Vajpayee was uncom-

fortable with this turn, as he was with Madhok. RSS sided with Vajpayee and Madhok was edged out of the Jana Sangh, ending the remainder of his life on the fringes of politics.

The tensions over economic policy resurfaced after the liberalisation of the Indian economy post-1991. BJP was always pro-business but was always dependant on small and medium-scale entrepreneurs who sought deregulation with protection from foreign capital. When the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 1998, Vajpayee—under the strong influence of Brajesh Mishra—sought to open up the Indian economy to beat back the economic sanctions imposed by Western powers as an expression of their distaste for the nuclear tests. This approach fetched dividends for the Indian economy as growth rates rose significantly. However, the entry of foreign capital and the privatisation of some state-owned enterprises triggered opposition within a section of the Sangh Parivar and was sharp enough to provoke Thengadi to denounce the Government's economic policy as '*rashtravidrohi*'.

Vajpayee was livid, as indeed was Advani who, in any case, had very little appetite for *swadeshi* economics, despite his personal proximity to S Gurumurthy—a very influential figure in the larger RSS family. However, Advani did attempt to bridge the differences between various wings of RSS and the Government. The relationship between the *sarsanghchala*k and Vajpayee had touched an all-time low and Sudarshan wanted the dismissal of people such as Brajesh Mishra from positions of authority. This in turn prompted

Vajpayee and what I once cheekily described as the people at his dining table to dig their heels in. The cold war, which Mishra kept alive by deftly using the media to his advantage, also engulfed Advani. Sitapati has mapped this strained relationship between the two stalwarts in the last two years of the Vajpayee Government quite accurately. But he has underestimated its intensity. I believe it was principally responsible for distancing the NDA from its core support base and BJP's defeat in 2004.

Many of us who witnessed the journey of BJP from the margins to the centrestage have chosen to keep their memories largely private. Yet, with the death of Vajpayee and the retirement of Advani from active politics, not to mention the fact that BJP has moved to a very different political trajectory under Modi, the time may have come to record the varied experiences. Sitapati's book is an important step in filling up the important gaps in our knowledge. It isn't a comprehensive work, but it is unlikely to be bettered in the immediate future. ■

Swapan Dasgupta is an MP and India's foremost conservative columnist. He is the author of *Awakening Bharat Mata: The Political Beliefs of the Indian Right*

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**WITH THE DEATH OF VAJPAYEE AND THE RETIREMENT OF ADVANI FROM ACTIVE POLITICS, NOT TO MENTION THE FACT THAT BJP HAS MOVED TO A VERY DIFFERENT POLITICAL TRAJECTORY UNDER MODI, THE TIME MAY HAVE COME TO RECORD THE VARIED EXPERIENCES**





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By **James Astill**

# AFTER THE

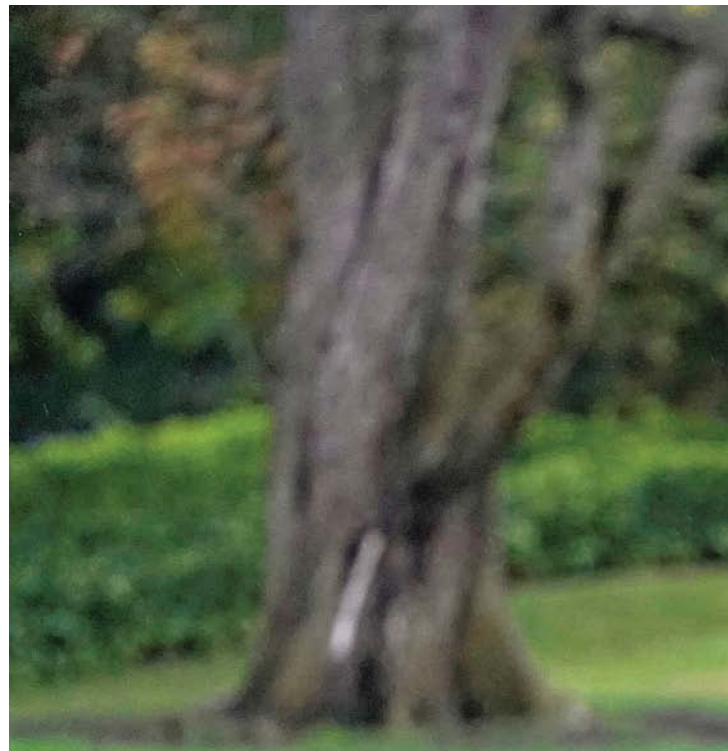
Donald Trump is facing ejection from the White

**W**HEN DONALD TRUMP began falsely claiming that last November's general election was fraudulent, his Republican enablers chuckled and urged everyone who found this troubling to calm down. "What is the downside for humouring him for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change," one told the *Washington Post*. "He went golfing this weekend. It's not like he's plotting how to prevent Joe Biden from taking power on January 20th. He's tweeting about filing some lawsuits, those lawsuits will fail, then he'll tweet some more about how the election was stolen, and then he'll leave."

It was the same one-eyed, complacent attitude that had seen the president's party—the party of Lincoln and Reagan—excuse or defend Trump's incompetence, loutishness and abuses of power over the past four years. And it would have the same result: whenever he suffers no consequences for his rule-breaking, he behaves worse. Yet not even the most jaundiced critics of Trump—who on January 13th suffered the historic disgrace of becoming the first president to be impeached for a second time—could have predicted quite how much worse.

Trump's legal campaign to overturn the election was every bit as hapless as predicted. His legal team was a joke. It was led by Rudy Giuliani, the once-admired and now unhinged former mayor of New York. He was supported by a conservative lawyer and conspiracy theorist called Sidney Powell, who argued that Trump had been robbed of electoral victory by a secret cabal comprising communists, George Soros, the CIA, Hugo Chávez and the hundreds of Republican and Democratic officials who administered the general election, including the pro-Trump Republican governor of Georgia, a state Trump lost by 12,000 votes. You think that sounds ridiculous? Then also consider that Giuliani launched this audacious effort at a press conference in Philadelphia held outside a small gardening company, known as Four Seasons Total Landscaping, which was located between a sex shop and a crematorium. It was suggested that the unfailingly incompetent Trump team had meant to book the nearby Four Seasons Hotel, but got their wires crossed—as indeed Giuliani continued to do during the press conference.

He alleged that the election had been so fraudulent in Philadelphia, whose state of Pennsylvania Biden had won by over 80,000 votes, that that result would need to be voided. He presented no proof of this claim, besides a list of names of dead people,



**Whenever he suffers no consequences for his rule-breaking, Trump behaves worse. Yet, not even the most jaundiced critics of Trump—who on January 13th suffered the historic disgrace of becoming the first president to be impeached for a second time—could have predicted quite how much worse**

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# INSURRECTION

House, a second impeachment trial and a mutiny in his party

REUTERS





including the former heavyweight boxer Joe Frazier, whom Giuliani said had voted in the election. It was very quickly established that they had not.

From this inglorious beginning, things went seriously downhill for Trump's legal effort. Giuliani's 60-odd legal challenges, filed in the six battleground states that had voted decisively for Biden, were laughed out of court; including the Supreme Court. The various audits and recounts the Trump team requested also failed to deliver the goods. A partial recount of the vote in Wisconsin, which the president lost by 21,000 votes, merely added 87 to Biden's tally. Increasingly desperate, as the prospect of a rare comeuppance loomed, Trump made personal calls to Republican officials in all the relevant states. By turns beseeching, flattering and darkly threatening, he demanded that they overturn the election for him. But there was nothing doing. After he implored Georgia's Republican secretary-of-state, Brad Raffensperger, for the umpteenth time to "find 11,780 votes" for him, Raffensperger had his office leak the call to the press. And yet, even as Trump's substantive efforts to overturn the election were coming to nothing, the political effects of his contortions were a triumph. Three-quarters of Republican voters claimed to believe Biden's victory was illegitimate.

This persuaded many Republican politicians who had no direct responsibility for the election to try to win the president's favour by attacking it on his behalf. The fathomlessly cynical Republican attorney-general of Texas (who, incidentally, has been indicted on unrelated fraud charges) filed a lawsuit to overturn the results in four battleground states. Around two-thirds of

Republican members of the House of Representatives added their names to the suit—before it, too, was summarily dismissed. Many Republicans had been secretly hoping that Trump's electoral defeat would loosen his grip on the party. Yet, in defying the reality of his loss he seemed only to be tightening his grasp.

That led to the awful scenes in Washington DC on June 6th, when Congress gathered to rubber-stamp the election results. This congressional process was in the past such a formality that it barely garnered newspaper headlines. Yet Trump, half-crazed by the humiliation of his loss, saw it as a last possible roll of the dice.

In a series of frenzied tweets through late December, he invited his hardcore followers to congregate in Washington and challenge Congress to overturn the result. "JANUARY SIXTH, SEE YOU IN DC!" Members of a white nationalist group called the Proud Boys answered the call. So did many members of a Trump-ultra cult, QAnon, who claim to believe the president is at war with a shadowy cabal of socialist devil worshippers and paedophiles. A few days before the planned vote, an ambitious young Republican Senator, Josh Hawley of Missouri, announced that he would lead an effort to overturn the results as the president wished. And suddenly things began to look more serious.

Hawley's challenge had no chance of success—as he, an alumnus of Stanford and Yale Law who has branded himself a scourge of the elite under Trump, knew full well. The election results would be approved by bipartisan majority in both congressional Houses. Yet the spectacle of even a performative election heist by the president's party, in the sanctum of American democracy, seemed alarming enough. It also provided additional encouragement to the hordes Trump had summoned to Washington, who had been deluded into thinking the election really was up for grabs. Ahead of the showdown, a Harvard scholar of democracy, Daniel Ziblatt, told me he feared we were about to witness a "dress rehearsal" for a more serious Republican attempt to overthrow a future election. I wondered if that was too pessimistic. Yet it would very soon seem almost complacent.

At noon on January 6th, as members of Congress were gathering on Capitol Hill ahead of the vote, Trump addressed a crowd of his supporters two miles away, outside the White House. "We're going to walk down to the Capitol," he told them. "You have to show strength... You'll never take our country back with weakness." Even as he was speaking, the crowd began flowing down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Hill, joining the hundreds of red-capped #MAGA diehards who had already gathered there. Swiftly, the mob then breached the Capitol Building's perimeter barricades, after attacking their hopelessly outnumbered police guardians with chemical agents and flagstaves. In what appeared to be a coordinated assault, the mob attacked the main building from two sides. By around 2PM, Trump's supporters were in. They killed a policeman, by braining him with a fire extinguisher and then kicking him in the head, around that time. It was the first time the Capitol Building had been breached since 1814, when it was burned by British troops.

Over the next four hours, the mob rampaged through the building, looting and wrecking offices, defecating in its pol-

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At noon on January 6th, Trump addressed a crowd of his supporters outside the **White House**: "We're going to walk down to the Capitol," he told them. "You have to show strength... You'll never take our country back with weakness"





Trump supporters storming the Capitol Building, Washington, January 6

**In a coordinated assault, the mob attacked the main building from two sides. By 2PM, Trump's supporters were in. They killed a policeman, by braining him with a fire extinguisher. It was the first time the Capitol Building had been breached since 1814, when it was burned by British troops**

policeman and a bank manager from Georgia, who was arrested for his role in the crime, have since committed suicide.

The blow this debacle represents to America's global standing will take some time to become clear. Pity the next American ambassador, in Kinshasa or Dhaka, whose job it is to lecture the locals on the importance of free and fair elections. And naturally, America's adversaries, in Beijing, Moscow and Tehran, have revelled at the news: their state broadcasters have been running updates on the battle of Capitol Hill for over a week. Yet more serious damage may have been done to America's broader reputation for steadiness and reliability.

The country's dysfunctional politics has long been a drag on its ability to govern itself. Yet its allies and foreign investors have for the most

ished corridors and hunting for politicians. Mike Pence, the vice president, who was charged with overseeing the vote in his role as president of the Senate, appears to have been the insurrectionists' main target: Trump having falsely claimed his deputy had the power to overturn the result. They also went looking for Nancy Pelosi, the 80-year-old Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, who is a particular hate figure on the right. Some of the Trump terrorists wore combat fatigues, were armed with zip-ties, batons and guns, and moved with military precision. Others constructed a gallows, maybe for the symbolism of it, maybe for possible use, outside the building. Mercifully, they failed to take any prisoners. But it was a close-run thing.

The chamber of the Senate was evacuated—and the Senators taken to a safe-room under armed guard—just a minute before the first intruders burst in. The police were hopelessly overrun; a few showed sympathy with the insurrectionists, cheering and taking selfies with them. Trump, watching the action from the safety of the White House, was reportedly spellbound. To the extent that, when he was frantically first requested to send the National Guard in to reinforce the police, he allegedly failed to act. In a video message to the insurrectionists on his Twitter account, as the rampage began to quieten, he called them “very special” people, told them he loved them, reiterated his false and incendiary claim that the election had been stolen; then urged them to kindly withdraw.

By the time they did so, another four people were dead. An air force veteran, who had lost her head to the QAnon cult, was shot by police as she launched herself through a shattered window. It is still unclear how the three others died. Two more participants, a

part felt able to shrug this off. That will now be harder. A country that cannot manage a peaceful democratic transition is not well-placed to provide allies with policies and investors with contracts that they can expect to last from one administration to the next.

The damage might blow over, of course. It is still America, a country with more reputational credit than almost any other. But that will mostly depend on its ability to reform and improve its politics. What are the chances of that?

**T**HEY ARE AT least much better than they might have been. Under an unprecedented authoritarian challenge, America's institutions held. The courts now look less straightforwardly partisan than many feared; many state-level Republican officials played their part. So Trump will be out of office on January 20th. Moreover, the second impeachment trial he is now facing—after the House voted on January 13th to try him in the Senate with ‘incitement of insurrection’ against the US government—could lead to an even stiffer reckoning.

When Trump was impeached by the Democrats the first time round—for having coerced his Ukrainian counterpart to launch a bogus graft investigation into Biden—the process withered, like most political initiatives, in the fires of partisan animus. No Republican House member joined the Democrats in voting for the impeachment (though in private many conceded that it was warranted). And after Trump was duly tried in the Senate, only a single Republican there, Mitt Romney of Utah, joined the Democrats in finding the president guilty as charged. This time already

looks different.

Even some of Trump's most loyal Republican defenders were badly shaken by the riot. "Enough is enough...count me out," declared Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a favourite presidential golf partner and poodle. A near brush with a lynch mob concentrates the mind, it seems. And the anger towards Trump among more principled conservatives—who have long despised him though they have defended him—is much fiercer. Liz Cheney, the third-ranking Republican in the House (and eldest daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney) was among 10 Republicans to vote for Trump's impeachment this week. "The president of the United States summoned the mob, assembled

The Oval Office, White House

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**What are the chances of America reforming? They are much better than they might have been. Its institutions held. Trump will be out of office on January 20th. Moreover, the second impeachment trial could lead to an even stiffer reckoning**

the mob, and lit the flame of this attack," she declared in a statement, announcing her decision. "There has never been a greater betrayal by a president of the United States of his office and his oath to the constitution."

More dramatically still, Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, has let it be known that he might vote to convict Trump when his impeachment trial is held. That will not be before he leaves office. And there is already a legal wrangle over whether a former president can be put on trial and, if convicted,

then banned by the Senate from holding public office. America is in uncharted constitutional waters. Yet, most constitutional lawyers do not seem troubled by the lack of precedent. And if McConnell does indeed move against the president, it is highly possible that another dozen or so Republican Senators would join him and the Democrats in doing so. That could be sufficient to make up the two-thirds majority required for a first-ever presidential conviction.

