

PEN



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FORECAST 2021

THE POLITICS OF GRIEVANCE
A TIME FOR STIMULUS
THE DAY OF THE WOLF WARRIOR
THE FUTURE OF WORK
A TEST FOR KOHLI'S INDIA

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FORECAST



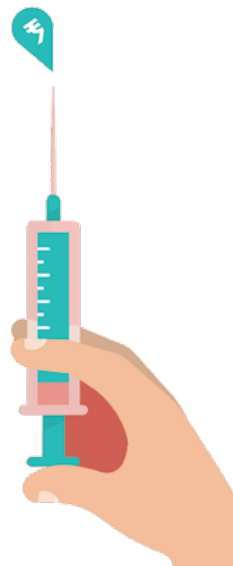
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Cover by Saurabh Singh



LETTER OF THE WEEK

Leaders are marked out by their resolve and composure in adversity ('Forged in Fire', January 11th, 2021). Take any great leader from history—Abraham Lincoln, FD Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Mikhail Gorbachev, Mujibur Rahman and Gandhi—who were thrust into difficult situations: finally, they emerged victorious. Narendra Modi's advent and rise to his unparalleled stature that has rarely been achieved in the Indian context owes mainly to his confident handling of equally tough situations: GST implementation, Swachh Bharat, the bankruptcy code, the criminalisation of Triple Talaq, the scrapping of Article 370, Covid management, the citizenship legislation and now the farm reforms. All of these reflect his firm conviction. Modi's indifference to loose cannons denigrating him is one reason why opposition parties seem clueless. While he is initiating changes at the grassroot level, his political opponents are left debating in TV studios. His ability to weather severe storms artificially created by his detractors is phenomenal. The opposition has lost the narrative and has forgotten to how to play this game.

Bholey Bhardwaj

PROTEST FOR WHAT?

These are no ordinary times, though neither the best nor the worst ('A Portrait of Protest', January 11th, 2021). Divisive forces inimical to India's growth are active. Social media is the new devil. One day you see an innocent child in tears sitting in protest and ranting against the Government, next day you see him gorging on pizza and saying protesting was fun. One moment you see one woman at Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, another moment she is sitting with farmers to protest against the Government. What's the actual picture? In turns, people are sitting on hunger strikes; Kejriwal is somersaulting on stubble burning; extremist activists are sloganeering among crowds; an iPhone factory is

torched; Amazon facilities are attacked. Who are these protestors and whom are these protests actually directed against? Has India become a land of mercenary streetfighters? The Modi Government should act more stringently against such pretenders and for-hire protestors. Worst of all, now people, including politicians whom you would expect to be more responsible, are protesting against Covid vaccines. When will the Government find time to concentrate on growth and development if it is busy firefighting on these fronts?

Ashok Goswami

KASHMIR'S FUTURE

Kashmir's history was aptly summarised in one pithy line: 'It was not unusual



to see terrorists appearing at the funeral of a slain terrorist. And yet, some from the same areas ended up on an Army recruitment drive to be part of the force they supposedly abhor so much' ('The Valley of Paradoxes', December 28th, 2020). The Valley has seen so much violence in the last three decades that peace can only prevail gradually after sustained efforts from all participants. Since terrorist organisations do not want that to happen, such paradoxes will keep appearing. It is a clear sign of a typical Kashmiri's 'never say die' attitude that they enrol for Army recruitment and vote in local elections. For every sensible Kashmiri youth choosing the right path, there is someone still preferring to pelt stones at Indian soldiers. So governments at all levels will have to keep trying to bring the Kashmiri youth into the mainstream as far as possible. Constructive engagement with local people from the four districts of South Kashmir holds the key to restoring peace and faith in the Valley. It's a changed world without Article 370.

Bal Govind

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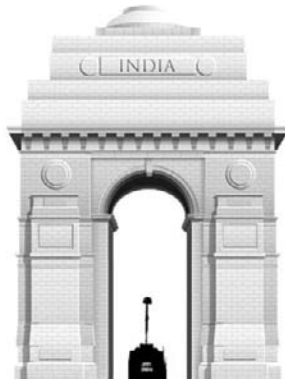
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INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

BISHAN SINGH BEDI along with EAS Prasanna and Bhagwat Chandrasekhar formed the lethal spin trio of Indian cricket in the '60s and '70s. On a good day, it could tear through the defences of the best of batsmen in the world. Once their cricketing careers ended, both Prasanna and Chandrasekhar faded quietly from the limelight, rarely finding a mention even in the sport pages. However, it is Bedi who continues to pop up in the media every now and then, but often for the wrong reasons. Like the other day when he shot off an angry letter to the Delhi and District Cricket Association, resigning in protest against the erection of a statue of Arun Jaitley, a former head of DDCA, at the stadium which following his death two years ago was named after him. Home Minister Amit Shah formally unveiled the statue at a solemn function on December 28th, what would have been his 68th birthday. Bedi, who had once contested against Jaitley for heading the DDCA and lost badly, reveals his pique in the letter. He regurgitates the same old corruption charges for which Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had to tender a meek apology. At the time, Kejriwal had suggested that he was misled by former cricketers who bore a grudge against the former DDCA president. In the bitter vitriol-brimming letter to Rohan Jaitley, the lawyer son of the late finance minister who now heads the DDCA, Bedi finds it odd that the stadium should be named after a cricket administrator rather than a cricketer. In his hatred for Jaitley, the once ace left-hand spinner forgot that the famous Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai commemorates



a former Maharashtra minister who, as head of the Mumbai Cricket Association, had built it to end the arm-twisting by the controllers of the nearby Brabourne Stadium. But then, Bedi wouldn't be Bedi if he weren't to play a contrarian. I remember several years ago meeting him at a dinner at the house of the sport-linked entrepreneur Lokesh Sharma. Referring to the incident a few days previously at a premier British-era club in Madras, which had denied entry to MF Husain owing to his unshod feet, Bedi unleashed a volley of choicest Punjabi invectives against the club bosses: "*Angrez chaley gaye... aulad ...*", or "*Angrezon ke gulam...*". I tried to reason about it being a private club and competent to set its own rules of admission, etcetera. When that failed to stop him from having a go at the club administrators, I countered, "You have played for India in scores of tests, how come you were seen wearing the same white shirt and trousers which the whites-dominated international cricket body prescribed... why not in your regular, everyday Punjabi attire of '*tehma'* (a sort of *lungi*) and, instead of a turban, a colourful *patka*... and why white, why not red or blue or yellow shirt...?" Expectedly, he had no answer. But for the rest of the

evening, he still revealed his regret that he had peaked as a cricketer when there was little money in cricket. That Sunil Gavaskar—'*chhotu*' for Bedi—had parlayed his excellence as a player into a successful post-retirement career as a commentator, or a Kapil Dev, post-cricket, had made a successful switch to business, too seemed to rankle with Bedi. I had heard about Bedi not adjusting well after the end of his cricketing career, but that evening at Lokesh's house, I came across a bitter and frustrated man who rued not so much that life hadn't given him enough but that his peers and others, some certainly much less talented cricketers than him, had got far more in financial terms. It wasn't enough that his record as a left-hand spinner still shone bright. Jealousy is a disease of the mind and needs a lot of introspection and mental discipline for one to overcome it.

SOMETIMES A WHATSAPP message hits you hard, even if you feel helpless to effect change. Like this one from a bureaucrat friend: 'We know Kareena Kapoor and Anushka Sharma are expecting... but do we care to know about Cadet Amit Raj, 28, of Sainik School, Purulia, who while jogging one morning in his hometown Nalanda, Bihar, responded to desperate cries for help... a house was on fire. Without caring for his own life, he plunged inside and saved three little children of a complete stranger... but himself perished from burns in a hospital a few days later... Of course, we know it will be a second child for Kareena and a first for Anushka and Virat Kohli!' ■

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

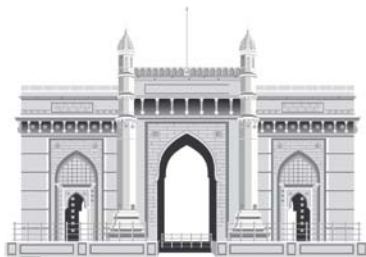
Anil Dharker

NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS on December 31st were like no other, but then 2020 was a year like no other. The first blow was the edict that all restaurants and pubs must shut at 11 PM. This was based on the latest scientific discovery that the coronavirus sleeps through the day and goes out for a drink and a bite after 11. New Year was thus brought in at 10, which was apt because everyone, barring Trump, wanted 2020 out of the door as early as possible.

Going against the advice of many who suggested staying at home with loved ones (which we have been doing for nine months, so now we know who's been straying—the guys giving stay-at-home advice), we celebrated with friends. (Note to authorities: this consisted of two families with three members in each, a sit-down dinner at a table that sits 12, masks on even when eating and drinking, a new mask for every course). On the way back, there was no one on Marine Drive except cops observing social distancing. It was just like being in Chennai on any evening after 8.

With no taxis to dodge on the way home, there was nothing to do but reflect on the year gone by. This is always a melancholic exercise because the year gone by has never lived up to expectations, even though all of us, barring Trump, did our best. I have been brought up to look for silver linings in every dark cloud (on the sound principle that this at least makes you look up), so I began my gloomy stock-taking and scrabbling around for shiny metal. Believe me, dodging taxis is a much better option. However, for what they are worth, here are my silver linings.

You will instantly recognise that the linings I look for are gold, not silver, when I say Covid hasn't been all that bad. For example, if you exclude the



population that carelessly caught the coronavirus, Mumbai's health chart actually *improved* last year: gastroenteritis figures came down from 7,785 to 2,478, hepatitis from 1,534 to 259, dengue from 920 to 128, H1N1 from 451 to a mere 44. Only malaria went up, from 4,357 to 4,874, probably because mosquitoes forgot to use sanitisers. Other pluses include fewer dog bites. The daily average of 180 in 2019 came down to 90 in 2020, a reduction of 50 per cent, so every dog obviously didn't have his day. Did fear of the virus keep stray dogs with their loved ones in whatever spaces they call home?

In other good news, psychiatrists had more patients than ever before. "Earlier, we were only counselling mentally ill patients," a leading practitioner was quoted saying, "But now we are also counselling Covid-19 patients. Not just that, we are counselling the doctors and nurses who are treating the Covid patients!" It's no laughing matter, of course: apart from the constant worry of catching the virus, health workers have to wear PPE suits and masks for hours on end. That's resulted in obese doctors becoming trim and thin, disappearing completely. Many have turned to God, others to yoga and *pranayam*, which are forms of prayer too. One of the city's best known psychiatrists has given this sage advice: eat good food, sleep eight hours a day, go on a vacation. Nothing like expert advice when you are in distress.

Apparently—and you can rely on our pink papers to come up with

catchy headlines—'Sober Days Over, Liquor Companies Are Back in High Spirits as Sales Surge'. The reason for this professional inebriety is that sales of alcoholic drinks for October, November and December 2020 were 7 per cent better than for those months in 2019. Some brands in the 'luxury sector' (which probably means spirits for people who drink when they don't have to), shot up by as much as 30 per cent. Another extremely useful statistic: in the absence of travel, duty-free has given way to duty-paid, which increases state revenue. Considering that two-thirds of the price of an alcoholic beverage goes into government pockets, what's the betting international travel will be banned for a further period?

That means more high-flying Indians laid low in severely locked-down London (and they thought they were getting away from poor, benighted Mumbai!) If any of them are looking for silver linings, the Michelin-starred Gymkhana restaurant in Mayfair, famous for 'elegant Indian dishes inspired by the Raj', is now advertising 'Club Experience' boxes. For a mere 110 pounds sterling you can get dinner for four consisting of the Gymkhana's signature Wild Muntjac Biryani, Kid Goat Keema, Tandoori Lamb Chops, Dal Maharani and Makai Palak accompanied by 'poppadoms, gol guppas, pao buns, garlic naan balls, saffron water and gulab jamuns.'

Closer home, December 31st saw the promoters of Zomato and Swiggy on a non-alcoholic high. After all, they recorded 60 per cent higher orders than last year's last day, with Zomato's peak hitting 4,254 orders per minute. Obviously, more and more people celebrated the kicking out of 2020 at home with their loved ones.

What a cosy picture! Happy New Year to you too. ■

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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

The Kiss of the Serpent

IF I'D WAITED for the world to come to me, I'd be waiting still.' That is Alain Gautier aka Charles in the new *BBC One* series *The Serpent*. Five years after Bollywood made *Main Aur Charles*, based largely on his arrest in India, *The Serpent* focuses largely on his time in Thailand where posing as a gems dealer, he drugged, robbed and killed at least a dozen travellers. It adds to a growing body of books and movies that have made the murderer a cultural phenomenon long after his arrest in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2003.

What makes Sobhraj such an enduring bad boy? Filmmaker Sriram Raghavan, who was contemplating a movie based on him, says he largely based Saif Ali Khan's suave but evil character in *Ek Hasina Thi* (2004) on Charles Sobhraj. "He was charming and diabolical," he says. Raghavan couldn't meet him, but says he has read his biography *Serpentine* by Thomas Thompson. "He's the sort of guy who could befriend a diplomat as easily as a cab driver," adds Raghavan.

So powerful is his allure that various stars in India have thought seriously about playing him in a movie, including Aamir Khan and Sanjay Dutt. Indeed, in *The Serpent*, Charles boasts about how Indians love him, regarding him as something of an anti-hero despite the two stints, between 1976 and 1997, he served in Tihar Jail in Delhi. Retired police officer Amod Kanth, the 'main' in *Main Aur Charles*, says Sobhraj was a cheap conman who was given undue importance and attention. "He was made larger than life," says Kanth, whose character was played by actor Adil Hussain in *Main Aur Charles* and by Aly Khan in *The Serpent*. "The media was obsessed with him and

though he didn't speak very good English, he was clever enough to pick up some knowledge of the law and of philosophy with which he used to impress people."

Sobhraj was in his custody in Delhi for a whole month and Kanth says he got a good opportunity to study him. "I didn't use third degree but made sure he sat on the ground all through his interrogation, telling him that his place was at my feet." Kanth recalls his bad breath, a smell he still cannot forget. "I told him I could never understand what women saw in him," he recalls, calling him a "stinking swine".

But as *The Serpent* makes it clear, it is his outsider status that makes him attractive to certain people. Born to a Vietnamese mother and an Indian father who abandoned both mother and son, he was a citizen of nowhere. Speaking mostly in French and English, he would befriend Western travellers, offering them basic facilities in an open house he maintained in Bangkok, Thailand with his Quebecoise girlfriend Marie-Andrée Leclerc, whom he met on a houseboat in Srinagar's

Dal Lake. A warm bed, hot shower, food and drink would often be enough to lure these young men and women far from their families and nations. He would then prey on them—stealing their passports and money—before disposing of them. *The Serpent* ends with a tribute to his forgotten victims: 'To all young intrepids who set out with big dreams but never made it home.'

Sobhraj is shown as someone who deeply despises this lost generation who 'travel only to acquire' the Eastern way of life, calling it a 'new kind of colonialism'. The acquisitions could range from gems to drugs to yoga to transcendental meditation. It was the time of The Beatles travelling to India (1968) and men such as Steve Jobs and

*As BBC One's *The Serpent* shows, it is Charles Sobhraj's outsider status that makes him attractive to certain people. Born to a Vietnamese mother and an Indian father who abandoned both mother and son, he was a citizen of nowhere. Speaking mostly in French and English, he would befriend Western travellers, offering them basic facilities in an open house he maintained in Bangkok, with his Quebecoise girlfriend Marie-Andrée Leclerc. He would then prey on them—stealing their passports and money—before disposing of them*



Tahar Rahim as Charles Sobhraj in BBC One's *The Serpent*

Apple's first employee Daniel Kottke looking for higher meaning (1974). The world was in ferment, with anti-Vietnam War protests in the US and the student agitation in Europe. By the time Sobhraj was arrested in Delhi in 1976, he had already left a trail of burnt and mangled bodies behind. His vanity was overpowering, enough to defeat anything, as Leclerc says to him in *The Serpent*. He thought he was invincible. At the end of the road trip from Paris to Mumbai, he says to Leclerc, 'Nobody cages us, nobody.'

Someone finally did, and as *The Serpent* shows, it was a junior Dutch diplomat in Bangkok, Herman Knippenberg, whose tenacious search for two young Dutch travellers to Thailand led him to Sobhraj, whose trail he never left. Sobhraj's close brushes with the law had also emboldened him and he got careless, trying to drug as many as 22 of a German group in Delhi. During his two decades in Tihar Jail, he was something of a celebrity, carefully reading the prison manual to get himself facilities such as a typewriter, a colour TV, special food and media interviews.

Much of it was his constant craving for attention in the media. He would give interviews not merely to impressionable young journalists in Tihar Jail, which then changed its policy on access to prisoners, but also to foreign journalists, such as Richard Neville of *Oz*, who co-wrote *On The Trail of the Serpent: The Life and Crimes of Charles Sobhraj*. Such desperation to be in the limelight is a trait Sobhraj shares with other notorious

serial killers such as Ted Bundy, most of whose victims were collegegoing women from Washington and Oregon to Utah and Colorado in the US.

Like Bundy, Sobhraj had his fans, the latest of whom was his lawyer's daughter, Nihita Biswas, who married him in Nepal and sought her own parallel career in Bollywood by entering *Bigg Boss* Season 5 in 2011. Psychologist Dr Rajat Mitra says psychopaths such as Sobhraj modulate their body language, gestures and tone of voice in such a seductive manner that they tend to take people away from the path on which they are travelling: "It's partly genetic and partly the way they were raised. By the time their victims realise they have been exploited, it is usually too late for them," he says.

And such is their charm that each new victim believes they are the one who can change him, which explains the never-ending trail of girlfriends and enablers. Sobhraj, now 76, is still in prison in Kathmandu. He continues to hold the rights to his lifestory, which is why even *The Serpent* doesn't mention his full name. His appetite for recognition continues unabated and he hopes he will be played at some point by a big Bollywood star. Director Ram Gopal Varma, chronicler of many who live in the shadows, scoffs at that idea. "There are far more interesting criminals than him," he says. But few perhaps with such global allure. ■

By **KAVEREE BAMZAI**

PORTRAIT • ADAR POONAWALLA & CYRUS POONAWALLA

VACCINE MOGULS

Their company will help India and the world come out of the pandemic

NO VIRUS CAN read a calendar year. And yet, here we stand at the start of a new year, our hearts brimming with hope. That's because the vaccines are here. And in India's case—and really much of the developing world's—one particular vaccine: Covishield, the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine being manufactured by Serum Institute of India (SII). (The indigenously developed Covaxin by Bharat Biotech has been granted emergency use approval in India but is still undergoing final phase trials.)

And amidst this moment, stand two individuals, arguably the most important figures in the global vaccine scene who don't work in a lab. The Poonawallas. The father-son duo of Cyrus and Adar Poonawalla who run SII in Pune.

Although Covishield (along with Covaxin) was granted approval a few days ago—and it seems so far that the Government is yet to reach a price and supply deal with the company—the first phase of the vaccination drive is expected to begin sometime in mid-January. And SII will likely not just be India's insurance against the virus. It will be for much of the world's middle- and low-income nations.

Both the big pharma vaccines of Moderna and Pfizer are far too expensive and require large investments in cold chain supplies. Rich countries have mostly ensured that only their citizens will have access to these at this time. So, for most of the world right now, it appears it will come down to the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine, and in turn, the large manufacturing capacities of the Poonawallas' SII that will churn them out, to ensure that the world—and not just rich countries—is able to put the pandemic behind it.

While the pandemic has thrust the Poonawallas into the limelight, they

have been important players in the vaccine market for decades. The two oversee a vaccine empire—the world's largest vaccine manufacturing plant by number of doses—that annually churns out around 1.5 billion doses against diseases such as meningitis, measles and tetanus. Last year, *Forbes* ranked Cyrus India's sixth richest individual, his net worth estimated at \$11.5 billion.

The Poonawallas were originally famous horse breeders. It is said that in the 1960s, a young Cyrus got into vaccine manufacturing after a chance meeting with a veterinary doctor at Mumbai's Haffkine Institute, where the retired horses from their stud farm were sent so vaccines could be made from horse serum. The company grew rapidly because they managed to keep vaccine prices very low. There was a meteoric rise for the company after the mid-1980s, Cyrus had told a media outlet, once it got accredited for supplying vaccines to the UN agencies.

Before the pandemic broke out, his son Adar had been as famous for his business nous as for his lifestyle, his large collection of cars, European artworks, his passion for horses, and being frequently spotted, along with his wife, with Bollywood personalities. In the business domain, Adar has expanded the group aggressively, acquiring other vaccine companies, investing in new technology, and scaling up volumes. He once told *Mint*: "I wouldn't take risks in things I don't understand. Maybe I will take more risks in the vaccine space than, say, real estate."

Covid-19 has thrust the Poonawallas, and especially Adar, into the forefront. And Adar has proven more than up to the task, from signing deals with promising vaccine researchers and international agencies, investing his own personal wealth in ramping up production even before test results were out, to negotiating prices and hashing deals behind the scenes. According to reports, India could be buying about 100 million doses at a price of Rs 200 per dose, which is below the \$4 to \$5 price tag given to the UK government. At some point, discussions about making the vaccines available privately at a higher cost will no doubt arise. The company also has international commitments to supply a certain number of doses. And according to reports, the company wants access to higher-margin private markets where the vaccine's price will be marked up by about five times.

For all the risks taken earlier, there will probably be more than a windfall for the Poonawallas at the end. ■

Adar (left) and Cyrus Poonawalla



FOTOCORP

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

ANGLE

RELATIVELY SPEAKING



It will all look good in 2021, but only in comparison

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

THE SAVING GRACE of coming out of a year that has been the worst humanity has seen in recent times is that anything that follows is going to be smelling of roses. That is really nothing to celebrate. For example, take the Indian economy. It has been clobbered into a recession, but the stock markets are behaving as if there is a boom. It has touched historical heights right when the economy is at its nadir. And this it does anticipating that the pandemic will get over in 2021 and the wheels of growth will start rolling again. It is true. Growth will be stupendous as compared to 2020. It is only when you compare it to 2019 that the real damage is obvious. If you compare it to any pre-demonetisation years, then it is worse. The recession becomes evident in full measure.

