

A DISPATCH FROM THE TUNNELS OF TERROR
ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN ON THE GREAT BETRAYAL



OPEN



1 MARCH 2021 / ₹50

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MODI IN THE MARKETPLACE

THE DESTIGMATISATION OF WEALTH



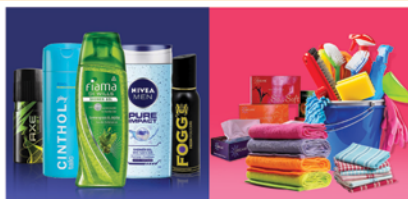
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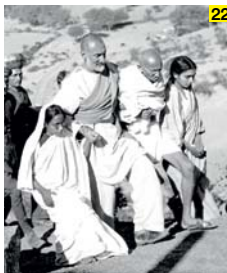
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OPEN MAIL

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

In the popular Indian imagination post-1857, violence and non-violence have come to be seen as contradictory strategies of resistance ('The Last Mutiny' by Pramod Kapoor, February 22nd, 2021). The British repression of the war by Indian sepoys in the East India army was brutal. The colonial psyche was so scarred by the Indian rebellion that everything it did after the British Raj took over from the Company reflected that brutality. This is one of the most important psychological reasons why armed resistances have failed again and again both in the struggle for freedom and even after that against the state. That most Indians remain stuck in hand-to-mouth lives has only made it worse for upper-class armed agitators, unlike in the US where the revolutionaries were not constrained by 'circumstances of existence'. This is something Gandhi understood acutely. And this is why the masses also understood Gandhi. Even today, when incomes have grown manifold, most Indians intuitively reject even the slightest hint of aggression in any protest.

Neeta Nair

TALK TO EXPERTS

Let Indian farmers and governments talk to various groups of agricultural experts until a satisfactory solution for long-term profitable production and marketing is reached ('Punjab and Protest' by Nonica Datta, February 22nd, 2021). There is no need to talk to the general public. What does the public know about the intricacies of agriculture, economics, production and agri-marketing? Not every voting citizen is an expert. Even an expert in a single domain does not know about other domains related to this problem. Civil society is not the right platform for every deliberation. This is not a problem that can be solved through media debates. The aggrieved constituencies should be discussing with

experts on those issues for policy solutions. Nothing more is needed.

Vasudeva Rao P

AFTER AMMA

Rajinikanth's absence has made VK Sasikala's return to politics after her prison sentence even more relevant ('AIADMK's Sasikala Reconciliation Problem', February 22nd, 2021). While the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam might be feeling assured after an alliance with its old friends, Kamal Haasan and MK Alagiri are going to divide the voter base that all these players commonly rely on. A day after Sasikala left jail, the residence of Jayalalithaa was converted into a memorial by the state government. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is set to



make the most of the Amma-Sasikala relationship.

MR Jayanthi

Sasikala's return to Chennai by road had all the signs of AIADMK's plan to make her play a central role in Tamil Nadu politics very soon.

CKR Nathan

RIGHT TIME

This is the right time to prove that 'less government, more governance' is not a mere slogan ('The Rites of Liberation' by Swapan Dasgupta, February 15th, 2021). This year's Union Budget finally discarded the outdated formula of wellbeing for the promise of growth. This will liberate in the most complete way India's creative and entrepreneurial energies. So, many years after Independence, we are only now beginning to break our chains. Our aggregate stock of assets, infrastructure and capital is one of the largest in the world. Yet, what has been missing all these years after 1991's faltering steps is our individual capability to convert this stock into productive resources. This is our true inflection point.

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By S PRASANARAJAN

THE TOOLKIT OF DISSENT

WHEN DISSENT IS what we are talking about, and when governments are generally paranoid about being subjected to a show trial, mainly on social media nowadays, I'm tempted to return to the essay 'The Power of the Powerless' by Václav Havel. It was written more than 40 years ago as a hasty manifesto for dissidents living under communism, or what Havel calls post-totalitarianism. I would say it's still mandatory reading for anyone interested in knowing the moral responsibility that comes with the act of standing up to power. Havel wrote the essay at a time when the "secularised religion" of communism, with its "hypnotic charm", offered "wandering humankind" a "low-rent home". The resident of this home consigns "reason and conscience to a higher authority." In this home, everyone is a variation of the greengrocer who displays a slogan among his wares: "Workers of the world, unite!" Why? He doesn't think too much about this exhibition of loyalty. It's a sign of "indifferent conviction". For him, "ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers humanity the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them." The greengrocer is trapped inside an illusion. The slogan is a talisman for the victim who wants to belong.

What happens when the greengrocer, suddenly one day, takes down the slogan? His action, a defiance and a disruption, is a threat to a system built on a lie, and he himself was living that lie, for the slogan alone defined his identity. The lie is exposed, and the appearance called a deception, when truth challenges power. "Living within the truth", in a post-totalitarian system, is revolt with a moral responsibility, and it's from this defiance that the idea of an alternative emerges. By replacing convenient pragmatism with a moral position, you are standing up to the living lies of ideology, and presenting truth as your only ally in the struggle. Still, as Havel, the dissident who led the Velvet Revolution, argues, the revolt doesn't place the dissident in an exalted realm of resistance. He is just one among those who redeem politics from the ritual of ideology. The dissident happens to be the most articulate, active, and visible manifestation of the independent citizens' initiative. The most important dissident activity, Havel writes,

"one that predetermines all the others, is simply an attempt to create and support the independent life of society as an articulated expression of living within the truth." Dissent is an anti-ideological rejoinder. The dissident serves the truth. The dissident is an active member of the "parallel polis" that forms an alternative to the ideological model. Havel, even as he changed the world, remained modest about the power of the dissident. But not about the power of truth.

Havel's dissident doesn't look dated even as we read his essay in a post-ideological world. In a cruel irony, the Eastern Europe of 2021 has no tolerance for the romance of 1989. It is home to some of the most domineering populist demagogues—among them frontline fighters of 1989 against the Lie—who borrow liberally from the discarded book of ideology. Havel's essay could be a guide for dissidents in Poland or Hungary, for the lie has staged a remarkable comeback. It's not just the old communist who offers a "low-rent home" to people trapped in structured worlds of simulated happiness. The post-ideological demagogue too is a retailer of happiness—as long as you are as loyal as the greengrocer with the mandatory slogan displayed in his window. We may not have heard about a new Havel from those places. The courage—and symbolism—of an Alexei Navalny is the story that brings out the power of the powerless today. It's the story of truth's determination to outlive the potentate's poison.

The story is different elsewhere. In two of the world's largest democracies, the dissident is no longer the truth's representative pitted against the lie of the state. The dissident is not the one setting the "low-rent home" of ideology on fire. He has become the pillar of a new ideological order, and the last apostle of a new orthodoxy. Righteous and unforgiving, the dissident is the new ideologue. He is the architect of the new "low-rent home" of homogeneous thoughts—stay there or be damned. He could be a vocational activist in a wretched country with no justice, and no mercy;

he could be the only arbiter in the arena of difficult arguments; or he could be the permanent victim in search of convenient persecutors. In his "parallel polis", there are only certainties. Dissidence has become the new ideology. The tools in his metaphorical kit are bought from the second-hand shops of causes.

The supreme irony of it all: the new dissident has snatched the slogan from the greengrocer. ■



INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

STRIFE IN THE house of god? No, not over some high-minded godly matter, such as the interpretation of an old Sanskrit hymn. Or the meaning and symbolism of a particular practice or ritual. Unfortunately, even those who tend to the countless gods supposedly resident in tens of thousands of temples that dot the landscape of, dare we say, the godforsaken country—okay, make that idols of gods and goddesses—are obsessed with nothing better than the mundane pursuit of money. Even in the designated abodes of the Supreme, Mammon alone for the priestly class seems to be, well, supreme. The latest case of the ungodly goings-on in the temples to the gods that caught my eye is from the heart of the national capital. Those claiming to be the inheritors of the old founding priestly family are at one another's throat, unable to apportion amicably the spoils of worship. The famous Kalkaji Mandir in south Delhi, daily attracting thousands of devotees, is mired in a bitter fight over the rival claims to perform *puja*. Which translated means an assertion over the substantial donation money offered on the days one is playing the priest. What further injects irony to the dispute is that a temple devoted to the Goddess Kali should reject the claims of one of the heirs of the chief priest due to her gender. And even when she sought redress from the Delhi High Court, Justice Pratibha Maninder Singh upheld her claim with a vital caveat. She will conduct prayers in the temple—and thus take home a stipulated share in the offerings to the deities—but only through a trusted male nominee. Such a condition, Justice Singh



said, was necessitated to uphold an old religious practice. In other words, the Kali temple cannot have a performing priestess. The court battle also threw up a host of other interesting facts. It seems there are 38 donation boxes. All securely locked, the keys kept with the court receiver. These are opened by the receiver in the presence of the nominees of the rival factions of priests. Barring one-sixth of the donations, which will go to the woman petitioner, the remainder is to be deposited with the court registry. The daily offerings to the Goddess are said to average about Rs 10 lakh; on the weekends, and especially on special days in the religious calendar, these are in multiples of that figure.