Trump's party would be shot of him. The prospects for a return to functional governing—with Biden's administration finding modest bipartisan support for tackling the many problems his predecessor has largely ignored (including the pandemic)—would rise. It is an optimistic case. And to do it full justice, it did not exist before the insurrection. Most Republican lawmakers formerly assumed Trump would retain his grip on their party even after he left office, and that he would be their candidate again in 2024. That is less likely now—even if it is still far from improbable.

Trump has not yet been repudiated by his party's establishment. Indeed, 197 Republican House members have just voted against impeaching him for launching an insurrection against their own branch of government. The explanation is that a large majority of their voters are still for Trump—and so long as that remains the case, relatively few Republican politicians will turn on him. Stuningly, in the immediate aftermath of the insurrection, 45 per cent of Republican voters said they stood with the rioters. It is not hard to see why Ziblatt, the Harvard democracy expert, is so pessimistic about America's democracy.

It only works if both the two main parties are committed to it. That requires both to accept democracy's basic conditions: including the sanctity of elections, the legitimacy of the opposition and the degree of bipartisan mutual respect and restraint that underpins them. Under Trump, the Republicans have ventured a long way towards abandoning such things. And, to reiterate the fundamental truth of the 45th president, so long as he evades repudiation and censure for his corruption and rule-breaking, he will push his party ever further down that authoritarian path.

Over to the Senate then, to which the belated second stab at repudiating Trump will fall. His trial promises to be another close-run thing in the Capitol Building. And the future of American democracy will be even more at stake than it was last week, when the president's shock troops rampaged, wrecking and killing, through the building's polished halls. ■

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





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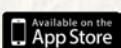
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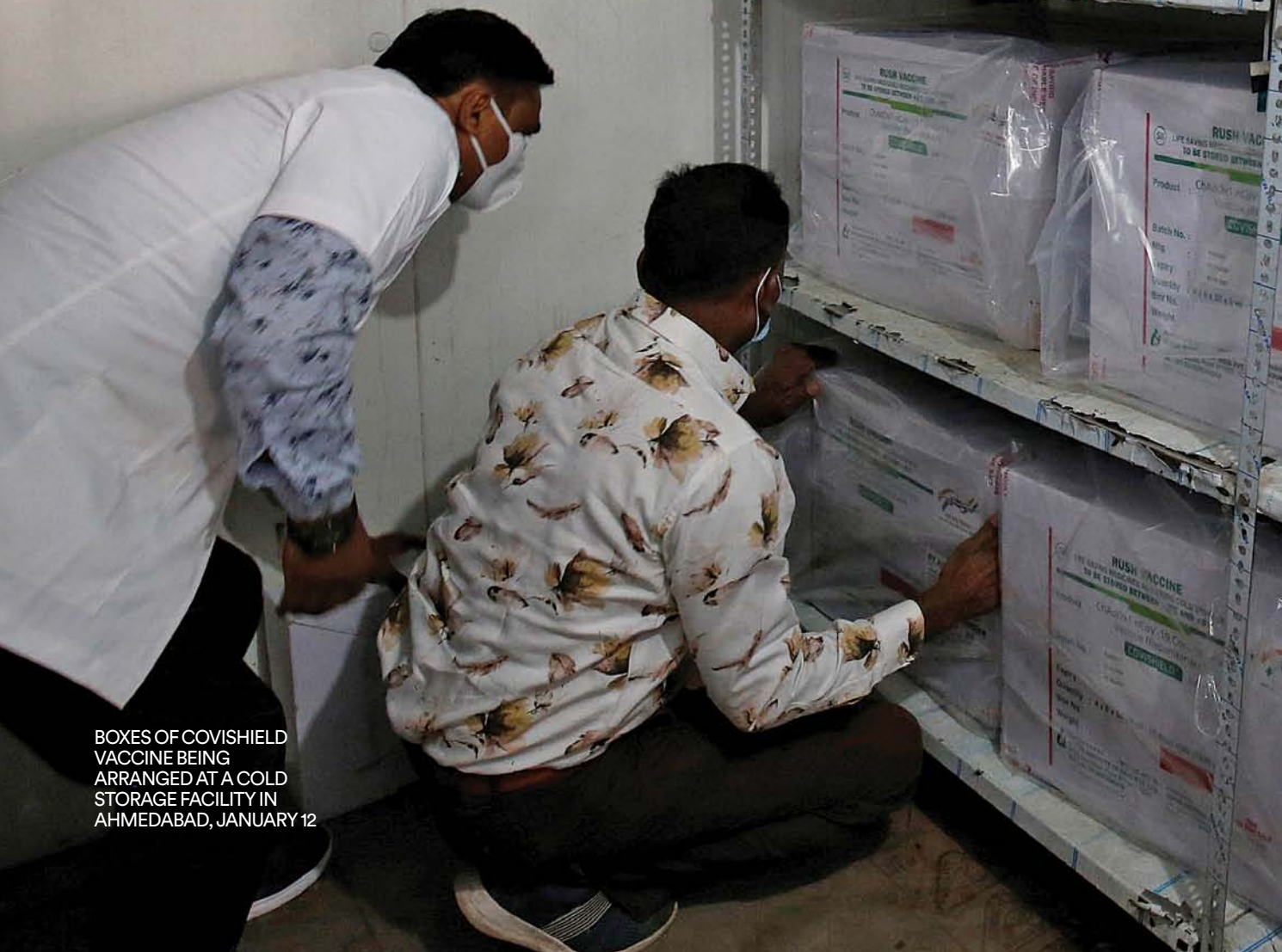
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# THE HEALING

India's vaccine rollout is more than about protection from the pandemic. It is symbolic of economic rejuvenation and a return to normalcy after a year of distress

By PR RAMESH



BOXES OF COVISHIELD VACCINE BEING ARRANGED AT A COLD STORAGE FACILITY IN AHMEDABAD, JANUARY 12



# PROJECT



# ON

January 6th, Prime Minister Narendra Modi assured German Chancellor Angela Merkel that India would deploy its capacities to combat the Covid-19 pandemic across the world. Merkel was briefed by Modi, via video conferencing, on the vaccine developments in India on the 70th anniversary of the Indo-German diplomatic relationship and the 20th anniversary of the bilateral strategic partnership. The German federal government's spokesperson, Steffen Seibert, tweeted later that the two leaders discussed the pandemic, advances in vaccine development and production in the Indo-Pacific region. But this wasn't the first time Modi and Merkel were talking about vaccine developments. Merkel was the first to call and congratulate Modi on his Covid containment strategy in a nation the size of India soon after the prime minister announced the emergency use authorisation (EUA) granted to two vaccines, both made in India. The lauding of Modi's efforts came days prior to Bharat Biotech signing an agreement



PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI AT THE SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA IN PUNE, NOVEMBER 28, 2020

with Brazil on vaccine supply.

Merkel's was no hollow appreciation. An editorial in the *New York Times* a fortnight ago had detailed how, in the US, the number of people vaccinated was nowhere near the two crore target set by the end of 2020. Of the 1.4 crore vaccine doses delivered to hospitals and health departments across the US, a mere 30 lakh estimated people had been vaccinated. In one Kentucky county, pharmacists had even retrieved vaccine shots dumped in garbage bins and offered them to lucky recipients on the spot. In India, the chain from the vaccine manufacturers to individual recipients is a long and complex one and would need stringent monitoring to iron out glitches notwithstanding the country's history of vaccine success with polio and other ailments.

Five days ahead of the January 16th rollout across India—the largest in the world to date—Modi spelt out his Government's detailed plan to the chief ministers: the exercise would cover three crore first response workers in the first phase, including one crore medical professionals/health workers and two crore other Covid warriors, including sanitation workers, ambulance





staff, those working in burial grounds, crematoria and civil defence personnel, totally free of cost. The second phase would be for those above 50 years of age and those younger but with comorbidities, roughly around 27 crore in all. The Government had capped the price per shot of vaccine at Rs 200. Asserting that he was proud of the two India-made vaccines, AstraZeneca-Serum Institute of India's Covishield and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin, the prime minister pointed out that India now had the privilege to be the pharmacist to the world in combating the pandemic. The presidents of Brazil and Ecuador, Jair Bolsonaro and Lenín Boltaire Moreno Garcés respectively, have already requested India for urgent supplies of the vaccine and several nations are in queue for vaccines from the world's largest vaccine-maker.

Holding out assurances about both vaccine efficiency and efficacy, Modi said that the world was also observing the nation's long established vaccine literacy lessons and experience and how these would impact the successful execution on the ground of the

current exercise. Modi also told the chief ministers that by the time the second phase started, four more vaccines would be available to the public, making it that much easier to plan and execute the roll-out for the much bigger second phase.

The rollout plan for a population of 1.3 billion was not a cavalier exercise. Nor was it blueprinted overnight. It was initiated months ago by Modi following prolonged meetings with pharma industry leaders. As far back as April 2019, he had urged the industry to consider the nation's battle against the pandemic as their "bounden duty" and focus

**THE ROLLOUT FOR A POPULATION OF 1.3 BILLION IS NOT A CAVALIER EXERCISE. NOR WAS IT PLANNED OVERNIGHT. IT WAS INITIATED MONTHS AGO BY MODI AFTER LONG MEETINGS WITH PHARMA LEADERS**

pointedly on vaccine development. Some of those present promptly asked for huge state funding. Without demur, Modi tapped the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to allot funds for research. That was barely weeks after the Wuhan-origin virus had led to untold misery, a devastated economy and forced reverse migration. Modi was battling an unknown enemy. The World Health Organization (WHO) had not shared the sequence of events, next to nothing was known about the rapidly spreading virus and Modi, trying to impress upon people how dangerous the developments were by enlisting their support through hand-clapping and *thaali* banging, was under attack from his detractors about the stringent lockdown.

But Modi's detractors in the political arena seem to be following their now familiar path—using even the vaccine success for cranking up the anti-Government rhetoric. Jairam Ramesh said it was puzzling that internationally accepted regulatory protocols were modified for Covaxin trials. The fact that Covaxin's first dose in the Phase 3 trial data for 22,500 volunteers was analysed by experts appears not to be the least important to the vaccine sceptics among Modi's critics.

Bharat Biotech is a traditionally sound, tried and tested com-

pany which has a legacy of coming to the aid of the country in times of health distress. As a leading manufacturer of innovative Hepatitis B vaccines, it supplied a million doses for the National Immunisation Programme at Rs 10 a dose. At a time when Big Pharma controlled by MNCs was selling it at Rs 1,400 a dose, it was Bharat Biotech that supplied affordable vaccine to the country. It was also the company that led the fight against Rotavirus that affected lakhs of Indians. A company with such sound credentials and credibility, a proven warrior, was being tarred with a nasty brush by Modi's detractors in a concerted fashion to score brownie points.

Confusion about vaccines does immense damage to immunisation programmes run by the state and creates a trust deficit in the public about the hard work put in for prolonged periods by professionals. And a trust deficit takes ages to bridge in the minds of people. None of this appears to have distracted Modi's critics from their primary goal of dissing every considered decision and politicising his intentions, irrespective of how unsuccessful their efforts ultimately prove to be. Even Gagandeep Kang and Kiran Mazumdar Shaw were roped in. The director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS),

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UNION HEALTH MINISTER HARSH VARDHAN REVIEWS A VACCINATION DRY RUN AT GURU TEG BAHADUR HOSPITAL IN NEW DELHI, JANUARY 2



Randeep Guleria, had said that Covaxin could be kept as back-up for the rollout until after the Phase 3 trials were completed. This was twisted to amplify questions on the credibility of the Hyderabad-based vaccine producer. The line of attack was as familiar as the rhetoric: under Modi, India has entered a coercive era of medical tyranny and vaccine nationalism.

**O**n January 12th, at the end of a long and anxious period of countrywide anticipation, the first doses of the Covishield vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII) were finally shipped to six cities from Pune. In all, the Government shipped out 56 lakh vaccine vials earmarked for 13 cities. There were emotional scenes—tears of relief, joy and pride, selfies and spontaneous clapping—as the first batch of vaccine consignments were unloaded at the Rajiv Gandhi Hospital in Delhi and in Chennai, where five lakh vaccines, both Covishield and Covaxin, were flown to. Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Kolkata were other cities which received vaccines, and Mumbai was to follow soon after.

Such emotional scenes as the consignments arrived at various destinations were understandable. The vaccines are not just protection from a pandemic that has taken over 1.5 lakh lives in India. They are a telling metaphor for the revival of the economy and the return of normalcy in a nation under lockdown for most of a year. Workplaces, schools, small industries, trade, business, even the most basic economic and social activities, had been affected in this period, devastating the most vibrant of societies worldwide. The rollout in India—the second most populous country—will serve that macro effort of dispelling the insecurities of a wretched year that decimated life as we had known it, life as it was lived and experienced before 2020.

However, as the country stands on the verge of a momentous executive and scientific feat—making not one but two vaccines—it has sparked a different type of concern among the regime's opponents. The developments on the vaccine front spell doom for those hoping to stage a comeback on the political front—something they have not been able to do successfully at the hustings—by tripping Modi.

Their hopes of Modi's failure on Covid management and on vaccine manufacture and rollout were reinforced and selectively amplified by tapping into a small network of fearmongers among the scientific community. Every setback in containing the spread of the pandemic was magnified in the initial days, exponentially raising fears of infection and fatalities among the public.

Despite that, India defied the scenarios of doom peddled by

anti-Modi activists disguised as Covid clairvoyants. They had also predicted mass starvation and destitution as a result of unemployment. True, the economy contracted, jobs were lost, and people's incomes crashed, cutting across class. But the predictions of mass starvation and destitution came to naught, given the Government's timely and tailored new schemes and the revamping of the older ones to ensure cash in the hands of the rural unemployed and migrant workers forced to return to their villages after their workplaces shut down. In addition, supply of additional free foodgrain to the eligible, right up to Diwali and beyond, ensured there were no starvation deaths. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana were boosted and became key conduits of direct relief to the most affected.

Modi's opponents have continued to find fault unrelentingly with his Government's handling of Covid. But it has become clear that people at large are more than satisfied with the manner in which he handled the situation and nowhere has this been proved decisively than through the ballot. In the past year, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has chalked up electoral successes time and again, from civic polls to panchayat elections to state

Assembly elections and bypolls; from Jammu and Kashmir to Bihar, Telangana to Madhya Pradesh (MP). In fact, 2020, despite the all-pervasive distress, could well be known as BJP's year. In Bihar, the party became the second largest, with 74 of 243 seats, only one seat less than the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) which emerged as the single largest outfit. BJP returned to power in Patna with the Janata Dal (United) towards the end of the year, but as the clear heavyweight in the alliance. It also wrested the Dubbaka Assembly by-election from the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and put up an impressive show in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation polls. The same was the case in the MP bypolls and in Rajasthan, even as the Congress performed abysmally. Modi retained more than his personal credibility and popularity.

Irrespective of the politically motivated narratives crafted by the opposition, the fact remains that the prime minister's intervention and owning of responsibility in urging pharma industry leaders early on in the pandemic went a long way in conveying the urgency of vaccine development in India. India has been able to take a huge leap taken by Big Pharma elsewhere without state oversight of any sort.

Self-styled experts here objected to virtually everything that prevailed in other developed countries, including shorter deadlines, abridged trials, insufficient peer review and lack of transparency on trial data, to cry wolf about the efficacy of the vaccines.