This glass-half-full phenomenon will be in most sectors and fields. For example, healthcare indices might look good. Deaths will be lower and it might look like we have a functioning healthcare system because vaccines will be available to everyone. Its delivery will be good and chances are everyone would get it free. But that is only because the entire attention and focus of the Government will be on it. The rest of the system will totter as usual and perhaps, even worse, because not many who matter will be concerned about tuberculosis or Japanese encephalitis.

Likewise, the world of business. Coming after a year of zero or negative

growth, companies will all be clocking double-digit upswings in topline and bottomline. But it is on the back of huge cuts in workforce and/or savings on rent since they gave up office space not needed during the lockdown. Most of those jobs won't be coming back in 2021 precisely because companies need to show shareholders that they are making up for what was lost. They will still struggle to get the numbers back to pre-Covid levels because the economy is still in recession.

Entertainment, particularly movies, will see an even bigger shift to over-the-top (OTT) platforms, but now it will not be forced on filmmakers. They will voluntarily choose releases on Netflix or Amazon Prime Video because they have now discovered a safer business model. It might not make them hundreds of crores in profits but those who got that in the earlier model, were not more than what you could count on your fingertips. That is bad news for theatres. Most of 2021, people would still be wary of going there.

Business travel might resume somewhat but there would still be risk associated with it, and many companies would be reluctant to take on that responsibility. Hotels will see more guests and more people will be eating out, but a Covid-free experience will only come in a Covid-free world and that would be only after everyone is vaccinated. If you want to bet on a revival, the odds would be better for 2022. ■

IDEAS



ALAMY

CONTROL

Even though China has remained politically autocratic, its businesses have enjoyed a large measure of economic freedom. Tech entrepreneurs who built businesses that could rival any in Silicon Valley became glamorous figures. This was more than encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party since they weren't just great engines of the economy, they also contributed to the country's soft power and became representative of a new China. The most famous among the entrepreneurs was the tycoon Jack Ma. But as his recent case—where he has disappeared from the public eye and his companies are being cut to size—highlights, the Party is now tightening the screws on business individuals and companies. While trouble for Ma seems to stem from a speech he gave at a conference last year where he criticised China's regulators, Beijing has elsewhere started to rein in the industry too. The message seems to be that no one can be bigger than the Party. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Communism is not love. Communism is a hammer which we use to crush the enemy'

MAO ZEDONG



By Keerthik Sasidharan

Truth as the Beginning

Look beyond seers and sages to locate the origins of Indian thought

A NEW YEAR IS as good a time as any to think about beginnings. But 'beginnings' are a tricky concept. Not just in the simple sense of cause-and-effect: can we truly say when something begins? But rather in that any description of a 'beginning' implicitly assumes that we are able to find an Archimedean position—call this position 'now'—which comes fully equipped with concepts and consciousness, information and potentialities to analyse the past. This privileging of the 'now' as some sort of above-ordinary moment in spacetime is what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called 'the metaphysics of presence'. This phrase, rather mouthful and capacious in its portents, speaks to our mental furniture that assumes the presence of certain fundamental hierarchies. Our 'now' comes equipped with intuitions that there is 'good before evil', 'positive before negative', 'pure before the impure' and so on. In turn, and over time, we create elaborate worldviews, manufacture meanings and organise institutions that turn these binaries into the fundamental axioms out of which we spin, like a spider creates a web from seemingly nowhere, an ideological framework that grapples with history. The complex, complicated and sometimes infuriating project called 'deconstruction', of which Derrida was the *paterfamilias*, was dedicated to making explicit the pathways through which language smuggled itself into our everyday consciousness to create what we call 'reality'.

Over the past century, as more and more Indians have entered the middle class and wilfully adopted mores of modernity, our collective 'now' has sought new ways to comport our past to reason. Thus, we see the rise of entire traditions of thought such as 'naturalistic' Buddhism, where all the supernatural and non-rational claims in traditional Buddhism are simply deemed irrelevant. (A Buddhism without rebirth, karma, nirvana, *bodhisattvas*, writes the philosopher Owen Flanagan, would still have much to say about metaphysics, epistemology and ethics). Within Hinduism, this rearrangement of what lives in our 'now' takes on a different colour. Whereas the previous generations saw the Rig Veda as a foundational text from which ritual and identity was derived,

over the past few decades, we have typically elevated one verse from the Rig Veda called the '*nasadiya sukta*' (often called the 'Hymn of Creation') above all else. This particular verse fragment asks, with breathtaking simplicity: 'But, after all, who knows, and who can say/ Whence it all came, and how creation happened?/ the gods themselves are later than creation,/ so who knows truly whence it has arisen?' (translated by AL Basham). Present-day Indians, faced with a society that is beholden to religious and communitarian chauvinisms, often hold this verse up as an example of intellectual enquiry. Thus we get a reading of our past in which we privilege scepticism over dogmatism, open-mindedness over rigidity, plurality over singular identities, wonder over blind certainty and so on. The 'now' from the inside of which we tell these stories of our collective past sees scepticism of the Indian mind as its fundamental quality.

But such a reading flounders when talking about the origins of our social arrangement. Instead of scepticism and reason, what we are faced with is an elaborate and complex archipelago of caste, gender and class that resists new readings. The 'now' out of which our understanding of Indian social past emerges privileges purity over impurity, *moksha* over all else, sexual fidelity over sexual experimentation, textual learning over workmanship, context-specific rules over universal norms and so on. These binaries are born from a sociopolitical consciousness that continues to marinate in the remains of a *varnashrama* dharma tradition which relies on this 'metaphysics of presence' to generate a historical reading. This, of course, is not unique to India. Every society or tradition has similar fundamental binaries upon which society relies to construct an understanding of its past. But in India's case, so extensive and vivid are its philosophical roots and lived histories, there is an overwhelming desire for our past as a homogenous whole and our textual traditions merely as means to reify this underlying ideology. Such critiques present the Indian tradition as uniquely uncritical of itself. The irony is that the exact opposite is true. Our textual traditions, including ones that speak of origins, often end up seeking to interrogate the very body politic inside of which these words live.

To me, no story is more moving and radical than the story



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

The composers of the Upanishad thought the origin story involving a young woman—her youthful ways where she may have happily had many partners or sex under duress (remember she was a maid) and later her illegitimate child—as worthy of inclusion in a work that speaks to the ultimate realities of the human mind. The sexual histories of a person aren’t seen as something to be ashamed of but rather a steady acquiescence to the fact that life is what it is

of Jabala and her son, Satyakama. Once, says the Chaandogya Upanishad (among the oldest of ancient texts, composed between 800 BCE and 500 BCE), there was a boy called Satyakama who was precocious and eager to learn more about the world and the great eternal truths. As was the custom in his time, he went to his mother to seek permission to leave home and go find himself a tutor. Jabala said, ‘Mother, I want to become a student. So tell me what my lineage is?’ (translated by Patrick Olivelle). We do not know if the mother replied sternly, lovingly, or distractedly—the Upanishads are not novels, not even poetry in the modern sense where sentiments

are foregrounded; they are expressions of man’s efforts to annotate the truth as it is experienced—but this is what she said, ‘Son, I don’t know what your lineage is. I was young when I had you. I was a maid then and had a lot of relationships. As such, it is impossible for me to say what your lineage is.’ No doubt, all this was new to young Satyakama—or was he, like children everywhere, capable of intuiting unspoken truths that courses through families? We cannot say. Then, with the clarity of a person who had thought for long about such matters on her own, she told her son, ‘But my name is Jabala, and your name is Satyakama. So you should simply say that you are Satyakama Jabala.’ With that knowledge about his origins, the boy left home to find himself a teacher.

In due course Satyakama Jabala went on to become one of the most common presences in the Upanishads—despite being a mysterious spectral figure, about whose inner life we know little. Not much is heard about Jabala either after this tale. But what is striking about this episode are the unspoken aspects that live within this seemingly plainfaced conversation between a mother and her child.

One, perhaps the most remarkable aspect, is that the composers of the Upanishad thought this origin story involving a young woman—her youthful ways where she may have happily had many partners or sex under duress (remember she was a maid) and later her illegitimate child—as worthy of inclusion in a work that speaks to the ultimate realities of the human mind. Two, the sexual histories of a person aren’t seen as something to be ashamed of but rather a steady acquiescence to the fact that life is what it is. Both her matter-of-fact response and Satyakama’s willingness to internalise his mother’s ways of being as part of his own identity speak to a higher ideal—truth telling—over all else. In this sense, this fragment of the Upanishad is more Kantian (truth as a categorical imperative) than the more poetic commitments to truth, exemplified by Krishna in the Mahabharata. Third, such texts aren’t necessarily morality plays but an effort to flesh out what remains when we try to see life shorn of ideological layers and covering. What follows is a psychological experience that is both self-discovery as well as a test: should one speak truth at a cost to oneself? Fourth, more sociologically, the ease with which a mother’s name can become the ‘surname’ or an identifier of a child’s place in society speaks to a social way of being that we have now almost entirely lost. And last, perhaps most importantly, Jabala’s answers can be interpreted as her way of teaching her son that for all his wanderings in search of truth and Brahman, she had already taught him the greatest lesson: only truth can make you free.

To my mind, if we seek to locate the beginnings of Indian intellectual history, we must look not at the esoteric worlds of the seers and sages of the Rīg Veda, but rather to this story of a single mother, who lived her youthful years in ways she deemed fit, and then when asked about it, she spoke about it truthfully in an everyday language without fuss or fanfare. To her, there was no other way to be but to live in truth. ■



By Makarand R Paranjape

America's Ally

Vivekananda and the Himalayan connection—Part VII

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S TRIP to the Himalayas with his group of Western devotees was, as we have seen, quite eventful. Especially when it came to the interpersonal dynamics between him and his chief disciple, Sister Nivedita. The journey to the mountain top, so to speak, was arduous not just physically, but psychically and spiritually.

The party left Almora on June 10th, 1898. Descending to Kathgodam, they entrained for a long rail ride to Rawalpindi, via Delhi and Lahore. Jo, or Josephine McLeod, one of the American ladies in the party and Vivekananda's friend, describes how the remaining 200 miles up into the Himalayas, all the way to Kashmir, were traversed in tongas or horse-drawn carts. 'There were relays of horses every five miles,' recalls Jo, 'so that we dashed through on top of this beautiful road, as perfect then as any road the Romans ever made' (bit.ly/3bkzHAK).

At Baramulla, the group shifted to four, large houseboats:

'These boats called *dungas* are about seventy feet long and broad enough to have two single beds in them and a corridor between, covered with a matting house; so wherever we wanted a window we only had to roll up the matting. The whole roof could be lifted in the day-time, and thus we lived in the open, yet knew there was always a roof over our heads' (*ibid*).

Sara Chapman Bull and Jo occupied one boat, Nivedita and Mrs Paterson, the US Consul General's wife, another. Vivekananda had the third to himself. The fourth boat was their designated dining hall. After September, when it got colder, they took houseboats with fireplaces in them.

The group's routine was centred on Vivekananda, their leader and teacher:

'Swami would get up about half past five in the morning, and seeing him smoking and talking with the boatmen, we would get up too. Then there would be those long walks for a couple of hours until the sun came up warm; Swami talking about India, what its purpose in life was, what Mohammedanism had done and what it had not done. He talked, immersed in the history of India and in the architecture and in the habits of the people, and we walked on through fields of forget-me-nots, bursting into pink and blue blossoms, way above our heads' (*ibid*).

Yet, behind this idyllic routine were several tensions, some as

we shall see later, quite severe.

At stake were hard lessons in leadership. As his biographies by Eastern and Western disciples record, Vivekananda in Kashmir often spoke of the qualities of a true leader. He said: "A leader is not made in one life. He has to be born for it. For the difficulty is not in organisation and making plans; the test, the real test of a leader lies in holding widely different people together, along the line of their common sympathies. And this can only be done unconsciously, never by trying" (bit.ly/3pY2wY5).

For any guru, personal charisma and magnetism are double-edged swords. Such qualities inspire immense devotion, even adoration, in the faithful, helping to execute the guru's mission and work in the world. Vivekananda's personality was so magnetic and riveting that there was scarcely anyone of note who came in contact with him without succumbing, at least partially, to its force.

After his death, Jo vividly remembered just how powerful an impression Vivekananda had made on her: 'The thing that held me in Swamiji was his unlimitedness. I never could touch the bottom—or top—or sides. The amazing size of him!... Oh, such natures make one so free' (bit.ly/3bkzHAK).

Vivekananda, well aware of the dangers of being so attractive and appealing to his followers, knew that it might lead to jealousy and competition between members of his flock. He believed that the rectitude of impersonal love on his part could serve as an antidote. As he had cautioned Sister Nivedita in a letter in 1897, 'It is absolutely necessary to the work that I should have the enthusiastic love of as many as possible, while I myself remain entirely impersonal. Otherwise jealousy and quarrels would break up everything' (bit.ly/2XgQSL8).

In the same letter, Vivekananda went on to spell out at considerable length his idea of 'impersonal love':

'A leader must be impersonal. I am sure you understand this. I do not mean that one should be a brute, making use of the devotion of others for his own ends, and laughing in his sleeve meanwhile. What I mean is what I am, intensely personal in my love, but having the power to pluck out my own heart with my own hand, if it becomes necessary, 'for the good of many, for the welfare of many,' as Buddha said. Madness of love, and yet in it no bondage. Matter changed into spirit by

the force of love. Nay, that is the gist of our Vedanta.'

But how difficult such 'madness of love', without the slightest trace of bondage, would be. How difficult to change 'matter into spirit by the force of love'. This Nivedita was to realise the hard way. Vivekananda's clear warning, unfortunately, failed to save Nivedita from the suffering in store for her on this trip.

Matters would come to a head on their Amarnath pilgrimage. But till then, there were pleasant moments aplenty for the group. One of these underscored the Swami's devotion to the US, demonstrated in his surprise celebration of America's Independence Day on July 4th. He even got a local tailor to rig up a flag, with stars and stripes, which was pinned to the dining room boat. The

*Some gave up home and love offriends,
And went in quest of thee, self-banished,
Through dreary oceans, through primeval forests,
Each step a struggle for their life or death;
Then came the day when work bore fruit,
And worship, love, and sacrifice,
Fulfilled, accepted, and complete.
Then thou, propitious, rose to shed
The light of Freedom on mankind.
Move on, O Lord, in thy resistless path!
Till thy high noon o'erspreads the world.
Till every land reflects thy light,
Till men and women, with uplifted head,
Behold their shackles broken, and
Know, in springing joy, their life renewed!*
(bit.ly/399p0r1)

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



VIVEKANANDA'S POEM 'TO THE FOURTH OF JULY', ADDRESSED TO THE SUN OF LIBERTY, CELEBRATES THE SPIRIT OF THE US. IT WAS ALSO FROM HERE, IN THE HOUSEBOATS IN SRINAGAR IN JULY 1898, THAT HE WROTE THE POEM, 'TO THE AWAKENED INDIA'. CLEARLY, HE HAD A PLAN FOR AN INDO-US MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL PARTNERSHIP WHOSE DEEPENING AND UNFOLDING WE ARE STILL IN THE MIDST OF

result, though not entirely satisfactory, was certainly significant for symbolic import.

For the occasion, Vivekananda wrote his well-known poem, 'To the Fourth of July', preserved for posterity by Mrs Bull, or 'Dhira Mata', as the Swami had rechristened her:

*A welcome new to thee, today,
O Sun! Today thou sheddest Liberty!
Bethink thee how the world did wait,
And search for thee, through time and clime.*

with them'. Nivedita found remarkable the hundreds of monks, with their ochre tents, 'some no larger than a good-sized umbrella' (bit.ly/38gj7QD).

For Nivedita, the Amarnath yatra was the most important, most keenly awaited part of her Himalayan journey. Expectant and eager, she looked forward to nothing less than an epiphany, an initiation into the deepest mysteries of spiritual awakening and transformation, at the hands of her master, Swami Vivekananda.

(To be continued) ■

Whitelash

Joe Biden inherits a deeply divided America

By Minhaz Merchant

US PRESIDENT-ELECT Joe Biden will have his work cut out when he takes the oath of office on January 20th. He will preside over a deeply divided America: 46.9 per cent of the electorate voted for Donald Trump; 51.4 per cent voted for him.

Take away the large pro-Biden numbers in the heavily populated blue states of California and New York and the electorate is split right down the middle. Vast swathes of rural America are stubbornly Republican.

As former President Barack Obama conceded in the first part of his two-volume memoir, *A Promised Land*, his election as America's first Black president in 2008 set off a white backlash, coalescing a conservative, working-class, racist vote around Trump that underpinned his victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Much has been written about Biden's likely policies on China, Pakistan, the European Union, Iran and India. Not enough attention has been focused on the challenges Biden faces at home.

As a society, America remains deeply racist. It is easy to forget that till the 1964 Civil Rights Act, non-whites were not allowed by law entry into restaurants in several southern American states; non-white children were not given admission, again by law, to whites-only schools. Segregation was legal—well into the John F Kennedy era.

Religious prejudice too was deep-rooted in the early US. The country was founded by Protestants fleeing persecution in post-Reformation England in the 1600s. Catholics in the US were systematically discriminated against. In 1960, Kennedy, astonishingly, became the first Catholic to be elected president. Biden is the second.

Religion and race have long torn American society apart. Biden's Irish roots and devout Catholicism make him something of an outsider in Washington despite having occupied every important constitutional post in a career spanning 50 years in politics.

The US establishment has moved beyond its White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) elitism but Biden was never part of that elite. That makes him a cultural outsider, more in tune with Obama's ethnically diverse aides than the Washington Beltway establishment.

Biden's rainbow cabinet is the most racially diverse, women-centric and LGBTQ-friendly in US history. This

ironically could backfire. The US is a socially conservative white-majority country: 70 per cent of Americans are white.

Moderates in the Democratic Party are furious with its hard left led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar whom they blame for the loss of 10 seats in the House of Representatives. The Democrats now have a razor-thin 222-212 majority in the House. It could vanish in the biennial election due in 2022, giving Republicans control of the House.

Biden's first challenge apart from tackling the Covid pandemic will not be China or Europe but healing divisions within his party and within the country. Though they have won the White House, many Democrats are shocked and angry at the loss of seats in the House of Representatives and their failure to win a clean majority in the Senate.

That spells trouble for the Biden presidency. If the Democrats lose control of the House and fail to win back the Senate in 2022, the last two years of Biden's term could end in a congressional policy gridlock. To make matters worse, a glowering Trump, embittered by defeat, has vowed to run again for president in 2024—which the US constitution allows him to do. He will be 78, Biden's current age, in 2024.

Meanwhile, Trump will use the next four years to be a disruptive influence on the Biden presidency, playing to his racist base and widening the schism within American society.

Biden will be 82 in 2024. He has said he will not run for a second term. That makes Vice President-elect Kamala Harris the default Democratic presidential candidate. A Trump-Harris match-up in 2024 could be America's worst nightmare, unleashing all the latent racism and misogyny that bubbles beneath American society. With both the Senate and House possibly in Republican hands by 2022 and the White House under siege from rejuvenated Republicans, Biden's 2020 win could be pyrrhic.

That is why sensible Democrats are advising Biden to move the party back from the left to the centre where its college-educated, liberal base resides. If the party's hard left gains control, America could be staring at four more years of Trump in 2024-2028. The very thought should have a chilling effect on Biden's racially diverse Democratic base. ■

Minhaz Merchant is an author, editor and publisher



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RELUCTANT RAHUL

There is speculation that Rahul Gandhi may become Congress president again as some senior Congress leaders still want to bring him back as head of the party. However, the buzz is the Gandhi scion is not keen to take over the party presidency in the upcoming All India Congress Committee (AICC) session. According to the grapevine, Rahul has told his mother Sonia Gandhi that he is still not in a mood to take the reins. As a result, Sonia may have to continue as party chief. Also, Rahul went on an overseas jaunt in the midst of the farmers' protest, which he may have undertaken deliberately to send a message to party members that they should choose their own leader and let him be. Clearly, the Congress leadership is in a bind, and even has no clue where the next AICC session will take place. A leadership vacuum could well have anchored Priyanka Gandhi more actively. Instead, an income-tax raid at her husband Robert Vadra's house again has got the Congress in a huddle.

SEEKING THE SWAMI

IN the upcoming West Bengal Assembly election, Swami Vivekananda has become a major issue. He is not only a symbol of Hinduism, but is associated with Bengali identity. And it is well known that Prime Minister Narendra Modi shares a special bond with the Vivekananda-founded Ramakrishna Mission. However, on the sage's birth anniversary, January 12th, it will not be Modi but Home Minister Amit Shah who will visit the Mission headquarters at Belur Math. He is slated to visit the temple of Ramakrishna and see the room where Vivekananda used to live. Usually, this room is not open to the public but the Belur management has made an exception for Shah. He has recently visited Vivekananda's ancestral house. On January 23rd, Modi is scheduled to visit Netaji Bhawan on Elgin Road in Kolkata. On that day, too, he will not go to Belur. Meanwhile, Shah has constituted a committee on Subhas Chandra Bose and has included the general secretary of Belur Math on that committee.

Nephew Strikes Back

In West Bengal, BJP's main target seems to be Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew, Abhishek Banerjee. In Bengali, nephew is called '*bhaipo*'—so from Home Minister Amit Shah to BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya, everyone is attacking Abhishek without naming him, but calling him *bhaipo*. Though they allege the nephew is corrupt and an extortionist, no evidence seems available to back their claims. Meanwhile, Trinamool Congress (TMC) strategist Prashant Kishor is exhorting Abhishek to be aggressive rather than reticent in the face of such criticism. The new approach has prodded Abhishek to embark on a north Bengal tour where he has attacked Vijayvargiya's son.