The Kalkaji Mandir squabble brings to mind a similar dogfight over donations made to an equally, if not more, famous temple. The Hanuman temple abutting the old Rivoli Theatre in Connaught Place, too, has had a bitter legacy of disputing priestly families. One of the priests was a regular in the old Coffee House in the early 1970s when yours truly, along with a couple of fellow cub reporters, used to regularly drop in for coffee costing a princely

sum of four annas, that is, 25 paise. Always dressed in red or a green *kurta* and *churidar* pyjamas, the short-statured priest with a scraggly beard and a JNU-type *jholas* slung on his shoulders, spewed Marxist nostrums—instead of reciting the *Hanuman Chalisa*—while living rather well on his share of the offerings to Lord Hanuman for only two Tuesdays in a full year. The founding priest's heirs had so multiplied over the years that the 'Red Priest of India', as the lively gent was nicknamed by the regulars of Coffee House, could get to perform *puja*, but only on *do mangalbaars*, which was enough to sustain him and his family round the year. Meanwhile, the priests had turned street-smart, having learnt to create additional avenues of income thanks to the huge numbers coming to pay obeisance to the gods. Hawkers of various temple-related stuff, including flowers and wood and stone figures and figurines of gods and goddesses, could ply their business after paying hefty fees to the priests or the trusts controlled by them. In the case of the Kalkaji temple, warring priests generated substantial additional incomes hiring out space for hoardings strategically placed, which no devotee could miss. These sought to satiate consumerist rather than the spiritual appetite of the devotees. Indeed, next time if you are driving past the MEA Hostel on KG Marg, notice the mosque on the circular traffic island. Over the years, it has been overshadowed by a chemist shop and an office, over which loom the two big billboards let out for hefty rents. At least for some in the priestly class, religion is essentially commerce. ■

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Extract of the Statement of Consolidated Un-audited Financial Results for the Quarter and Nine Months ended 31 December 2020

(₹ in Crore)

S.No.	Particulars	Quarter ended			Nine Months ended		Year Ended
		31.12.2020	30.09.2020	31.12.2019	31.12.2020	31.12.2019	31.03.2020
		(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Audited)
1	Revenue from Operations	10,142.48	9,529.68	9,364.36	29,129.56	27,595.28	37,743.54
2	Profit before Exceptional Items and Tax [including Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (net of tax)]	4,446.57	3,892.89	3,498.06	12,320.84	10,257.00	14,590.15
3	Profit before Tax [including Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (net of tax)]	4,446.57	3,889.25	3,498.06	11,242.20	10,257.00	14,590.15
4	Profit after Tax for the period before Regulatory Deferral Account Balances	2,988.20	3,102.32	2,309.94	7,744.88	7,038.27	9,376.00
5	Profit after Tax for the period	3,367.71	3,094.10	2,672.03	8,510.23	7,745.93	11,059.40
6	Total Comprehensive Income comprising net Profit after Tax and Other Comprehensive Income	3,376.99	3,088.98	2,666.20	8,521.99	7,707.14	10,955.38
7	Paid up Equity Share Capital (Face value of share : ₹10/- each)	5,231.59	5,231.59	5,231.59	5,231.59	5,231.59	5,231.59
8	Reserves (excluding Revaluation Reserve) as shown in the Balance sheet						59,463.76
9	Earnings per equity share including movement in Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (Face value of ₹10/- each): Basic and Diluted (in ₹)	6.44	5.91	5.11	16.27	14.81	21.14
10	Earnings per equity share excluding movement in Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (Face value of ₹10/- each): Basic and Diluted (in ₹)	5.71	5.93	4.41	14.80	13.45	17.92

NOTES (₹ in Crore)

S.No.	Particulars	Quarter ended			Nine Months ended		Year Ended
		31.12.2020	30.09.2020	31.12.2019	31.12.2020	31.12.2019	31.03.2020
		(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Un-audited)	(Audited)
1	Key Standalone Financial information						
a)	Revenue From Operations	9,676.55	9,057.89	8,991.98	27,723.16	26,481.07	36,185.54
b)	Profit before Exceptional Items and Tax [including Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (net of tax)]	4,331.02	3,803.40	3,466.80	11,961.44	10,045.72	14,330.75
c)	Profit before Tax [including Regulatory Deferral Account Balances (net of tax)]	4,331.02	3,799.76	3,466.80	10,882.80	10,045.72	14,330.75
d)	Profit after Tax for the period before Regulatory Deferral Account Balances	2,944.34	3,125.63	2,311.40	7,654.82	6,920.86	9,127.78
e)	Profit after Tax for the period	3,323.85	3,117.41	2,673.49	8,420.17	7,628.52	10,811.18
2	The above is an extract of the detailed format of Quarter and Nine months Consolidated and Standalone Financial Results filed with the Stock Exchanges under Regulations 33 of the SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015. The full format of the Quarter and Nine months Consolidated and Standalone Financial Results is available on the Investor Relations section of our website http://powergridindia.com and under Corporates Section of BSE Limited & National Stock Exchange of India Limited at http://www.bseindia.com and http://www.nseindia.com respectively.						
3	Previous periods figures have been regrouped/rearranged wherever considered necessary						

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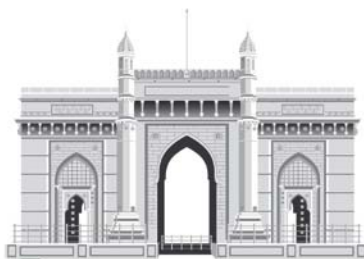
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A Maharatna PSU

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker



YOU CAN'T ACCUSE our governments of lack of ambition. After vaccinating healthcare and frontline workers, Mantralaya has announced that older people are next. 'Older people' are defined as people over 50, which seems a bit hurtful to the many in the prime of their lives. But who are we to deny the state its aspirations? If the first batch were to be 70-plus, the numbers would have been easier to handle (although Uddhav Thackeray is only 60, and would have been excluded).

The population of Greater Mumbai is currently estimated to be 21 million, or if you want to be exact, 20,667,656. By the time you read this, that number would normally have increased, but Covid is helping keep the population in check. Old figures I have dug out show that around 20 per cent of the population is above 50, but now that people live longer, let's assume that is 25 per cent. So the Maharashtra government, in one fell swoop, is lining up five million inhabitants for a shot at immortality, or six months, whichever is earlier. All that remains is to fix the CoWIN app, which will tell you that it is your turn next. It's been only a month, so the IT experts are sure to fix it soon, and then it's jab, jab we met.

The big daddy Government in Delhi is even more ambitious. Over eight million Indians have been vaccinated in one month, or if you want to be exact, 8,605,442. In the meantime, 16 million doses have been exported to 20 countries, including Bangladesh (highest at five million), Brazil, Morocco, South Africa, Egypt and the UAE. Of these, over five million have been gifted. The health ministry has assured us that 'India's needs will not be affected by these exports.' This makes eminent sense; 8,605,442

have already been vaccinated and our population is only 1,200,000,000, so not too many remain to be done.

However, if you are in a hurry, and rich, you could fly to the US on one of the special vaccine tourism packages being offered by some Mumbai companies. One travel firm, in fact, began advertising as early as last November: 'Be among the first to get Corona Vaccine,' their ad said, adding, 'As soon as the Pfizer vaccine is officially available to sell in America, we are ready for a select few VVIP clients.' The package costs Rs 1.75 lakh which includes airfare, three night's stay with breakfast and a vaccine shot. The second shot presumably involves a second package.