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THE SAME PEOPLE  
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COVAXIN**

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Without compromising safety or efficiency, the likes of Pfizer and Moderna availed of concessions from the UK regulator to deal with the emergency situation. No questions were raised by the vaccine sceptics here about these shortcuts, but Modi baiters criticised the same in the case of India's own commendable efforts.

Only the very naive can claim that vaccine and science can be totally insulated from politics. In the wake of Covid and the race to find a cure, 'vaccine nationalism' has become a familiar phrase in the realm of politics. Additionally, in a democracy, everything about vaccine development, clearance and rollout, platforms and costs, is certain to become part of the debate. That is as it should be. For, public health is too sensitive an issue to be left solely to pharma 'experts'.



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A VACCINE REGISTRATION TRAINING FOR HEALTH OFFICIALS IN BARAMULLA, JANUARY 12

But while one can debate, hold a government to scrutiny, the line cannot be crossed into overt politicising of public health, especially in a pandemic. It is ironic that the very same people questioning the delay in the manufacture of vaccines have now shifted the goalpost to question the efficacy of the vaccines, particularly Covaxin.

Cynicism is now giving way to outright opportunism. The fear-mongering is aimed at causing vaccine scepticism among a section of the population that has always seen such efforts as conspiracies against their faith and meant to cause serious bodily harm, such as infertility and so on. Statements from Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav and RJD's and Tejashwi Yadav—the former called it "BJP vaccine" and the latter asserted that he would

get vaccinated if Modi would lead by example and take the vaccine first—seem to be meant to increase vaccine aversion among already vulnerable sections.

Casting doubt on established regulatory processes followed by vaccine companies with a credible background was not enough. In tandem with the political opposition to Modi, activists and NGOs have also jumped in at this critical vaccine rollout time to claim that in some pockets in Bhopal, in BJP-ruled MP, the poor and Bhopal Gas Tragedy victims' families have been targeted with a payment of Rs 750 to enlist in Covaxin trials, many with no phone connections and not even aware that they were part of a trial and not the larger official government-driven vaccine rollout to begin only on January 16th. It is important to note

that in countries like the US, there have been loud protests about Moderna: not enough African-Americans and Latinos were being included in the vaccine's Phase 1 trials. The concerns prompted the company to proactively enlist more from among these groups in the second phase. Critics here are, no doubt, just as acutely aware that if samples of vaccine-testing in Phase 1 and Phase 2 trials are not representative of all groups, the conclusions are unlikely to be considered fully credible.

The Government, however, had anticipated this line of attack—especially on alleged opaque efficacy data on vaccines slated for rollout and on the equity aspect. It was to counter this deliberate disturba that the prime minister announced that three crore people in the first phase

of rollout would be vaccinated free of cost. Apart from other issues, this also called out those claiming their state governments would provide free vaccines to all state residents, a move seen as purely politically motivated. In other opposition-run states, such as Chhattisgarh, the governments have fallen prey to their own rhetoric and demanded supply of only Covishield and not Covaxin. With that one decisive move, Modi has managed to put to rest the falsehoods peddled about the vaccine rollout. While countries like the UK and Sweden, and even Israel, have been forced to repeatedly restart lockdown following a resurgence of infections, after first having eased up on this, Modi has remained on top of the criticism from his detractors and steps ahead of his political opponents. ■



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# A SHOT OF HOPE

**I**t is hard to quantify hope, but on the morning of January 12th, it had a shape—a glass vial of just 5 ml capacity filled with a transparent liquid: the Covishield vaccine. It was being carried in three pharma trucks that rolled out of the Manjri premises of the Serum Institute of India (SII). By 7:23 AM, Pune airport's Twitter handle had posted a video of the boxes being placed on a conveyor belt, with the message 'Stand by India!' Each box had 'Rush Vaccine' stamped on its side apart from the legend 'May all be free from disease' in English and Sanskrit. By 4 PM, more than 54 lakh doses of Covishield had travelled across the country according to the Union health ministry.

The country's capital was one of the first cities to receive its instalment, more than two lakh doses, by 10 AM that day. But even before the SpiceJet flight that was carrying the vaccine took

off from Pune, anticipation hummed through the corridors of the Rajiv Gandhi super specialty hospital in East Delhi. "If vaccine is gold then we are RBI," laughed Dr Chhavi Gupta, media spokesperson of the hospital. In late November itself, the Delhi government-run hospital was identified as a vaccine storage facility and since then work has been on here in full swing. A three-storied utility building in a secluded corner of the hospital campus was identified, a few metres away from a gate so that entry and exit of refrigerated trucks and vans could be facilitated. The building has been taken over by the state government's health department. On the day *Open* visited the site (before the arrival of the vaccines), security guards questioned those who were within walking distance of the building even as life-size Godrej crates were being placed side by side. "There is a CCTV room and the storage facility will be manned 24 hours, to maintain inventory





# In rolling out its mass vaccination programme, India expects to pull off the unprecedented

By NIKITA DOVAL

Photograph by ASHISH SHARMA



A VACCINATION DRY RUN  
AT GAYATRI HOSPITAL IN  
GHAZIABAD, JANUARY 10

and security,” says Gupta. The hospital will play no role in the handling of the vaccine.

Sushila, a healthcare worker at the Gayatri Hospital in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad district, usually reaches her workplace by 9AM. But on January 16th, she will be there at least an hour earlier. “I am not even sure I will be able to sleep, out of both nervousness and some excitement too,” she laughs. It is on this day that one of the world's largest immunisation programmes will roll out as India begins the project of vaccinating its billion-plus population against Covid-19.

A gigantic project involving 19 ministries and all the lessons garnered over three-and-a-half decades of the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP), this vaccination drive will test just about every system the country has in place, from transportation to last-mile rural health coverage. The first phase will see the vaccination of three priority groups: healthcare workers, frontline workers, who include personnel from state and Central police departments, the armed forces and even municipal workers, and people above 50. Those under 50 but with co-morbidities will also be included in this phase. The Government aims to vaccinate 30 crore people by summer of this year. To put it in perspective, a little over two crore people have been vaccinated worldwide since December when the UK became the first country to start vaccinations. The list of healthcare and frontline workers have already been provided to states and Central ministries from the data sent by health institutions and uploaded on the Co-WIN platform. The aim of vaccinating those on the frontlines is well-thought-out so that services do not falter, according to Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India.

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**A PROJECT INVOLVING 19 MINISTRIES AND ALL THE LESSONS LEARNT FROM THREE-AND-A-HALF DECADES OF THE UNIVERSAL IMMUNISATION PROGRAMME, THE VACCINATION DRIVE WILL TEST JUST ABOUT EVERY SYSTEM INDIA HAS IN PLACE**

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**O**f all the vaccines that have been approved for use all over the globe till date, there are three manufacturers whose vaccines have been the most anticipated: Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. In India, two vaccines have been given emergency approval: Bharat Biotech's Covaxin and Covishield, which is a result of SII's tie-up with AstraZeneca. Obtaining the vaccines may have been the easiest step in the long march that should culminate in the defeat of the pandemic. From cold-chain logistics to trained vaccinators, from the correct messaging to adequate security protocols, the Union and state governments face the unenviable task of pulling off a globally unprecedented exercise. The health ministry itself acknowledges in its operational guidelines that ‘the highest level of political and administrative ownership, commitment and support

is vital for successful planning and implementation of Covid-19 vaccination.’

Dry runs have been conducted across districts to simulate actual vaccine administration with the election process serving as a blueprint. Each site will administer the vaccine to 100 beneficiaries every session which in turn will be managed by a five-member team. A text message will inform the beneficiary of the time and place when and where they will first encounter Vaccination Officer 1—a police or home guard personnel who will be in charge of pre-checking the registration status of the beneficiary as well as verifying his or her photo ID. “Once inside, the beneficiary's document will be verified in the Covid Vaccine Intelligence Network (Co-WIN). Social distancing norms are to be followed at every step of the way,” says Dr Sanjay Agarwal, Additional Chief Medical Officer of Ghaziabad. The actual vaccination will be carried out by a trained vaccinator even as support staff uploads the details on the Co-WIN app. After vaccination, the beneficiary will be taken to a third room for a 30-minute monitoring of any After

Effects of Immunisation (AEFI) before he/she leaves the premises. Text details of the second vaccination date will be sent in real time to the beneficiary. All of this, including the monitoring, is standard protocol during vaccinations, says Agarwal.

In the dry run that was conducted on January 11th, Sushila was the vaccinator while her colleague Subhinesh was in charge of uploading the information on the Co-WIN app. “The first couple of shots took over five minutes mostly because of nervousness even though this was a drill and I have been a vaccinator for three years now,” says Sushila. But once she found her groove, it was smooth sailing. Subhinesh, too, struggled with the app but it is precisely to identify these issues that the dry runs were conducted. States such as Maharash-

tra have identified internet connectivity and even inadequate health services in rural areas to deal with possible AEFI-related complications and have recommended that data be uploaded offline as well. Health experts have also raised similar concerns along with the possibility of there not being enough trained vaccinators as the drive expands. As it happens, both Covaxin and Covishield are intramuscular injections.

Co-WIN is an extension of the electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVin) launched in 2015 for the UIP and is meant to facilitate every aspect of vaccine distribution, from maintaining digital records of usage and available vaccine stocks, as well as monitoring temperature. The app, which will be available to the larger public only later, will also allow the monitoring of utilisation and wastage of the vaccine as everything, from the batch



number of the vial to doses utilised per vial, will be uploaded on it. The app will come alive at 9AM and shut off at 5PM, keeping a tight control on vaccination schedules.

**O**ne of the biggest challenges in this battle is the maintenance of the cold chain. UNICEF defines it as a 'chain of precisely co-ordinated events in temperature-controlled environments to store, manage and transport.' Both Covaxin and Covishield require temperatures between 2 to 8 degrees. One of the main reasons why Pfizer remains a vaccine for rich countries is because its temperature requirement is (-)70 degrees and this needs specialised freezers that can cost anywhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000. According to figures cited by Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan, in a briefing made on December 15th, 2020, India currently has more

than 28,000 cold-chain points apart from 240 walk-in coolers, 70 walk-in freezers, 45,000 ice-lined refrigerators, 41,000 deep freezers and 300 solar refrigerators, which will be used for storage of Covid vaccines. At centres where vaccination is taking place, the vaccine will be kept in cold boxes with the lid closed till the beneficiary enters the premises. At the end of the day, all unopened vaccine vials are to be sent back to the distributing cold-chain point. The ones returned from the previous day have to be marked and stored separately so that they are used first on the following session day. The date and time of opening a vial must be carefully recorded and an open vial will have to be discarded after four hours of having been opened.

SII has said that they already have 500 lakh doses of the vaccine ready although the group also has commitments to other countries. Bharat Biotech has an initial order of more than 50 lakh from the Government and is confident that they can manufacture

HEALTH WORKERS AT A SCHOOL ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF AHMEDABAD THAT HAS BEEN CONVERTED INTO A TEMPORARY VACCINATION CENTRE, JANUARY 8



REUTERS



7,000 lakh vaccine doses by the end of the year. Whether vaccine shortage will become an issue in the days to come remains to be seen but there is an urgency to ensure that additional medical supplies like syringes and gloves are available in adequate numbers. Covid-19 may have been declared a pandemic only in March last year but Rajiv Nath, managing director at Hindustan Syringes & Medical Devices, the manufacturers of Dispovan syringes, knew in February itself that the company would have to expand its manufacturing capacity. Thanks to India's immunisation programme, there is an adequate supply of 0.5 ml intra-muscular syringes of the auto-disable variety. It is the same syringe that is required for the Covid vaccine. Nath says the Government only

of global immunisation and comparisons between its success and the Covid vaccination drive are inevitable. But Dr Suneela Garg, a public health expert, says that there was a lot of struggle at the beginning of that programme too. "There were myths and misconceptions then as there are now. These need to be countered at every step of the way." The mindset of *teeka lagana hai* (a vaccination shot) has entered the psyche of at least the mother in the country says Shailaja Chandra, a former secretary with the Union Government. "When UIP was first started, there were naysayers who balked at the thought of setting up cold-chain supplies in states like Bihar, but we have built systems and structures in place. Even as early as March we were spreading the message about

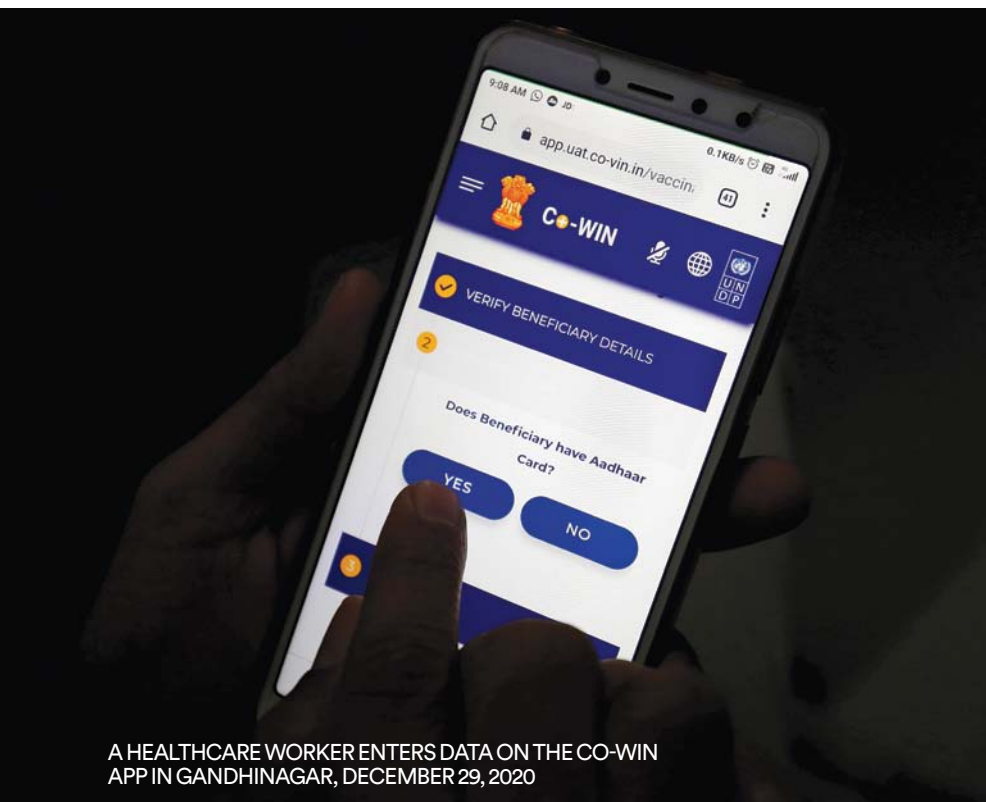
Covid through ASHA and Anganwadi workers and that helped create awareness," she says.

From election rolls to Census data to satellite imaging, every resource at the disposal of the Government needs to be called in for this drive and Chandra says it already is. The loss of income brought about by the lockdown instilled a fear of the disease in people's minds. India is increasingly reporting fewer Covid cases on a daily basis despite consistent testing. Yet, this should not make us complacent. "Rich people have the ability to remain secluded, but the ordinary man has no such luxury. He has been hit once and as such there shouldn't be resistance," she says.

The second phase of vaccination will ideally be meant to provide herd immunity but a lot of factors will ride on its success, beginning first and foremost with the stage the pandemic is in. "Will it be raging? Will it be receding on its own? These questions will have to be taken into account when the second phase is being planned. More

than a crore of infections have come to our attention but there would have been several lakh silent ones also so that cohort has memory cells. Questions like would only people above the age of 18 be vaccinated will need to be answered. But before we address all of that, we have to ensure the first stage goes off well," says a public health doctor who does not wish to be identified.