Vaccine Craving

It's the turn of the states to have a say on the Covid vaccines. As elections approach West Bengal and Assam, the states are hankering after the first jab. Both Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and his colleague Himanta Biswa Sarma want the people of Assam to get the shot first. But West Bengal BJP wants Prime Minister Modi to announce free vaccination in the state. In Bihar, the BJP manifesto prior to the election had announced free vaccination. Given that the Covid vaccine rollout is only a matter of days now, state demands are posing a major challenge for the Modi Government.

Action Replay?

In Bharatiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait, the farmers have found a face to their protest. And he happens to be the younger son of the late Mahendra Singh Tikait, who too held a massive farmers' rally at the Delhi Boat Club lawns in October 1988 until the then Rajiv Gandhi Government bowed to his demands. Eventually, Gandhi's Government got embroiled in the Bofors scandal and Finance Minister VP Singh had already stepped down in 1987. Today, Rakesh Tikait is tracing his father's footsteps from Meerut to Delhi. However, October 1988 and January 2021 are not the same. Prime Minister Modi is a strong and popular leader and the opposition is rather weak. Interestingly, Rakesh Tikait has named his son after Charan Singh, referred to as the champion of India's peasants.

All Eyes on Nitish

All eyes are on Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Apart from the strong rumour that he will resign very soon, there is gossip he may rejoin the Lalu Prasad grouping. There is also the tattle that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wants to get rid of its ally, the Janata Dal-United, as there is a large anti-incumbency against JD(U) in Bihar—so much so that a large section of JD(U) MLAs is poised to sign up with BJP. Earlier, Nitish had stepped down as JD(U) president after six of the seven JD(U) MLAs in Arunachal Pradesh defected to BJP. Lalu, too, is learnt to have reached out to Nitish on the issue, suggesting that he quit. But it hasn't quite changed the chemistry that Nitish and Prime Minister Modi share. Modi has instructed the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to cooperate with the Nitish government.

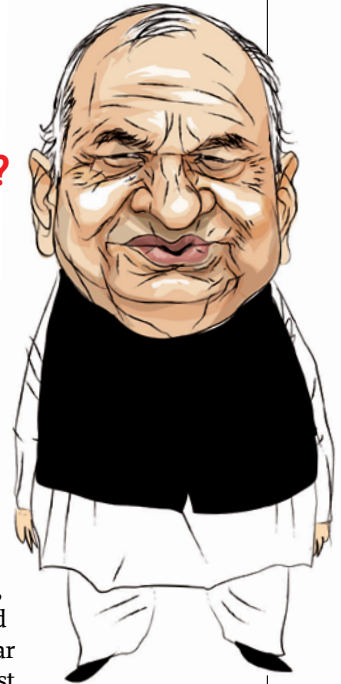


Death Probe

Prime Minister Modi is learnt to be sad about the death of Karima Baloch, the human rights activist from Balochistan and a vocal critic of the Pakistan government. In exile as a Pakistani dissident, Baloch's body was found in Toronto, Canada, on December 22nd, 2020. Modi is learnt to have instructed National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval to give him a detailed account of what happened, and the latter is actively pursuing the case.

A NEW VICE PRESIDENT?

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan is now a hot favourite of BJP and the Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS). A section of the RSS brass thinks he can be a good choice for the country's next vice president. The Prime Minister, too, likes him. Khan was a strong campaigner against Article 370. On Triple Talaq, too, he stood his ground and supported BJP. He is a scholar of Islam, but is firmly against fundamentalism. Now that elections are due in West Bengal and Assam, sources reveal that the Prime Minister wants to send out a message that he was never against Muslims.



Rediscovery of India

Behind Narendra Modi's passion for knowing his countrymen is an efficient research team which keeps him up-to-date. On several occasions, the Prime Minister gives ideas for fresh enquiries. In the *Mann ki Baat* programme, he uses such inputs. A case in point is Healing Himalayas founder Pradeep Sangwan, who has been campaigning since 2016 to rid the mountains of plastic waste that the tourists leave behind. Sangwan's dogged approach made Modi praise him in his year-end *Mann ki Baat* and refer to him as a young Turk. Such gems are unearthed by the PMO's communication officers, an IFS officer who was earlier trained in the media, an IT specialist and a clutch of social media analysts who are involved in this new discovery of India.

Tribal Talk

Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren is bound for Harvard to deliver a talk. For that purpose, a senior professor is reportedly teaching him English. Soren is slated to deliver a speech on tribal life and how his government has impacted the rural tribal areas. The buzz is that it was Prime Minister Modi who inspired Soren to deliver such a speech abroad after doing proper homework.



By **MANI SHANKAR AIYAR**

WHO IS AN INDIAN?

Being and belonging according to Shashi Tharoor

ANYONE WHO HAS the stamina to read through the 400-plus pages of Shashi Tharoor's *The Battle Of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What It Means to Be Indian* (Aleph Book Company; 462 pages; Rs 799) will come away staggered by the extraordinary scholarship on such meretricious display, besides wondering whether the author really has read all the sources he cites or because he has a research team that is expert at surfing the internet and picking up the juicy bits from the barebones of Wikipedia.

For, within the first 100 pages of explaining the word 'nationalism' in all its connotations, the reader is introduced to not only Greek philosopher Epictetus' dialogue with Flavius Arrianus and Roman philosopher Cicero but also, through Kautilya and Ibn Khaldun, to the 17th century British philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and then down to the French philosophers, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Marquis d'Argenson, to the 19th century French professor, Ernest Renan, and the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, besides the American Mark Twain, on to the 20th century (the most bloody in history) featuring Dušan Kecmanović, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Emilie Ashurst Venturi and George Orwell, till we reach the post-WWII world, which then features Kenichi Ohmae and Aihwa Ong, Hans Kohn and Francis Fukuyama, Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, Arnold Toynbee, Alisdair MacIntyre and Liah Greenfeld, Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Karl Popper, Yuval Noah Harari, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Pheng Chea and Theodor Adorno (translated from the German by EFN Jephcott), before arriving at the nineties and noughties' stars, Jürgen Habermas and Mark Juergensmeyer, taking in along the way Josep Llobera, Anthony D Smith, EJ Hobsbawm, Umut Özkırımlı, Yoram Hazony, Rich Lowry and Tyler Stiem. Phew!

The subcontinent too is represented, notably by the quotes from the Bangladeshi poetess, Nazneen Ahmed, and Pakistan's A Azfar Moin. There is also no dearth of Indian names. Note, this is only a limited extract of the sources quoted, perhaps no more than 10 per cent. Along with the unread villagers of Oliver Goldsmith's lines on the village schoolmaster in his poem 'The Deserted Village', one can only in wonder grow that 'one small head could carry all it knew'. Yet clearly, Shashi Tharoor's head does. For the endless sources, drawn from all over the globe and in numerous languages, are well integrated into the argument which basically differentiates between nine schools of 'nationalism' and the far more attractive idea of 'patriotism'. (Although, to my startled surprise, Tharoor, having cited everyone else, sidelines Samuel Johnson's notorious remark: 'Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.' Of course, although this is little remembered, Johnson was referring to the then standard judicial practice of allowing fit, young criminals found guilty, to escape the gallows by opting for 'patriotism', which in those days meant dangerous and often shortlived service in the merchant marine with which Britain was launching her Leviathan on the high seas to bring her unlimited riches and an Empire on which the sun never set.)

'Nationalism', says Tharoor, came into common use in English only after 1844. Indeed, for several decades thereafter, 'nationalism'



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE MUST BE: **DO THE NUANCES OF THE MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS OF 'NATIONALISM' AND 'PATRIOTISM' THAT HAVE HAUNTED EUROPE—A CONTINENT OF AROUND 40 NATIONS INHABITING A TITHE UNDER THE SURFACE AREA OF ONE INDIA—HOLD ANY ANSWERS FOR THE INTEGRITY AND INDEPENDENCE OF OUR LAND?** MORE RELEVANT FOR EXISTENTIAL INDIA ARE THE ISSUES OF 'UNITY IN DIVERSITY' OR 'UNITY IN UNIFORMITY'

was a term of opprobrium in lands that were proud of their multinational imperial possessions, such as 'the British, the French, the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian'. It was the Americans who 'inaugurated a new idea of nationhood born of a unified people with common political and economic interests, under a system combining democracy with capitalism'—yet it was founded and embedded in the evil precept of 'nationhood' applying only to white, English-speaking, preferably Protestant males. Slavery was allegedly abolished by Proclamation in 1863 but it was not till 101 years later that the Proclamation was codified into the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the struggle continues, as can be seen in the contemporary 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

In Europe, it was the revolutions in Italy, led by Giuseppe Mazzini, Count of Cavour and Giuseppe Garibaldi, and in Germany under Otto von Bismarck, that made 'nationalism'

the much-lauded norm, at least in their respective countries, by bringing together in 'one nation' dozens of principalities and mini-kingdoms. Yet, it was precisely in these two countries that fascism under Benito Mussolini and nazidom under Hitler showed within half a century how a 'noble' concept like the 'nation' could be perverted into the vilest behaviour known to humankind.

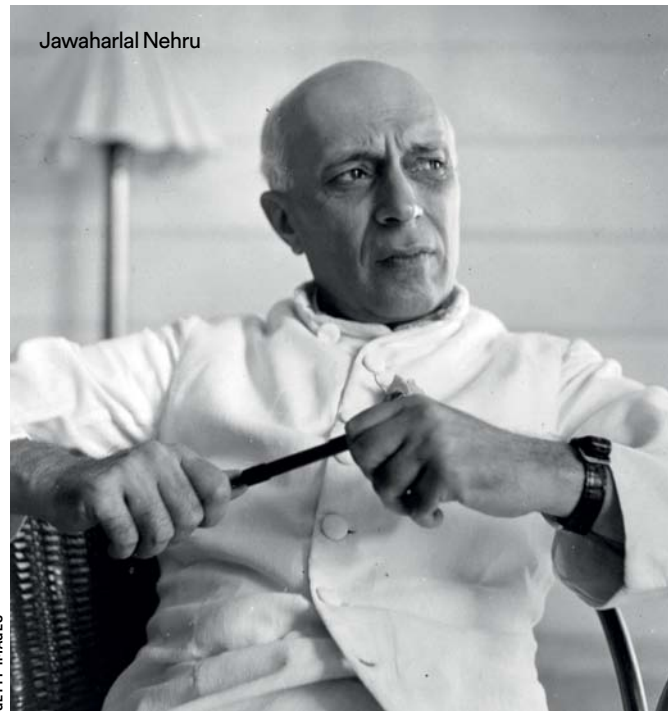
Distilling these philosophical ruminations and historical developments, Tharoor identifies (page 21) his nine categories of nationalism: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, territorial, radical or revolutionary, anti-colonial nationalism, diaspora nationalism and civic nationalism. Many of these overlap or form hybrid nationalisms such as, in India, the ethnoreligious-cultural-diaspora nationalism of the saffron brotherhood, on the one hand, contrasting with the territorial

nationalism evolving from anti-colonial nationalism into civic or constitutional nationalism of the mainstream freedom movement. This latter form of nationalism is associated with Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, BR Ambedkar and many, many others, and, above all, the Nehruvian 'idea of India', a term attributed to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, that Nehru definitively set out in his *The Discovery of India* (first published by the Signet Press, Calcutta in 1946).

In Tharoor's native Malayalam, '*rashtrabhakti*' apparently means devotion to the state or polity (nationalism) while '*deshbhakti*' denotes love of one's homeland (patriotism). 'Patriotism,' writes Tharoor, 'accepts the great reality of diversity; nationalism seeks to obliterate diversity and create the world in its own abstract theology of supremacy.' I am not sure I quite understand. Was Allama Iqbal being a 'nationalist' when he wrote '*Sare jahan se accha/Hindustan hamara*' (an expression of the 'theology of supremacy') and a 'patriot' when in the next verse he wrote inclusively of our rich diversity, '*Hum bulbul hain uski/Wo gulistan hamara*' (We are its nightingales, and this is our garden)? Perhaps the answer lies in Mark Twain whom Tharoor quotes: 'The only rational patriotism is loyalty to the nation all the time, loyalty to the Government when it deserves it.' Or George Orwell whom Tharoor also quotes: 'By 'patriotism' I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally... Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power... (not for the individual but) for the nation in which he has chosen to sink his individuality.' Orwell goes on, 'While nationalism can unite people, it must be noted that it unites people against other people.'

All this has a particular historical context: that of Europe in the 25 years between the end of WWI and the end of WWII, the period during which Orwell went from being virtually a communist to penning *Animal Farm* and 1984. How relevant is all this to an India where 'the Battle of Belonging' is being fought today as never before? At one level, very relevant—for both Savarkar and Nehru were admirers of Mazzini and Garibaldi and drew the inspiration for their own avowed 'nationalism' from the Italian example. When it came to nationalism uniting 'people against other people', neither Savarkar nor Nehru wanted to unite Indians to dominate over other nations and peoples. That had been the bane of Europe through history and became particularly acute during the first half of the 20th century. What Savarkar wanted was for Hindu civilisation to dominate and end the pernicious outside influences that, in his view, had polluted our ancient land but, in Nehru's view, had enriched it. So, the reader is inclined, after 100 pages of this 'narcissism of minor differences' through the linguistic parsing of the difference between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' in a Europe divided into linguistic and religious homogeneities, to protest, 'Thank you Mr Tharoor—but can we please get on with the 'Battle for Belonging' in India?'

And the point of departure must be: do the nuances of the meaning and implications of 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' that have haunted Europe—a continent of around 40 nations



GETTY IMAGES

HOW RELEVANT ARE EUROPEAN DEBATES BELONGING' IS BEING FOUGHT TODAY RELEVANT—FOR BOTH SAVARKAR AND AND GARIBALDI AND DREW THE INSPIR 'NATIONALISM' FROM THE ITALIAN EXAM UNITING 'PEOPLE AGAINST OTHER PEO WANTED TO UNITE INDIANS TO DOMIN

inhabiting a tithe under the surface area of one India—hold any answers for the integrity and independence of our land? More relevant for existential India are the issues of 'unity in diversity' or 'unity in uniformity'. Are we proud only of being the inheritors of ancient India, and to thus build our national identity by ignoring or rejecting or 'othering' the 666 years between Mohammed Ghori seating himself on the empty throne of Delhi in 1192 CE till the dethroning of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in 1858? Or are we to take pride in the rich historical diversity in our land that through history has been open to thoughts and doctrines and ways of life that have made us the colourful, bubbling India we are?

Tharoor gets to that eventually at, literally, page 100 of his tome—and then does a pretty thorough job of it. 'Citizenship is about the conferral of rights of participation in the national collective; identification relates to the emotive dimensions of belonging.' One would hope that could be expressed in fewer and more simple words, but readers will forgive Tharoor his



Vinayak Damodar Savarkar

TO AN INDIA WHERE 'THE BATTLE OF AS NEVER BEFORE? AT ONE LEVEL, VERY NEHRU WERE ADMIRERS OF MAZZINI ATION FOR THEIR OWN AVOWED PLE. WHEN IT CAME TO NATIONALISM PLE', NEITHER SAVARKAR NOR NEHRU ATE OVER OTHER NATIONS AND PEOPLES

circumlocutions and rodomontade as the author proceeds to illustrate, illuminate and expound upon his basic propositions over the next several hundred pages.

The fundamental juxtaposition is between the 'Idea of India' (Section Two) and the 'Hindutva Idea of India' (Section Three). Tharoor argues—and I agree with him all the way—that the 'modern idea of India... is a robustly secular and legal construct based upon the vision and the intellect of our founding fathers' (who notably did not include any member of the saffron tribe). He emphasises, rightly in my view, 'the role of liberalism in shaping and undergirding the civic nationalism of India'. I would also highlight his fundamental perception of the meaning of 'secularism' in actual political practice: 'Even though India was partitioned... [India] embraced the Muslims who remained and sustained them through an official policy of secularism.' He could have added 'despite Pakistan evidencing little similar compassion for its Hindu minority'. It was this that resulted in the Mahatma's assassination by Nathuram

Godse of the saffron brotherhood. And it is this 'official policy of secularism' that was subsequently decried by the religious right as 'pseudosecularism' built on the 'appeasement of the minorities' to create a 'votebank' for the Congress. This is what lies at the heart of the contemporary 'Battle of Belonging' for our minorities. It is the litmus test of whether we are an India for all Indians equally, as prescribed in our Constitution (constitutional nationalism), or whether by 'nationalism' we mean, as the saffron brigade does, an India in which all are equal 'but some more equal than others'. To put it bluntly, this is the principal motivating force behind the saffron brotherhood's espousal of the '*Majoritarian State*'—that is the title of a publication with the subtitle '*How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*' (HarperCollins, 2019), edited by Angana P Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, comprising stinging analyses by a host of academic experts on every aspect of the Battle of Belonging. It is curiously missing from Tharoor's otherwise long and detailed bibliography. (He has, however, cited one—just one—of Jaffrelot's prolific contributions to the subject, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton Press, 2007). I think this book might have been improved if instead of citing myriad authorities from distant lands reflecting on issues from a distant past, the author had more intensively supplemented his sources by more contemporary commentary (including this reviewer's *Confessions of a Secular Fundamentalist*, Penguin, 2004). For the Battle is here, not in 'Old, unhappy far-off things/ And battles long ago' (Wordsworth, 'The Solitary Reaper').

'Pluralism,' argues Tharoor, 'is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India's geography and reaffirmed by its history.' He ends with ringing affirmation, 'That is the India I lay claim to.' Yet, that is precisely the ground—history—on which the 'Hindutva Idea of India' challenges the 'Idea of India' by asking whether pluralism/secularism need to be 'reaffirmed by [India's] history' or repudiated on the same ground? Whereas Tharoor (and I) would agree that India's is 'a non-European nationalism' (which is why I think the prodigious effort and expertise put into the first 100 pages of this work is of little relevance to the theme of this volume, which is *our* Battle of Belonging), our Indian nationalism revels in 'embracing, indeed celebrating and guaranteeing its own diversity' and 'the Nehruvian legacy [is] a vigorous rejection of India's assorted bigotries and particularisms'. The alternative Hindutva idea of India, on the other hand, is a vigorous affirmation of these 'assorted bigotries and particularisms'. It is completely lacking in compassion or concern for the minorities. The Hindutvists would reel back in horror at Wajahat Habibullah's assertion, based on historical fact, that 'the bulk of India's ruling class was Hindu since at least the seventeenth century' (*My Years with Rajiv*, Westland, 2020, page 90). Thus, the contested terrain is our medieval history. The interpretation of that history is not the theme of the book; instead, we have the conclusion put forward with the author's trademark elegance: 'Indian nationalism is the nationalism of an idea—emerging from an ancient civilization, united by a

shared history, sustained by pluralist democracy under the rule of law' (page 130). Fair enough. Professional historians ranging from Romila Thapar and KN Panikkar to Mushirul Hasan and Irfan Habib have long laid to rest the invidious portrayal of that period as an uninterrupted tyranny of a religious minority over a religious majority—and, therefore, to be avenged.

Constitutional nationalism needs to never forget BR Ambedkar's injunction, cited by Tharoor, that 'Democracy in India is only a top dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic.' That is why 'constitutional morality' more even than the letter of constitutional nationalism is the imperative. It is not enough to kiss the entrance to Parliament House and declare Constitution Day on the anniversary of the day the Constitution was adopted; it lies, in the founder's words, in 'building up the feeling that we are all Indians... I do not want that our loyalty as Indians should be in the slightest way affected by any competitive loyalty, whether that loyalty arises out of our religion, out of our culture or out of our language.... I want all people to be Indians first, Indians last and nothing but Indians' (page 138). That is why the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the National Register of Citizens and so much of recent state and Central legislation are repugnant to 'constitutional morality'. That is also why on the question of 'a penal code more in tune with civic nationalism' I part ways from Shashi Tharoor. An India without community personal laws cannot claim to be a paragon of secularism or pluralism, an essential component of which must be reinforcing community identities and preserving/promoting minority interests as key components of a secular polity and 'unity in diversity'. Was Tharoor himself not affirming his community identity when he opposed the implementation of the Supreme Court ruling on the entry of menstruating women to the Sabarimala shrine? And does his endorsement not contradict the sentiment and logic of his final words in the section 'Idea of India': 'Each Indian is free to nurture multiple identities: regional, religious, caste, linguistic, ethnic'—especially as he himself feels 'secure in each of these identities because of the sheltering carapace of one overall identity: that of being Indian' (page 162)?

What then is the alternative 'Hindutva Idea of India'? Tharoor takes us by the hand, as it were, on a quick, guided tour through Savarkar, Golwalkar and, finally, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. Savarkar, the founder and patron saint of Hindutva, is etched somewhat sketchily in just three pages through such quotes as 'Hindutva [should not be] confounded with its other cognate term Hinduism'. Savarkar's idea of India is then cited for lauding what he calls the 'Hindu race' and defines this 'race' as 'bound together' by 'a common fatherland', by 'common blood' and, above all, by 'the tie of common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture'. Paradoxically, Savarkar affirmed his personal atheism, did not follow the rites and rituals of the Hindu religion, denounced the caste system and expressed a strong aversion to Hindu *sants* and *sadhus*, strongly disfavoured cow worship, flaunted his 'staunch rationalism' and sought 'rapid social transformation'—on all

of which points he was at one with Jawaharlal Nehru. Because Tharoor does not examine these points of commonality—plus their joint admiration for Garibaldi—his book also does not dwell on where they parted ways. This is a pity because the heart of Savarkar's extolling an alternative idea of India lay in his bitter disagreement with the Gandhi-Nehru idea and was closest to that of Jinnah post-1940, namely that Hindus and Muslims constitute two incompatible nations.

Also, the role of non-violence both as an ethical ideal and an instrument of political action to drive the British back to their island-nation. Where Nehru avowed that if he were to turn to any religion, it would probably be to Buddhism, Savarkar regarded the Buddha as the fount of the downfall of Hindu civilisation because, he thought, it was such deviant thinking that had robbed the Hindu of his 'manliness' and rendered him vulnerable to the encroachment and eventual domination of first, Buddhism, then Islam and, finally, Christianity.