THE KALA GHODA Festival, which attracts hordes of people from all over the city, went online this year. So understandably, its usual buzz with food stalls, handicrafts and loud music mingling happily with literary events, was missing. Nevertheless, Kala Ghoda, now with a brand new riderless black horse replacing the old one with King Edward, which now sits in the zoo, still managed to be in the news.

That's because one of the road junctions in the area has been named as Shimon Peres Chowk (the sign painter added his own touch, so the plaque reads Shimon Pares Chowk).

How does a former Israeli prime minister get his name up here in the lights? Did he, unbeknownst to anyone, ride a black horse one dark

and stormy night to the chowk and leave his imprint there? Now Peres was a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and a friend of India, but only the former Municipal Commissioner Praveen Pardeshi knows Peres' Mumbai connection, and he isn't telling. Congress and Samajwadi party corporators want the plaque removed. BJP wants it to stay, while Shiv Sena is sitting on the fence. Watch this space to know if Peres/Pares holds on, or is consigned to the fate of King Edward.

'HAWK-EYED HUMANS make way for Hawk-eye', said a recent sports headline. The reference was to the Australian Open where linesmen and lineswomen have been replaced by technology. Until last year, HawkEye only beeped for faulty service; now they have recorded male and female voices saying 'Out' when a shot goes long or wide. The audio calls even say 'Fault' or 'Foot Fault'.

Apparently, HawkEye has a 3.6 mm margin of error, below the officially acceptable 5 mm. According to a report in the *New York Times*, out of 2,25,000 electronic calls made in the first week of the US Open, only 14 were incorrect. That's 0.0062 per cent. Compare that with 265 of the 1,538 calls by humans going wrong. That's 17.23 per cent. However, I for one miss the visual of crouching men and women, their eyes focused on the lines. I miss the drama of Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic showing us that the gods of tennis can be lesser human beings when they scream and shout and say they have been done in. I miss the suspense and the oohs and aahs of the crowds as we all watch the slow-mo replay of challenged calls. But what's the use? In the end, HawkEye and Siri and Alexa will always win. ■



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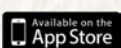
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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Going Big on Bitcoin

BUYING A BITCOIN is very easy, as I found out. Even if you know nothing about it, all that you need to do is a quick Google search, download one of the many apps used for this, often going under the label Bitcoin exchanges. You fill in your details, upload identification and address proofs, link your bank account, online wallets, etcetera. And then in the app, you can put in an order for the amount. In one app I used, it began with Rs 250. For another one, it was Rs 500. The order can go into lakhs too, if you so wish. In the app, the current price of a Bitcoin is listed. If you think you can get it cheaper, you can place an order for a lower amount. If the market drops, then the trade will go through. If it doesn't, you won't get it and will have to go back and place another order. However, I did not buy any because I came headlong at an issue that Bitcoin and all cryptocurrencies face—and that is trust. Giving my details and bank account to startups involved in Bitcoin trading might be mostly safe, but it is not after all a bank or a stock exchange that is regulated stringently by government. You could get defrauded in those arenas too, but there is at least the dependability of experience. With Bitcoins and cryptocurrencies, you are really taking a leap of faith.

It is still nowhere as bad as it was in the beginning of this financial phenomenon. There has now been an incredible rise in the price of Bitcoins and that is on the back of some major US corporates, like electric vehicle company Tesla and its visionary founder Elon Musk putting their weight behind it. Tesla has bought \$1.5 billion worth of Bitcoins and Musk has announced that they would now accept Bitcoins as payment for the purchase of cars. This has changed the nature of the beast. When Bitcoin first came online, it was predominantly an underground currency, used on the dark net for buying all sorts of things, narcotics included. In fact, Bitcoin's beginning itself is something of a mystery. The man who invented it goes by the name of Satoshi Nakamoto, but that is only a pseudonym. No one really knows his identity and he disappeared from the scene,

leaving it to be an entirely uncontrolled currency operating on the basis of the software and the community created around it. The website *bitcoin.org*, which he had initially registered, says this about Bitcoin and its founder: 'Bitcoin is the first implementation of a concept called "cryptocurrency", which was first described in 1998 by Wei Dai on the cypherpunks mailing list, suggesting the idea of a new form of money that uses cryptography to control its creation and transactions, rather than a central authority. The first Bitcoin specification and proof of concept was published in 2009 in a cryptography mailing list by Satoshi Nakamoto. Satoshi left the project in late 2010 without revealing much about himself. The community has since grown exponentially with many developers working on Bitcoin.'

There is, however, one agency that does want to control cryptocurrencies—governments. Currency has exclusively been their preserve and it is a big arsenal in their armour in maintaining financial stability. For example, after the 2008 recession following the investment banks going bust and also now after Covid, the US printed unimaginable sums of currency to stave off economic collapse. Should cryptocurrencies become mainstream, it would make a big dent on the power of governments. People who don't trust their government would just start turning to cryptocurrencies to store wealth and make transactions. Predictably, there has been action to discourage cryptocurrencies. What governments

also do is offer security for market transactions against cheating and fraud. If they withhold that, then it is harder for the general public to trust cryptocurrencies. Also, they can just outrightly make it illegal. For some time, there has been speculation that the Indian Government is going this route. In the 2018 Union Budget speech, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had stated the Government's position: "The Government does not consider crypto-currencies legal tender or coin and will take all measures to eliminate use of these crypto-assets in financing illegitimate activities or as part of the payment system. The Government will explore use of block chain technology

Should cryptocurrencies become mainstream, it would make a big dent on the power of governments. People who don't trust their government would just start turning to cryptocurrencies to store wealth and make transactions. Predictably, there has been action to discourage cryptocurrencies



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

proactively for ushering in digital economy.”

They now have a Bill ready on cryptocurrencies, but it is not known whether they intend to ban them. Many think that is going to happen. A *Financial Express* article this week said: ‘Although the Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, is among the list of bills to be presented in the Budget Session of Parliament, but without any clue about the contents of the bill, the uncertainty is still there. So, there is no clarity on how this bill would impact the cryptocurrencies and what would be the impact on investors.’

Because it is hard to put the genie back in the bottle, another way governments are trying to address the issue is by creating their own sovereign digital currencies to challenge cryptocurrencies. China is already testing the waters on this front and even gave it for free on February 12th, their Lunar New Year, as an experiment of its usage. A *Financial Times* article said: ‘Authorities in several cities have given away tens of millions of renminbi as new year “red packets” that can be downloaded on to a smartphone. Beijing and Suzhou alone have doled out 200,000 red packets worth Rmb200 (\$31) each in a public lottery. Such philanthropy conceals a harder-hitting agenda. By handing out the traditional red packets in the form of “digital renminbi”, China’s authorities are conducting trials for a crucial new technology that could lead the world’s adoption of digital currencies and set global technical standards.’

Towards the end of January, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released a booklet titled ‘Payment and Settlement Systems in India: Journey in the Second Decade of the Millennium’, which also envisioned issuing their own cryptocurrencies. It said: ‘Private digital currencies (PDCs)/virtual currencies (VCs)/crypto currencies (CCs) have gained popularity in recent years. In India, the regulators and governments have been sceptical

about these currencies and are apprehensive about the associated risks. Nevertheless, RBI is exploring the possibility as to whether there is a need for a digital version of fiat currency and in case there is, then how to operationalise it.’

Like Tesla, Mastercard is another major multinational making cryptocurrencies mainstream by getting them onto their network of credit cards. On February 10th, they came out with a press release explaining their rationale: ‘We are preparing right now for the future of crypto and payments, announcing that this year Mastercard will start supporting select cryptocurrencies directly on our network...Our philosophy on cryptocurrencies is straightforward: It’s about choice. Mastercard isn’t here to recommend you start using cryptocurrencies. But we are here to enable customers, merchants and businesses to move digital value—traditional or crypto—however they want. It should be your choice, it’s your money.’

While all this makes a sanguine future for cryptocurrencies, unless you are a gambler, it might be better to stay away from them. For one, what action governments like India’s will take makes it an all-or-nothing bet. If it is made illegal, then you end up not knowing how to dispose of it unless you participate in an illegality. And secondly, there is the phenomenal rise in its price itself. It has moved almost five-fold in a year. Last February, one Bitcoin cost around Rs 7 lakh, and now it is at Rs 37 lakh. The only reason to get into it is to expect the price to keep rising but as the millions who have burnt their fingers in stock market bubbles know, the last fool is the one left holding something that he paid an absurd amount for and there was no one else who wanted to buy it anymore. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • TOOLKIT

THE PROTESTOR'S MANUAL

This pamphlet of the digital age has become essential for any movement today

THE CASE AGAINST climate activist Disha Ravi and warrants against two others have revolved around a 'toolkit' that the police claim they were involved in creating. The toolkit was developed to 'spread disaffection against the Indian state', the police say, and these individuals had collaborated with a separatist group abroad to create it.