January 16th will begin with a prayer on everyone's lips, the answer to which we may not fully receive for months yet because, like intelligence operations, the success of a public health initiative is usually not visible for years. But by the time the first phase draws to a close, India should have some answers as to how the pandemic is likely to fare in the second half of 2021. ■



A HEALTHCARE WORKER ENTERS DATA ON THE CO-WIN APP IN GANDHINAGAR, DECEMBER 29, 2020

REUTERS

woke up to the need for more syringes in September last year, asking syringe-makers to ramp up their manufacturing capacity. "I knew that we would have a vaccine but unless we ramped up production early on, there might be a problem of enough doses being available but not enough syringes to deliver them." With over 30 crore intended beneficiaries in the first phase itself, the requirement goes up to approximately 70 crore syringes. By June 2021, the company is on target to raise its production to 100 crore pieces, but like SII, it too has international commitments. At this stage however, Nath does not foresee a shortage unless the Government clears the private sector for administering the vaccine.

India's UIP is widely considered to be one of the success stories

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COVISHIELD VIALS BEING INSPECTED AT SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA, PUNE, NOVEMBER 30, 2020





# THE JOURNEY OF A VACCINE

**Serum Institute will need all of its capacity and experience to ensure Covishield begins the end of the pandemic in India**

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

**I**n the early 2000s, when international health organisations such as PATH and the World Health Organization (WHO), supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, decided to come up with a vaccine to eradicate the deadly meningitis A epidemics from sub-Saharan Africa, they got stuck over one question: who would manufacture it?

The 'meningitis belt' is a region that comprises 25 countries in Africa, from Ethiopia in the east to Senegal in the west. The disease manifests as an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. People in this region have suffered from epidemics caused by this bacteria for nearly a century. Reports of the disease usually start at the beginning of the calendar year, when the dry sand of the Saharan desert blows southwards carrying tiny spores of the bacteria with it. Every year, many get infected and die. And every few years, a full-blown epidemic breaks out. What had got the world startled when organisations such as PATH stepped in was the region's worst reported outbreak. Around 25,000 people had died and over 250,000 infected in 1996 and 1997.

It wasn't as though a vaccine could not be developed. Just not an affordable one.

For a vaccine to work in this region, researchers realised, it would have to be priced no more than half a dollar. According to a PATH report, a local official from Niger told Dr Marc LaForce, the director of the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP), a partnership between PATH and WHO, “Please don’t give us a vaccine that we can’t afford. That’s worse than no vaccine.”

The MVP team began to scour through the developed world, looking to interest a pharmaceutical company that could mass-produce such a vaccine. But no one was willing to come on board at that price. It just wouldn’t cut it.

That’s when the Serum Institute of India stepped in.

The Pune-based company, already a major vaccine manufac-

turer then, was expanding its reach. It was tying up with international bodies, negotiating deals with foreign governments and health bodies, importing the latest equipment and enlarging its facilities and capacities. To anyone else, a 50-cent vaccine made no sense. But for Serum Institute, it fit just right in.

The company had built, and was further building, a vaccine empire based on a model of scale. Working on the economies of scale, it churned out mass volumes of vaccines cheaper than anyone else and yet turned a profit.

It came out with MenAfriVac, a meningitis A vaccine that cost just \$0.50 for a single dose in 2010. According to a 2015 report by WHO, just five years after its introduction, the disease has been

nearly eliminated from that region. Dr SV Kapre, the executive director of Serum Institute, was reported as saying then, “Making a vaccine is a technical issue, but making the vaccine available at an affordable price is a real challenge.”

Serum Institute has grown even larger now. Its business model of mass-producing vaccines at cheap rates has led to more orders, which in turn has motivated it to further expand. It has acquired more companies, enlarged its plants and manufacturing capacities, and by manufacturing about 1.5 billion vaccine doses annually become the world’s largest vaccine manufacturer by doses produced. In the 1990s, it exported its vaccines to around 35 countries. Today, the bulk of its business comes from abroad. It exports its vaccines to an estimated 170 countries, and until recently claimed that 80 per cent of its business came from foreign shores (now it claims exports contribute 60 per cent of its business; the rest coming from India). As Cyrus Poonawalla, the founder of Serum Institute, has been known to say, the company reaches more children than Coca-Cola and PepsiCo can ever hope to.

This expansion of its business and manufacturing capacity has now put the company in a crucial position. If the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine (or Covishield, as it is known in India) is the vaccine that will lead to the end of this pandemic—especially given how expensive the other two leading vaccines, the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, are—for India and many other

## SERUM INSTITUTE’S MACHINES CAN FILL 500 VIALS A MINUTE. CEO ADAR POONAWALLA STOPPED BY ONE SUCH MACHINE TO EXPLAIN TO A STUNNED JOURNALIST, ‘SO THAT’S 5,000 DOSES PER MINUTE FILLED. AND BY THE WAY THAT WILL DOUBLE IN FEB’

REUTERS







GETTY IMAGES



REUTERS

A COVISHIELD CONSIGNMENT ARRIVES IN KOLKATA, JANUARY 12 (LEFT); GUJARAT DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER NITIN PATEL CONSECRATES A COVISHIELD CONSIGNMENT AT AHMEDABAD AIRPORT, JANUARY 12

countries in the developing world, it will need Serum Institute to use all its capacities and experience to churn out the vaccine at an incredibly fast clip.

Over the past year, much of the conversation around the world has revolved around whether researchers can develop a vaccine fast enough. Now, there's another equally important question: can the vaccines be mass-produced fast enough? For the pandemic to end soon, just the fastest developed vaccines in history will not do. It will also have to be the fastest ever produced on such a mass scale.

**I**n the early morning of January 12th, when the clock had yet to strike five and the city was covered in darkness, a small crowd of journalists and camera crew had gathered outside the gates of Serum Institute in Pune. For days now, journalists had stood outside these gates, trying to film the goings-on in the factory, trying to learn just when the vaccines might make their way to the rest of the country.

Now finally, across the steel gate, in the darkness ahead, lay the objective for which they had gathered all of the past few days. Amid a small army of policemen and security personnel lay three trucks, packed to the brim with boxes of what appeared to be vaccines.

But everyone would have to wait. A policewoman, Deputy Commissioner Namrata Patil, materialised in front of the truck to carry out a little prayer ceremony. And then, a little scramble

broke out, as the trucks made their way out. For the rest of the day, several trucks left the premises—some to the airport and from there to the rest of the country, and a few later in the day via road to the rest of Maharashtra. Through the day, as these vaccines began to show up elsewhere, their trucks would be garlanded and more prayer ceremonies would take place.

The excitement was understandable. With these vaccines (and some from Bharat Biotech's Covaxin), India is going to launch its largest vaccination drive in history.

For now, the Centre has contracted Serum Institute to supply 1.1 crore doses of Covishield. Once the vaccination programme officially kickstarts, a larger order is expected. In all, 30 crore are expected to be vaccinated in the first phase. Since both Covishield and Covaxin require double doses, that is at least 60 crore doses. Serum Institute of course will not be producing vaccines just for India. It also has deals and requests from other countries, apart from a commitment to supply 200 million doses to India and other middle and low-income countries by 2021 as part of its deal with COVAX Facility, a vaccine alliance that wants to ensure a rapid and equitable distribution of vaccines across the world (this includes doses of both Covishield and another Covid-19 vaccine that it is manufacturing for the US company Novavax). Overall, it has a licensing agreement with AstraZeneca to supply 1 billion doses of the Oxford vaccine to middle and low-income countries. Serum Institute has now also begun to appeal for a simultaneous rollout of its vaccines for the private market in India.

That is a lot of vaccines.



# THE OTHER VACCINE

The biggest challenge is yet to come for Bharat Biotech

By AMITA SHAH

**C**ovaxin, the country's first indigenous vaccine against the coronavirus, has been in the eye of the storm. In the summer of 2020 as Covid cases rose and a vaccine was still elusive, the emergence of an Indian vaccine came as a ray of hope, but was clouded by scepticism given the deadline set by the Government for a vaccine to be ready.

The Covaxin story began when the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR) National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune, isolated strains of the SARS-CoV2 virus, less than two months after the first Covid case was reported in India on January 30th, 2020. By early May, Hyderabad-based biotechnology company Bharat Biotech received the strain. Since then, behind the secure walls of the Bio-Safety Level 3 (BSL-3) high containment facility in Genome Valley, about a hundred invisible faces pored over developing a vaccine against the coronavirus. For the next couple of months, they dedicated themselves to their mission, desisting from going home to their families, as a precaution against any chance of exposing them to the virus. In two months, the team completed animal toxicology and immunisation on rat, mice and rabbits, establishing 100 per cent safety on the animals.

Outside the high walls of the facility, Covaxin created a flutter. The Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) cleared it for human trials on June 29th. When Bharat Biotech announced that it has successfully developed Covaxin, BBV152, an inactivated virus-based Covid vaccine, in collaboration with ICMR and NIV, the company's founder Krishna Ella, a scientist-turned-entrepreneur, was still unsure of the returns on investment. He described it as a "moral responsibility". The company had shut down its injectable polio project and converted it for development of the coronavirus vaccine.

The announcement came on a day when Prime Minister Narendra Modi had reviewed India's preparations for vaccinating the country's over 130 crore population. June had witnessed a 66 per cent increase in the number of Covid cases reported till then. Two days later, ICMR Director General Balram Bhargava, in a letter to the 12 institutions chosen as clinical trial sites for the vaccines, underlined the need to fast-track the vaccine trials. He set a deadline of July 7th to enrol candidates for trials.

The haste sparked off a controversy, raising experts' eyebrows and drawing political criticism, casting a shadow over

the jubilation of developing an indigenous vaccine.

A low-profile Ella, who termed the vaccine as a "small drop in the ocean", however, had not indicated any timetable for it. His goal was to give global access to people who needed the vaccine most. Bharat Biotech evaded getting drawn into the row, maintaining a stoic silence.

According to Dr Rajni Kant, director, ICMR Regional Medical Research Centre (RMRC), Gorakhpur, and head, Research Management, Policy, Planning and Coordination, ICMR Headquarters, Covaxin has shown safety and efficacy in pre-clinical, Phase 1 and Phase 2 studies. Bharat Biotech was chosen because of its state-of-the-art facilities and ICMR's experience of working with it.

The dust had barely settled on the controversy over rushing the vaccine when it got embroiled in a new one. Covaxin, along with Covishield developed by Oxford University and



BHARAT BIOTECH FOUNDER KRISHNA ELLA IN HYDERABAD

GETTY IMAGES

AstraZeneca Plc, got the DCGI's approval on January 3rd this year, even before the Phase 3 trial data for the Bharat Biotech vaccine was available. Ella, pushed into defending the vaccine, told the media that permission for Covaxin was based on immunogenicity data. "The tests on hamsters and monkeys displayed 100 per cent protection offering the best animal challenging data compared to other vaccines." He said that approval means that the company will no longer be required to have a placebo group in its ongoing human clinical trial, and will vaccinate people in an open-label format. Vouching for its safety, he sought a few days to announce its efficacy level, as done by Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca.

The Government came out with an explanation justifying

its nod for Covaxin, and said it was for “restricted emergency use”. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said Covaxin would be used in clinical trial mode, and claimed that it was more likely to work against newer variants like the UK one. Amidst apprehensions over its authorisation, the Government has ordered 40 lakh doses of Covaxin at Rs 309 each, besides 1.1 crore from the Serum Institute of India (SII) at Rs 220 per dose, for the inoculation drive beginning on January 16th. Covaxin was being purchased at a higher price because Bharat Biotech was also giving 16.5 lakh doses free of cost, taking the cost per dose to Rs 206.

Covaxin is based on traditional technology, in which vaccines insert an inactivated virus into the body. In the new mRNA vaccines, they teach cells how to make a protein to trigger an immune response inside the body, which produces antibodies protecting against the virus. Dr Sanjay Rai, who is the principal investigator for Covaxin trials at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), says the main objective during Phase 1 trial was to establish the safety of the vaccine. “Covaxin is based on an old technology of making vaccine. That’s why the safety concern is minimal, even in the long term. There are nine vaccines in the world and two—Pfizer and Moderna—use the new mRNA method, for which there’s no evidence of long-term safety. All the information is in the public domain. Those who are in a dilemma should find out.”

Just when Covaxin was battling controversy, SII’s Adar Poonawalla said that apart from Covishield, only vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna had shown efficacy while others, including Covaxin, were only “safe, like water”. Ella, at a press conference refuted the charge, and said his company had carried out a “200% honest trial in national interest” without any financial aid, and did not deserve such a backlash.

For Ella, the biggest challenge is yet to come, once the vaccines start rolling out. As of now, he has moved away from public glare, focusing on the vaccine, for which Phase 3 trials involving 25,800 volunteers across India, each of whom will get two doses in a space of 28 days, had begun in November.

Founded in 1996, when Ella returned from the US after studying molecular biology, Bharat Biotech was started with a total cost of Rs 12.5 crore. It has a track record of innovation with more than 140 global patents, a product portfolio of more than 16 vaccines, delivering four billion doses of vaccines worldwide, four bio-therapeutics, registrations in more than 116 countries and WHO pre-qualifications. Among its biggest achievements is Rotavac, the vaccine for Rotavirus, the leading cause of diarrhoea in children across India.

In an interview nearly a decade ago, Ella had drawn similarities between science and business. “For both, you plan and implement ideas. If it is hypothesis in science, it is business plan in business. If it’s risk analysis in business, it’s testing the methods in science... There are dogmas against high technology and high capital-intensive projects. What I had planned was high technology and high capital intensive. The third dogma was the feeling that Indians could not do it. Fourth dogma was the belief that a scientist could not think like an entrepreneur.”

As of today, Ella is thinking more like a scientist.

According to an executive in a rival vaccine manufacturing company in India, Serum Institute has both the scientific expertise and manufacturing capacities, apart from the financial strength to produce vaccines at such a massive scale. “Manufacturing vaccines at such scale is quite complicated. But Serum has a lot of experience in this field. Out of all vaccines sold globally, probably over 60 per cent has been manufactured at a Serum plant,” the executive said requesting anonymity. Serum Institute also has deep pockets. According to *MoneyControl*, the company clocked a revenue of around Rs 5,900 crore in 2019-2020, about six times the revenue of its nearest rival, the Hyderabad-based Biological E, which generated Rs 952.4 crore.

**I**n 2020, when it was announced that Serum Institute would be manufacturing the vaccines, CEO Adar Poonawalla had said that apart from the 1.5 billion vaccines it produces annually, the firm has an extra capacity of 400-500 million doses.

The Poonawallas have an impressive facility. They have massive bioreactors, cameras that can scan for particles in vials and machines that can fill 500 glass vials every minute. During a recent interview, he stopped by one such machine to explain to a stunned journalist, “So that’s 5,000 doses per minute filled... And by the way that will double in Feb.” He has also begun to construct a massive facility in Pune which, when complete, he claims, will add another 1 billion doses to Serum Institute’s annual capacity.

But even Serum Institute’s massive facilities weren’t going to be enough to mass produce a Covid-19 vaccine in record time. The company reportedly had to build new facilities and rejig old ones, apart from halting the production of other vaccines in some plants to prioritise on a Covid-19 vaccine to scale up production. They also started producing the vaccine even before it was granted a licence or the results of its studies were out, risks probably no listed company could have managed.

A few months ago, Poonawalla told *Open* that such risks had to be taken to protect lives. “If I had waited till November [2020]... we wouldn’t have seen the vaccine till the end of [2021]. We would have lost countless numbers of lives had I not taken that risk,” he said.