EQUALLY, WHERE SAVARKAR pours bile on Ashoka for his conversion to non-violence after the Battle of Kalinga, Nehru considered Ashoka as the greatest ruler of not just India but the whole world and cited HG Wells approvingly in this regard: 'Amidst the tens of thousands of monarchs that crowd the columns of history... the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star... More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard of Constantine or Charlemagne.'

Savarkar's dislike of the Buddha and Ashoka spilt over into an abiding hatred of Gandhi's espousal of non-violence. The hatred was such as to make him complicit in the Mahatma's assassination. All this is fully explained in the published and ongoing work of Vinayak Chaturvedi of the University of California, Irvine, who is arguably the leading contemporary academic authority on Savarkar, rectifying the balance after the treachery biography by the more frequently cited Dhananjay Keer. Curiously, neither of them is mentioned in the author's otherwise amazingly comprehensive bibliography.

In complete contrast to Savarkar, Nehru neither favoured a cult of violence nor was willing to make violence a test of 'manliness'. He was a pragmatic practitioner of the Gandhian doctrine of non-violence, humane, civilised. This is clear from his *An Autobiography* (first published by The Bodley Head, London in 1936; republished by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund in 1980, page 537):

'Gandhiji impressed India with his doctrine of non-violence... Vast numbers of people have repeated it unthinkingly but without approval, some have wrestled with it and then accepted it, with or without reservation, some have openly jeered at it... The doctrine is of course almost as old as human thought, but perhaps Gandhiji was the first to apply it on a mass scale to political and social movements... Gandhiji tried to make this individual ideal into a social group ideal. He was out to change political conditions as well as social; and deliberately, with this end in view, he applied the non-violent method

on this wider and wholly different plane.'

Nehru goes on to quote Gandhi: 'Violent pressure is felt on the physical being and it degrades him who uses it as it depresses the victim, but non-violence exerted through self-suffering... works in an entirely different way. It touches not the physical body, but it touches and strengthens the moral fibre of those *against* whom it is directed' (emphasis added). In consequence, while Savarkar's school celebrated and participated in the vicious communal violence that defined Partition, it was at that terrible time that Gandhiji's belief in the effectiveness of non-violence and non-discrimination was best on display. He paid with his life for it—but it was in martyrdom that Gandhi definitively demonstrated the hollowness of Savarkar's way.

Tharoor summarises rather more comprehensively Golwalkar's contribution to the sharpening of the serrated edges of Hindutva through the 'othering' of Indians of non-Hindu

170, that notes the repudiation in RSS circles of the 'authenticity' of Golwalkar's *We or the Nation Defined*, first published in 1939. Tharoor comments: 'The fact that he claimed authorship and promoted the book extensively, while not repudiating any of its tenets in his lifetime, vitiates the force of this disclaimer. Whether he wrote it or not, he was happy to claim its contents as his own.'

I think the author could have usefully brought in BS Moonje who, after a visit to Italy, where he had been feted by Mussolini, came away so impressed that, in imitation of the Black shirts and rifles of the Fascisti, the RSS cadres were outfitted in uniforms and 'lathis' and organised into 'shakhas' where they were indoctrinated into Hindu 'cultural nationalism'. This 'cultural nationalism' sought, says Tharoor, to establish 'the hegemony of Hindus, Hindu values and the Hindu way of life in the political arrangements of India', to the exclusion and demonisation of

Golwalkar's favourite enemies, Muslims: 'Ever since that evil day, when the Muslims first landed in Hindustan, right up to the present moment, the Hindu Nation has been gallantly fighting on to shake off the despoilers. The Race Spirit has been awakening.'

This spewing of hatred against India's Muslim minority climaxed when, in the wake of the Partition riots, Golwalkar proclaimed that "no power on earth could keep Muslims in Hindustan. They should have to quit this country". Golwalkar, concludes Tharoor, had 'appalling ideas on how 'foreigners' should be



ALONG WITH THE UNREAD VILLAGERS OF OLIVER GOLDSMITH'S LINES ON THE VILLAGE SCHOOLMASTER IN HIS POEM 'THE DESERTED VILLAGE', ONE CAN ONLY IN WONDER GROW THAT 'ONE SMALL HEAD COULD CARRY ALL IT KNEW'. YET CLEARLY, **SHASHI THAROOR'S**

HEAD DOES. FOR THE ENDLESS SOURCES, DRAWN FROM ALL OVER THE GLOBE AND IN NUMEROUS LANGUAGES, ARE WELL INTEGRATED INTO THE ARGUMENT WHICH BASICALLY DIFFERENTIATES BETWEEN NINE SCHOOLS OF 'NATIONALISM' AND THE FAR MORE ATTRACTIVE IDEA OF 'PATRIOTISM'

faiths and invoking 'race' and 'race purity' as the distinctive characteristic of 'Hinduness'. Carrying to its logical conclusion, Savarkar's definition of 'Hindutva' as the establishment in independent India of 'Hindudom', as the equivalent of the establishment in Europe of Christendom, Golwalkar regarded 'territorial nationalism', as advocated by Gandhi, a 'barbarism' and 'democracy as alien to Hindu culture'. In becoming passionate advocates of 'cultural nationalism' (as opposed to territorial nationalism), Golwalkar and his cohort's principal inspiration was Hitler's Germany:

'To keep up the purity of its Race and culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews. Race pride at its height has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit from.'

(There is an important footnote here, number 202 on page

dealt with... If Muslims, Christians (and communists) refused to convert or submit, they should be forced to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race'.

The author then moves to the most interesting chapter of his book, 'Hindu Rashtra Updated', which expounds the 'updating' of Hindu Rashtra by Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, Vajpayee's guru. His chief innovation was in rejecting Golwalkar's 'final solution': 'No sensible man will say that six crore Muslims should be eradicated or thrown out of India.' In thus ruling out the Hitler-Golwalkar advocacy of physical liquidation, Upadhyaya opts for cultural genocide. 'Every community,' he argues, 'must identify themselves with the age-long cultural stream that was Hindu culture in this country... unless all people become part of the same cultural stream, national unity or integration is impossible. If we want to preserve Indian nationalism, this is the only way.' He goes on to say, 'There are no separate cultures here for Muslims and Christians.' Asserting that 'Indian nationalism is Hindu nationalism', Upadhyaya held that Muslims sought 'to

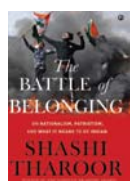
destroy the values of Indian culture, its ideals, its national heroes, traditions, places of devotion and worship'. He, therefore, recommended that we 'nationalize Muslims... to make Muslims proper Indians'. This led later to Advani's assertion that all Indians are 'Hindus'; so, Muslims are 'Muslim Hindus' and Christians are 'Christian Hindus'. So, I asked Advani what he was: "A Hindu or a Hindu Hindu?" Unsurprisingly, there was no answer!

The Constitution repudiates all these false beliefs and prejudices. So, Upadhyaya rejected the Constitution as being 'imitative of the West, divorced from authentically Indian ideas about the relationship between the individual and society', rendering his 'update' resonant of Golwalkar's denunciation of the Constitution 'for incorporating 'absolutely nothing' from the *Manusmriti*'. And thus we find that whatever adjustments are made in the Hindutva ideology from time to time, quintessentially the ideology remains firmly anchored to the goal of a uniform if mythical Hindu Rashtra that irons

country into a populist, communalist, chauvinist, authoritarian, slickly-marketed, and powerful kakistocracy supported by stoked-up vigilante mobs' (page 381). But is it enough for us secular nationalists to throw the dictionary at our opponents? Are they going to bend before Tharoor's thesaurus assault?

The question that remains is TS Eliot's: 'After such knowledge what forgiveness?' How have we come to such a dreadful pass? Is it the obvious reluctance to firmly affirm, as Nehru did in the aftermath of Independence, a principled stand based on what I call 'secular fundamentalism'? Or is it, indeed, secular fundamentalism that has led to this rightward, religion-bound orientation of the nation's perception of itself? Can we revert—indeed, should we revert—to Nehruvian secularism? Or is 'soft Hindutva' responsible for lending so much respectability to hard Hindutva? Was there something dystopian about the wish, notwithstanding the secular acceptance of Partition as the price to be paid for Independence, to include the minorities as pre-

precious elements of our heritage to be valued in the present conception of nationhood? Or were Savarkar and Jinnah both right in seeing our two main religious communities as 'two nations'? Rather than a detailed, if blood curdling, recounting of India's drift under Modi to an illiberal, unconstitutional, communal and fearful 'republic of hatred', which is for all of us liberal nationalists a living nightmare, I would have preferred from Shashi Tharoor a searing conclusive analysis of



THE MOST INTERESTING CHAPTER OF THAROOR'S BOOK IS 'HINDU RASHTRA UPDATED', WHICH EXPOUNDS THE 'UPDATING' OF HINDU RASHTRA BY

PANDIT DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA, VAJPAYEE'S GURU. HIS CHIEF INNOVATION WAS IN REJECTING GOLWALKAR'S 'FINAL SOLUTION': 'NO SENSIBLE MAN WILL SAY THAT SIX CRORE MUSLIMS SHOULD BE ERADICATED OR THROWN OUT OF INDIA'

out our native diversity and is pervaded by an anti-Muslim/anti-minorities ethos. To this has been added an intense dislike of 'Anglophile Indians schooled in Western systems of thought' ('Macaulay *ki aulaad*', Macaulay's bastards).

Although the second half of the book is given over to a trenchant and well-informed critique of Moditva (which we might label Hindutva 4.0), there is such widespread awareness of the excesses that the present Government has visited upon our benighted land that much of the remaining 200 pages reads like recycled columns on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the proposed National Register of Citizens; on the Muslim women's spontaneous protest gatherings against the Act and the Register at Delhi's Shaheen Bagh that spread like wildfire to every nook and corner of the country; on the virtual abrogation of Article 370 and the subsequent atrocities visited upon the wretched, long-suffering Muslims of the Kashmir Valley; on the 'etiolation of democratic institutions'; on the attacks on Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University; on Hindi chauvinism; on Ayodhya; on the continuing atrocities against minorities; and on a host of other painful issues of communal governance, at its worst in Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh. And all of this leading to the final indictment: 'The present ruling dispensation is remaking the

how in the last six years, so many in this country (nearly 40 per cent) have surrendered to the pernicious assumptions and highly communal bias of the Hindutva ideology when, for almost the whole of the first half century of Independence, it was the people of India who had kept these very forces firmly at bay.

Shashi Tharoor is right in seeing salvation as a return from making India that is Bharat a 'Hindu Pakistan' towards liberal, democratic, constitutional values and norms and constitutional morality as the eventual solution to our current problems, but that is to remain in la-la land unless we first analyse why the nation has drifted so far from its Gandhi-Nehru moorings as to actually give the Savarkar *bhakt*s over 300 seats in the Lok Sabha. Then to work out new approaches to oust Hindutva from the minds of our people. And, finally, on to the most humongous task of them all: selling these new approaches to our party. Three decades ago, we had a Congress prime minister who could boldly assert on the floor of Parliament, "India can survive only as a secular nation—and perhaps an India that is not secular does not deserve to survive." Is there anyone who can pick up that gauntlet now? ■

Mani Shankar Aiyar, a diplomat turned politician, is a former Union minister and an author of several books



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F O R E C A S T

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It's that time of the year when we in the media, being true to the established fetish of the profession, pretend to be the biographers of the future. This year happens to be different, and no matter how much we resist, to play with a novelist's phrase, the struggle of memory against forgetting is what defines the survivors' lives. We crawled out of the plague year learning how to unlearn, for nothing is the same any longer. Still, a future built on the ruins of the past need not be fragile. That is the hope of 2021, and that is the shared sentiment of

its biographers.

We want to forget many things that made yesterday what it was. Our original reactions to the pandemic were formed by instinct, expertise and expediency (mostly political), and in fear, questions were muted when rulers resorted to either drastic remedies or casual denials; when information was realistic, reassuring, contradictory, and even alarmist. And when politics was compassionate, urgent, autocratic and foolish. In the survivor's tales, the pathogen's persistence was matched by the range of our impulses. We want to leave all that behind.

We have regained hope, courtesy science. The speed and the competitiveness with which science came up with a Covid vaccine is the story of our time, and while giving in to hope, let's not be distracted by vaccine doubters or be amused by those who insist that they will take only a halal vaccine. Consider it as another good story bringing with it bad distractions verging on the ridiculous and the mischievous.

What the future can't escape is the aftermath of pandemic politics. As you read this, the last desperate act of the fallen to prolong power has come to a disgraceful finale. The pandemic denied Donald Trump a second term, but he, floating in the alternate reality of an unhinged Narcissus, refused to see rejection as anything other than subversion. On January 6th, the so-called Shining City on a Hill was a darker place. The storming of Capitol Hill was Trumpism's final spectacle while Trump was still in power. The spectacle will continue, elsewhere, as an antidote to the elected normalcy; and the legitimacy of the normal presidency will continue to be challenged by the Trumpian militia. The politics of conspiracy may not sound as Dan Brownesque as QAnon; it will go mainstream when a great political tradition such as the GOP struggles to choose between disintegration and gangsterism. The idea of America never ceases to concentrate our mind, and in the coming days,

it will be for its flexibility in redefining freedom.

We are the other great democracy, and the original land of spectacles. At this particular moment, the spectacle that hogs the headlines is the farmers' agitation. On Capitol Hill, it was the lumpenisation of grievance at its dramatic worst, all in the defence of a fallen leader. At the Delhi border, the dramatisation of grievance reveals only one thing: a strongman who refuses to be browbeaten by the organised strength of anti-modernisation. As, elsewhere, strongmen fall or get more anti-democratic, here, the story is all about the one who is still indulged by the world's most volatile democracy. Modi's domination of the popular mind will define the Indian political story.

There will be regional show of strength—or its depletion. In Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, the lady who won't give up, and one of Indian politics' enduring symbols of struggle and perseverance, faces her biggest challenge as BJP threatens to storm her social base, which itself once belonged to Marxists whom she unseated in 2011 after 34 years of uninterrupted rule. In Tamil Nadu, the electoral battle of 2021 will be comparatively normal in the absence of two political lives larger than their cardboard cut-outs: Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa. In Kerala, it will be a referendum on Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan who looms large over the battleground without a challenger worthy of him. We will see whether the thunder comes from the East or the South.

Poeticising the future is a human trait. It's as comforting as a good dream. My favourite line about it comes from the novelist Julio Cortázar: every future is fabulous. That is what we wish, and that was what we wished long before the plague. The perceived poetry of the future makes the prosaicness of the present bearable.

Happier 2021. ■

— SPRASANNARAJAN

THE POLITICS OF GR

The cycle of agitations against the Modi government is un

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA
MODI'S VIDEO ADDRESS AT
THE 75TH JUBILEE OF THE
CSIR-NATIONAL PHYSICAL
LABORATORY IN NEW DELHI,
JANUARY 4



LEVANCE

likely to end anytime soon



By PR RAMESH

Just hours after the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) granted the much-awaited emergency use authorisation (EUA) to two 'Made in India' vaccines against Covid-19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the "eagerness of the scientific community to fulfil the dream of an *atmanirbhar Bharat*", reaffirming India's position as a pre-eminent world player on this front.

Heralding positivity in the first week of January, Modi, speaking at the 75th jubilee of the National Physical Laboratory under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), said: "The new year has brought with it another big achievement. India's scientists have successfully developed not just one, but two made-in-India Covid vaccines. In India, the world's largest Covid vaccine programme is also about to begin. For this, the country is very proud of the contributions of its scientists and technicians." Projecting into the decade ahead, Modi said that while in the past India was dependent on foreign standards of quality and measurement, it would now set its own new heights in standards for the world to follow. "In India's pace, India's progress, India's growth, India's image, India's influence, our capacity-building will be set by our standards. In our country, there should be quality in our services, whether it is the government sector or the private sector. Our quality standards will decide how much the strength of India, and its products, increase in the world."

His words were not just about the admirable developments on the vaccines made at home and set to be exported soon. They were a telling metaphor of hope in the new year and the decade ahead for a nation locked down for several months under health, economic and other compounded distress. They were a blueprint for the progress and growth in store for millions countrywide.

MODI'S WORDS WERE NOT JUST ABOUT THE ADMIRABLE DEVELOPMENTS ON THE VACCINES. THEY WERE A BLUEPRINT FOR THE PROGRESS IN STORE FOR MILLIONS. THAT, HOWEVER, WAS NOT HOW HIS DETRACTORS PERCEIVED THE MOMENT. WITH IMPORTANT STATE ELECTIONS THIS YEAR, THEY CAN BE EXPECTED TO HAVE A BUSY CALENDAR

That, however, was not how Congress President Sonia Gandhi perceived the developments. She instantly swung back to the favourite pastime of her ilk. Launching a tirade against the Modi Government, she alleged that it was the first time since Independence that such an “arrogant” Government had come to power. Berating the prime minister, she demanded that he “leave the arrogance of power and immediately withdraw the three black farm laws unconditionally to end [the farmers’] agitation.” Her party leaders like Shashi Tharoor, meanwhile, were quick to decry the EUA for the Indian-made Covaxin as “premature” and likely “dangerous”. His comment was slammed by Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan on the heels of a backlash against Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav’s earlier statement that he would not take “any BJP vaccine”. The EUAs were dissed as “political *jumla*” by Modi’s detractors.

Sonia Gandhi’s position on the farm laws, which she chose to focus on at such a momentous time when two Indian vaccines against Covid-19 were granted EUAs, appears to be a testament to the doublespeak her party adopted when in power. A political elite that claims its commitment to facts is unshakeable has found it appropriate to remain parsimonious with the truth when it comes to attacking Modi. On the farm laws, the party has conveniently resorted to duplicity in defending its own position, as stated in its election manifesto not long ago, endorsing reforms and opening up the primary sector, including doing away with the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) or government-run markets for agri-produce and the floor price (MSP) declared by the Centre for 23 crops, thus paving the way for price realisation by the market. The punditocracy and their media enablers have been trying to create a narrative of a historic and just, pan-India farmers’ agitation against a complete corporate takeover of the agricultural sector, advantaging ‘Modi’s own friends’. This, despite the fact that, for over a month now, it has been mainly the rich farmers of Punjab and Haryana, fearing their affluent lifestyles are under threat, who have been blocking the roads leading to Delhi. The storytelling has been centred not on facts but emotional hyperbole, involving plunging temperatures, pouring rain, women struggling to keep the farm fires going back home in the villages, and so on. Gyms, spas, laundrettes, hair salons, shiatsu massage chairs, ‘Kisan Malls’, ‘Kisan ATMs’ (for essential groceries) sprang up all over the protest area overnight, competing with the best of services in metros. Setting up their own website and social media accounts to apparently sidestep Government propaganda, savvy youngsters at the protests have churned out tragic tales of how bleak the New Year’s Eve would be for the farmers. The truth, though, was that

popular singers were belting out their numbers from multiple music systems as the ‘farmers’ partied into the wee hours of the New Year’s morning.

Although the Modi Government and its ministers have repeatedly urged the protestors to send the elderly, the women and children back home and engage with the Government with an open mind, they have continued to use the vulnerable among them as a protective ring for the agitation, even as they threatened to take out a tractor rally into the capital on Republic Day

REUTERS



FARMERS ON MASSAGE CHAIRS
AT THEIR PROTEST SITE AT SINGHU
ON THE DELHI-HARYANA BORDER,
DECEMBER 15, 2020

THE PUNDITOCRACY HAS BEEN TRYING TO CREATE A NARRATIVE OF A HISTORIC AND JUST, PAN-INDIA FARMERS’ AGITATION. THE FACT IS THAT IT HAS BEEN MAINLY THE RICH FARMERS OF PUNJAB AND HARYANA, FEARING THEIR AFFLUENT LIFESTYLES ARE UNDER THREAT, WHO HAVE BEEN BLOCKING THE ROADS LEADING TO DELHI

if their demands were not met by then.

Among the most glaring examples of duplicity on the farm laws is that of former Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) Kaushik Basu, who has been economical with the truth on his position regarding opening up the farm sector to market forces and diminishing government control on pricing and procurement of agri-produce. Basu was CEA between 2009 and 2012, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in power. As CEA, he had authored three Economic Surveys—2009-2010, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012—in which he had talked about the need for agricultural reforms. But on December 11th, 2020, he proclaimed on Twitter: ‘I’ve now studied India’s new farm bills and realize they are flawed and will be detrimental to farmers.

Our agriculture regulation needs change but the new laws will end up serving corporate interests more than farmers. Hats off to the moral strength of India's farmers.' This was promptly hailed as a kumbaya moment by the Congress and its ecosystem.

Arvind Panagariya, former vice-chairman of NITI Aayog, said that both Basu and his successor Raghuram Rajan had 'recommended reforms similar to those just enacted' and have 'now come down heavily on them.' In an article in a daily, he went on to cite instances from the Economic Surveys authored by Basu and Rajan and pointed out that they both not only favoured the entry of private investment in agriculture but also foreign multi-brand retailers in agricultural marketing. One of the surveys helmed by Basu had said: 'Anyone who gets a better price and terms outside the APMC or at its farmgate should be allowed to do so.' It also supported FDI in multi-brand retail: 'Considering significant investment gaps in post-harvest infrastructure of agricultural produce, agriculture should be encouraged and the FDI in multi brand retail, once implemented, could be leveraged towards this end.'

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, not too long ago a vocal supporter of the farmers' protests, even an agent provocateur, has been forced on the backfoot after protestors sharpened their aggression in the home state and attacked over 1,500 Reliance Jio telecom towers, directly inconveniencing students, medical professionals, business people and homebodies, and negatively affecting the state's economy. As Reliance went to court against the attacks which continued despite Singh's appeals to the miscreants, he has now threatened action against protestors destroying telecom towers. Singh is now in an unenviable position where he has realised the serious economic consequences for his state. But the fear of going against the powerful Jat Sikhs of four Punjab districts has curtailed his options in controlling the direction and momentum of the protests.