A protest toolkit is really just a pamphlet of the digital age. It is the pamphlet to communicate ideas; to set out guidelines; to organise, mobilise and coordinate. Except, it is done now entirely—and with far more sophistication—online.

Of course, the protest toolkit is just one of its kind. A vast number of them really have nothing to do with protests. Since a toolkit in its essence is just a plan of action, it is used by various types of organisations. Various World Health Organization bodies have their own toolkits, for example. And even Indian government bodies have their own toolkits to implement objectives like intellectual property rights.

Protestors have taken to the use of protest toolkits because it has become one of the most effective ways of sending their message across. Usually a Google document, it can reach vast audiences within seconds, state clear objectives and methods of achieving it, create impressive social media campaigns, and lead to real on-ground successes. Often, it can help create highly organised protests and campaigns even when there is no real organisation or group behind it. Because any form of protest or dissidence now is fought as much in the streets as in the digital realm, a toolkit has become essential for the movement's success.

All the protests that have been successful or created a lasting legacy in

recent times have involved sophisticated toolkits. Among the first to create such a big impression was the 'Occupy Wall Street Movement' of 2011. It was also among the first to show that the new protests of the digital age could be effective and highly organised even when the movement itself was leaderless.

Since then, most protests the world over have had their own toolkits, from the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and 2020, climate protests, the Black Lives Matter movement last year to the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) that broke out in India in 2019. The toolkit promoting the anti-CAA protests had guidelines on where protests could be held, what one should do if detained by authorities and suggested what hashtags to promote on Twitter.

Among the most sophisticated protest toolkits we have seen so far were those used by demonstrators during Hong Kong's protests in 2019 and 2020. Protestors would relay real-time information to colleagues across the city through online channels within seconds. They knew how to defuse tear gas grenades, how to protect themselves from rubber bullets and pepper spray attacks, how to mask themselves to not be identified through artificial intelligence algorithms that scan video footage. Their social media teams generated memes, had different messages for different audiences, from cartoons for kids to messages with large font sizes for the elderly; they crowdfunded enough money to place ads in international media outlets; and sometimes, according to a *Washington Post* article, would resort to low-tech tools like pasting post-it notes with messages on 'Lennon Walls' (a reference to the wall in Prague that has become a posthumous tribute to John Lennon) under the fear of government surveillance.

In a *Foreign Policy* essay US political scientist Erica Chenoweth highlights the factors behind protests which have failed (although her focus is on demonstrations in autocratic countries), such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests or the 1956 Hungarian Uprising: as campaigns they are unable to include a vast proportion of the population, to shift between highly risky tactics and safer ones which would make the movement attractive to risk-averse participants, and to establish a long-term strategy to make the campaigns sustainable. These are all points that today's toolkits, both in autocratic and democratic countries, seek to address.

Irrespective of what occurs in the current case in India, the protest toolkit will not disappear. ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

ANGLE

A NEED TO BE SEEN REACTING



Why Maharashtra government toying with another lockdown is a bad idea

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

CORRELATION IS NOT always causation, but often it can be. Take the spurt in Covid cases in Mumbai. This comes right on the back of local trains being opened for the general public. The spurt began about a week after it, almost perfectly in tune with the time the virus signals its diffusion from a super-spreader event, which is what every crowded suburban train in Mumbai is. But government officials list the trains reopening as just one of the probable causes. And there is always one other cause that never seems to go out of fashion, and that is to blame the public itself for not taking the necessary precautions like wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, something that Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray too echoed. As the *Times of India* reported this week: 'If Covid-related norms are not followed, the state government will be forced to reimpose a lockdown, warned chief minister Uddhav Thackeray on Tuesday...' 'People have become carefree. It is for the people to decide if they want a lockdown or want to continue living with the small restrictions like now,' said Thackeray, while directing local administrations to crack down on citizens and establishments that are found violating Covid-19 norms and standard operating procedures (SOPs).'

If that is true, then why did cases drop in the first place by 90 per cent from the September peak? Public behaviour, good or bad, has been more or less a constant. There is a pleasure that governments derive by thrusting responsibility

for adverse events on the people themselves because they, after all, spelled out the rules in black-and-white. These rules were, however, never possible to implement in a country like India. Mumbai's success in curtailing the virus was probably because a large percentage had already become infected, and had therefore become natural breakpoints in the chain of transmission.

Politicians in power and bureaucrats think they need to account for why they could not prevent the rise. But that is self-delusion. Take a casual look at any of the services that the government provides and they are almost all overwhelmingly inefficient and without empathy. But everyone is inured to it and it gets passed off as the Indian condition. When something new like Covid makes its appearance, why should it be any different? That cities like Mumbai and Delhi have developed a certain level of herd immunity is actually a testament to how little the government has been able to do against the virus. We were just lucky that unknown factors led to the pandemic being relatively benign in India.

When the Maharashtra government hints at the possibility of another lockdown because the public can't be trusted to protect themselves, all they do is repeat a process that really did nothing the first time. It once again deals a blow to the livelihoods of people, often the maximum brunt being borne by the poorest. There are times when doing nothing drastic is the wisest course of all. ■

IDEAS

GETTY IMAGES

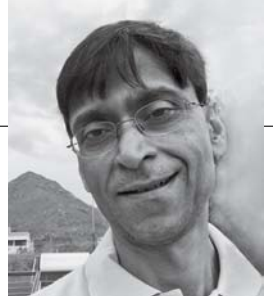
FORGIVENESS

While at a Q&A session in a college in Puducherry, on being asked what he felt towards LTTE, his father's killers, Rahul Gandhi replied that he felt pain but not anger or hatred and that he forgave them. This is a virtuous way of addressing trauma. Anger and hatred are double-edged swords consuming the person who harbours them, no matter how legitimate the grievance. By forgiving those who did one ill, one escapes becoming perpetually hostage to them. Also, a mind that does not harbour negativities, finds itself much more at ease. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive, is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies'

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR
AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST



By Makarand R Paranjape

The Rites of Pilgrimage

Vivekananda and the Himalayan connection—Part X

ON THE WAY to the holy Amarnath cave, Swami Vivekananda had to convince the leaders of the various congregations of pilgrims that it was all right for a European renunciate to accompany him. His own servants and companions included Muslims. Vivekananda, thus, pointed out how ‘the warmth of his love and sympathy for Mohammedanism’ was not misplaced in the interest of human unity even though ‘the soil of the Punjab... was drenched with the blood of those who had died for the faith’ (*bit.ly/3dp51rm*).

After Pahalgam, 3,000 pilgrims strove to reach the icy grotto of the Lord of Immortality. Higher than the snow line, they pitched their tents by the frozen river. Warming themselves by a blazing juniper bonfire, they rested for the night. The next evening, firewood became even more scarce. The regular path-way ended, forcing them to trek along goat paths at altitudes close to 13,000 ft.

As recorded in Swami Vivekananda’s biography by his Eastern and Western Disciples, ‘crossing frost-bound peaks and glaciers the procession reached Panchatarni, the place of the five streams’ (*bit.ly/3doohtP*). Struggling up the steep inclines and scrambling down dangerous declivities, they reached ‘the boulder-strewn gorge, in which the Cave of Amarnath was situated’. The master and his English disciple had finally reached the mouth of the gigantic, sacred cavern.

Nivedita recounts the vivid scene in *The Master as I Saw Him*: ‘As we ascended this, we had before us the snow-peaks covered with a white veil, newly-fallen; and in the Cave itself, in a niche never reached by sunlight, shone the great ice-lingam, that must have seemed, to the awestruck peasants who first came upon it, like the waiting Presence of God’ (*bit.ly/3dp51rm*).