Later in the day when the first batches of vaccines were being sent out, Poonawalla held a press conference where he spoke about the challenges the company faced in producing such large volumes in record time. According to him, the company will continue to produce more than 70-80 million doses every month. “Smaller companies are taking time to bring out their vaccines. Their supply will be scaled up in the second and third quarter [of 2021]. Till that time, the world will be dependent on us,” he said.

Producing millions of vaccines until more supplies from elsewhere begin to show up will be no mean feat. ■

MK Stalin



# A STA TWO

**It is a straight contest in Tamil Nadu between MK Stalin and**

**F**

OR A WHILE, it seemed like the rinse-repeat cycle of Dravidian politics was about to be broken.

There were others in the fray who had set out to disturb the settled order of things. Or so it seemed. As the polls loom closer, however, the great cinematic hope of Tamil Nadu and alleged one-time unmaker of J Jayalithaa, actor Rajinikanth, has exited the stage without even making an appearance, and Kamal Haasan remains a shadow-boxer in the entrenched duopoly of the Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), no longer content to be an éminence grise, has been eyeing opportunities amidst the messy remainders of Jayalithaa's legacy and is yet to find its moment. Other parties in the state, such as Vijayakanth's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) and Seeman's Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK), are scrabbling at small vote banks. Despite the flux in Tamil politics in the past four years, the tradition of two-to-tango remains surprisingly unbroken. Outgo-

ing Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami and DMK President MK Stalin are the only jousting in the arena, with all other contenders reduced to rumbles in the distance, and even their own eminent predecessors, the late J Jayalithaa and M Karunanidhi, made part of the furniture of the post-hero politics of Tamil Nadu.

While it is not a multi-cornered contest, Tamil Nadu 2021 is unlikely to be a cinch for either party. For one, the aspirants, who are each seeking the people's mandate for the first time in their careers, are far from equally matched. Stalin, who for the first time faces an Assembly elec-





Edappadi K Palaniswami

# GE FOR ONLY

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

**Edappadi K Palaniswami after Rajinikanth's retreat** **By V SHOBA**

tion with the full support of the DMK cadres, is up against sacks of money and the desperation to hang on to power that has kept AIADMK together despite vicious infighting since the death of Jayalalithaa in 2016. In alliance with the Congress and smaller regional parties, DMK is in a better position to contest a vast majority of the 234 constituencies than AIADMK, which will come under pressure to cede ground to Anbumani Ramadoss' Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), BJP and other allies. While the anti-incumbency that has built up over a decade and the split leadership of AIADMK are handy weap-

ons in DMK's arsenal, the party has betrayed its anxiety by relentlessly catastrophising AIADMK rule, to the extent that it ran an entire round of campaign meetings across the state on the theme of 'rejecting AIADMK'. "I agree it makes us look weak. The negative campaign was Prashant Kishor's idea and he got the leader's okay, so we could not do anything about it," says a DMK spokesperson, peevishly adding that while Stalin has adopted a more consultative approach with his partymen in the past year, ground truths sometimes fall by the wayside in a professionally-run campaign. Besides, the doom loop

of dynastic politics continues to impact DMK's popularity, especially with the rise of Stalin's son, actor and party youth wing secretary Udhayanidhi.

There is no crisis of narrative, argues Su Thirunavukkarasar, Congress MP from Tiruchirappalli and chairman of the party's campaign committee for Tamil Nadu. "Corruption, the lack of unity within the party, unpopular leaders, ten years in power and a doomed alliance with BJP—the odds are stacked against AIADMK," he says. The key charge against AIADMK—that of throwing its traitorous lot with the 'anti-Tamil' BJP—

“Corruption, the lack of unity within the party, unpopular leaders, ten years in power and a doomed alliance with BJP—the odds are stacked against AIADMK”



**SU THIRUNAVUKKARASAR**  
Congress MP

“I believe that we have reached a stage in Tamil Nadu where more than caste or freebies, it is the performance of a government that will guide voters”



**TKS ELANGO VAN** DMK MP

“The one thing affecting AIADMK cadres is the alliance with BJP, whom they blame for the drubbing they took in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls”



**MAALAN NARAYANAN**  
political analyst

is likely to stick, especially when framed in the tautology of Dravidianspeak. The AIADMK leadership has little choice but to defer to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah even as its second-rung leaders criticise the national party in a bid to raise the morale of party workers. In a supple re-negotiation of the alliance-of-convenience, AIADMK, in its annual general council meeting on January 9th—where it ratified the declaration of Palaniswami as the chief ministerial candidate—commended the Centre for its vaccine drive and welfare schemes on the one hand, even as its deputy coordinator, KP Munusamy, speaking at the event, dubbed the national party “immaterial to the election”. “Our only rival is the DMK,” he told partymen in clear terms, in a throwback to AIADMK under MG Ramachandran, who had relied on leaders like K Kalimuthu to lyrically dismiss the Congress—then an ally at the Centre—as a spent force in the state without having to personally implicate himself. Importantly, BJP, which had been openly bickering with its regional ally, has now softened its stance, with party national general secretary and Tamil Nadu incharge CT Ravi admitting on January 11th that it is a “minor partner in an alliance led by AIADMK”. Says senior state BJP leader KT Raghavan, “We believe this is a mutually beneficial alliance. We know for a fact, for instance, that the reduced margin in the DMK’s victory in the Vellore bypoll in 2019 was due to the Triple Talaq Bill.” In his 30 years with the party, there has never been a more conducive sociopolitical moment for BJP in Tamil Nadu, he says.

“This is an issue-less election. The one thing affecting AIADMK cadres is the alliance with BJP, whom they blame for the drubbing they took in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. They believe that in a direct contest between AIADMK and DMK, they would have a fighting chance,” says political analyst, journalist and author Maalan Narayanan. AIADMK won just one out of 38 Lok Sabha seats that went to the polls in 2019, with its vote share tanking from 44.3 per cent in 2014 when it had contested the Parliamentary polls alone under Jayalalithaa, to 18.8 per cent. Even

adding the 5.25 per cent votes polled by the splinter group led by Jayalalithaa aide VK Sasikala’s nephew TTV Dhinakaran, the volley of votes that went to the DMK camp seems to point to women and the SC community of Arunthathiyars, who had traditionally voted for Amma, switching sides. “It is very simple this time. The side backed by BJP will lose,” says TKS Elangovan of DMK, citing among the failures of the AIADMK, its inability to get the BJP Government at the Centre to scrap the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) and to disburse the Goods and Services Tax (GST) dues.

**T** HERE ARE LARGE chinks in DMK’s own armour. In a show of strength, the party launched its campaign from the Kongu belt in western Tamil Nadu, considered an AIADMK stronghold because of caste affiliations and its representation in the Cabinet, with the chief minister and several ministers hailing from the Gounder community that is among the dominant castes in the region. In 2016, AIADMK won 42 of 47 Assembly seats from the region. More recently, it proved its hold over western Tamil Nadu in the local body polls held in the state in December 2019 by winning big in the chief minister’s home district of Salem, and in Erode, Namakkal and Coimbatore. The DMK organisation in the Kongu region, insiders say, has been busy battling its own internal issues. After the passing of senior leaders like CT Dhandapani and Veerapandi S Arumugam, the party has lacked popular faces from the western belt. Campaigning in Edappadi, DMK’s Salem West district secretary TM Selvaganapathi admits the Vanniyar-dominated constituency will be a hard one to bag. “We are a lot more confident of winning Mettur and Sankari. The only surprise element now is money—and in every grama sabha, we tell the people to look beyond the direct and indirect bribes the government is giving them, either in the form of the Pongal bonanza of Rs 2,500 or as cash for vote.” DMK has charged that the state government has wasted precious





Rajinikanth (centre) announcing the launch of his political party in Chennai, December 31, 2020

**WITH RAJINIKANTH EXITING THE STAGE WITHOUT EVEN MAKING AN APPEARANCE, IN THE ENTRENCHED DUOPOLY OF DMK AND AIADMK, TAMIL NADU 2021 IS UNLIKELY TO BE A CINCH FOR EITHER PARTY**

resources on Smart City and other badly-executed programmes, leaving its coffers empty. While Palaniswami is on a freebie spree, announcing a generous Pongal bounty—financed by borrowings, the Opposition has pointed out—and free internet for students for four months, competitive populism alone will not win him an election.

“I believe that we have reached a stage in Tamil Nadu where more than caste or freebies, it is the performance of a government that will guide voters. We will highlight the corruption rampant in this industrial corridor and the Salem-Chennai expressway that will displace farmers; and talk about investments and jobs that have not materialised,” Elangovan says. Among DMK’s more realistic promises is an increase in the number of workdays under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act from 100 to 150, with payment of wages on the same day. DMK also understands a priori the need to tune its ideological timber to appeal to women and young voters. It is creating a large number of posts for women within the party organisation and expanding its digital presence across platforms. The involvement of local AIADMK functionaries in the sexual assaults in Pollachi against nearly 50 young women has posited room for a narrative on women’s safety—one that Opposition MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi has championed with urgency.

While AIADMK has further consoli-

dated its pre-existing support base among the Founders of the Kongu belt, by ‘usurping’ power from Sasikala and Deputy Chief Minister O Panneerselvam, both Thevars, the Palaniswami government may have alienated the powerful OBC community that was once a dependable vote bank for AIADMK. The pall of lost opportunity has descended on Panneerselvam, who is now the paler of the two leaves of AIADMK. He has launched his own campaign, which so far has crossed paths with the chief minister’s just once. Despite their differences, together the two leaders stand for the idea of the new AIADMK. It is a stereoscopic one that could continue to grow in scope and perspective—but only if it can pull off a victory in the 2021 Assembly elections. A party that until a few years ago blindly followed the holy writ of Jayalalithaa has become decentralised under Palaniswami and Panneerselvam. “The Congress under Kamaraj operated in this fashion and encouraged regional satraps to run the show in their own districts. This idea has come of age in present-day AIADMK. Leaders like CV Shanmugam, SP Velumani, Pollachi Jayaraman and KC Veeramani have been given free rein to operate in their regions and are held responsible for the party’s performance there,” says Maalan Narayanan.

“Between EPS and OPS, they have delivered a working government that was better than the Jayalalithaa administration in the final years of her life,” says political observer Raveendran Doraiswa-

my. In an election where the farmer has become a totem for justice—AIADMK has presumably balanced the scales by backing the Central Government’s farm reform bills months after declaring the Cauvery delta districts of Pudukottai, Thiruvarur, Thanjavur, Cuddalore and Nagapattinam as a protected agricultural zone—Palaniswami’s humble origins and subsequent rise within the AIADMK ranks should have made him an inspiring, if self-referential, figure. And yet, wherever he speaks, he gives the impression of being a lone rider eager to apportion the credit due to him. His campaign, ‘*vetri nadai podum Tamilakam*’ (Tamil Nadu on a victory march), often lapses into a personal list of achievements, too giddy to be bothered by inconvenient truths or to acknowledge the scaffolding of the establishment that backs him.

The reason the two Dravidian parties have ruled Tamil Nadu by turns is because they are both structured like language, the smallest of their units conveying meanings that, when they join with other units, make up infinite truths. And in the meticulously observed prose of Tamil thought leaders, they inspire intense beliefs, rational and otherwise, in the people who run the show and write the sentences. This election belongs not to Stalin or Palaniswami or to the ideologues labouring under misapprehensions about what it means to be Dravidian, but to these swirling units of democracy. The sentences will write themselves. ■

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# SALON



ANIL KAPOOR

# THE MARATHON MAN

He's played a street-smart vagabond, a dramatic leading man, even a joker. Now a fine performance as a version of himself caps an extraordinary 40-year career, but Anil Kapoor is in no mood to stop reinventing himself

By Kaveree Bamzai

**T**HERE'S A SCENE in Netflix's *AK vs AK*, an extraordinary meditation on fame and stardom, when director Anurag Kashyap breaks down and talks about his midlife crisis. How he has two broken marriages, one child to whom he wants to be a good father. He is saying this to Anil Kapoor, playing a version of himself, who roars back: "Don't you think I've had mid-life crises? I have three children, a marriage that has lasted 36 years. Do you think it's easy? To run like a dog? To dance like a monkey?"

He forgot to add that he's been a star for over 40 years—far longer than he acknowledges. He tells me, "I remember going to Shirdi to pray to Sai Babaji for a break in the Mumbai film industry. I had just done a Telugu film but was getting no work in Mumbai. A busload of tourists descended on me and the girls started crowding around me for my autograph." It was 1980. They had just come down from Andhra Pradesh, where his first film as a lead actor, *Vamsa Vruksham*, a Telugu film directed by Babu (who had directed his producer brother Boney Kapoor's first film *Hum Paanch*) had

become a success.

That sums up Anil Kapoor's extraordinary career. A certain respectful disregard for his stardom, the anticipation of his own imminent crises, a complete surrender to whatever movie he is working on, and total dedication to his craft. Long-time collaborator and director Subhash Ghai says it best: "He is a man in a constant and ruthless search of excellence."

So whether it involves sitting down in the middle of Mumbai's Grant Road, bruised and battered, but still asking if the take was good, for *AK vs AK*, or stopping the car and asking a passerby to give him the shirt off his back because it suited his character in *Mashaal* (1984), he will do it. He will do it, whether it means shaving his chest for a role in *Ahsaas* (1979) which required someone younger looking (a role which he didn't get eventually) or removing his moustache for the first half of Yash Chopra's *Lamhe* (1991).

In a career that began in 1979, he

has reinvented himself several times. He was the beloved *tapori* (vagabond) in movies such as *Tezaab* (1988), *Ram Lakhan* (1989) and *Awaargi* (1990). He then did more dramatic roles in movies such as *Virasat* (1997), *Taal* (1999) and *Pukar* (2000), for which he won the National Film Award for Best Actor.

"Then something happened to me while I was shooting Honey Irani's *Armaan* [2003]. I decided I had to change what I was doing." He did, starting off a successful spree of mainly comedic roles such as *No Entry* (2005) and *Welcome* (2007). "I realised if you're a comedic actor like Steve Martin, Peter Sellers, Walter

Matthau or Jack Lemmon, you can be ageless," he says.

At every point, he has taken risks that have eventually paid off. It could be taking the role of gameshow host Prem Kumar in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) after being told by son Harshvardhan Kapoor to do so immediately—reminding him of the

“  
When I dream  
it is about  
characters I want  
to play. Not homes,  
not thousands of  
fans clamouring  
for me”

ANIL KAPOOR actor



poster of *Trainspotting* in his office. It could be deciding to do Zoya Akhtar's *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), where he hesitated to play Priyanka Chopra's father.

"Because you had to go grey for the role?" I ask. No, he says, "Because we came close to playing romantic partners." Until his son reminded him that he was playing a character, not himself.

And Anil Kapoor has never been afraid of playing it different. "I remember for *1942: A Love Story* [1994] I had to play a lover who would climb a balcony, Romeo and Juliet style, to woo the woman I loved. I told Vinod [producer-director Vidhu Vinod Chopra] why don't you take a younger star like Aamir or Bobby Deol? Why me? But both brothers [producer Vir and Vidhu Vinod] were insistent on taking me," he says. He was 38 then and decided he had to start taking care of himself. "I started jogging, exercising, I lost weight, I cut my hair." In *Eeshwar* (1989), he played a grandfather for a portion of the film. He cites superstar Rajinikanth as inspiration. "We were acting together in a film called *Bulandi* in 2000 where he was playing my father and I saw he was so secure with himself. He needed no external validation as an actor," says Kapoor. "When I dream it is about characters I want to play. Not homes, not thousands of fans clamouring for me."