The subplot of the agitation—the attack on Reliance Jio mobile towers—is intriguing. The towers were targeted even though Reliance is not into contract farming or foodgrain procurement. The fact that you cannot tell the tower of one service provider from another has led to suspicions of telecom rivalries playing out in Punjab. All of this has naturally raised eyebrows as the plan to roll out an indigenous 5G network by the company is in the works, and the Government has been looking ahead to it for ridding itself of the dependence on China's Huawei. This has also raised questions as to who is fuelling the targeting of Jio towers. Singh himself, in his meeting with the prime minister early on in the agitation, had expressed apprehensions that this could have national security implications.

This is not the first time that issues have been manufactured to target the Government. The anti-Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) protests—a law meant to give rights to oppressed communities, mainly Hindus, in neighbouring nations, and a longstanding commitment of the BJP—were propped up for months against the Government. Although this was initially fronted by the civil liberties platoons of liberals, Modi baiters, so-called intellectuals, the radical Left and others, it was soon exposed for what it truly was: a planned subversive movement taken over by hardliners

from the Muslim community against the Modi Government, and meant to lay down firmly the terms on which they would engage with the mainstream polity thereon. It was aimed at marking a decisive socio-political turn in the nation's existence.

Most of those who spearheaded or covertly co-authored the anti-CAA protests, from college students to ultra-Left activists to Muslim hardliners, such as Sharjeel Imam and Umar Khalid, are now behind bars with charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, including sedition, against them.

The farmers' protests will not end too soon. Especially since the Government has been consistent in its view that, with the new laws, farmers will benefit immensely. They will be free now to sell their produce outside the APMC and such trade will not be taxed, giving farmers a higher margin. Farmers can sell their produce within or outside their state, allowing them to benefit from higher prices wherever such prices prevail.

Under the new laws, there will also be no licensing of traders to buy agri-produce outside the APMCs and disputes arising from such trade will have to be settled within 30 days by a sub-divisional magistrate. Besides, heavy penalties will apply to violations of rules and regulations.

The ongoing protests have been described by some analysts as "anti-CAA protests raised to the power of n", indicating, in no small measure, that like the anti-CAA agitation end of last year, this may not be only about farmers and their core concerns. The Government will not buckle and repeal the laws, falling prey to the emotional entrapment set up by vested political and ideological interests.

But how did the self-styled 'woke' people, 'secularists' and radical leftists come to entrench themselves in the system so firmly that, six years short of eight decades as a free nation, India's sociopolity can still be held to ransom on growth, stability and social harmony by manipulating issues of routine policy by a Government elected overwhelmingly—not once but twice—to consistently undermine Modi's leadership? The answer to that lies in the late 1960s, three decades into India's independence and the ascent of Indira Gandhi. In 1969, the '*Goongi Gudiya*' of the ruling Congress took the significant step of backing independent candidate VV Giri for the post of India's president, directly challenging the decision of the elders of her party to support Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy for the post. This rebellion was aimed at cementing her position as the most powerful leader in the Congress and undermining the authority of the 'Syndicate'. Indira Gandhi, not yet 50, had been feeling threatened by these senior party leaders since the 1967 General Election. In a bid to dig in her heels, she chose to espouse a populist agenda and socialist policymaking that included a lot of welfarist rhetoric, stringent control on business and nationalisation of banks. This was meant to broaden popular support for the Congress while also clipping the wings of the older power elite within. Her Government began to lean heavily on the Soviet Union for both policymaking vision and for other assistance, a move frowned upon and criticised by the Syndicate leadership.



VV Giri won the presidential election. On November 12th, 1969, Indira Gandhi was expelled from the Congress for violating party discipline and formed her own Congress with overwhelming support from members of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). She was still 45 seats short of a majority. And herein lay the rub. She asked the Communists for support, which they were eager to give but based on a crucial quid pro quo. The leftists made a decisive long-term ideological investment and captured the 'soft' centres of power, the spheres of culture and, most critical of all, education. It was an 'investment' that marked a definitive step in dominating the minds of generations to come. A covert coup and a calculated, strategic entrenchment that was paying off but threatening to completely unravel of late.

SONIA GANDHI'S POSITION ON THE FARM LAWS APPEARS TO BE A TESTAMENT TO HER PARTY'S DOUBLESPEAK. THE CONGRESS ELECTION MANIFESTO HAD ENDORSED REFORMS AND OPENING UP THE PRIMARY SECTOR, INCLUDING DOING AWAY WITH APMCS

With another round of important state elections slated for this year (including West Bengal and Tamil Nadu), the 'woke' crowd—cloistered in the comfort zones across campuses, newsrooms, court halls and Bollywood—can be expected to have a busy calendar. Resentment theories, Hindutva conspiracy plots, whining about how the Modi Government is systematically gagging opinion, trampling on freedom and free speech and undermining institutions, including the judiciary, can all be expected to be amplified manifold. As with the anti-CAA/National Register of Citizens (NRC) protests and now, the ongoing farmers' agitation, none of this has diminished Modi's and the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral domination, from local civic body and panchayat polls to state Assembly elections.

But the persistent script of grievance is not surprising. There is little doubt that once the farmers' protests are dialled down, a new issue will be engineered by the 'wokes' and those radicalised against the socio-cultural and historical moorings of this country. The Modi regime is seen as a threat to their hold over the estates they have controlled. And they were at it barely weeks after Modi took over in 2014, an indication of the high stakes in maintaining the status quo of the establishment.

The 'award *wapsi*' drama was the first attempt. It took shape in the run-up to the Bihar polls in 2015 when the BJP was facing the combined might of Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad, a numerically formidable alliance. Hindi poet Uday Prakash, who was protesting against the murder of scholar and rationalist MM Kalburgi in 2015, returned his award received from the Sahitya Akademi. Nayantara Sahgal and Ashok Vajpeyi—a Congress partisan made a cultural czar of sorts by Arjun Singh—followed. Those who returned awards included Krishna Sobti, Kashinath Singh, Keki Daruwalla. And the orchestrator of this move was Vajpeyi.

But nothing gained or nothing conceded despite these choreographed moves to embarrass the Modi Government was troubling. Soon, they latched on to cow vigilantism and every criminal act was projected as its fallout. But the BJP did not give in and announced, instead, that every illegal abattoir in Uttar Pradesh would be banned. This was spelt out in its 2017 election manifesto for the

state Assembly elections and the party went on to sweep the state because of public revulsion at the Akhilesh Yadav government.

There were various eruptions before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The suicide of a Dalit student of the University of Hyderabad, Rohith Vemula, was one such rallying point endorsed by the 'woke' brigades to undermine the Government. The Left leadership, activists and their media enablers conveniently chose to ignore Vemula's last missive in which he expressed his acute disappointment with the Left student organisation, the Students Federation of India, to which he had belonged.

In 2018, a Supreme Court order on the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was used once more to pitch Dalits against Modi and his party's efforts at a larger Hindu consolidation. The results showed that the attempt at undermining the Government's credentials failed once more, with the BJP winning the most number of reserved seats in the country. None of this has come as a surprise to either Modi or his party leaders since they are aware that their ascension to power is the biggest challenge faced by the status quoists maintaining a vicelike grip on the power establishment for decades.

What is on display is the glorification of the *arhatiya* (broker/dealer), cutting across issues. Currently, they are being projected in the ongoing farmers' protests as altruistic and not as middlemen who routinely squeeze small and marginal farmers with usurious interest rates for loans they grant, even in the 21st century, driving them to distress, penury and death. Jawaharlal Nehru may have famously said: "Everything else can wait, but not agriculture." He may have insisted on the first Soviet-style Five Year Plan of 1951-1956 focusing solely on the primary sector. But after decades of his party and family ruling at the Centre, it is the one sector in which the mafia of middlemen has become the most entrenched, the rich most protected and the poor and marginal most orphaned in terms of policy and insurance against risks.

The coming days will see assorted groups, with little in common but for a shared animosity towards Modi, magnifying real and imagined grievances and attempting to weave a narrative of India on the boil. The outrage artists may have a busy calendar but Modi, who continues to have a high approval rating, is in a high-stakes battle in a historic righting of wrongs and will not bend. ■



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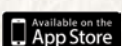
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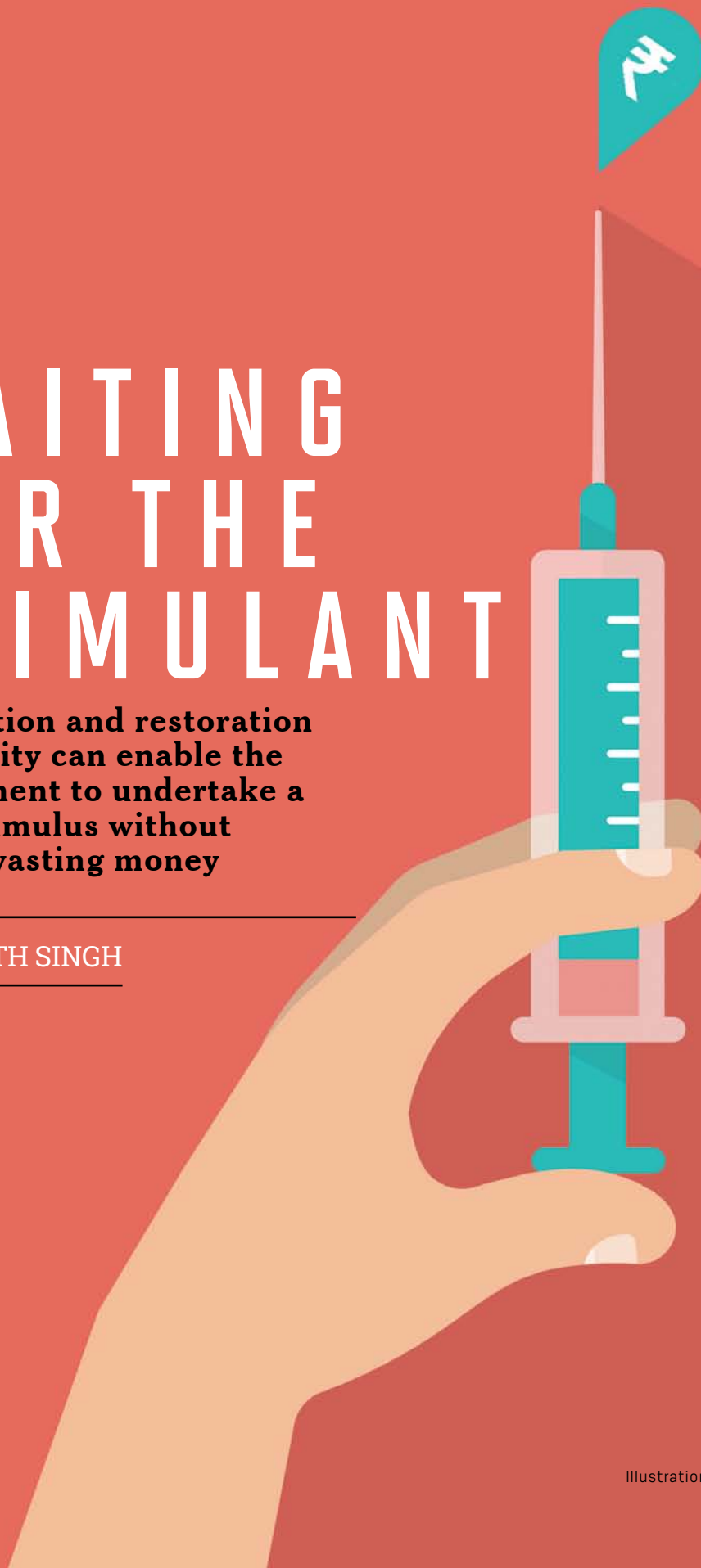


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WAITING FOR THE STIMULANT

Vaccination and restoration of mobility can enable the government to undertake a fiscal stimulus without fear of wasting money

By SIDDHARTH SINGH



If 2020 is any measure of the depths of despair that India had to confront, 2021 has begun on a tangibly positive note. Several different trends show that the elusive 'normalcy' may be at hand sooner than later. If 2020 has one lesson it is that forecasts—especially when numbers and quantities are involved—are hazardous.

Even with these caveats, several things have changed for the better and this fact clearly hints at a much better economic performance this year. The approval given to two vaccines manufactured in India and their forthcoming rollout will decisively put an end to mobility issues that had severely dented the Indian economy last year. Even without the vaccines, the link between the rising number of cases and mobility restrictions had been broken by early October; the vaccines will act as insurance over and above this.

Probably the most important effect of the vaccination programme and the restoration of mobility will be one of enabling the Government to undertake a fiscal stimulus without fearing that money will be frittered away or lost to corruption and leakages. The constant carping of economists of a particular political persuasion through 2020 was that the Government was not spending money. It turned out that there were very good reasons for not doing so. Reports from Britain and the US indicate how even well-designed stimulus programmes are subject to leakage and those initiated during the pandemic disappeared into an economic blackhole.

With an economy dominated by the services sector, it would have been impractical if the Government were to inject money in a stimulus programme when the economy was gripped by severe mobility problems. If one compares mobility data at the time when the first *Atmanirbhar Bharat* programme was launched (May 12th, 2020) with mobility trends at the start of this year, the contrast is stark. Google mobility data for the week of May 16th showed a (-)41 per cent change in mobility at workplaces compared to the baseline at that time; on January 1st, 2021, this had improved to (-)29 per cent. In case of transit stations/public transport, the comparison for those two dates is (-)52 per cent (May 16th, 2020) versus (-)11 per cent (January 1st, 2021). Clearly, this is conducive to the recovery of services and the possibility of the Government engaging in a meaningful stimulus.

The possibility of the Government spending more to give a helping hand to the economy has increased for another reason: the greater availability of resources as compared to the time when the pandemic hit India and when lockdowns were imposed. In April and May last year, there was a virtual collapse in the collection of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), severely handicapping the Government's ability to spend. On top of that, there was an ugly spat between the Union Government and the states on GST compensation. All that seems to be a bad memory now. From

September onwards, GST collections have been robust and have gone up every month on a year-on-year basis. And in December last year, these collections were the highest ever recorded since the GST was rolled out in July 2017.

These trends are likely to continue this year. But one lasting damage inflicted by the pandemic is in terms of employment and inequality. This is a complex and unfolding situation but some trends are already visible. Job losses, especially those in low-skill, low-wage segments, are likely to exacerbate inequality that was already high. This is not just a moral question of helping those who have lost their livelihoods but an economic one as well. Severe or permanent loss of income has a direct bearing on demand and, in turn, output. This cannot be ignored by the Government for both political and economic reasons. At the same time, its ability to ameliorate this situation is extremely limited.

The other trend that will be worth watching is about trade and globalisation and what happens to them. Ever since 1991, a crucial part of India's economic fortunes has been its openness to trade. What 2020 showed was broken supply chains over and above an already strong sentiment against globalisation. The virtual cornering of medical supplies by China and the race to secure them among other countries have left a lasting impression on

IF ONE RE-READS THE DIRE PROGNOSIS ISSUED BETWEEN JUNE AND SEPTEMBER LAST YEAR, IT IS STRIKING THAT FISCAL STIMULUS IS EMPHASISED REPEATEDLY BUT NOT A WORD IS SPOKEN ABOUT THE DESIGN OF A STIMULUS PACKAGE

the world. Henceforth, supply chains are likely to be re-forged and located within national jurisdictions much against the economic logic of locating them on the basis of comparative advantage. That is among the motivations for the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* plan. In India's case, an additional complication is its dependence on China for a huge number of items it consumes and its border conflagration with it at the same time. India is already taking steps to reduce its dependence on China and this will continue this year. Two big economies of the world disengaging from each other will only further fuel the trend of de-globalisation.

The Covid-19 pandemic is easily a once-in-a-century event of extreme uncertainty. Epidemiologists to administrators across the world were hit with a situation that defied their models and accumulated empirical wisdom. From April 2020, when the pandemic began galloping, reliable estimates of how many persons would get infected and what would be the rate of recovery were subject to near continuous revisions to the point where science became more an art.

Economists, especially those in India, too, were subject to the same uncertainty. But that did not deter them from presenting estimates and policy prescriptions. It seemed as if they were immune to uncertainty. One of the more interesting sets of forecasts, at all times, is the bi-monthly Survey of Professional Forecasters (SPF) conducted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). For the past nine months, these forecasts have swung wildly in their estimates. In early April, when the 63rd round of the survey—with data collected from economists between March 6th and 19th—was released, the estimates for GDP and other economic indicators were more or less tranquil. GDP growth for 2020-2021 was estimated at 5.5 per cent. The more interesting part of the survey deals with the probabilities assigned to different growth estimates. The highest probability (34 per cent) was assigned to the possibility that India would grow at 5 to 5.4 per cent. It was March 2020 and knowledge of Covid cases was common. Yet, the possibility that the pandemic could have a severe economic

high optimism for growth in the next year (2021-2022) went up as the year progressed.

This quick summary of what is a complex technical exercise is not meant to castigate the economists who participate in various rounds of SPF but is meant to suggest how difficult forecasting the future remains even after the phenomenal advances in forecasting tools.

Yet, these large swings in economic forecasts have not prevented other economists from maintaining consistent policy advice through the course of the pandemic: the Government had to spend more or else India would be doomed economically. This consistency is so remarkable that one is forced to suspect that there is a political element in it and it is not just dispassionate economic advice. To an extent, this was expected as the tested remedy for recessions and depression and is Keynesian in nature. But what these economists refused to see was that, unlike a usual recession/depression where effective demand fails due to

economic reasons, this was a pandemic where labour was forced to flee cities to save its life. How is Keynesian medicine to be administered and to whom? If one re-reads the dire prognosis issued between June and September last year, it is striking that fiscal stimulus is emphasised repeatedly but not a word is spoken about the design of a stimulus package. There was, to be sure, some noise about transferring money to the poor and those who had lost their jobs. But even a moment of reflection will show that people in such a situation are the least likely to spend the money received: they are certain to hoard it in the face of extreme uncertainty. Quarterly data on savings released by the RBI and the money injected into and taken out of Jan Dhan accounts captures the reality of precautionary savings vividly and pours cold water on the notion that transferring money would automatically lead to higher spending.

It is interesting to compare the rather stingy spending of the Union Government with what happened to the large stimuli carried out in Western countries. In those countries, as recent reports indicate, much of the money did not reach those for whom it was intended. In contrast, the *Atmanirbhar* packages were designed as immediate support for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) along with guarantees for these firms. What this did was to prevent leakages and corruption that run-of-the mill stimulus programmes end up being. If there is one trade-off the Narendra Modi Government was acutely aware of, it was the one between higher government spending and higher corruption. Through the barrage of criticism and economic adversity, it did not let that happen. ■



FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA SITHARAMAN CHAIRS
A PRE-BUDGET MEETING IN NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 22, 2020

impact did not reflect in the SPF estimates: only 4 per cent probability was given to the possibility that growth may be lower, at 4 to 4.4 per cent.

By June, these estimates had swung to the economy contracting by 1.5 per cent; in early August, a further contraction to 5.8 per cent was announced and, finally, by early December, to the more realistic 8.5 per cent contraction. But by then two sets of quarterly data (for the first and second quarters of 2020-2021) were available. There are two further, technical, bits of information. One, the various probabilities for GDP growth rates continued to be scatter shots—spread all over the place—instead of the neat clustering in March, reflecting a close consensus. Two, if pessimism crept through the year, reflected in the various SPF rounds, extremely



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THE DAY OF THE WOLF WARRIOR

With all eyes on the new US administration, China looks set to consolidate its gains while India may find itself lonely

By SUDEEP PAUL

The meanest trap to fall into is to begin with the assumption that once we have seen hell, we are bound for heaven. End-2020 mass-produced inestimable variations on the theme of the 'worst year'. While it doesn't necessarily alter the discourse, a little perspective can always set the record straight. It's not ironic that somewhere in the great beyond, Fernand Braudel is smiling his sad, old man's smile. Let us absolve ourselves thus: We didn't miss the penumbra of the pandemic in January 2020.

We just couldn't guess how far its umbra would stretch. Moreover, much of what went on in the power play on the map still stuck to patterns of predictability and held course, despite sharp twists, awkward turns and sudden bursts of speed.

Which is why 2021, the Year of the Ox (strength and stubbornness), ought to consolidate the Great Gains of China in 2020, the Year of the Rat (good fortune). The ox also inspires confidence. Notice how, with an eye on the clock ticking away to New Year's Eve, the European Union (EU) caved. Before that "geopolitical coup", as one China watcher called it, Beijing had signed and sealed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with 14 other Indo-Pacific countries, including Australia, on November 15th. The EU's U-turn, after spending most of 2020 growing a spine—helped undoubtedly by public opinion in most developed countries that had turned decidedly anti-China—makes the job more difficult for the incoming US administration. On paper, China's investment agreement does not amount to much given the inroads Chinese companies have already made in Europe. But Beijing sees it as a diplomatic victory since it seeks to pre-empt any effort Joe Biden might make in trying to build a multilateral coalition of democracies to corner Beijing.

Reposing faith in the likelihood of Biden taking—and sustaining—a tough stand on China seems, however, to be the pre-

rogative of the partisan, mainstream media in the US. Rather, of some of their columnists and talking heads. It's too soon to forget the president-elect's lifelong proximity to the myth of China's peaceful rise and the characters thereof, to say nothing of his son Hunter's deep dealings on Xi Jinping's turf. 2021 is hinged on the new administration set to take charge on January 20th and the new president's primary job would be at home. Biden would be challenged to meet America's fiscal crisis, even if Republicans on the Hill, in their competitive haste to shed Trumpism, cooperate. That crisis is the biggest since the Great Depression. When one adds the pandemic, it doesn't surprise that few experts, and fewer ordinary Americans, have time for foreign policy. Beijing, meanwhile, began the year as it ended the last one—walking away with its successful exploitation of the transition circus in Washington.