Vivekananda had observed all the rites of pilgrimage with the utmost and punctilious diligence. He had not only kept his fasts and told his beads, but ‘bathed in the ice-cold waters of five streams in succession’ (*ibid*). Nivedita describes her master’s exaltation when he finally entered the cave, after such a long and arduous pilgrimage, on August 2nd, 1898:

‘And now, as he entered the Cave, it seemed to him, as if he saw Siva made visible before him. Amidst the buzzing, swarming noise of the pilgrim-crowd, and the overhead fluttering

of the pigeons, he knelt and prostrated two or three times, unnoticed; and then, afraid lest emotion might overcome him, he rose and silently withdrew. He said afterwards that in these brief moments he had received from Siva the gift of Amar—not to die—until he himself had willed it. In this way, possibly, was defeated or fulfilled that presentiment which had haunted him from childhood, that he would meet with death, in a Siva temple amongst the mountains’ (*ibid*).

This is how his Eastern and Western biographers describe what the master experienced:

‘He then reached the cave, his whole frame shaking with emotion. The cave itself was “large enough to hold a cathedral, and the great ice-Shiva, in a niche of deepest shadow, seemed as if throned on its own base”. Then, his body covered with ashes, his face aflame with supreme devotion to Shiva, he entered the shrine itself, nude, except for a loin-cloth; and kneeling in adoration he bowed low before the Lord. A song of praise from a hundred throats resounded in the cave, and the shining purity of the great ice-Linga overpowered him. He almost swooned with emotion. A great mystical experience came to him, of which he never spoke, beyond saying that Shiva Himself had appeared before him and that he had been granted the grace of Amarnath, the Lord of Immortality, not to die until he himself should choose to throw off his mortal bonds, corroboration of the words of his Divine Master regarding him...’ (*bit.ly/3doohtP*).

In her *Notes of Some Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda*, Nivedita also offers a vivid and deeply felt account:

‘To him, the heavens had opened. He had touched the feet of Shiva. He had had to hold himself tight, he said afterwards, lest he “should swoon away”. But so great was his physical exhaustion that a doctor said afterwards that his heart ought to have stopped beating, but had undergone a permanent enlargement instead. How strangely near fulfilment had been those words of his Master, “When he realizes who and what he is, he will give up this body!”’ (*bit.ly/3pwM6VG*).

Later, Vivekananda, much calmer, told Nivedita: ‘I have enjoyed it so much! I thought the ice Linga was Shiva Himself. And there were no thievish Brahmins, no trade, nothing wrong. It was all worship. I never enjoyed any religious place so much!’ (*ibid*). The assurance of the Lord that Vivekananda had



IN THE CAVE OF AMARNATH, 'A GREAT MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE CAME TO SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, OF WHICH HE NEVER SPOKE, BEYOND SAYING THAT SHIVA HIMSELF HAD APPEARED BEFORE HIM AND THAT HE HAD BEEN GRANTED THE GRACE OF AMARNATH, THE LORD OF IMMORTALITY, NOT TO DIE UNTIL HE HIMSELF SHOULD CHOOSE TO THROW OFF HIS MORTAL BONDS, CORROBORATION OF THE WORDS OF HIS DIVINE MASTER REGARDING HIM'

been conferred the boon of *icchamrityu*, to die only with his own consent, is reiterated. To a somewhat perplexed Nivedita, the master says, 'You do not now understand. But you have made the pilgrimage, and it will go on working. Causes must bring their effects. You will understand better afterwards. The effects will come' (*ibid*).

The *darshan* of the ice-lingam of Shiva made a deep impression on Vivekananda. As Nivedita puts it, 'The purity and whiteness of the ice-pillar had startled and enrapt him' (*ibid*). It was as if 'he had entered a mountain-cave, and come face to face there with the Lord Himself' (*ibid*).

A few months later in, November 1898, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty records his conversation with Vivekananda about the latter's experiences at Amarnath.

Sharat: 'Won't you relate to me what things you have seen at Amarnath?'

Swamiji: 'Since visiting Amarnath, I feel as if Shiva is sitting on my head for twenty-four hours and would not come down.'

'I underwent great religious austerities at Amarnath and then in the temple of Kshir Bhavâni.

'On the way to Amarnath, I made a very steep ascent on the mountain. Pilgrims do not generally travel by that path. But the determination came upon me that I must go by that path, and so I did. The labour of the strenuous ascent has told on my body. The cold there is so biting that you feel it like pin-pricks.'

Sharat: 'I have heard that it is the custom to visit the image of Amarnath naked; is it so?'

Swamiji: 'Yes, I entered the cave with only my Kaupina on and my body smeared with holy ash; I did not then feel any cold or heat. But when I came out of the temple, I was benumbed by the cold.'

Sharat: 'Did you see the holy pigeons?'

Swamiji: 'Yes, I saw three or four white pigeons; whether they live in the cave or the neighbouring hills, I could not ascertain.'

Sharat: 'Sir, I have heard people say that the sight of pigeons on coming out of the temple indicates that one has really been blessed with the vision of Shiva.'

Swamiji: 'I have heard that the sight of the pigeons brings to fruition whatever desires one may have.' (bit.ly/3jXs99E)

For Vivekananda the Amarnath *darshan* was peak spiritual experience. As Nivedita herself affirms, it was an 'over-

whelming vision that had seemed to draw him almost into its vortex' (bit.ly/3pvwM6VG). His monastic brother, Swami Brahmananda, the first president of the Ramakrishna Math, remarked, 'Since returning from Kashmir, Swamiji does not speak to anybody, he sits in one place rapt in thought; you go to him and by conversation try to draw his mind a little towards worldly objects.' (bit.ly/3jXs99E).

But what about Nivedita? Did she feel equally blessed? What did she expect? And did she find her own spiritual quest fulfilled?

(To be continued) ■

Fixing the Narrative

The cost of the failure to articulate the truth on farm laws

By Minhaz Merchant

ALIE TRAVELS HALFWAY around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes. That cliché needs to be updated for India. A lie in this country circles the world several times while the truth is still searching for its shoes.

Lies are like electrons. They carry a small negative charge. Truth, to further the physics analogy, is like a positron that carries a small but equal positive charge. In our physical universe, positrons and electrons constantly annihilate each other to maintain equilibrium.

In politics, similarly, to annihilate a lie, there must be a countervailing truth. The tongue-tied Government has failed to articulate the truth on the farm laws. The result: lies and half-truths abound. The fact that leading agricultural economists have endorsed the farm laws is buried. Half-truths acquire a life and momentum of their own.

Farmers have for decades been victims of small, unremunerative land holdings. Over 10,000 farmers and farm workers died by suicide in 2019.

Farmers who have benefited from the colonial-era restrictions on the freedom to sell wherever they want, whenever they want and to whomsoever they want are overwhelmingly from Punjab.

The state has 50,000 *arhtiyas*. These middlemen act as conduits. They liaise with the Food Corporation of India (FCI), provide farmers loans to buy equipment and fertilisers, and follow up payments from the Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) *mandis*.

For this service, the *arhtiyas* charge farmers an official commission of 2.5 per cent. Unofficially, it can rise exponentially when bundled together with steep interest rates on loans. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) FCI pays Punjab's farmers through these middlemen is over 50 per cent higher than all input production costs for crops.

Punjab's well-connected political families control most large *arhtiyas*. They make fortunes—entirely income tax-free—from the current unreformed farm system. Public criticism of the new farm laws by Punjab's politicians, principally from the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), make it relatively easy to identify who they are.

The nexus has three powerful tiers. The first comprises complicit politicians with a vested financial interest in preserving outdated agricultural laws that enrich the few at the expense of the many.

The second tier is made up of farmers' unions. These have members from across the country but the most vocal farmers in these unions are from Punjab and Haryana. They too want to preserve the generous FCI-MSP system.

FCI pays a procurement price to farmers through the *arhtiyas* that is far higher than global grain prices. That makes the export of excess wheat and paddy commercially impossible. The result: FCI godowns groaning with extra wheat and rice that they have had to procure at the world's highest prices in a country with among the world's lowest per capita incomes.

The excess procurement this year could see up to 9 crore tonnes of grain stored in FCI godowns. Much of it will rot or be eaten by rats.

Meanwhile, the Government is forced to distribute grain at heavily subsidised rates to the poor. This is a double whammy: one, paying a steep price to procure grains that the country doesn't need and can't export; two, selling it to Below Poverty Line (BPL) families at a fraction of the procurement price.

Countless farmers are reduced to penury every year because they are shut out of a self-enriching agriculture system.