**T**HAT MAY ALSO be because he has secured a level of comfort with his large, tree-covered home in Juhu where a lift transports you to the floor occupied by whichever Kapoor you want to see: the parents, actor Harshvardhan, producer Rhea or actress Sonam Kapoor Ahuja (while she was living there). It is miles away from where Kapoor grew up, in Tilak Nagar (Chembur, Mumbai) in a one-room set with a kitchen, which housed Boney, Anil, Sanjay and their sister Reena, along with the parents. "There were 36 tenants in each building in that area. We used to play football, using our slippers as goal posts and forget them every day, with our

mother shouting at us. We enjoyed that era," says Boney. Their father suffered a heart attack in 1976, and Boney stepped up to take on the production of *Hum Paanch*. "Anil was with me every step of the way," says Boney, who graduated a year earlier than Anil from St Xavier's College, Mumbai. He also played his father in a theatrical production, for which they rehearsed, but with Anil falling ill, he couldn't perform it.

Their father, Surinder, grew up in the same street in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) as Dilip Kumar's brother and Shah Rukh Khan's father. Partition brought them to Meerut. Their grandfather finally handed over their father to cousin Prithviraj Kapoor who put him to work in production, most memorably on *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960). From there, Surinder Kapoor stayed with Prithviraj Kapoor, and when Shammi Kapoor's assistant went away for a while, his wife, actress Geeta Bali, asked him to handle her husband's work. Bali gave Surinder Rs 10,000 which started him off in production, which is why they still acknowledge 'Geeta Aunty' in the title of all their movies.

Those were halcyon days and Boney, the family historian, remembers them in detail. The birthday parties where the best child dancer would get a prize of Rs 2 from Prithviraj Kapoor. The days learning to drive thanks to Raj Kapoor's daughter Rima at their Loni farm near Pune. The day he, Anil and Shammi Kapoor's son Mickey banged the star's Chevrolet into a tree. "But Anil was always a stickler for work," says Boney, recalling how he didn't wash his face for two-three days when he played a young Shashi Kapoor in *Tu Payal Main Geet* in 1970 (the movie was released much later). Much later he even went to Khadakwasla to shoot with Raj Kapoor as a cadet in a film he was planning, *Param Vir Chakra*, which never got made.

*AK vs AK* director Vikramaditya Motwane believes his family is the anchor, allowing him to focus on his career and characters. "I would rather



“

**I realised if you're a comedic actor like Steve Martin, Peter Sellers, Walter Matthau or Jack Lemmon, you can be ageless"**

**ANIL KAPOOR**





ANURAG KASHYAP (CENTRE) AND ANIL KAPOOR ON THE SETS OF AK VS AK

the older man being the hero.”

Remarkably, 40 years in the spotlight have not changed him much. He remains a people’s person, whether it is befriending a clueless young reporter on the film sets about the protocol around Amitabh Bachchan (“He doesn’t like to be watched while he is eating”) or admitting frankly that he was often Ghai’s fallback choice for a role. He has happily given much of the credit for blockbusters such as *Beta* (1992) and *Mr India* to the actresses, Madhuri Dixit and Sridevi. He has maintained a great friendship with his co-star on many films in the ’80s and ’90s, Jackie Shroff. Ask him about the fine eye for the aesthetic his children have and he credits it to his wife, Suneeta, who has largely kept herself aloof from cameras.

**H**IS TRADEMARK PHRASE, “*Jhakaas!*”, first uttered in the utterly forgettable *Yudh* (1985), epitomises Kapoor. Ask him to explain its appeal and he says it suggests something fresh and lively. “I was on the Kapil Sharma show recently and I got so many people telling me they loved seeing me laugh and smile. They said seeing me happy makes them happy too.”

It’s a rare actor who can say that and it explains his staying power. Few actors have straddled the era of the angry young man, embodied by Bachchan, and the three Khans. From the pre-liberalisation era of Bachchan to the post-liberalisation era, he has been an actor who is as much at ease at the Toronto International Film Festival as he is at the IIFA awards. In 1989, in a detailed interview to a newsmagazine, he had said, “People are fed up of violence, they want peace.” He had said then he represented “the down-to-earth, uncorrupted, vulnerable, not angry young man”. Over 30 years later, he can still lay claim to the same everyman. ■

that people come to me and say why are you not doing hero roles than them telling me to play the father,” says Kapoor. He is also, like Amitabh Bachchan, enjoying attention from young directors who are writing roles specifically for him.

He’s glad the ‘*chalta hai*’ (easygoing) attitude in the industry has given way to greater professionalism. “Earlier we would write the script on the set, the choreographer would listen to the song on the set and then create steps. We would often get our own clothes,” he says, recalling how he used his own silver suit and red shirt for a key scene in *Ram Lakhan* (1989) and bought his own jackets for *Woh 7 Din* (1983) and *Mr India* (1987). The nature of fame was different too. Often he would be away on an outdoor shoot for a month

and a film starring him would be a hit. “I wouldn’t even get to know,” he says, comparing it with the instant bouquets and brickbats which social media today ensures. “Everybody has an opinion about you now,” he says.

There is no *Lakshman rekha* any longer, he says. The industry and audience are less emotional, less considerate. His work ethic is unchanged though, says Motwane. He gets into the script details, makes his notes, does his rehearsals and yet asks the director for cues, for the simplest of explanations. In *AK vs AK* it was this: imagine the worst day of your life. The film, which was to be made with Shahid Kapoor earlier, has benefited from Anil Kapoor’s bigger footprint. Says Motwane, “He has much more to lose, and also more to prove, in terms of

# The Historian's Eye

Romila Thapar provides a nonjudgmental cultural perspective on China

By Shivshankar Menon

IT TAKES A serendipitous combination of a significant time, an interesting place and an astute observer to make the diary form work outside one's immediate circle of family and friends. We have all three in abundance in Romila Thapar's *Gazing Eastwards: Of Buddhist Monks and Revolutionaries in China*. The result is a unique book, well worth reading, which should appeal not just to scholars of history, China and India but to the intellectually aware public.

It is an account by the historian of her visit to China in 1957 as research assistant to Sri Lankan art historian Anil de Silva along with a French photographer to work on the major Buddhist sites at Dunhuang and Maijishan on the Silk Road, or, as they should more accurately be described, the web of Eurasian silk and horse routes or Silk Routes. The book is based on the diary she kept for friends. Thapar has wisely refrained from editing her impressions in the diary, for they retain the freshness of first sight. She has merely added a brief introduction and epilogue.

The art history project which took Thapar to China marked an exploration of China's past, in particular of the Buddhist past that links India and China. It is through sites such as Dunhuang and Maijishan that India and China were in contact exchanging goods, ideas, science, technology and religion right through the first millennium and into the second. The intermediary kingdoms, traders, monks and others made it possible for trade, ideas and religion to flow and be adapted over time. Pilgrims and travellers such as Xuan Zang and Kumarajiva also followed these paths that trade and religion opened. Dunhuang and Maijishan are sites that

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



**ROMILA THAPAR'S IMPRESSIONS OF BEIJING, NANJING, SHANGHAI AND OF THE PEOPLE SHE MET ARE SHARP BUT SYMPATHETIC, AND QUITE AT VARIANCE WITH THE MONOCHROMATIC TROPES THAT NOW PASS FOR RECEIVED WISDOM ABOUT CHINA AND THE CHINESE IN THE MEDIA**

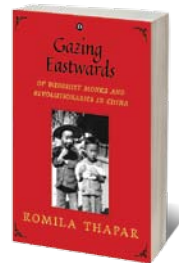
still astound visitors with their beauty and scale—Dunhuang’s many caves with their murals and sculptures in what is called ‘10,000 Cave Hill’, and Maijishan (literally, ‘bushel of wheat’ for its shape) where the hill itself has been carved into caves with murals and giant Buddhas. They are much easier to access today than when Thapar went in 1957. She then roughed it out, living in cramped and primitive conditions, revealing an admirable devotion to her profession. Today’s visitor can travel and stay in relative comfort, but must share the sites with thousands of other visitors, to the point where most caves are now closed lest they be damaged by the sheer presence of tourists, and a high-technology Visitors Centre in Dunhuang gives you a virtual tour of the site.

For many years thereafter no other foreigners were allowed such access to these sites as the three ladies enjoyed, living among the monks and people. In 1957 they were visiting a new, hopeful and revolutionary China that was soon to take a darker turn and be embroiled in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Thapar was perceptive in sensing the tightening restraints on academic discussion and the restrictions that came soon after Mao’s call in 1956 for a hundred flowers to bloom, encouraging intellectuals to speak out. The rectification campaign that followed in 1957 was harsh and marked the start of a turning inward and cutting off of links with the outside world, including Soviet allies, that lasted through the next two decades.

Thapar was also sensitive enough to sense the growing tension between the Chinese authorities and the Soviet Union before this became public. She notes how a cutting off from the world and suppression of academic freedom and discussion are necessary and initial actions by incipient dictatorships. Her disquiet comes through in her account of the limited openness she encountered in her discussions with fellow Chinese historians and archaeologists.

Some of what she saw and experi-

enced is still true today as it was 60 years ago. The Chinese Communist Party has launched another rectification campaign in 2020, this time concentrating on officials of the security state. The segregation and special treatment, good or bad, amounting to an ‘othering’ of foreigners, including allies such as the Russians, continues today in more sophisticated forms. The Chinese regime utilises the innate courtesy of the Chinese people and their sense of exceptionalism to distance them from ‘dangerous’ outside influences, especially ideas or ‘spiritual pollution’ that foreigners carry. This is the mirror



**GAZING EASTWARDS  
OF BUDDHIST MONKS  
AND REVOLUTIONARIES  
IN CHINA**  
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image of the overwhelming hospitality that Indians experience in Pakistan, which is yet another form of othering. Thapar also perceptively notes the problem of introducing communism in large social and territorial systems such as Russia and China and the inability of ideological systems, whether of left or right, to answer why and how questions, leading to dictatorship. Indeed, one is struck that such a young Thapar should be asking such serious questions and sensing so much more than she was shown. Her healthy scepticism and resistance to being guided are an example to all students of China.

Thapar and her companions were

fortunate in the places they visited, the access that they had and in the timing of their visit. She shook hands with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai at Indian Ambassador RK Nehru’s reception, spoke to Chinese people from all walks of life, and glimpsed ordinary Chinese life when old China and new China were both jostling for space. What makes this book such an interesting read is Thapar’s reactions to the complexity of a China in revolutionary change. Her impressions of Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai and of the people she met are sharp but sympathetic, and quite at variance with the monochromatic tropes that now pass for received wisdom about China and the Chinese in the media. She found the ordinary Chinese she met friendly and practical, curious about foreigners and the world. As a woman in a strange environment, she found China comfortable and non-threatening, unlike several other societies. This too has not changed.

Her comments and observations are made more relevant by the parallels she draws between India and China, and the sense of familiarity that she feels outside the big cities with what she knew from India. This is less true today, for the Chinese have worked on and transformed not just the built environment in their cities but the land and environment itself in ways that India has not. Today, both countries present very different aspects and faces to the visitor and the gap between them has grown.

Despite writing when outside opinion on ‘Red China’ was polarised and China was a litmus test for where one stood on the political spectrum, as it is today, Thapar was open-minded and objective, neither adulatory nor condemnatory but attempting to understand what she saw. This is an example that we could all profit from. This book is proof, if proof were needed, that the historian’s eye is one of the most useful tools we

have to understand other cultures and societies. ■



*Shivshankar Menon is a former national security advisor*



# THE MAN AND THE IDEAL

Arshia Sattar brings out the many shades of dharma in the Ramayana

By Bibek Debroy

**I**N SANSKRIT, THE word 'maryada' has several meanings. The etymological root of the word implies something that sets a limit or a boundary. Therefore, in geographical descriptions, texts speak of mountain ranges between regions that are like boundaries. They are known as *maryada parvatas*. In transactions, you and I may have a contract. That is *maryada* and violation of *maryada* will represent a breach of contract. As societies evolved and large numbers of individuals gathered together and interacted, norms evolved on what is proper conduct. Understandably, these norms of good behaviour are often society and context-specific. Nevertheless, these norms are *maryada* too and anyone who violates these violates *maryada* and treats ethical norms with dishonour. The word 'dharma' can only be translated imperfectly into English, since in different contexts, it means different things. There is *moksha dharma*, the *dharma* of emancipation from *samsara*, the cycle of existence, involving birth, death and rebirth. There is *raja dharma*, the rules according to which a king should govern, punishing the guilty and protecting the virtuous, ensuring swift dispute resolution. There is *dharma* that individuals follow, transcending, but not to the exclusion of, the *dharma* of the four *varnas* and four *ashramas*. Conflicts between different notions of *dharma* are inevitable and depending on the decision taken, an individual reaps the consequences. *Karma*, a word that again has multiple meanings, is the flip side of *dharma*.

The Mahabharata is longer than the Ramayana. Not only is it longer, it is much more complicated, encompassing the views of multiple protagonists. In contrast, the Valmiki Ramayana is

not only shorter, it is primarily, though not exclusively, a portrayal from Rama's perspective, which is the reason it is known as Ramayana, Rama's progress. Perceptions about the Ramayana aren't always based on Sanskrit versions. There are non-Sanskrit renderings of the Ramayana too, sometimes more popular today than Sanskrit versions. Even within the category of Sanskrit Ramayanas, there are versions of the Ramayana story in Kalidasa (Raghuvamsam) and the Ramopakhyana account in the Mahabharata. Other than Valmiki Ramayana, there are also Adhyatma Ramayana and Yogavasishta Ramayana. There are few people who know the Ramayana as well as Arshia Sattar. This is particularly true of Valmiki Ramayana. She has done an abridged retelling, a book on 'Uttara Kanda', a book on Rama's conduct and has written the stories in separate books for children. Perhaps one should add that there is a Critical Edition of the Valmiki Ramayana text, published by Baroda Oriental Institute, and most people work with that. Today, the Valmiki Ramayana (and most Ramayanas) has seven *kandas* or books: 'Bala Kanda', 'Ayodhya Kanda', 'Aranya Kanda', 'Sundara Kanda', 'Kishkindha Kanda', 'Yuddha Kanda' and 'Uttara Kanda'.

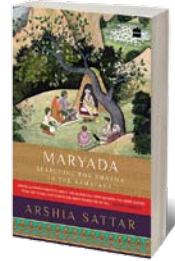
We don't precisely know when the Valmiki Ramayana was composed, nor when it reached some degree of finality as a text, with additions and interpola-

tions. Comparing various manuscripts, the Baroda Institute produced the Critical Edition, excising *shlokas*, especially from 'Uttara Kanda'. Most people will say 'Uttara Kanda' is a later interpolation. Indeed, the language and quality of poetry is often inferior to that in, say, 'Ayodhya Kanda'. This is also true of 'Bala Kanda'. But there is nothing to suggest that this division into seven *kandas* existed from the beginning. That *kanda*

classification also probably occurred later. Hence, logically, there can be older sections in 'Bala Kanda' or 'Uttara Kanda' and newer sections in 'Ayodhya Kanda'. Therefore, I feel slightly uncomfortable with statements such as the following: 'If we work with the well-established assumption that the Bala Kanda is a later addition to the middle books of what we call the Valmiki Ramayana, our first

encounter with Dasharatha is in the Ayodhya Kanda' (page 19). But that is a very minor point and doesn't alter the substantive arguments of this book.