None of this augurs well for India. The US-China cold war predated the presidency of Donald Trump. Where Trump made a difference was in taking the fight to the Chinese leadership and getting in its face. But as with much of what he did abroad, even sound policy was sold unsoundly, or not at all. One of the givens for New Delhi through most of the Trump years was the no-questions-asked support from Washington in its geopolitical wrangle with China and the few-questions-asked latitude on domestic game-changers. More than the individual in the White House, it's the convergence of the volubility of the Democratic left and what is about to become a fully Democrat-controlled, vengeful Congress—Capitol Hill was actually being stormed by pro-Trump protestors at the time of going to press—disproportionately swayed by the same left of the party, that could narrow a Democratic administration's room for manoeuvre. While Delhi doesn't quite need to care about Justin Trudeau, DC is another matter. A Democratic administration, riding on the sole ticket of undoing Trump, could take that task too literally and extend it to every sphere.

While every other strategic concern in Delhi would be eclipsed by the change of guard in Washington in 2021, South Block

suddenly does not seem to have too many big friends or reliable, sizeable buddies. Shinzo Abe is gone. Trade-battered Australia, having braved its own return to the Quad, has just got a trade-off from China for joining the RCEP and may again become a hesitant partner in the maritime and naval domain. What's more, the Quad was resurrected thanks largely to Trump. Already, 'Asia-Pacific' has returned to the media literature with a vengeance. The UK, not accounting for much strategically in the Indian Ocean Region, will spend a long time looking in the mirror. On the other hand, Messrs Macron and Merkel have just taken the fight out of the Continent. The 'illiberal democracies' in Eastern Europe, of course,

dictable, than its strategic partnership with the US. Therein lies the reason for hope—ironically again, in the institutional durability of the status of bilateral relations, irrespective of the resident at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Unless America undergoes a Marxist-lite revolution, most things should hold.

Which cannot be said of the Great Game territory. Of all the neighbourhood crises that could come to a head, the fate of Afghanistan has the worst security implications for Delhi. With the US determined to lose the war and leave the country to the Taliban, jihadists could again find refuge there and turn Afghanistan into a global launchpad. Now, that would be in neither Delhi's nor

Beijing's interest, but things may have moved well beyond the point of functional, issue-based strategic cooperation between India and China.

India's next looming mega-crisis is also of Chinese design, rather literally. That disaster, if it were to happen, would certainly not be scheduled for 2021 but last month, China's state-owned Power Construction Corp announced plans to build a mega-dam and 60GW hydro-power project on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in Tibet. Part of the 2021-2025 Five-Year Plan, this project, aiming at three times the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam, is an environmental and humanitarian catastrophe in its conception itself. And it's one that could devastate India's economy and kill millions. As Brahma Chellaney recently wrote for *Project Syndicate*: 'China's over-damming of internal rivers has severely harmed ecosystems, including by causing river fragmentation and disrupting the annual flooding cycle... In August, some 400 million Chinese were put at risk after record flooding endangered the Three Gorges Dam. If the Brahmaputra mega-dam collapses—hardly implausible, given that it will be built in a seismically active area—millions downstream could die.' China has indeed 'not hesitated to use its hydro-hegemony against its 18 downstream neighbors', including its friends, and recently warned India how it 'could "weaponize" its control over transboundary waters and potentially "choke" the Indian economy.'

A SCREENGRAB OF CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S VIDEO CONFERENCE WITH FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON, GERMAN CHANCELLOR ANGELA MERKEL, EUROPEAN COUNCIL PRESIDENT CHARLES MICHEL (TOP RIGHT) AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENT URSULA VON DER LEYEN (BOTTOM RIGHT) ON DECEMBER 30, 2020



THE EU'S U-TURN, AFTER SPENDING MOST OF 2020 GROWING A SPINE, MAKES THE JOB MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE INCOMING US ADMINISTRATION. BEIJING SEES THE INVESTMENT DEAL AS A DIPLOMATIC VICTORY SINCE IT SEEKS TO PRE-EMPT ANY EFFORT JOE BIDEN MIGHT MAKE TO BUILD A COALITION OF DEMOCRACIES TO CORNER BEIJING

never wanted to believe the Belt and Road Initiative posed a mid to long-term threat of neocolonisation with Chinese characteristics. Closer home, the RCEP has reaffirmed Beijing as master of the Indo-Pacific even as the South China Sea shows no sign of calming.

It would be ironic if, after decades of harping on strategic autonomy, Delhi had to hunker down and wait for the indefinite winter of anxiety to pass just when it had begun to see alliances as something not altogether abominable. And yet, in the sea of uncertainty suddenly engulfing India, little is stabler, or more pre-

China's dams are Thomas F Homer-Dixon's world on steroids. Homer-Dixon's eye-opening 1991 article titled 'On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict', published in *International Security*, showed how changes in our physical environment impact conflict. Future conflicts, he argued, would more likely occur from resource scarcity. We have been living in that world for three decades at least. From the Sahel to Somalia, the map of conflict is not disappearing anytime soon, irrespective of whether the US chooses to project power militar-

ily—to prevent or mitigate conflict—or not. For some time now, all we have seen is the US withdrawing troops from one place to only deploy them elsewhere. For example, last month, Trump announced the withdrawal of 700 troops from Somalia as part of the effort to end America’s “endless wars”. However, within days, 5,000 Marines and sailors had to be dispatched from the Horn of Africa to provide safe passage to the 700 moving out—not going back home but getting redeployed elsewhere in East Africa. These circular motions should have served as a lesson that American withdrawal is not only unwelcome but also undoable. The biggest example of that is, of course, Afghanistan, but the new US administration, against the backdrop of debate on Congressional authority over the military, will have to hit the ground running on bulwarking its promise of multilateralism. Multilateralism, which America’s old Trump-dumped allies are apparently crying for, should not become a shambolic, immobile behemoth that never gets its feet off the ground where unilateral, or limited collaborative, surgical strikes seemed to have worked in recent years—in fact, twice in 2020 itself. (The EU, trash-talked to humiliation by Trump as with NATO, could stand up to China with him in office. But with Biden and his promise of rebuilding bridges on the way, the EU lost its nerve and yielded, evidently angering the president-elect’s team that had asked Brussels to wait. Now there’s an irony nobody is talking about!)

‘And of the many things I saw more clearly, one was how Reagan was a great president precisely because he had surrounded himself with such realist and pragmatic luminaries as George Shultz, Casper Weinberger, and James Baker III...As inspirational and unyielding as Reagan’s rhetoric was—morally arming the United States against Communist oppression in Central and Eastern Europe as never before—Reagan and the men around him never would have countenanced the kind of military action chosen in Iraq,’ lamented Robert D Kaplan in *In Europe’s Shadow* (2016). In many ways, Ronald Reagan was the apogee of the marriage of American idealism and Nixonian realism. Part of that had stayed with his vice president when, as president, he went to war against Saddam with a coalition of 39 states. That realism was erased in the era of ‘liberal hegemony’ unleashed in the post-Cold War high of the Clinton years. His administration, nevertheless, did not intervene *when it should have* in the Balkans. By the time of the Iraq war of 2003, geopolitical pragmatism was a distant memory. Occupied abroad and exhausted at home, the US did not see China’s rise for what it was for a long time, till the maverick president arrived, whose foreign policy, while informed by realism, has borne too much taint of the transactional to perhaps leave an imprint.

US PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN AND HIS NOMINEE FOR SECRETARY OF STATE, ANTONY BLINKEN, IN WILMINGTON, DELAWARE, NOVEMBER 24, 2020



IT WOULD BE IRONIC IF, AFTER DECADES OF HARPING ON STRATEGIC AUTONOMY, INDIA HAD TO HUNKER DOWN FOR THE WINTER OF ANXIETY. AND YET, LITTLE IS STABLER, OR MORE PREDICTABLE, THAN ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH THE US—ITS INSTITUTIONAL DURABILITY, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE RESIDENT AT 1600 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE

That’s a pity, for Trump was better abroad than at home. Whether the Biden administration builds on his success in the Middle East (with Israel and Arab states) or reverts to a status quoist two-steps-up-one-step-back will be one of the first questions answered in 2021, irrespective of Binyamin Netanyahu’s fate. Nearer home, a test for the new administration will be Venezuela where the challenge will be to get Nicolás Maduro out without retaliation from his allies in Beijing and Moscow. The Venezuelan fuse is actually shorter than Iran or North Korea.

The new administration is unlikely to have any option but to pursue the US-China decoupling and not yield on America’s financial and technical knowhow. This, in the long run, should work out well for India but would bring little cheer in the near future. For the short to medium term, Beijing will be on a roll, asking troops to be combat-ready to act any second, tightening Party control on the private sector with vanished or executed tycoons, threatening to switch off water, etcetera. China cares about its image when it comes to the West, not the East and the rest. If 2020 ended with Beijing getting back more than it had lost in the early months, 2021 might turn out to be the wolf warrior’s best year yet. There’s not much those at Beijing’s receiving end can do except regroup till the US knows its new mind. ■

OFFICE POL

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

In the peak months of the lockdown, I went and stayed in my native village in Kerala. There were other relatives who also came. A cousin from Mumbai who had a corporate job. The house was a mini-experiment in work-from-home and one that was thousands of kilometres away from our places of work. It seemed to go without hurdles and as the months rolled on, the ecosystem became a completely natural arrangement. I saw my cousin hunched over his laptop almost the entire day, a relay of online meetings with his team and clients. If anything, the amount of work he did appeared more than the ordinary. A recent article in *The Conversation* reported on a survey in the UK that found that this wasn't unusual. As they noted: 'In our survey during the pandemic, we found that 54% of employees increased their working hours under lockdown. What has been established over many decades is that rather than emancipating the worker, technology frequently leads to an intensification of work. We found that 60% of new homeworkers had an overall increase in work demands during lockdown, 51% felt constantly under strain and 50% found a blurring between work and life.' What they couldn't tell for certain was whether it was the technology that was doing it or because the office itself was putting greater pressure on workers. Despite the load, people preferred this new mode and wanted to keep it going. The article said: 'Our research with eighty interview participants in Spring and Summer of 2020 and almost 1,400 survey participants, indicates that not only do people want to keep having some of their working week at home, but that they are also happy to video conference with homeworking colleagues from the office.'

That was 2020's sironies of work in a nutshell. Meanwhile, we all returned from Kerala as the lockdown's extremes were lifted. Nothing much had changed for work though. Offices still did not insist on attendance. In Mumbai, the suburban trains were still not operational. My cousin, out of volition, goes a couple of times a week on his bike to his office. When he went looking for shared homes to rent, there were three and five BHK flats that were empty and he could thus have all of it for himself for the time being at least. Work-

ing from home had found a new incentive to be convenient. Not just employees, many companies, especially bigger ones in services, like the new model. Why would they not? A friend who works in a tourism-related multinational saw the firm drop half their space. They had laid off a substantial percentage of their employees. They permitted the remaining ones to work from home too. They were cutting costs on two fronts, salaries and rent. Those who survived the bloodbath weren't complaining, at least they had a job. Numerous companies, especially the small and medium enterprises (SMEs), just gave up on an office entirely because it was money going down the drain when there was no cash coming in.

The new year thus comes with the realisation of the office as a non-necessity. Sectors like Information Technology will continue to make merry because their work is overwhelmingly not dependent on



ITICS

**The future is remote and virtual.
For better or worse?**

physical presence. According to a survey of more than 1,000 chief information officers (CIOs) across the world by Enterprise Technology Research (ETR), a market research firm, remote working, or those who operate away from the office, will double because companies have found that productivity has increased. A *Reuters* report on the survey points out: 'The survey said information technology decision-makers expect permanent remote work to double to 34.4% of their companies' workforces in 2021, compared with 16.4% before the coronavirus outbreak, a result of positive productivity trends. About 72% of their companies' total global workforce is currently working remotely, according to the CIOs. Of the more than 1,000 CIOs interviewed for the survey, 48.6% reported that productivity has improved since workers began working remotely, with only 28.7% of respondents indicating a decline in productivity. IT divisions in telecommunications, financials and the insurance sector reported large productivity boosts, whereas there has not been



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

much benefit in energy, utilities, and education sectors.'

The first half of the year is predictable across sectors because vaccine delivery will only reach a sizeable percentage of the population by then. And working from home would have to be the norm, except where essential. Manufacturing needs boots on the ground, for instance. You can't assemble a car from your home. The shooting of a movie needs actors before a camera with the crew doing the other functions. But every sector, or even segments within a sector that do not need physical presence, will likely continue remote work. Or companies might come up with middle-path solutions. A *Wall Street Journal* forecast on the US real estate market, in an article titled 'Covid-19 Vaccine Outlook Prompts Businesses to Dust Off Return-to-Office Plans', expected lasting changes to work culture and said: 'Working from home and other remote locations, which became a necessity during the pandemic, will likely remain a major part of the workplace, employers and real-estate executives say. Businesses that are highly competitive for top talent will likely begin opening small

WORKING FROM HOME WOULD HAVE TO BE THE NORM, EXCEPT WHERE ESSENTIAL. MANUFACTURING NEEDS BOOTS ON THE GROUND, FOR INSTANCE. BUT EVERY SECTOR, OR EVEN SEGMENTS WITHIN A SECTOR THAT DO NOT NEED PHYSICAL PRESENCE, WILL LIKELY CONTINUE REMOTE WORK

satellite offices in metropolitan areas and offering employees the option of working there, at home or in centralized headquarters—or a combination of the three. Design firm Gensler already is working with a half dozen Fortune 100 companies on such "hub-and-spoke" strategies, as they are becoming known in the office industry, said Joseph Brancato, co-chairman of the firm.'

Even though 2020 was the year when technology made online meetings much better, one of its disadvantages is that it is still being a poor replacement for personal interaction. But there might be already an answer to the problem in virtual and augmented reality. Companies are investing in technologies that make virtual meetings mimic the real thing. A couple of months ago, a US startup called Arthur Technologies launched a VR meeting app and even did their press briefing completely online over VR. It was far from perfect. A *Wired* reporter who attended it said: 'Taking a meeting in Arthur requires a literal suspension of reality. You exist only from the waist up (hey, just like Zoom!), and your shirtsleeves taper off to reveal blue computer arms, which move according to how you move the Oculus Quest controllers in your hands. Your digital eyes are obscured by Matrix-style glasses, and a headset microphone covers your virtual mouth. This is because

the technology can't yet mimic facial expressions in VR, and "it's better than looking at dead eyes," says Arthur founder Christoph Fleischmann. My avatar looked nothing like me, except that it had dark brown hair.' This is nascent technology, but what is waiting round the corner is clear. If everyone in a meeting is physically near even while separated by vast distances, it will make the onsite conference room even more redundant.

An offshoot of the lockdown has been a body blow to business travel, and that too does not look like it will resume in 2021 in any great measure. In *Forbes*, Dan Reed, a contributor who specialises in the travel and airline sector, listed why there wouldn't be an upturn in the segment anytime soon. They included the fear of Covid still being dominant among companies and travellers, cost-cutting, and, with half the workforce operating from homes, who would the business travellers go to meet? He wrote, 'When the Institute of Travel Management recently asked corporate travel managers around the world what they expect their companies' travel plans and budgets to be for 2021, 38% of them said their

businesses' travel volumes will be down by 25% to 50% vs. 2019, the last "normal" year. Another 36% were even more pessimistic, saying their corporate travel would fall 50% to 70% from 2019.'

LinkedIn, the social networking platform for professionals, also came out with their predictions for the workplace in a blog. Virtual recruiting was one of the main points. 'According to our latest Future of Recruit-

ing Report, 81% of talent professionals agree virtual recruiting will continue post-COVID and 70% say it will become the new standard. Those are big numbers that can't [and shouldn't] be ignored,' said the post. Some of the other predictions were companies being more concerned about employee well-being, and then there was virtual selling becoming a default option. The post added: 'It wasn't that long ago when virtual selling was the outlier—some sales professionals tapped into its power, while others relied heavily on in-person meetings. This year changed the game—not for one year, but for the long-term. Jonathan Lister, VP LinkedIn Sales Solutions, predicts virtual selling is the new rule. In 2020, we saw a secular shift toward virtual selling and that will only continue. In the years ahead, virtual selling will lead sales organizations and there will be greater scrutiny on the real value of face-to-face meetings.'

LinkedIn also conducted a survey in which they asked Indian professionals how they expected 2021 to be and over half expected their companies to do better in the year. And 40 per cent of them thought new jobs would increase. Which could mean the other 60 per cent were not so sanguine. What everyone can be sure of is that no matter what the year brings, it will be something that the world of work can negotiate, unlike what has just passed. ■

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A TEST FOR NEW

The challenges of being the best By LHENDUP G BHUTIA



I N D I A



VIRAT KOHLI AND
HIS TEAMMATES IN
HAMILTON,
NEW ZEALAND,
JANUARY 2020

AP

Late last year, just before the start of the India-Australia Test series, former Australian cricketer and once controversial India coach Greg Chappell, who has long keenly observed cricket in this part of the world, described Virat Kohli as “the most Australian non-Australian cricketer of all time.”

As an international cricketer, Kohli has now travelled to Australia four times. And there has been no country where the image of a modern cricketer has gone through such a turnaround. From the 2011-2012 series where a young Kohli got on the nerves of spectators like no modern cricketer has, flipping the bird, cursing often, and even getting fined for his conduct, and where as a batsman, save for the last Test, he appeared as if he did not even belong at this level. To the next series, where he put in one spellbinding performance after another, and then one after that, where he led India to its first ever series win on Australian soil, and that same crowd which booed him, began to cheer for him as a cricketer built in the same mould as their own.

Australian cricketers pride themselves on the passion they exhibit on the field, a kind of combativeness that both animates and, occasionally, threatens the game. And in Kohli, so unlike any Indian cricketer to have visited that country, Chappell and the rest of his country see an Australian in Indian colours.

Kohli, however, was quick to dismiss Chappell’s suggestion. He wasn’t Australian, he said shortly afterwards. Just the representation of a new India.

Which begs the question: just what exactly is this ‘new India’? How different are he and his colleagues from those that played, say, at the start of this century? Is Kohli a radical departure, if not in his skills, then at least in temperament from the era of the equally gifted but staid and dour personalities like Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid? And when exactly did this new India arrive on the cricket field? Did it start with Kohli, or did it move incrementally, from his forebears at the Lord’s team balcony when Sourav Ganguly infamously removed his shirt, through the era of the cricketer superstar from the hinterlands, MS Dhoni, and now to him?

It would be foolhardy to say which of the eras was more gifted, but there is a noticeable ease with which the current team under Kohli moves through the world. Even though many will point out that their achievements are limited, there appears to be little doubt in their minds about their newness, their special place in history. This has also coincided—and there is certainly a link here—with India becoming the undisputed nerve centre of cricket in the world.

The team has had its special moments—Test wins in England and South Africa, and most of all, the series win against Australia two years earlier. But this team, led by coach Ravi Shastri, has often been too quick to describe itself as the best ever Indian team, earning its members some deserved opprobrium.

When the Adelaide Test disaster unfolded where India fell to its lowest innings total of 36 runs, it appeared yet again proof of this team’s misplaced opinion of itself. This wasn’t a new India, it wasn’t even an old one. Had cricket come to an end last year on December 19th, there would have been no choice but to review the calendar year, even one so severely truncated, as one of the most humiliating ones for Indian cricket. It is not every day that an international team, let alone one so fancied as this Indian team, gets blown away in a single session, reduced to an inter-school-like innings score. All that would be remembered of 2020 for Indian cricket would be that scorecard, that string of soul-crushing single-digit scores registered against such fancied multimillionaire cricketers. The force of that humiliation was just so much.

And yet this is not how the year ended. Just a few days later, the team submitted proof of just why it believes it is so different from the teams that came

before it.

Missing its best batsman and captain, several of its first-choice bowlers and team regulars, led by the performances of two men not particularly favoured over the last few years (Ajinkya Rahane and R Ashwin) and a support cast of debutantes, this team crafted one of its finest moments in Melbourne. It wasn't just that they crushed Australia, but that they bore no bruises of the past few days, carried no doubts, no wounds.

The performance had the ring of a newness. If they threatened briefly with Indian cricket's worst on-field moment, days later, at the cusp of a new year, they presented it with hope. And hope, of course, is something that has been in short supply everywhere lately.

2020 has been an unusual year for cricket. The most remarkable thing about cricket in the year was that it took place at all. Tournaments were called off and postponed; there were the unusual sights of empty stadiums, virtual fans, pre-recorded audience noises; and for the first time, even Kohli went without making a single century in a calendar year. The pandemic has also ushered in several crises. Before Covid struck, a women's T20 World Cup had just been held—where Australia defeated India at a packed Melbourne Cricket Ground—with such success that it was felt it would lead to a deeper interest in the women's game. But then the pandemic struck and its after-effects continue in the women's format, with most boards moving laggardly over reinstituting women's games. Then there has been the churn—going on for some time—where the inequities between the wealthier and poorer boards have

THE PERFORMANCE HAD THE RING OF A NEWNESS. IF THEY THREATENED BRIEFLY WITH INDIAN CRICKET'S WORST ON-FIELD MOMENT, DAYS LATER, AT THE CUSP OF A NEW YEAR, THEY PRESENTED IT WITH HOPE. AND HOPE, OF COURSE, IS SOMETHING THAT HAS BEEN IN SHORT SUPPLY EVERYWHERE LATELY

been growing sharper, and the market becoming overwhelmingly more interested in short-format matches over the more prestigious Test format. Covid has hastened these processes. Uday Shankar, the man responsible for much of the boom that we see in modern cricket today, when stepping down from his post of chairman at Star & Disney India last year, warned that the current global model of cricket is unsustainable. The market, he told a media outlet, is interested in short-format cricket, and just a few Test matches that feature the Big Three of India, Australia and England. The rest of cricket as it functions today with its many bilateral cricket matches “make no sense”. “While a lot of things will come back to normal after the pandemic is over,” he warned,

“a lot of things will never come back to normal.”

For the Indian cricket team, the pandemic cut short a year when the team was expected to deliver on its promise of a new India. It had gone through 2019 reaching so close to a World Cup, and then failing miserably. 2020 with its T20 World Cup was expected to provide this team's redemption. But then the pandemic struck, and this tournament, like many others, got pushed aside.