The third tier in this powerful nexus consists of Khalistani separatists like the banned Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) group and Poetic Justice Foundation (PJF) fishing in troubled waters. The separatists aren't interested in farm reforms. They aren't farmers in any case.

PJF founder Mo Dhaliwal, a pro-Khalistan rabble-rouser based in Vancouver and a supporter of Republic Day rioter Deep Sidhu, says repealing the farm laws is not the end. It's the beginning. The protests will increase even after repeal.

The agenda is to destabilise a border state. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) failed to disrupt Punjab with the Bhindranwale-led separatist movement through the 1980s. It failed to destabilise Jammu & Kashmir over the next 30 years. It has now turned its attention back to Punjab.

The farm laws serve as a veil. Hidden beneath the veil is ISI's obsession with India. Politicians in Punjab, caught between the fortune the old farm system delivers to them and the separatist Khalistani threat, have by backing a fraudulent narrative on farmers' protests chosen to sup with the devil. ■

The farm laws
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Hidden beneath
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Minhaz Merchant is an author, editor and publisher



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By Rachel Dwyer

Magic Mountains

Hindi films and the eternal romance of snow

WE'VE JUST HAD the coldest weather in the UK in 25 years, with even some stretches of the Thames freezing. Many of us who grew up in the 1960s didn't have central heating and this meant frozen and leaking pipes. So for those of my generation nothing beats viewing snow from the comfort of a warm house, enjoying the frenzy at the bird feeder as the sparrows and tits dip in and out until the robin chases them away. Then off he flies and it all starts again, while the blackbird, too big for the feeder, waits patiently underneath for his share.

One has to brave the cold to exercise as we're barely allowed out during our endless lockdown, remembering that there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes. When we went to Murree in Pakistan 30 years ago, we had 'bad clothes', so had to buy woollens on arrival, but had only sandals for walking in the snow. I don't remember ever being so cold but the open fires in the old Hotel Cecil were lifesavers. This mid-19th century hotel has been used as a movie location for Pakistani films, such as *Armaan* (1966), another feature that Murree and Shimla share, the latter also having its own Hotel Cecil.

Hindi films are often dismissed as escapist, so one has to escape from somewhere to somewhere else, typically from the city with its heat and crowds to cold, sparsely populated destinations such as hill stations, Kashmir, and Switzerland.

In Hindi films, love and beauty are closely linked, especially in film songs. These are shot in landscapes of love, often spectacular pastoral settings well suited to the music, lyrics and dance as well as the beauty of the stars and their costumes. Viewers delight in this celebration of nature which is so connected with love throughout the history of Indian poetry.

Hindi films are often shot in the cool hills and mountains. Formerly, this was mostly in Kashmir, but also in colonial-era hill stations. Kashmir has long been an important cultural centre of India. The Mughals escaped there when the north Indian plains were too hot, the hills and cooler climate being redolent of Persian and Central Asian landscapes, and created Persian-style gardens for their recreation. A similar nostalgia also affected the British,

who established hill stations in the image of the UK as their summer retreats from the major cities. The rapid growth in Indian tourism in the last few decades has meant many more people now share these tastes, enjoying Kashmir and the hill stations as exotic locales as well as cooler and more comfortable places to spend the hot weather vacations.

Kashmir was one of the early outdoor locations for Hindi cinema, with Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* (1949), moving between it and an unnamed city, contrasting the two, the journey between the village and the city being a popular motif throughout Indian cinema in classics such as the many versions of *Devdas*. Much of *Barsaat* was shot in a studio and I don't recall any snow scenes in it or in other films which focussed on the Dal Lake, such as Shammai Kapoor and Sharmila Tagore's *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), which is one of the many films that associate Kashmir with tourism and romance.

Shammai is forever associated with Kashmir through his song in *Junglee* (1961), where the Westernised, unemotional Shekhar starts reading Urdu poetry and bursts out to hurl himself around the snow with the immortal cry, 'Yahoo!' Raj Kapoor used the isolated log cabin and the remoteness of Kashmir in *Bobby* (1973), though again I don't recall snow, nor for Shashi Kapoor in *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965). This was a largely non-Muslim Kashmir, just a beautiful holiday destination.

Kashmir later went from paradise to hell, the latter shown in the many more political films, whether Mani Ratnam's *Roja* (1992), Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Fanaa* (2006) or Vishal Bharadwaj's Hamlet as *Haider* (2014), and in fiction, such as Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

It is often said that Hindi films are shot in Switzerland as the political situation has made it difficult to film in Kashmir, yet filming in hill stations has decreased overall given the rapid expansion in overseas shooting. Switzerland may be similar to Kashmir in its combination of mountains and touristic appeal but the nature of this tourism and the specific meanings of the Swiss landscape are very different. Switzerland has the natural beauty but also associations with high-end tourism, secretive banking

practices, health and cleanliness.

While Raj Kapoor shot sequences from *Sangam* (1964) in Switzerland, Hindi cinema is most closely associated with Switzerland through Yash Chopra's films, a landscape that created a new kind of romance tied to middle-class consumerism, depicting the lifestyles of the super-rich. Switzerland allowed for a display of a radically different and expensive lifestyle with luxury shops, hotels, sports, and different costumes which contrasted with the snow, in particular, Rishi Kapoor's famous knitwear. Chiffon saris also look nice set against the snow but the very thought



Shammi Kapoor in *Junglee* (1961)

sends a cold shiver through my Aran jumper.

In London's recent snowy weather, I compiled a personal 'Top Ten Hindi Snow Songs'. Yash Chopra soon dominated. '*Maine ek khwaab sa dekha hai*' (*Waqt*, 1965), which began as a phone song, moving to flowering gardens before snow scenes. Then '*Hum aur tum*' (*Daag*, 1973), '*Tere chehre se*' from (*Kabhi Kabhie*, 1976), along with the first rendition of the title song. It was only after this he began to shoot in Switzerland, with numerous snow scenes, including the title song of *Chandni* (1989) and '*Tu mere saamne*' (*Darr*, 1993). In his last film, *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* (2012), which had scenes in Switzerland and Kashmir, we saw Samar (Shah Rukh Khan) shovelling (artificial) snow in London while Meera (Katrina Kaif) ran past him into a church. Aditya Chopra also celebrates snow and Switzerland in songs like '*Zara sa jhoom loon*', and (parts of) '*Tujhe dekha to ye jaana sanam*' (*DDLJ*, 1995) and '*Humko humise churalo*' (*Mohabbatein*, 2000). I remember being

about the coldest I've ever been on the sets of the latter at Longleat in Wiltshire.

So, excluding these, here are my Top Ten Snow Songs.

'*Yahoo!*' from *Junglee*, where Shekhar (Shammi Kapoor) realises he's fallen in love and leaves his book of Urdu poetry to run out in the snow to tell the world he's in love.

'*Naina barse rimjhim, rimjhim*' (*Woh Kaun Thi?*, 1964), shot in Shimla snow. The well-known anecdote is worth retelling, namely that Lata Mangeshkar hadn't yet recorded the song in time for filming so crowds who gathered were surprised to witness Sadhana singing playback to Madan Mohan's voice. And a special mention to Manoj Kumar's beret.

'*Gunguna rahe hain bhanware*' (*Aradhana*, 1969), a film where I love every song.

'*Karvate badalte rahe*' (*Aap Ki Kasam*, 1974), where the pairing of Rajesh Khanna and Mumtaz is also dynamite.

Hindi film music changed with the appearance of AR Rahman, who composed this lovely song about love in Kashmir, despite the troubles: '*Yeh haseen vadiyan*' from *Roja*.

A bit of a cheat, but in *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008), the use of Kishore Kumar's '*Chahiye thoda pyaar*' in a desolate drive through the snow, though it rescued the song from the fight sequences in *Lahu Ke Do Rang* (1979).

'*Mere haath mein*' from *Fanaa*, a love story set in Kashmir, where families are torn apart by politics.

'*Subhanallah*' is such a lovely song from *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* (2013), with two of my favourite actors, Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone.

Haider, Vishal Bharadwaj's setting of *Hamlet* in Kashmir, was an engaging but troubled film,

but still had space for romance with his music, Gulzar's lyrics and Arijit Singh's voice: '*Khul kabhi toh*'.