What is this book about? 'Rather than provide a conclusive definition of dharma in the Ramayana, the essays in this book seek the various boundaries that different ideas of dharma come up against, boundaries beyond which actions become transgressive and deserving of punishment. 'Maryada' is a commonly used word for 'boundary' in Sanskrit. It also means 'propriety of conduct', and with this additional



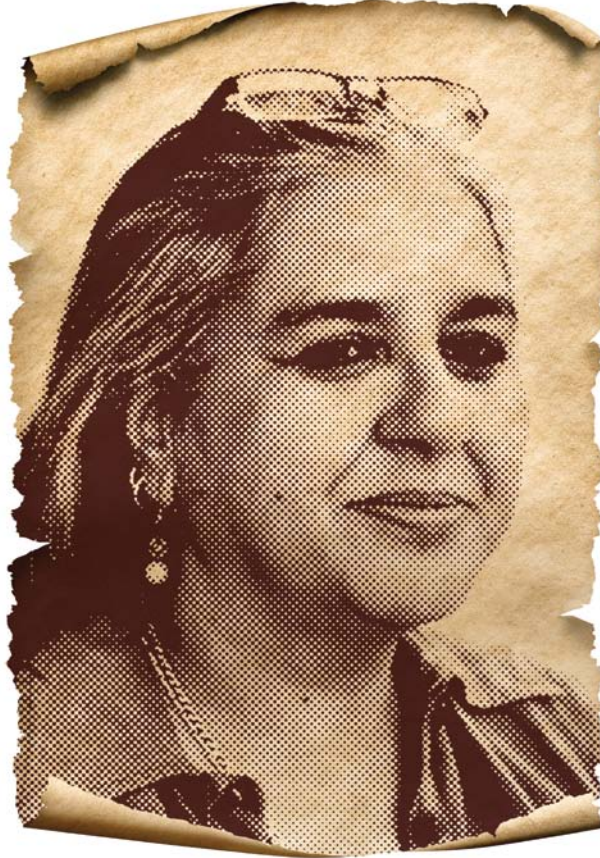
**MARYADA**  
SEARCHING FOR DHARMA  
IN THE RAMAYANA  
Arshia Sattar

HarperCollins  
244 Pages | Rs 499

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

connotation, it holds within itself the idea that the boundary it refers to cannot be crossed without some kind of retributive action. In the context of the Ramayana tradition, the word *maryada* carries a special weight precisely because the word comes to be used as Rama's defining virtue. Within the tradition, and especially after the later Ramayanas, Rama becomes known as the 'maryada purushottama', the ideal man. In fact, it could well be that the meaning of 'maryada' as 'good conduct' comes from Rama's essential association with the concept of propriety itself.' (page 2). That's the reason the title of the book is *Maryada*, with the subtitle of *Searching for Dharma in the Ramayana*. 'Searching for Dharma' would have been too vast and difficult to pin down. 'Maryada' narrows down the domain of discussion.

'Purushottama' is an excellent human being, though the word has other meanings too. Why is Rama an ideal man? Is it because he sets norms of good conduct for others to follow, or is it because he does not deviate from a contract, once made? The former is the more common interpretation, though the latter resonates more. For instance, the killing of Vali is a trade-off of *dharma*, 'justified' by the contract he had with Sugriva. Sita's ordeal by fire or the killing of Shambuka can also be 'justified' by the contract he made for ruling the kingdom. To quote Sattar, 'More and more, Rama seeks a righteousness not based in caste or life-stage (*varnashrama*), but in a higher truth which an individual can grasp through intuition... He moves from holding that a particularised individual *dharma* is the only basis for



## THERE ARE FEW PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE RAMAYANA AS WELL AS ARSHIA SATTAR. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE OF VALMIKI RAMAYANA

choice (obviously limited) to the more radical idea that *dharma* is the truth that transcends all boundaries.' In other words, *dharma* is even above notions of *maryada*. Some have questioned Rama's decisions and found it difficult to understand them. There are also those who have composed alternative Ramayanas in the process, unhappy with what Valmiki portrayed in his Ramayana. (Some of the essays do refer to other Ramayanas.) But this book is not about Rama and his decisions and their consequences, though there is an essay about Rama and the ascetic

ideal. Sattar has explored that in an earlier book (*Lost Loves*, 2011).

This book is about others and their attitudes towards *maryada* and *dharma*. 'I had intended to write about the so-called minor characters in the Ramayana, such as Dasharatha and Vibhishana. I also wanted to think about major characters, such as Ravana, Lakshmana and Hanuman, and their narrative roles' (page 209). Thus, in this slim book with seven essays, we have essays on Dasharatha, Hanuman (there are two on Hanuman), Vibhishana and Lakshmana. But we also have essays on Ayodhya's wives (meaning Dasharatha's wives and Sita, not Urmila, Mandavi or Shrutakirti) and the women outside (Shurpanakha, Ahalya, Svayamprabha, Tara). Those who have read Sattar's work know that she writes exceedingly well, in an engaging and reader-friendly way, without losing academic rigour. Since so many people are interested in the Ramayana and Rama, I think they will find this an engrossing read. But I don't think this will be the last book Sattar

writes on Ramayana and its characters. Her exploration of *maryada* and *dharma* will certainly continue and she will write more about the minor characters. Rabindranath Tagore wrote an essay (in Bengali) about Urmila, suggesting that readers want to know about Urmila, but not about Mandavi or Shrutakirti. Wait for Sattar's next book. As for this one, it is an excellent read. Go for it and do read the others, in case you haven't already. (Sattar's *The Mouse Merchant: Money in Ancient India* (2015) and her translated *Tales from the Kathasaritasagara* (2000) are different in nature.) ■

# Pandemic Reflections

Vinay Lal gives historical context to our collective and individual responses to Covid

By Ullekh NP

EVER SINCE HE wrote an op-ed in *The Los Angeles Times* in 1998 titled *Coming Out from Gandhi's Shadow* following India's nuclear tests, Vinay Lal has earned a preeminent position as a public intellectual. His keen observations as a historian on Hindu nationalism, Indian movies, American foreign policy, history writing in India, society, people and culture are proof of his stature as a scholar with a vast knowledge of history's cyclical sweeps.

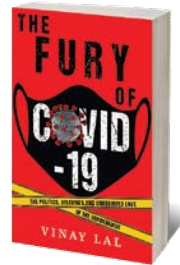
*The Fury of Covid-19*, his latest book, tracks the history of epidemics as part of the author's project to understand the current pandemic in the context of human and political behaviour. In the chapter titled 'Plague and Pestilence in India, 1896-1920', Lal, Professor of History and Asian American Studies at University of California, Los Angeles, speaks about various epidemics of the period in India, including the influenza of 1918, to offer us a big picture of current events. He argues—and regrets—that people 'conversant' with that piece of history would have been more effective in tackling the migrant crisis triggered by the fear of the coronavirus in March-April 2020. The references he gives in this 300-page work are extremely useful.

Be warned, this work is not a statistical account or an update of how Covid-19 wreaked havoc in the world and in India. Instead, it is a brilliant exposition of the pandemic—which has so far claimed close to 2 million lives worldwide—against a historical and cultural backdrop of other diseases and emergencies in the past to understand this one better. In one instance, he writes of the 'singularity of global social responses' to Covid-19:

'At the height of wars, disasters, national emergencies, even plague epidemics, public life never came to a standstill—certainly not on this scale. Londoners descended into the Underground as their city was blitzed by the Luftwaffe and then, as the all-clear sirens sounded, emerged into the streets and went about their business. The bars in Paris remained open at the height of the Nazi occupation. But by contrast, the coronavirus had necessitated, or so it seemed from the advice advanced by scientists and epidemiologists, segregation and isolation in extenso.'

As someone who is obsessed with understanding Gandhi, Lal has devoted some pages, as a box item, on the Indian leader's tough-as-nails nature in not only philosophising about how to execute relief work but also in action. The author imagines Gandhi, if he were here today, as punishing himself 'to the hilt in working around the clock, organising relief workers and soup kitchens, and cajoling people not to rely on government handouts but to make themselves useful and apply their ingenuity'.

Lal, who states in the beginning that he has used arguments from published essays of his, including those in *Open*, writes a stunning chapter correlating each country's Covid-19 response to its national history. He hastens to add that he wasn't subscribing to the views of Margaret Mead and others in ascribing



**THE FURY OF COVID-19  
THE POLITICS, HISTORIES,  
AND UNREQUITED LOVE  
OF THE CORONAVIRUS**

Vinay Lal

Macmillan  
300 Pages | Rs 599

distinct personality traits to the national character of a country. Lal then goes on to talk about the rallies taken out by white supremacists as those 'disguised as protests in defence of individual liberties and the American Constitution'. He also writes a thing or two about the 'American way of life' taken as a whole being more detrimental to the interests of humankind and the earth than

anything else in history, an observation that perhaps acquires a new meaning after the so-called insurrection at Capitol Hill on January 6th.

Chapter X gives us more than a glimpse into a subject that is germane to the contemporary world, but, again, from a historical perspective: of how countries tend to treat 'the Other' as the source of an epidemic. Lal, who discusses in earlier chapters the experiences of groups considered inimical to certain national interests, concludes in this chapter that thanks to the stigmatisation of other geographies (such as Africa in the case of AIDS and China in the case of the coronavirus), the way the virus outbreak has been seen by many people 'has considerably weakened the hand of those who stand by globalization and given further impetus to nationalism, already on the rise in many countries in the world'.

The author builds up his arguments after dwelling at length on feudal



practices in India that once insisted on distancing between communities. The author talks about the Kerala experience of yore when the distance people had to keep from others was rigidly determined by caste. The idea of that distancing was based on a notion of 'pollution' and lately some enthusiasts on social media have lapped it up to say that their forefathers were right about caste-based distancing as a cleanliness measure. Lal talks about this sentiment with other anecdotes and also about what should now be a slap in the face of those who had vilified Muslims, especially the Islamic missionary organisation Tablighi Jamaat which had organised an international

convention in Delhi in mid-March 2020, over 'creating' pandemic hotspots. 'Few in the country were prepared to reason or listen: the view among many was that Muslims had earlier forged a conspiracy to seduce innocent Hindu girls, waging 'love jihad', and soon the call went out that the Muslims were now engaged in 'Corona jihad' and would have to be now stopped in their tracks,' Lal says in this book which was written in August 2020. Around April, the media was filled with condemnation of these participants for reportedly being superspreaders of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In December, the Supreme Court exonerated 36 foreigners who had come to attend

the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi's Nizamuddin area of violating Covid-19 guidelines and asked the Union Government to help them return to their countries.

The author is deeply reproachful of what he calls the 'infantilisation' of its citizens by leaders. That, according to him, is the thrust of the Indian response to the viral scourge. As regards the migration crisis in the country that forced people in cities to leave for their homes hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, many on foot, Lal interprets Gandhi who had said that "India lives in its villages" thus: 'He was ridiculed for his supposed adulation of the poverty-stricken den of superstition and backwardness called the 'village', but what Gandhi meant has been illustrated amply by the millions of Indians who have, since the lockdown was imposed, taken to their feet and sought a return passage to their villages.' He emphasises that what he sees in India now is rule by fiat. He recalls another occasion before the lockdown when it was on full display: demonetisation in November 2016. He uses French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's phrase to explain the phenomenon: 'the law of the father'.

He neither spares the Chinese, calling them out for being 'adept at obfuscating the truth', nor approves of Americans' unwillingness to learn from the experiences of the rest of the world and their penchant for placing the blame at others' feet. Lal digs deep to put the disease in a large frame of history, politics and society since antiquity. He is also occasionally sceptical of the narratives of the past, including that of Thucydides, as he weaves his own to bring out projections of where we will stand after Covid-19. On a lighter note, what Lal accomplishes here can be compared to the elderly wisdom of analysing a person's character by their behaviour in a team sport. He puts the spotlight on nations by replacing the game with a pandemic. Which is perhaps why, among other Covid-19 books, his stands out for its readability. ■

**AS PART OF HIS PROJECT TO UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT PANDEMIC IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR, VINAY LAL WRITES A CHAPTER CORRELATING EACH COUNTRY'S COVID-19 RESPONSE TO ITS NATIONAL HISTORY**



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

# KOREGAON PARK CALLING

A new gallery puts Pune on the national art map

By Nandini Nair

**A** MURMUR HAS arisen in the leafy lanes of Koregaon Park in Pune. The murmur has grown into a buzz especially in Lane 8. Koregaon Park has always been known for its sprawling banyan trees, gated mansions, the Osho International Meditation Resort and as a hub for bars and restaurants. Here the city's trendiest walk alongside those in Osho slippers. In this neighbourhood a new entrant has emerged. It is an art gallery with a restaurant, named Vida Heydari Contemporary.

The gallery is an intimate space with high ceilings and interesting nooks that permit a viewer to enjoy an artwork one-on-one. The space allows for moments of contemplation and does not rush the viewer on. The adjoining 80-seater restaurant (operating at half capacity during pandemic times) is as expansive as the gallery is personal. The restaurant is all



BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI STANDS  
NEAR BENITHA PERCIYAL'S *THE  
MYSTERIOUS VISITOR*

"I WAS LOOKING FOR ARTISTS WHO MADE AN IMPORTANT STATEMENT IN THEIR WORK."

chic and classy, the kind of venue where one feels compelled to order a martini and not chai. Apt for a cocktail lounge crowd. The *ikat*-inspired wall made of plants that borders the restaurant is an aesthetic highpoint of the open-air space.

On December 16th, 2020, VHC opened with an art show, *Origins of a Perennial Bouquet* curated by the artist and Kochi Biennale founder/director Bose Krishnamachari. Running till February 14th, the show includes works of five Indian artists: Benitha Perciyal, Manish Nai, Sudarshan Shetty, Sumedh Rajendran and Tanya Goel.