We now enter a new year, with the team poised at what could be a breakthrough moment. A series victory against Australia, if achieved, would not be its first. But to achieve it without its best batsman and usual captain, and its frontline seamers against a near-full strength Australia, would eclipse even the achievements of the last series. Even a series draw, accompanied by fighting performances like the one seen during the Melbourne Test, would be commendable and propel the team to what should be an eventful year.

For, 2021 could be the year that sealed just how we remember this team. With cricket now returning to full steam, a tough and promising calendar—made more arduous by the pressures of biosecurity protocols—the team now travels to Sri Lanka, perhaps even to Zimbabwe, along with hosting several matches in India, including a strong English side. But among the most important ones would be the team's tour of England, where India will believe it can provide a far superior account of itself than the 3-1 drubbing it was subjected to two years ago and where it copped a lot of ridicule for suggesting it was the best touring Indian team in the last two decades. There is also a tour to South Africa at the end of the year where, given the recent poor form of the hosts, India will fancy its chances of registering its first Test series win on South African soil.

And then somewhere between these tournaments in October and November, India will host the T20 World Cup. If there is one thing that remains conspicuous by its absence in the team cabinet, it is the ICC trophy. Kohli, for all his greatness in limited overs' cricket, has never been able to win an ICC tournament. He came close in 2019 with the 50-over World Cup, but blew his chance with what he called “45 minutes of bad cricket”. Could 2021 be the year when he would finally prove that this indeed was a new India?

Most of the team's core members are approaching what is often categorised as a cricketer's peak. Kohli is now 32—a father to boot. Rohit Sharma, another father, is 33. Rahane, Ashwin, Jadeja, Mohammad Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, and a host of others are in their early 30s or just touching 30. It is the onset of early middle age. A time when cricketers' bodies retain the suppleness of youth, their eyes and hands as sharp as ever, while their minds become mature and calmer. Another four years or so, and time begins to chip at these strengths. And a deterioration follows inevitably.

Could Kohli and his colleagues use this prime, bang in the middle of a time when the world went topsy-turvy, to convince us once and forever of their special place in history? ■

SALON

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WHAT TO READ AND WATCH IN

2021



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Masters and Subversives

From Orhan Pamuk's plague novel to Kazuo Ishiguro's love story, from Jhumpa Lahiri's first Italian novel to Jeet Thayil's feminist testament

By Nandini Nair



(Clockwise from top) Jhumpa Lahiri;
Orhan Pamuk; Jeet Thayil; Kazuo Ishiguro

Nights of Plague

by Orhan Pamuk (Viking)

A historical novel that takes place during the third plague pandemic.

Whereabouts

by Jhumpa Lahiri (Hamish Hamilton)

Lahiri returns to her themes of exuberance and dread, attachment and estrangement. The woman at the centre wavers between stasis and movement, between the need to belong and the refusal to form ties. This is the first novel Lahiri has written in Italian and translated into English.

Klara and the Sun

by Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber & Faber)

A novel by the Nobel laureate that asks what does it mean to love. It tells the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches the behaviour of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass on the street. She remains hopeful that a customer will soon choose her.

First Person Singular

by Haruki Murakami (Harvill Secker)

The eight stories in this new collection are all told in the first person by a classic Murakami narrator. From nostalgic memories of youth, meditations on music, and an ardent love of baseball to dreamlike scenarios and invented jazz albums, together these stories challenge the boundaries between our minds and the exterior world.

The President's Daughter

by Bill Clinton and James Patterson

(Century)

Matthew Keating, a one-time Navy SEAL—and a past president—has always defended his family as staunchly as he has his country. Now those defences are under attack. A madman abducts Keating's teenage daughter, Melanie—turning every parent's deepest fear into a matter of national security. As the world watches in real time, Keating embarks on a one-man special-ops mission that tests his strengths: as a leader, a warrior and a father.

China Room

by Sunjeev Sahota (Hamish Hamilton)

Mehar, a young bride in rural 1929 Punjab, is trying to discover the identity of her new husband. She and her sisters-in-law, married to three brothers in a single ceremony, spend their days hard at work in the family's 'china room', sequestered from contact with the men. When Mehar develops a theory as to which of them is hers, a passion is ignited that will put more than one life at risk.

Harlem Shuffle

by Colson Whitehead (Hachette)

Set in 1960s Harlem, this book centres on Ray Carney, a furniture salesman who gets caught up in a heist gone wrong. What ensues is both family drama and crime saga as Carney finds himself leading a double life.

The Committed

by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Hachette)

The Committed follows the Sympathizer as he arrives in Paris



HARUKI MURAKAMI'S SHORT STORIES IN **FIRST PERSON SINGULAR** ARE ALL TOLD IN THE FIRST PERSON BY A CLASSIC MURAKAMI NARRATOR. THEY CHALLENGE THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OUR MINDS AND THE EXTERIOR WORLD

as a refugee. There he and his blood brother Bon try to escape their pasts and prepare for their futures by turning to drug dealing. Both literary thriller and a novel of ideas, it is a portrayal of commitment and betrayal.

Second Place

by Rachel Cusk (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
A woman invites a famed artist to visit the remote coastal region where she lives. His provocative presence provides the frame for a study of female fate and male privilege.

Names of the Women

by Jeet Thayil (Jonathan Cape)
From Mary of Magdala to Susanna the Barren, women whose stories were suppressed in the New Testament.

The Last Queen

by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (HarperCollins)
Daughter of the royal kennel keeper, Jindan Kaur became Maharaja Ranjit Singh's youngest and last queen. She became regent when her son Dalip, barely six years old, unexpectedly inherited the throne. Dedicated to protecting her son's heritage, Jindan distrusted the British and fought hard to keep them from annexing Punjab. Defying tradition, she stepped out of the *zenana* and conducted state business in public. A novel that brings alive one of the most fearless women of the nineteenth century.

Real Estate

by Deborah Levy (Hamish Hamilton)
The final instalment in the award-winning 'living autobiography' series is a meditation on home and the spectres that haunt it.

The Start-Up Wife

by Tahmima Anam (Hamish Hamilton)
Computer scientist Asha has her future all mapped out. But a chance meeting with an old classmate,

Cyrus, and his best friend, Jules, inspires her with a life-changing idea: building a social networking app that could bring meaning to millions of lives. This is a novel about dreaming big, speaking up and fighting to be where you belong.

In Search of the Distance

by Anuk Arudpragasam (PRHI)
It's about a young man (Krishan) after the death of his grandmother's former caretaker (Rani). The novel largely takes place in Krishan's thoughts from the moment he finds out about Rani's death, through his train journey from Colombo to Rani's village, and his final arrival at the cremation.

Murder at the Mushaira

by Raza Mir (Aleph)
Reminiscent of *The Name of the Rose*, this is a murder mystery, literary novel, and a work of historical fiction.

Song of Draupadi

by Ira Mukhoty (Aleph)
A novel revolving around the epic figure of Draupadi.

A Net for Small Fishes

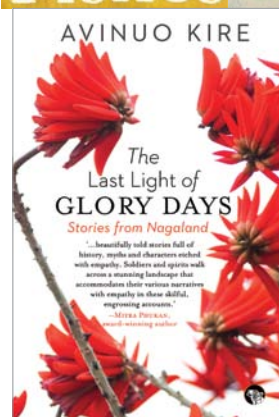
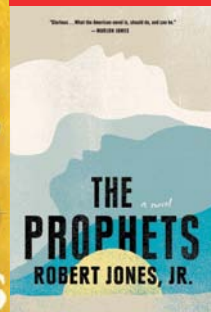
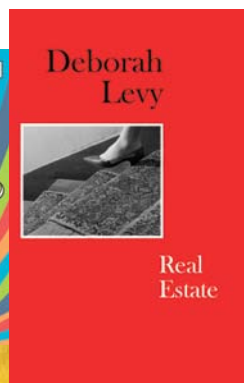
by Lucy Jago (Bloomsbury)
Based on one of the greatest scandals of the 17th century, *A Net for Small Fishes* explores the twisting corridors of power with the friendship of two women at its heart. It's a dive into the pitch-dark waters of the Jacobean court.

One of Them

by Annie Zaidi (Aleph)
A novel about people who live on the margins of a big city.

The Prophets

by Robert Jones Jr (Hachette)
A unique novel about gay love and slavery and what happens when brutality threatens the purest form of serenity.



Asoca

by Irwin Allan Sealy (Viking)
An imagined memoir of Ashoka, the emperor who ruled most of the Indian subcontinent and played a pivotal role in the spread of Buddhism from India to other parts of Asia in the third century BCE.

A Time outside This Time

by Amitava Kumar (Aleph)
A novel about fake news, memory, and how truth gives way to fiction

Hostage

by Clare Mackintosh (Sphere)
The atmosphere on board the inaugural non-stop flight from London to Sydney is electric.

Numerous celebrities are rumoured to be among the passengers in business class and journalists will be waiting on the ground to greet the plane. But the plane has barely taken off when Mina (a flight attendant) receives a chilling note from an anonymous passenger, someone intent on ensuring the plane never reaches its destination.

Club You to Death

by **Anuja Chauhan** (HarperCollins)

When a personal trainer is found asphyxiated to death under an overloaded barbell at the posh Delhi Turf Club, on the eve of the club elections, it is first thought to be a grisly freak accident. But when it comes to light that his protein

Viral

by **Robin Cook** (Macmillan)

A medical thriller featuring a deadly airborne disease set in New York City from the master of the genre himself.

Theeyoor Chronicles

by **N Prabhakaran**

(translated by **Jayasree Kalathil**) (HarperCollins)

A journalist goes to Theeyoor—‘the land of fire’—to investigate the unnaturally large number of suicides and disappearances in the city. After completing this project, however, Theeyoor refuses to leave his consciousness, and he decides to write its history.

NAMES OF THE WOMEN BY JEET THAYIL REIMAGINES THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM THE POINTS OF VIEW OF THE WOMEN WHO BECAME THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST AND WHOSE ROLES HAVE BEEN ERASED FROM THE GOSPELS

shake had been laced with a lethal dose of a popular party drug, it can no longer be denied that one of the members of the Club is a cold-blooded killer.

The Cage

by **Amrita Pritam**

(translated by **Rita Banerji**) (Hachette)
Amrita Pritam was one of the earliest feminist writers of modern India; her most notable work written in 1950, the Punjabi novel *Pinjar*, was the foremost approach to Partition and its aftermath through the eyes of a woman. This translation of Pritam's iconic work revives a poignant feminist work of Indian literature.

Four Strokes of Luck

by **Perumal Murugan**

(translated by **Nandini Krishnan**) (Juggernaut)

Seemaatti is unable to live without her beloved buffalo. Kumaresu has found success in business, but he has never been able to overcome rejection by his childhood sweetheart. Readers can once again enjoy classic Murugan themes of loneliness, outcasts, and bonds between humans and animals.

The Lesbian Cow and Other Stories

by **Indu Menon** (Eka)

Indu Menon is known for her liberal, progressive writing. She uses raw images, bold language that

verges on the shocking, and an avenging spirit in her characters that lets no one have an easy pass.

Turn a Blind Eye

by **Jeffery Archer** (St. Martin's Press)

Newly promoted to Detective Inspector, William Warwick is tasked with a dangerous new line of work, to go undercover and expose crime of another kind: corruption at the heart of the Metropolitan Police Force. Along with detectives Rebecca Pankhurst and Nicky Bailey, his team is focused on following Detective Jerry Summers, a young officer whose lifestyle exceeds his income. But the investigation risks being compromised when Nicky falls for Summers.

The Loves of Yuri

by **Jerry Pinto** (Speaking Tiger)

A coming-of-age story about friendship and first loves and the great city of Bombay. Set in the 1980s, this is the first in a trilogy of novels that trace the emotional and intellectual journey of the protagonist, Yuri, from early adolescence to late youth.

The Tombstone in My Garden

by **Temsula Ao** (Speaking Tiger)

Tesmla Ao depicts life in Nagaland, from things as simple as a lily that will not bloom, or a day in the life of a band of workers in Dimapur railway station, to the darker mysteries of the tombstone of a husband who had left only bitter memories behind.

The Last Light of Glory Days: Stories from Nagaland

by **Avinuo Kire** (Speaking Tiger)

A collection of stories from Nagaland, filled with folklore. Kire illuminates the lives of her people in the picturesque towns and villages, the mustard fields and fragrant forests. She also talks of the trauma and violence the people have endured due to conflicts. ■

THE RUSTLE OF IDEAS

The art of



(Clockwise from top) Salman Rushdie; Sonia Faleiro; Manu S Pillai; Amartya Sen

everything personal and political By Nandini Nair

Languages of Truth

by Salman Rushdie (Hamish Hamilton)

In his latest collection of nonfiction, Rushdie brings together essays, criticism, and speeches that focus on his relationship with the written word. Gathering pieces written between 2003 and 2020, *Languages of Truth* chronicles his intellectual engagement with momentous cultural shifts.

How to Avoid a Climate Disaster

by Bill Gates (Allen Lane)

Gates explains why we need to work toward net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases, and details what we need to do to achieve this goal. He gives us a clear-eyed description of the challenges we face.

Pride, Prejudice & Punditry: The Essential Shashi Tharoor

by Shashi Tharoor (Aleph)

Fiction and nonfiction, including over 25 pieces that have never been published before.

The Light of Asia

by Jairam Ramesh (Viking)

The history of a poem that inspired everyone, from Gandhi to Nehru and Churchill. *The Light of Asia* is a poetic narration of the life of Buddha written by Sir Edwin Arnold. Ramesh traces the original poem's history and its impact.

Restless as Mercury: My Life as a Young Man

by MK Gandhi

(edited by Gopalkrishna Gandhi) (Aleph)

The extraordinary story of the householder and lawyer who would become the Mahatma—told in his own words. This book complements his incomplete autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

The Good Girls

by Sonia Faleiro (Viking)

In the summer of 2014, India woke up to the news of two teenage girls found hanging from a tree in Katra, Uttar Pradesh. A photo found its way into the digital world. An investigation followed and arrests were made. Faleiro reveals what happened that night through the voices of the girls' families, those who saw them last, and the legal and medical officials who were on the case.

Home in the World

by Amartya Sen (Allen Lane)

The memoir of the Nobel laureate, which seeks to answer the question, where is 'home'? For Amartya Sen home has been many places—Dhaka where he grew up, Santiniketan where he was raised, Calcutta where he first studied economics, and Trinity College, Cambridge. This is a book of ideas, from Marx to Keynes, as much about people as places.

The Heartbeat of Trees

by Peter Wohlleben (translated by Jane Billinghamurst) (Viking)

A treatise on the ancient bond between humans and nature. Drawing on new scientific discoveries, *The Heartbeat of Trees* reveals the profound interactions humans can have with nature, exploring the language of the forest and the consciousness of plants. He reveals a cosmos where humans are a part of nature, and where conservation is not just about saving trees—it's about saving ourselves too.

The Musical Human: A History of Life on Earth

by Michael Spitzer (Bloomsbury)

A musicologist tells the story of humankind's relationship with



music across evolutionary time, from the birth of the lullaby through to AI generated music, arguing that music is the most important thing we ever did; it is a fundamental part of what makes us human.

The Indian Power Elite

by Sanjaya Baru (Viking)

An examination of the nature of power and elitism in the economic and political context of India. The morphology of the Indian power elite presents a complex structure, which Baru aims to deconstruct—whether it is the civil services, landed gentry or the remnants of the feudal elite.

The Soul of a Woman: Rebel Girls, Impatient Love, and Long Life

by Isabel Allende (Bloomsbury)

An autobiographical meditation from the bestselling Chilean novelist on feminism and what women want.

Unfinished: A Memoir

by Priyanka Chopra Jonas (Viking)

Unfinished takes readers from Chopra's childhood to winning the beauty pag-

eants that launched her acting career. From her dual-continent career as an actor and producer to losing her father to cancer to marrying Nick Jonas, the book covers it all.

On Nationalism

by Eric Hobsbawm (Hachette)

Eric Hobsbawm's writing on nationalism explores some of the critical historical insights he brings to this contentious subject.

This Life at Play: A Memoir

By Girish Karnad (translated from the Kannada by Srinath Perur and Girish Karnad) (HarperCollins)

Girish Karnad's memoirs—first published in Kannada in 2011—were to be translated into English by Karnad himself, but he could only finish part of it. The translation has now been completed by Srinath Perur and is available to English readers for the very first time. From his early life, growing up in Dharwad and engaging with local theatre, to his education in Mumbai and as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford, his career as a publisher, his successes and travails in the film industry, and his personal and writerly life—Karnad's voice shines through.

Virus

by Pranay Lal (Penguin)

Lal presents the wide array of benefits that viruses provide and helps develop a more sane and appreciative perspective of the microbial world. This is the story of the origin of viruses and their role in evolution and how their presence inside and outside our bodies has shaped us.

Everybody

by Olivia Laing

(WW Norton & Company)

Olivia Laing charts the long struggle for bodily freedom, using the life of the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich to explore gay rights and sexual liberation, feminism, and the civil rights movement.

Ancient India: Culture of Contradictions

by Upinder Singh (Aleph)

An examination of the contradictions and conundrums of ancient India.

The Hard Crowd

by Rachel Kushner (Scribner)

The first essay collection from the author of *The Flamethrowers* and *The Mars Room*. She takes us on a journey through a Palestinian refugee camp, an illegal motorcycle race, 1970s wild-cat strikes in Fiat factories, her love of classic cars, and her life as a young woman in San Francisco.

How Prime Ministers Decide

by Neeraj Chowdhury (Aleph)

Based on several hundred interviews, and the author's interactions with numerous PMs, the book provides the inside story of some of the most important (and sometimes controversial) decisions ever taken at the highest levels of government.

Winged Stallions and Wicked Mares: The Horse in Indian Myth and History

by Wendy Doniger (Speaking Tiger)

Horses are not indigenous to India. And yet, folklore and popular culture is full of stories about them. In this book, Doniger examines the horse's significance throughout Indian history, from the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, followed by the people who became the Mughals (who imported Arabian horses) and the British (who imported thoroughbreds and Walers).

The Tale of the Horse: A History of India on Horseback

by Yashaswini

Chandra (Picador)

In this debut, Chandra takes us on the trail of the horse into and within India. What follows is a journey, covering caravan-trade routes originating in Central Asia and Tibet and sea routes from the Middle East. The history of the horse in India, mirroring that of its human inhabitants, is a tale of migration and permanent intermingling.

Tagore and Gandhi: Walking Alone, Walking Together

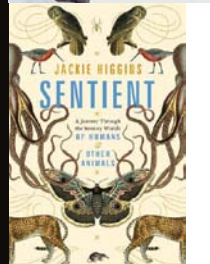
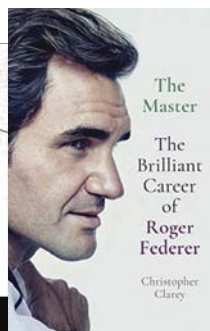
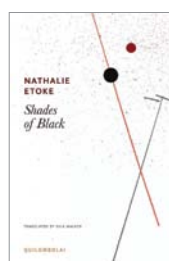
by Rudrangshu Mukherjee (Aleph)

The first in-depth study of the deep bond between Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore.

We Are Bellingcat

by Eliot Higgins (Bloomsbury)

Eliot Higgins is the founder of Bellingcat, an investigative website which in its short life has broken scoop after scoop. This book tells the story of how this school dropout created a new category of information-gathering and galvanised citizen journalists to solve some of the biggest stories, and how big data can be harnessed to protect democracy. It delves into some of Bellingcat's most successful investigations, such as the truth about the downing of Malaysia





Sumana Roy

Priyanka Chopra Jonas



Flight 17 over Ukraine, the sourcing of weapons in the Syrian Civil War and scoops into journalistic phone hacking.

Spy Stories: Inside the Secret Worlds of ISI and RAW

by **Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark** (Juggernaut)

With unprecedented access to RAW and ISI, the writers talk about the inner workings of these two rival agencies.

The Right to Sex

by **Amia Srinivasan** (Bloomsbury)

A dismantling of the politics and ethics of sex in this world, animated by the hope of a different one, written by a young intellectual.

Creation

by **John-Paul Stonard** (Bloomsbury)

The story of how people all over the globe, from prehistory to the present, have created images in order to understand the world they inhabit. It explores the remarkable endurance of this creative impulse, and by tracing the diversity of artistic forms through the ages, offers an introduction to world art.

The World of Raja Ravi Varma: Princes and Statesmen

by **Manu S Pillai** (Juggernaut)

Pillai writes of India's princely states and the ways they stood up to the Raj, through Ravi Varma's portraits of

prominent late nineteenth century rulers, to tell the stories of those states.

India Reborn: British-Colonial Depredations and India's Revolutionary Comeback

by **Prasenjit K Basu** (Hachette)

A history of India's subjugation by Britain, its dire economic consequences which outlasted Britain's colonial presence, and the real story of the many intertwined struggles that ultimately ended that rule.

In Search of the Divine: Living Practices of Sufism in India

by **Rana Safvi** (Hachette)

Safvi journeys into the fascinating history of the arrival of Sufi saints in India and the impact they have had on the lives of people across communities through the living traditions of India's major *dargahs* today.

The Fifteen: The Women Who Shaped the Constitution of India

by **Angellica Aribam and Akash Satyawali** (Hachette)

A look at the making of the Indian Republic through profiles of the 15 women who were a part of the Constituent Assembly of India and active participants in the drafting of the Constitution. Tracing the history of the making of India's Constitution, it provides insights into these women.

Of Grass and Gardens

by **Sumana Roy** (OUP)

This work studies the life and writings of five cultural icons from Bengal, artists who were neither botanists nor environmentalists but wrote about and around plant life. Weaving biography, cultural history, and literary criticism, Roy studies the plant philosophy of several literary and spiritual personalities against the background of the scientific and cultural developments in early twentieth century Bengal.

A Luxury Called Health: The Art, the Science and the Trickery of Medicine

by **Kavery Nambisan** (Speaking Tiger)

A doctor and writer draws upon her experiences as a surgeon over four decades in rural and small-town India—from Bihar and UP to Karnataka and Tamil Nadu—to show how tragically and, indeed, criminally, the country's health system and private medical practitioners have failed us.