Lastly, one of my favourite films of the last 10 years is *Lootera* (2013), which evokes a Bengali world in the first-half (not least in the presence of the zamindar played by Barun Chanda, famous for Satyajit Ray's *Seemabaddha*, 1971), while the second-half moves to Dalhousie in the snow. The nostalgia for hill stations in the snow and the love story from O Henry's *The Last Leaf* is a chilling love story compared to the warm first-half. The song, '*Zinda hoon yaar*' as the *Lootera* (Ranveer Singh) climbs a tree to hang an artificial leaf in the hope she won't die until the last leaf falls, is just one of many evocative songs in the film.

Today, many big Hindi films are moving away from masala and Bollywood to 'real' locations throughout India. The beauty of snow is such that I hope it remains a feature on Indian screens, though I'll be happy to see it go from my garden after a week. ■



Singer Politician

Kailash Vijayvargiya, senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, is active in the West Bengal election campaign as the state in-charge. He is going to every district and addressing public meetings. But what many have come to know only now is that Vijayvargiya sings very well, especially nostalgic Bollywood songs. In West Bengal, whenever he attends marriage ceremonies of party workers, there is a popular demand for him to sing. Recently, at a media conclave, in the middle of an interview, he was asked to sing. It is not clear what his role will be after the polls. When Home Minister Amit Shah was asked whether Vijayvargiya could be a chief ministerial candidate, it was ruled out since he is not from the state.

FILM STAR WANTED

In Kolkata, the Bhabanipur Assembly seat is being keenly watched because Trinamool leader and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is contesting from there. BJP needs someone strong to field here and rumours say the party is looking for a movie star because all political candidates would be easily defeated. The state has a tradition of actors entering politics. When Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat had gone to Mithun Chakraborty's home recently, there was speculation that the actor might contest against Banerjee. But it was Banerjee who had made Chakraborty a Member of Parliament, and Trinamool leaders overwhelmingly rule him out running against her. BJP has a strong relationship with another film star, Prosenjit Chatterjee. But he too shares an equally good rapport with Banerjee.

SEATING EXCUSE?

The main reason former Trinamool leader Dinesh Trivedi decided to leave the party, it is being said, was a seating issue. He had complained to Mamata Banerjee against the party's Rajya Sabha leader Derek O'Brien because he had been made to sit in the gallery of the House while junior MPs were allotted seats in the council chamber. After Covid, only some members from each party could be accommodated in the chamber and the parties had to decide who they wanted there. Trivedi had written to Banerjee about this humiliation, but she reportedly did not respond. Her perception was said to be that Trivedi was anyway planning to leave, and was using the seating arrangement as an excuse.



Consequences of Jest

Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb has caused a headache for the external affairs ministry after stating at a public function that BJP would expand to Nepal and Sri Lanka and form governments there. Deb said it was, in fact, Home Minister Amit Shah who had pointed this out in an internal meeting when he had visited Tripura. Turns out, Shah had said so in jest. The BJP central leadership is upset with Deb's gaffe. Already, Nepal has launched a formal objection with New Delhi over the matter.

Frugality Enforced

Odisha Governor Ganeshi Lal is fond of travelling to his native village in Haryana with pomp. But the Odisha government has become very strict with expenditure. Even the chief minister doesn't have a large convoy while travelling. When Lal travelled to Delhi recently, he wanted a convoy of four cars. The state government objected and said it was not possible because Covid-related constraints had led to a scarcity of cars and drivers. But the governor was insistent. The Odisha government then organised taxis for the governor to make up the convoy. Lal was not ready to use the official emblem, as protocol dictates, when he is travelling in a commercial vehicle. He also wanted a helicopter and the state government objected to that too because of the financial implications.

Price of Amity

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emotional farewell for outgoing Congress Rajya Sabha member Ghulam Nabi Azad may have put the latter in a spot with his party and constituents. Many are wondering whether Azad would now join BJP and become its Kashmir face. Some are even accusing him of being a BJP mole. Even in Kashmir, there is suspicion against him. In WhatsApp groups and social media, many say his farewell speech didn't raise the issue of Kashmir and the abrogation of Article 370.

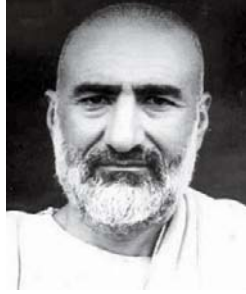


Revenge Politics?

Prashant Kishor, the election strategist for Trinamool Congress, is from Bihar. But what is not common knowledge is that his ancestral home is in Buxar district in the state. It was partly demolished recently by the government. Many think it was in retaliation for Kishor going against Janata Dal (United) and its leader Nitish Kumar. The local administration, however, says that the demolition was necessary because of the development of a highway in that area.

J&K MISSING

After decades, Jammu & Kashmir has no representation in the Upper House of Parliament. This is because its four Rajya Sabha members—Ghulam Nabi Azad (Congress), Shamsher Singh Manhas (BJP), Fayaz Ahmad Mir (PDP) and Nazir Ahmad Laway (expelled PDP leader)—have all retired. Mir and Manhas completed their six-year terms on February 10th, while Azad and Laway did so on February 15th. The loss of representation is because these berths cannot be filled in the absence of the J&K Legislative Assembly, the electoral college for Rajya Sabha polls. The Assembly had been dissolved in November 2018.



By **ABDUL GHAFFAR KHAN**

THE GREAT BETRAYAL

We did not abandon the Congress, they abandoned us

13 July 1981

MOUNTBATTEN WAS A very intelligent and far sighted man. He would find out what his Hindustani companions were feeling in their hearts. When he realized that Sardar Patel was prepared to accept his plan of partition of Hindustan, then, to bring him on board, he used the full potential of the power of his personality, charm and deceit. In his discussions, he would compare Sardar Patel to a walnut; his exterior was hard, but when broken, the interior emerged soft. After the conquest of Sardar Patel, he turned his attention to Jawaharlal. Initially, Jawaharlal would not entertain any thought of partition and his reaction would be very strong. But Mountbatten pursued him until, gradually, the strength of his opposition to the idea broke down. When it gradually became clear that Jawaharlal had also come around to the views of Sardar Patel about the partition of Hindustan, I was very saddened. This was because we considered this not so much as the partitioning of Hindustan, as that of the Muslims. I was, from the beginning, of the view, and I still believe, that the Cabinet Mission plan was the best solution for the Muslims in every respect. It would have ensured the unity of Hindustan and also provided each community the opportunity for a free and respectable existence. Even if you consider the benefits in this for the Muslims, one could not hope for a better solution. In provinces with Muslim majority, they would get full provincial autonomy in internal affairs. If we consider the provinces of a federal Hindustan, and give Balochistan a provincial status, then, in the federal government, they would have assumed an equal status with the Hindus.

Maulana Azad says that, 'I have thought over all these matters at great length. I wondered why Gandhiji had so very quickly changed his opinion. I think that this was the outcome of the influence of Sardar Patel. Patel would openly declare that there was no solution to the problem other than partitioning Hindustan. From experience, it has been established that it is not possible to work jointly with the Muslim League.'

It was necessary that Sardar Patel should have given importance to another matter as well; that Lord Louis Mountbatten said that the Congress had agreed to the weakening of the central government only for the purpose of pleasing the Muslim League; and for this reason, the provinces were given full provincial autonomy. But in a country with such vast differences between the people in terms



Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mahatma Gandhi visiting the North West Frontier Province, 1938