VHC is founded by Vida Heydari, a curator and gallerist. The Iranian-Canadian gallerist has worked with Indian, Iranian and Chinese contemporary artists for more than a decade and a half. Speaking on a bright mid-December day, Heydari says, "This gallery was created to be a

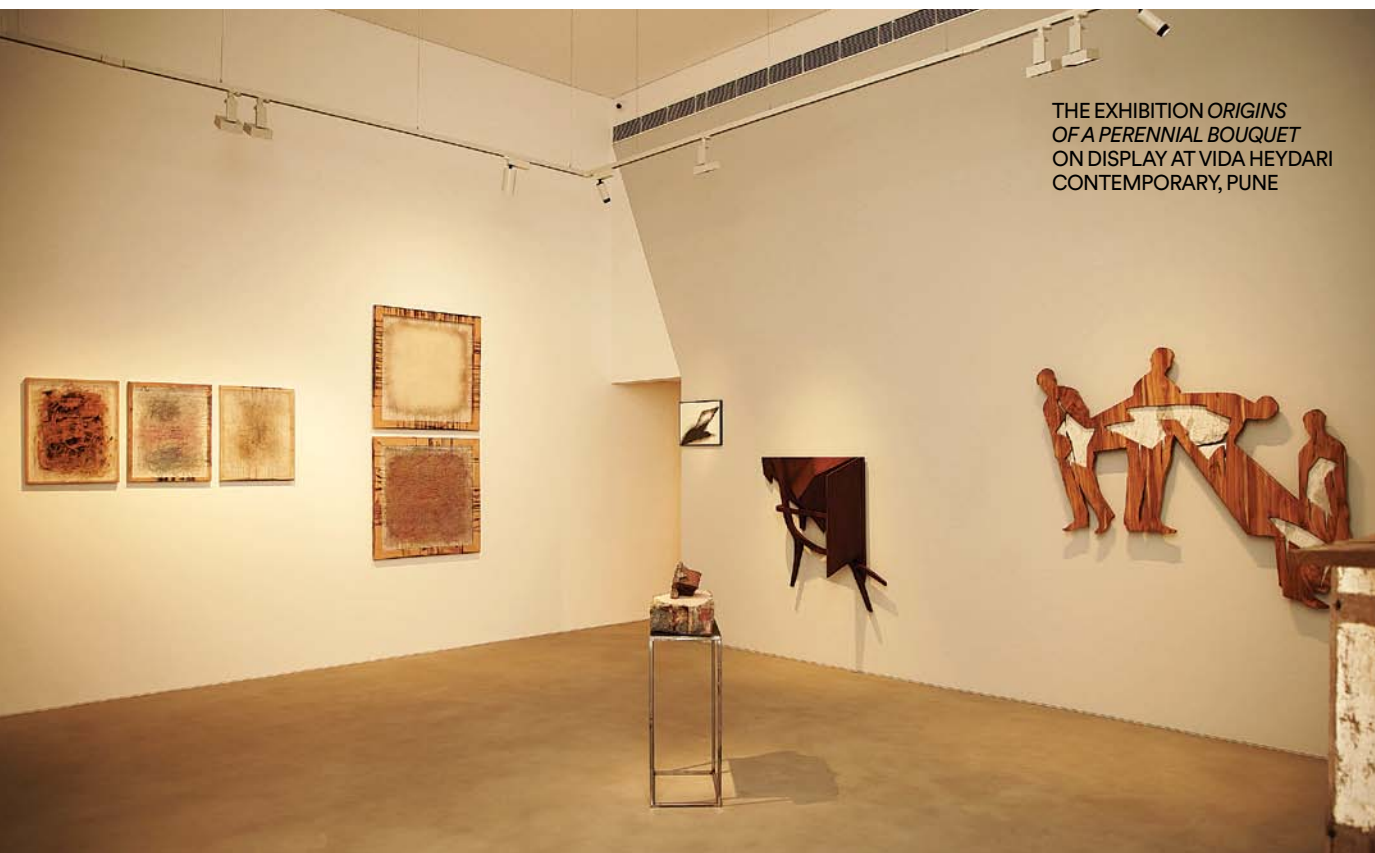
platform for Pune artists as well as artists I work with. There is an abundance of artists and art lovers here. Once I moved here, I felt Pune has given me so much. What better way to give back to it?"

For Heydari, Osho's teachings were her initial pull to the city. She read a book of his and was so moved by it that she chose to visit the city numerous times. She adds, "It really added to my life. And in the process, I fell in love with Pune. The people are very gentle. The landscape is mesmerising. And that is why I wanted to move here."

Bose and Heydari have known each other for close to a decade. Heydari reached out to Bose and asked if he would curate the maiden show for the gallery. With sites playing a crucial role to his vision, Bose saw the space, suggested changes and then reached out to artists to create original works for

the opening exhibition. When he first visited the space, Bose was immediately attracted to the high ceilings, which are hard to find in smaller venues. Bose and Heydari today joke over the fact that he completely overhauled the space, deleting her office, asking her to break a few of the walls and replace glass panes, in order to systematise the lighting and viewing experience. While this entailed a good deal of time and money, Heydari agreed with his plan. She says with a laugh, "I became office-less. But because of his comments, the space has really transformed." Bose concurs, "I feel this is one of the finest small spaces with great potential because of the aspect of the restaurant and art."

For Bose, the restaurant is fundamental to the gallery's vision. As someone who used to have a gallery space in Bombay, which included a restaurant and a



THE EXHIBITION *ORIGINS OF A PERENNIAL BOUQUET* ON DISPLAY AT VIDA HEYDARI CONTEMPORARY, PUNE

**"I REALLY LOVE ARTISTS WHO WORK WITH THEIR HANDS"** BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI, curator



VIDA HEYDARI



**“PUNE HAS A RICH ART AND CULTURE SCENE. I’VE MET SO MANY ART COLLECTORS WHO WOULD NORMALLY GO TO BOMBAY TO BUY FROM THERE. IT HAS BEEN EXCITING DAYS”** VIDA HEYDARI gallerist

bookshop, he knows the importance of a “conversation space”. He says, “This juxtaposition and connecting is very very important.” Artists and viewers of art need a venue where they can immerse themselves not only in viewing but also in conversations. Always aware of Pune’s vibrant arts scene, Heydari is happy with the response, and says that she has met more art lovers in the past few weeks than she knew existed in the city.

ON ENTERING THE gallery, Sumedh Rajendran’s pencil and pen on paper *Skin Doubt* greets the viewer. Within the frame of a pigeon-like bird, the artist has drawn a grill, the silhouette of a human and a door. The black-and-white-and-blue sketch hints at freedom and restraint, where there is a cage, there is a door out too. The art works on display at *Origins of a Perennial Bouquet* tell of an inside and outside world: whether it is Tanya Goel’s cement mixed with dye on found debris or Sudarshan Shetty’s sculpture *For All That We Gather* which consists of objects of home and travel (such as a tiffin *dabba*, shoes and a *potli* bag) made from reused teakwood.

I ask Bose how he decided on these five artists. He says, “I was thinking of how in this pandemic time, I didn’t want to make something pessimistic. People talk about being sick, and loneliness. I am tired of things like that. I was also looking for artists who made an important state-

ment in their work. I really love artists who work with their hands. Of course, technology is part of everybody’s practice, but I believe in making with your hands. That process is really important. I started thinking of artists who are working with materials as a serious subject.”

The engagement of the artists with their materials shines through the works. Benitha Perciyal uses a combination of frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, clove, bark powder, lemongrass, cedar wood, essential oil and reused Burma teakwood in her sculpture *The Mysterious Visitor*. Her work entails labour-intensive toil of curing and making. Even the pedestal, on which the human figure in *The Mysterious Visitor* stands, is made of scarred wood. Sumedh Rajendran’s *Reverse Land* made from teakwood is a hybrid model that questions normal representations. A viewer will come up with her own interpretation of it depending on the length and duration of her gaze. From some angles it might look like a winged horse, from another a peacock and from yet another a ship in sail.

Another artist at the show whose work slowly reveals itself to the viewer is Tanya Goel. She is known to make her own pigments from materials such as charcoal, aluminium and concrete. At VHC one can see her work sourced from the demolition site of a building. In *Tracing Modernity in Dust, and Light*, made from cement mixed with dyes on found debris collected from Central Public

Works Departments, she creates a geometric configuration on a boulder-like structure. In *Mechanisms 8.5 (fragment 2)* she uses graphite, pen, acrylic and silk to create a canvas that reveals her engagement with textures and pigments. It is a dense work of semi-circular lines that speaks of balance and its possible dalliance with chaos. Calling her “a really contemporary artist”, Bose says, “She understands found materials that are historically important. She picks up materials from the demolished building landscapes, which have layers of memories and colours.” Manish Nai’s work *Untitled IV* is a weblike work on a fly screen made from water colour, primer, varnish and wood. During a walkabout in the gallery, Bose explains Nai’s work, “Textile is an important material, when you talk about the history of Bombay or the history of people who worked in those places.”

In the materiality of the works on display at VHC one can, perhaps, glimpse the future of the gallery itself. As a new space, in a city that is rooting itself into the national art scene, it will be a venue for tangible discoveries. Here artists and those interested in art will find a home under the canopy of trees to seed new ideas and nurture projects to fruition. ■

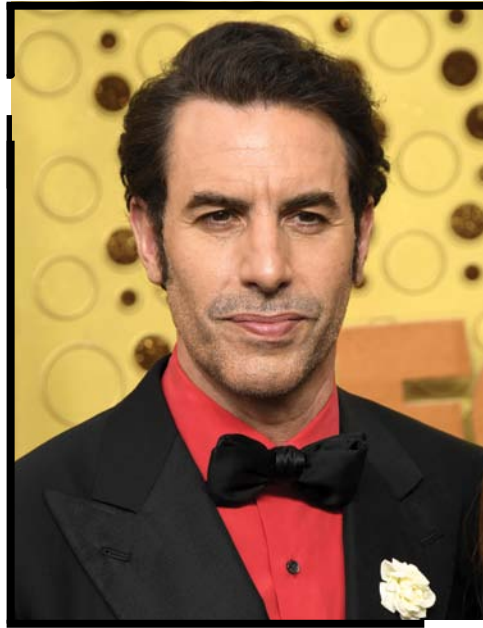
*Origins of a Perennial Bouquet, curated by Bose Krishnamachari, runs till February 14, 2021, at Vida Heydari Contemporary, Pune*

# 'Borat Is a Slightly More Extreme Version of Trump'

**S**ACHA BARON Cohen stars in *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, in which he gets everyday people and political figures to open up and expose their true beliefs and, often appalling, ignorance.

## How do you get people to open up to you?

Well, this was the most challenging movie that I've ever made, because I was taking my most famous character and trying to make a movie with real people. And I realised Borat is the perfect character for Trump, because really Borat is a slightly more extreme version of Trump. They are both misogynistic and racist, they both support anti-Semites, they both cannot care less about democracy, they both hold very old worldviews, and they're both laughable characters. So, I realised by talking to some Trump supporters as Borat, I could actually get them to reveal how far they were willing to go, because what is publicly said by the president and some of his supporters is so extreme, I thought how do you satirise that? So, when it came to the gun rally in Washington state and getting a crowd of people to agree to slice up journalists, what I wanted to reveal again was that we are on a precipice where we can see the edge of democracy and after that we fall into the abyss of autocracy, where it's not just verbal attacks on journalists, it's physical attacks and it's the autocracy's fight. As members of a journalistic association, I know you guys feel



*Sacha Baron Cohen*

increasingly threatened, so I brought out my own fake news journalist to make America and the world laugh, and to try to occasionally show the danger that lies ahead.

## Did you have problems opening a conversation with hate-filled people?

Well, I realise that to make a sequel to *Borat* which itself was a startling movie for cinemagoers, I would have to put myself in some deeply uncomfortable situations, so I knew that during some of the scenes my heart would start thumping. In fact, on one of the first days of filming at the Richmond Gun Rally, there had been a threat that had been uncovered by a white supremacist group to conduct a mass shooting. The [Federal Bureau of Investigation] had foiled it and I was going into a situation

where I'd be wearing a tee-shirt that was not fully supportive of the National Rifle Association and so, it's the first time in my career I donned a bullet proof vest which I wore for two of the scenes in the movie.

## Do you think that social media exaggerates polarised behaviour?

Well, essentially what's happened is there are a handful of people who control what information billions of people around the world receive. That is unfair and undemocratic, those people aren't voted for, they cannot be replaced and they're not accountable. And what we have witnessed is a revolution far more impactful than the Industrial Revolution. It's the technological revolution. After the Industrial Revolution there were decades where

governments caught up with the changes that were brought, and it took many years for the government to introduce legislation that curbed the excesses of the industrialists who were at the forefront of that change. I believe that we are in that period now where there's been a technological revolution that everyone assumed would be merely positive, they've realised there are some very negative effects from it and governments around the world are catching up, and there'll be a period before there is legislation that really makes a change. But I believe that real change has to happen. I would also say that social media has done more to change in the past few weeks than in the past few years. And a lot of that is down to a wonderful movie called *Stop Hate for Profit*, so there's hope. ■

## STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI



SIDHARTH MALHOTRA

ADITI RAO HYDARI

SHABANA AZMI

**Luck by Chance** News about the launch of *Aankhen 2*, a sequel to the 2002 thriller starring Amitabh Bachchan and Sidharth Malhotra, highlights an unusual Bollywood phenomenon—the lucky outsider. Few non-family newcomers have had the kind of good fortune as erstwhile Delhi boy Malhotra, who continues to get significant work and media coverage despite delivering a series of movie disasters. One of the three youngsters launched by *Student of the Year* in 2012, Malhotra was an assistant director in *My Name Is Khan* (2010). While his debut movie did well, few of the 10 movies he has done since have been successful. Since *Kapoor & Sons*, in which he was the weakest link, made Rs 70 crore at the box office, he has had a series of films which have been underwhelming. Yet, it doesn't seem to dim either his so-called star value, reflected in his endorsements, his home being designed by Gauri Khan, or his star girlfriends—the latest of whom seems to be rising star Kiara Advani, who plays his girlfriend in *Shershaah*, a forthcoming biopic of Kargil martyr Captain Vikram Batra. Is it merely because he was launched by starmaker Karan Johar, whom few in the industry want to alienate?

**Oldest Newcomer** When Luv Ranjan was developing the script for Ranbir Kapoor's new film, he was clear he wanted the father to be played by "someone like Boney Kapoor". When he saw him in Vikramaditya Motwane's *AK vs AK*, where he plays himself, he decided to go for the original. So here is Boney Kapoor now, at 65, making his

debut as a "rich, super confident guy" in Ranjan's romance, which is being shot largely in Delhi. Playing his wife will be Dimple Kapadia, whose *Tenet* appearance has reminded filmmakers in India of the powerhouse of talent she is. Watch out for her performance as a wily politician in *Tandav*, Ali Abbas Zafar's political series set in Delhi.

**Mrs India** Swaroop Sampat has spent much of her life after her success in the TV sitcom *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* as a teacher to disabled children and wife to Paresh Rawal. A rare appearance by her onscreen is one of the many highlights of Ramin Bahrani's *The White Tiger*. The Miss India 1979 plays a lower-caste politician who is unafraid of inspiring fear among her rivals and supporters, whether it is by asking for huge amounts as bribe, hurling the most vicious of abuse or even spitting out *paan* on spotless marble tops. She should expect her phone to ring non-stop once the movie airs on Netflix.

### Women of a Certain Age

First, it was Neena Gupta in *The Last Color* (2019). And now Shabana Azmi stars as a New York chef who has lost her mojo and returns to India to reinvent herself. Directed by star chef Vikas Khanna, the movie, his second, sees Azmi returning to the big screen in a lead role after ages, disproving the ageism and sexism inherent in Bollywood. At 70, Azmi is very much in demand for movies and streaming services. She was the matriarch in ITV's terror thriller *Next of Kin*; plays a key figure in the forthcoming sci-fi series for Showtime's *Halcyon*; and is Esan

Daulat Begum, Babur's grandmother in Nikkhil Advani's *Moghuls* for Disney+ Hotstar.

**About Time** She never got her due in Bollywood, so it was no surprise that Aditi Rao Hydari has chosen to act in southern movies, headlining Mani Ratnam's *Kaatru Veliyidai* (2017) and *Chekkappa Chivantha Vaanam* (2018), among others. Her shoot with southern heartthrob Dulquer Salmaan for choreographer-turned-director Brinda Gopal's *Hey Sinamika* was interrupted by Covid-19 before finally wrapping up in December, but now comes exciting news for the beauty with royal blood. She plays the lead in Amazon Prime Video's forthcoming period series set in 1940s Bollywood. It is the work of three directors: *AK vs AK* helmer Vikramaditya Motwane; *Gulab Gang* director Soumik Sen; and *Class of '83* writer-director Atul Sabharwal scripting each episode. So *Stardust*, as it is called, should live up to its name.

### Did You Know?

Anyone wondering how an Iranian-American filmmaker has such an acute understanding of caste and class in India, stop. Ramin Bahrani, the celebrated director of *The White Tiger* (2021), was in college with the writer of the Man Booker Prize-winning novel of the same name, Aravind Adiga. Bahrani now teaches film at their alma mater, Columbia University, in New York. Open *The White Tiger* and you will find the dedication to Bahrani right up there before the book begins. ■



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