Sentient

by **Jackie Higgins** (Picador)

This book assembles a menagerie of zoological creatures—from land, air, sea from all four corners of the globe—to understand what it means to be human. Through their eyes, ears, tongues, noses and more, we embark on a journey to discover how we sense and make sense of the world.

Landscapes of Loss: The Story of an Indian Drought

by Kavitha Iyer (HarperCollins)

This is the story of Marathwada—its stunning basalt hills, scorched brown earth, the flaming reds and pinks the locals wear—through the accounts of its people: its marginal farmers, Dalits, landless labourers, farm widows, and its children.

Indian Botanical Art: From the Moghuls to Today

by Martyn Rix (Roli)

A collection of botanical drawings from the colonial period of Indian history, which melds together scientific precision and artistic grace. Each section on flowers, herbal plants, fruit, shrubs and trees contains an introduction to the vast variety of indigenous plants found in India.

Enter Stage Right: The Alkazi / Padamsee Family Memoir

by Feisal Alkazi (Speaking Tiger)

In this memoir, Feisal Alkazi recounts the story of the Alkazis and the Padamsees—two families who straddled the worlds of art, theatre

and literature, and between them, pioneered some of the most important events in post-independence India. While the story of the Alkazi and Padamsee families may read like a mini history of contemporary theatre, Feisal Alkazi laces it with stories that only an 'insider' would know.

Pulwama

by Rahul Pandita (Juggernaut)

The inside story of how one man in the National Investigation Agency (NIA) cracked the Pulwama suicide attack case. The investigating agencies were initially clueless about who had planned the attack and how. It is after months of painstaking work that the story became clearer.

The Master: The Brilliant Career of Roger Federer

by Christopher Clarey (John Murray)

Based on 20 years of one-on-one interviews with Federer and with access to his inner circle, including his coaches and key rivals, sports reporter Christopher Clarey tells the story of Federer's life.

The Three Khans

by Kaveree Bamzai (Westland)

As the three Ms of Mandir, Masjid and Market unfold, a trio of stars emerge to define the nation. Three Khans dominate India's narrative over three decades. With their distinct following, their specific body of work and their irresistible resilience, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan have changed the game.

India versus China: Why They Are Not Friends

by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut)

India and China comprise nearly 40 per cent of the world's population. In recent years, the uneasy peace following the 1962 war has been broken by several military confrontations and the growing power asymmetry between the two countries. This book helps one understand the complex and



Isabel Allende

troubled relationship between Asia's two largest countries, and how these might develop in the future.

The Saravana Bhavan Murder: The Inside Story of the Tycoon Who Became a Killer

by Nirupama Subramanian (Juggernaut)

P Rajagopal, founder and owner of Saravana Bhavan began life as a poor village boy, but with his drive, ambition, and the superb quality of the food he served, he created a brand. Then the twice-married Rajagopal became obsessed with Jeevajyothi, the young daughter of an employee. The fall of one of India's most successful restaurateurs is a story of an entrepreneurial genius whose obsession turned him into a cold-blooded killer.

Top 10 Game Changing Moments in Indian Economy

by Bibek Debroy (Rupa)

Debroy discusses the key inflection points in the Indian economy, from the nationalisation of banks to demonetisation.

Radical Cartography

by William Rankin (Picador)

A look at how we represent the world through maps, suggesting that maps aren't just an end in themselves, but a way of confronting novel problems and finding creative visual solutions.

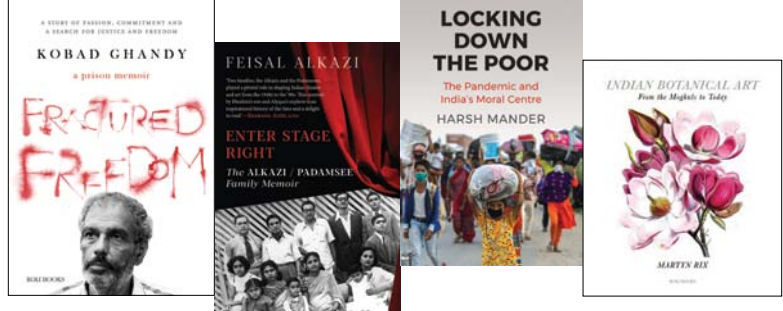
Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe

by Niall Ferguson (Allen Lane)

Drawing from history, economics and network science, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe* is a global post-mortem for a plague year.

George Saunders





IN *HOME IN THE WORLD*, AMARTYA SEN ASKS WHERE IS ‘HOME’? FOR HIM HOME HAS BEEN MANY PLACES—DHAKA WHERE HE GREW UP, SANTINIKETAN, CALCUTTA AND TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Ferguson describes the pathologies that have done us so much damage: from imperial hubris to bureaucratic red tape and online schisms.

Fractured Freedom:

A Prison Memoir

by Kobad Ghandy (Roli)

Dedicated to his inspiration, his late wife, the book details Kobad Ghandy's early life—from his time studying in London to his return to India and introduction to the Dalit Panthers and radical politics. It gives us an insight into his decade-long journey of arrests and time in prisons across India.

Ayodhya and Beyond: National Hindutva Awakening

by Subramanian Swamy (Rupa)

Subramanian Swamy goes beyond the headlines to discuss the road map for a Hindutva awakening beyond Ayodhya.

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life

by George Saunders (Random House)

For the last 20 years, Saunders has been teaching a class on the Russian short story to his MFA students at Syracuse University. Here he shares a version of that class, offering some of what he and his students have discovered together over the years. The seven essays are for anyone interested in how fiction works and why it's more relevant than ever. It explores the essence of great writing and how it works on the mind.

Shades of Black

by Nathalie Etoke (translated by Gila Walker) (Seagull Books)

Focusing on recent and ongoing topics in the US, including the murder of George Floyd, police brutality, the complex symbolism of Barack Obama and Kamala Harris, Etoke examines Black existence today.

Shikwa-e-Hind: The Political Future of Indian Muslims

by Mujibur Rehman (Simon & Schuster)

What is the political future of Indian Muslims? Over the years, deliberations have occurred with regard to the economic or cultural identity of Muslims because it was presumed that the political future is ascertained in the Indian constitution. The rise of majoritarianism as an electoral issue has altered that situation.

The Taste of Literature

by Chandras Choudhury

(Simon & Schuster)

From Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay to Vikram Chandra and Irene Nemirovsky to Raj Kamal Jha, the reader will find an eclectic array of essays. Each essay is a few pages short, and covers matters from Hindu nationalism to questions of myth, history and the realist novel.

Locking Down the Poor: The Pandemic and India's Moral Centre

by Harsh Mander (Speaking Tiger)

A book about a lockdown that should never have been. With stories of the suffering of the migrant workers and the homeless, and data about the extent of their destitution, Mander shows how the Indian state and the

middle class wilfully abandoned the country's poor and vulnerable.

Exiles of the New Frontier: Epics of the Homeless in India

by Ashwin Parulkar (Speaking Tiger)

Containing over 100 life histories—of homeless men and women across in Delhi—the book examines why and how people become homeless, how they survive on the streets and how some of them exit the state of homelessness but many never do. Ashwin Parulkar has worked for nearly a decade among this demographic.

Leopard Diaries

by Sanjay Gubbi (Westland)

An account of the Indian leopard by Sanjay Gubbi, winner of the Green Oscar. The leopard is often overlooked in the Indian wildlife scenario given the media obsession with lions, tigers and elephants. But this hardy predator is found all over the country often in close conjunction with urban settlements. It has been at the forefront of the human-animal conflict in several places and often subject to the ire of the locals.

The Many Lives of Agyeya

by Akshaya Mukul (Context)

A complex man and a literary giant, and deeply involved with the social politics of the time, Agyeya was worshipped and reviled for his unconventional views and unorthodox personal life. This biography is as much an account of the life of an important figure from Indian history as it is a slant-wise look at the history of a newly independent India, by the author of *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India*. ■



True to Life

BIOPICS AND
ADAPTATIONS
ADD TO THE
THRILL

By Divya Unny

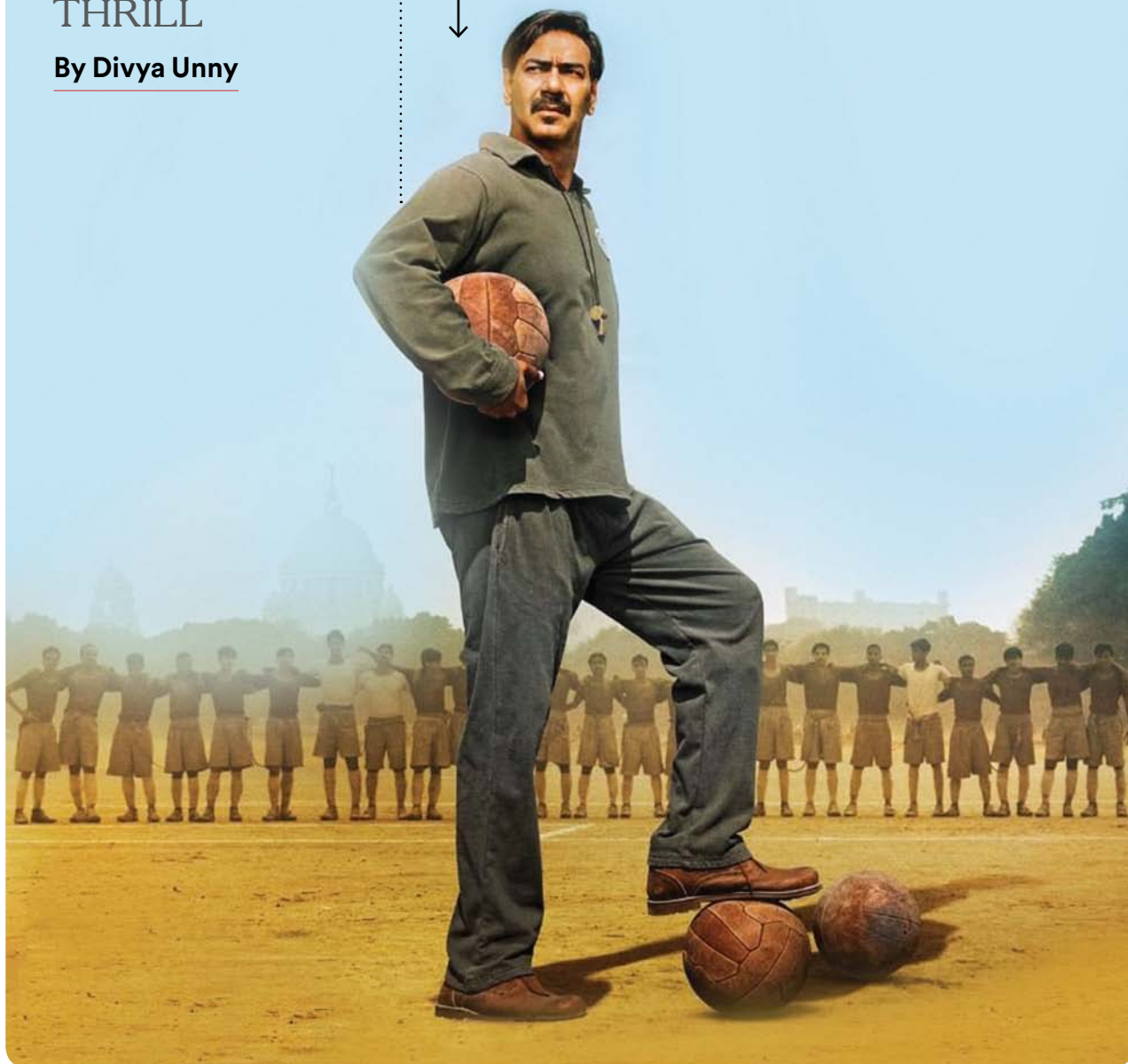
MAIDAAN

Directors: **Amit Ravindernath Sharma, Zeel Thacker**

Actors: **Ajay Devgn, Priyamani, Ansuman Bhagat**

Medium: **Theatres** Releases: **October 15**

The story of the 'golden age' of Indian football. Ajay Devgn plays coach Syed Abdul Rahim who is known as one of the greatest football gurus India has ever seen. *Maidaan* is about the triumph and turbulence the team faced in the '50s and '60s. Rahim guided the Indian team to gold medals at the 1951 and the 1962 Asian Games. Under him India also reached the semi-finals of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, which is still considered one of our greatest achievements in football.



THE WHITE TIGER ↗

Director: **Ramin Bahrani**

Actors: **Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Rajkummar Rao, Adarsh Gourav**

Medium: **Netflix** Releases: **January 22**

The screen adaptation of Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, promises to be interesting. This is a story that unpacks a complex mix of poverty, ambition and globalisation within new-age India, through the eyes of a sharp young man who could even kill for his dreams. The biggest challenge would be to match up to Adiga's book.



Director: **Kabir Khan**

Actors: **Ranveer Singh, Deepika Padukone, Pankaj Tripathi**

Medium: **Theatres** Expected: **2021**

This is one of those films that could raise spirits, in the way *Lagaan* did. India's epic World Cup win of 1983 has been recreated with Ranveer Singh playing the part of Kapil Dev who led the team from the front.

LAAL SINGH CHADDHA

Director: **Advait Chandan**

Actors: **Aamir Khan,**

Kareena Kapoor, Mona Singh

Medium: **Theatres** Releases: **December 25**

If there was ever to be an Indian counterpart to Tom Hanks, it was always Aamir Khan, not just in terms of acting skill, but personality too. So when Aamir plays Forrest Gump in the official remake of Hanks' film, we have much to look forward to. *Laal Singh Chaddha* was to release last Christmas and has been delayed by an entire year.





Streaming in 2021

BOMBAY BEGUMS

Netflix

Directed by Alankrita Shrivastava and with actors such as Pooja Bhatt and Shahana Goswami, this contemporary urban Indian story tells of five women, across generations, who wrestle with desire, ethics, personal crises and vulnerabilities to own their ambitions.

TANDAV

Amazon Prime

Saif Ali Khan emerges as a political tycoon and a character who spares nothing and no one when it comes to his political ambitions. We hear it's on the lines of *House of Cards*; if that's true, Saif has Kevin Spacey's shoes to fill in terms of performance.

FAMILY MAN, SEASON 2

Amazon Prime

Manoj Bajpayee returns as the unassuming intelligence officer on his way to crack a case even more crucial than the first one.

DELHI CRIME, SEASON 2

Netflix

The Emmy award-winning show promises to be grittier and even more impactful in exposing the brutalities against women in northern India.

A MARRIED WOMAN

Alt Balaji

The adaptation of a popular novella by the same name, this is a love story between two New Delhi women set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992.

MUMBAI DIARIES 26/11

Amazon Prime

Capturing the aftermath of the terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008, this series focuses on the happenings at a hospital where several of the injured were admitted and the staff and patients were put in the line of fire.



GANGUBAI KATHIAWADI

Director: **Sanjay Leela Bhansali**

Actors: **Alia Bhatt, Ajay Devgn, Emraan Hashmi**

Medium: **Theatres** Expected: **2021**

While *Sadak 2* did no favours to Alia Bhatt, her role as Gangubai might prove to be another pinnacle in her career. Gangubai Kothewali, a powerful woman in the '60s, was also known as the 'Madam of Kamathipura' for her connections with the underworld. With Bhansali's epic visualisation and re-creation skills of an era gone by, *Gangubai* could be an important female protagonist on screen in 2021.



DESERT DOLPHIN

Director: **Manjari Makijany**

Actors: **Waheeda Rehman, Amrit Maghera, Jonathan Readwin**

Medium: **Netflix** Expected: **2021**

This is story of a teenage girl from rural Rajasthan gunning to become the next skateboarding champion of the country. A tale of hope and dreams coming alive and lives being transformed despite countless odds.



RAJEEV MASAND

Role Call

There is talk that **Rajkumar Hirani** has zeroed in on **Taapsee Pannu** to star opposite **Shah Rukh Khan** in his next film, which is reportedly a comedy about immigration. No official announcement has been made yet, but industry insiders say Taapsee has been asked to match SRK's dates for the first schedule of the film that is expected to begin shooting in the second quarter of the year. Taapsee, who has frequently described her co-star as "the most charming man I've ever met", has shot three films back to back, but will focus on Hirani's project as soon as she wraps her *Run Lola Run* remake *Loop Lapeta*.

In other big casting news, despite widespread reports that **Kriti Sanon** has been signed to star as Sita opposite **Prabhas** in the role of Lord Ram in *Tanhaji* director **Om Raut**'s Ramayana story *Adipurush*, industry insiders say it is not a 'done deal'. Raut reportedly has his heart set on National Award-winning *Mahanat* star **Keerthy Suresh** with whom negotiations are still on. The film's producer T-Series honcho **Bhushan Kumar** thinks Kriti will give the film the 'pan-India' appeal he is hoping for, but Raut is convinced Keerthy's commanding screen presence is a better fit for the part.

Now Streaming

At least two 'inside-Bollywood' streaming shows are currently in the works. Contrary to initial reports that the **Madhuri Dixit** project produced by Dharma is a remake of the French show *Call My Agent!*, sources say it is in fact an original script in which Dixit plays an ageing diva who suddenly goes missing one day. Her *Beta* co-star **Sanjay Kapoor** is reportedly playing her husband, and **Manav Kaul** her lover. The show is meant to be a drama, not a situational comedy like the French series it was believed to be based on.

However, it turns out that a Hindi remake of *Call My Agent!* is also in

production. The French show about a talent management agency in Paris and the hoops its agents must jump through to keep their starry clients permanently happy and employed has amassed a considerable fan following after all three seasons began streaming on Netflix. Now there is talk that *Inside Edge* and *Lipstick under My Burkha* actress **Aahana Kumra** has been recruited to star in a *desi* remake of that show.

Both Indian shows are expected to feature popular film and television actors in cameos, playing themselves, borrowing a leaf out of *Entourage*, arguably the most popular 'inside-showbiz' television series.

A Bold Generation

It's refreshing to see the younger generation of movie stars leading their lives without fear of judgement or unsolicited public opinion. There was a time when actors did their best to hide their romances from the public glare, but the Instagram generation recognises the value of piquing people's curiosity and interest through some mystery.

Sidharth Malhotra and **Kiara Advani** didn't show up in each other's photographs and videos from their New Year getaway to the Maldives, yet they made no effort to hide telltale signs that they were vacationing together. Their respective swimming, cycling, breakfast and lounging photos looked practically identical—except that each only figured in their own posts.

The same is true of **Ishaan Khatter** and **Ananya Pandey** who mostly posted their own photos and videos, also vacationing in the Maldives, without caring that it was clear to anyone who chose to notice that they were taken in the same locations. In one of his Instagram stories, Ishaan did post a distant photograph of his *Khaali Peeli* co-star and girlfriend, and in one post he credited her



for 'additional photography'. When they arrived at Mumbai airport on their return, the pair sportingly smiled for the paparazzi.

Also 'papped' at the airport on their return from their New Year's getaway in Goa were **Kartik Aaryan** and **Janhvi Kapoor** who didn't exactly pose for the shutterbugs but didn't break into a sweat on being photographed together either.

Talk to old timers and they'll tell you how stars who were dating on the down-low, frequently travelled separately, timing their flights apart so as not to be 'caught' by the press. Or how they'd use back exits at airports, restaurants, and five-star hotels to escape pesky photographers who'd staked out at the front gate after being tipped off by a hotel employee or a fellow diner at the restaurant.

Second Wind

When **Alaya Furniturewala** (at the time she was Alia; subsequently advised to change her name to avoid confusion with **Alia Bhatt**) reached out to **Anurag Kashyap** some two years ago, she was only hoping he might offer her some advice after looking at her showreel. The young girl (and daughter of actress **Pooja Bedi**) had compiled a seven-minute sizzle reel of her auditioning to popular scenes from famous movies so filmmakers might judge her potential on the basis of that.

But Anurag, she remembers, was dismissive: "He said he

doesn't make the kind of movies that I was interested in."

She said she didn't want a job, just his feedback. She says he watched the video intently, and immediately after, said he had just the role for her. It's how she landed her second film, as-yet-untitled but completed. It was the first film she signed, although she only shot for it after *Jawaani Jaaneman* came out in January last year.

"Working with Anurag Sir has been such a great experience. He really expects you to think. He gives you the scene but you don't just go through the motions. You're encouraged to think like the character and perform accordingly," she gushes. "It was also very different from making a film like *Jawaani Jaaneman* because Anurag would put us into a car, drive out a distance, then stop and say, 'Okay, this looks like a good location for *that* scene.' And you just had to be on your toes."

Thank You, Dear Reader

It feels like only yesterday that I was commissioned to write this column, the idea being to share the crazy stories from the Bollywood trenches, the idiosyncrasies of movie stars, the behind-the-scenes deal-making, the casting ins and outs and just about everything that was 'normal' in showbiz but was pretty much unheard of in the real world. As it turns out, it's been a little over 10 years I've been writing this column and now it's time to say goodbye and thank you.

It was a joy (and sometimes horror) discovering how this business works, how the wheels turn, and in learning that there is in fact a method to the madness. Over hours and hours of conversations with filmmakers, actors, writers, agents, managers and just about everyone who works on a movie set, one came closer to bringing you the stories from behind the scenes of the dream factory.

Only in this business will the creative team at a studio forget to wipe down a white board that lists a director under the 'cons' side of a 'pros and cons' list for a film they were in negotiations to bankroll before a meeting with the very director and his team—who were naturally horrified to discover what the studio thought of him.

The objective was always and only to bring you, the reader, just a little bit closer to all the drama and the passion that goes into the making of movies. What I learnt in these years reporting this column—that this is a business driven by men and women who work incredibly hard to put their own (or others') dreams on the screen. Many of them are handsomely paid, others not so much, and yet what binds them is their love for the pictures, telling what they hope will be a compelling story, and the satisfaction of standing at the back of a cinema hall and watching the room erupt in laughter, or break into tears at all the right moments. It takes a special kind of madness to do that job over and over again; this column was an effort to capture that madness.

Thank you for taking this ride with me. ■





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