MOUNTBATTEN ADVISED THAT IN THE NORTH-WEST AND IN THE NORTH-EAST, A FEW SMALL PIECES OF HINDUSTAN SHOULD BE GIVEN TO THE MUSLIM LEAGUE; THEN FROM THE REST OF HINDUSTAN, A STRONG STATE CAN BE CREATED. THIS REASONING ALSO LED TO THE WEAKENING OF GANDHIJI'S OPPOSITION TO THE IDEA OF PARTITION

of language, faith and culture, the weakness of the central government strengthens the viewpoint of the enemy. If one is set free from the League, then arrangements can be put in place for a strong central government, and such a law can be legislated which would prove beneficial for the retention of the unity of Hindustan. Mountbatten advised that in the North-West and in the North-East, a few small pieces of Hindustan should be given to the Muslim League; then from the rest of Hindustan, a strong state can be created. This reasoning had a great effect on Sardar Patel, who believed that combining with the Muslim League would jeopardize the unity and stability of Hindustan. In my view it was not only Sardar Patel, but also Jawaharlal who believed in this reasoning. This reasoning, when recapitulated by Sardar Patel and Mountbatten, also led to the weakening of Gandhiji's opposition to the idea of partition. When Mountbatten saw that people were strongly opposed to the Cabinet Mission plan, he prepared an alternate plan for Partition, as he had wanted. Whenever the issue of partition came to the forefront, the issue of Bengal and Punjab assumed great importance. Mountbatten said that since Partition was based on the prin-

ciple of Hindu and Muslim majority areas and since, in certain parts of Punjab and Bengal, Muslims were in a majority, for this reason, both these provinces also needed to be partitioned. But he advised the Congress leaders not to raise this question, yet. He assured them that, at an appropriate time, he himself would raise this question. At this time, Mountbatten had worked out the details of his Partition plan, and so he decided to go to London for talks with the leaders of the government of Britain. I met with Mountbatten on 14 May in Simla. I discussed matters with him for a while. Then I appealed to him not to bury the Cabinet Mission plan; that we should resort to patience because there was still hope for the success of this plan. If we agreed to partition in a hurry, then Hindustan would be harmed greatly. I also told him that he should also keep in mind all the possible consequences of partition. Before Partition the Muslims and Hindus had attacked each other in Calcutta, Noakhali, Bihar, Bombay and Punjab. If, in such circumstances the country is partitioned, streams of blood would flow and the British alone would bear the responsibility for this. But Mountbatten immediately assured me that he would not allow anyone to riot



Abdul Ghaffar Khan being received by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, October 1969

hatred between the two communities would become even more intense. In 1946, when the riots which had started between the Hindus and Muslims spread to Calcutta and Direct Action Day was observed by the Muslim League, it was like adding fuel to the fire. In the city of Calcutta only a few Hindus were killed at the instance of the Muslim League, but the Hindus avenged themselves for this in Bihar. The Muslims are not well-organized, and the Hindus are. They did not slaughter or loot as many people in Calcutta as they did in Bihar. They killed and looted and committed arson on a large scale. I had personally gone to Bihar to help the Muslims. We would occasionally tell Suhrawardy sahib that the destruction which took place in Bihar was all because of the Direct Action call of the Muslim League, and that he was responsible for it. He said that he had a written communication in his possession and that when the time for investigating the truth came, he would reveal its contents. In Calcutta, many people from Bihar were killed. On the pretext of getting even, a lot of brutality was committed against the Hindus at Noakhali. The policy of the British to divide and rule was successful. The British were very happy at this handiwork of the Muslim League, because due to these stupidities committed by Hindustan, the British civil servants wanted to prove and show to the British Labour Party that the people of Hindustan were ready, like savages, to drink each other's blood and eager to eat and flay each other's flesh; and that they were unaware of the consciousness to live with each other like human beings. And for this reason, it was still necessary for the British to rule over them, and

that they should not be given a government of their own. And if this did not happen, they would destroy each other.

IN BIHAR

The Muslim League was the creation of the British. For this reason, they took undue advantage of the conditions in Surat. To disturb the peace and order there, the British and the Muslim League were in agreement.

With all this destruction, the passions of the Muslim League had not cooled down. It was conspiring in stoking the fires of communalism and was benefitting politically at the hands of the afflicted, who were being instructed to migrate to Bengal. I was immersed in worry for these tyrannized

THE CONGRESS LEADERS SAID THAT THE CONDITIONS WERE SUCH THAT THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY, OTHER THAN PARTITION. BUT WHO CREATED THESE CONDITIONS? THEY THEMSELVES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM

and would prevent blood from being spilt. Once Partition is accepted in principle, then he would issue orders to prevent any communal riots from taking place. But then the whole world came to know that, after the announcement of the Partition plan, communal riots took place in many parts of the country and rivers of blood flowed freely, and innocent women and children were slaughtered, and no worthwhile measures or action was taken to prevent the civil war between the Muslims and the Hindus.

DIRECT ACTION AND EQUALITY

In Punjab, fighting between the Hindus and Muslims had begun. When news of it used to be reported in the press, the

and oppressed people and wondered how I would be able to rehabilitate them in their own homes. But they had been so misguided by the Muslim League that they did not like what I said to them. So, I decided to meet the Muslim League leaders who were accommodated in the palatial residence of barrister Muhammad Younus. Whenever I would visit them, I would find them busy eating and drinking, and they would tell me that they would not hold discussions with me. When Nazimuddin told them that it was necessary for them to talk to me, they agreed. I requested them that the people had been harmed enough, and should be left to themselves now, and that they should not wreak more havoc on them. Was the destruction that was brought upon them not enough that they were now being persuaded to migrate to Bengal? If they did settle there, I would have no objection to this. But if this was intended only to make their political objectives evident and take advantage of them for this purpose, then this was

wrong. But these Muslim Leaguers had no mercy in their hearts. I also met with my old benefactor, Feroze Khan Noon here, after sixteen years. I asked him that he had promised that they would confer on what we had said, and would give us a reply, but that he had failed to do so up to now. He was a very honourable man. He lowered his gaze and gave me no answer. The fact is that in Simla he had complained that we had associated ourselves with the Congress. I had said to him that we had come to you (the Muslim League), but you had not assisted us, and we were confronted with a big problem, and so we then approached the Congress. That even if now, Punjab were to ally itself with us, I would have resigned from the Congress. He had then told me that they would confer amongst themselves and then give me an answer.

Most of the Muslim residents of Patna had fled their homes and were living in camps, leaving their valuables buried in their homes. They wanted someone to go with them and assist them in retrieving these valuables. But the Muslim League could not, out of fear, leave the city. When they were disappointed with the Muslim League, they asked me if I would accompany them. I told them that I had come to Bihar to be of service to them and, wherever they wished, I would go with them. So, I would transport some of them each day to their homes, in my own car, to retrieve their buried valuables. The Hindus would glare at them but say nothing, out of respect for me. I went to them in their camps and told them that the monsoon was about to break and that they should come so that I could re-settle them, but they paid no heed to my advice, because the Muslim League had promised to take them to Bengal. But when they experienced the sufferings and difficulties on their way to Bengal, they approached me. I went to the government of Bihar and since all the ministers had remained confined with me in the Hazaribagh jail, they quickly arranged for them to be rehabilitated. When I informed Gandhiji of this development, he cut short his Noakhali tour and came to Bihar

Abdul Ghaffar Khan
with his family

WHEN THE MUSLIMS OF PATNA WERE DISAPPOINTED WITH THE MUSLIM LEAGUE, THEY ASKED ME IF I WOULD ACCOMPANY THEM. I TOLD THEM THAT I HAD COME TO BIHAR TO BE OF SERVICE TO THEM AND, WHEREVER THEY WISHED, I WOULD GO WITH THEM. THE HINDUS WOULD GLARE AT THEM BUT SAY NOTHING, OUT OF RESPECT FOR ME



to help resettle the Muslim residents. With his arrival the momentum of our work also increased. When we saw Gandhiji, our strength, courage and resolve were renewed. Like him, we also toured the affected areas and, let alone the men, the women also knew that we had come out to serve them and were no longer afraid. This had a very positive effect on the people, because here in Patna the position was that the Muslim League leaders, out of fear, could not even move about in the city. A nation that has strong and brave leaders becomes strong and brave, and a nation that has cowardly leaders, becomes cowardly. I was also told something by Pyarelal; that Sardar Patel was opposed to my touring Bihar, but that Gandhiji had told him that this did not concern him and was uncalled for.

THE INFIDELITY OF THE CONGRESS

The Congress had been waging the struggle for the liberation of Hindustan for the past sixty years, but the British, let alone total independence, had not even granted them limited freedom. But when the Pukhtuns joined them in this struggle and gave sacrifices in Qissa Khwani, Takar, Uthmanzai, Kohat, Hathikhel, and Mirwais; and in similar fashion our tribal brothers allied themselves with the Pukhtuns and waged a jihad for the liberation of Hindustan, and bared their chests as shields to the guns and tanks of the British and stood firm like a mountain before their onslaughts, only then were the British compelled to agree to the independence of Hindustan. We had allied with the Congress in the struggle for freedom on the condition that we would jointly liberate the country and free ourselves of the yoke of slavery. But when the time came, all the promises made to us were discarded, and nobody asked

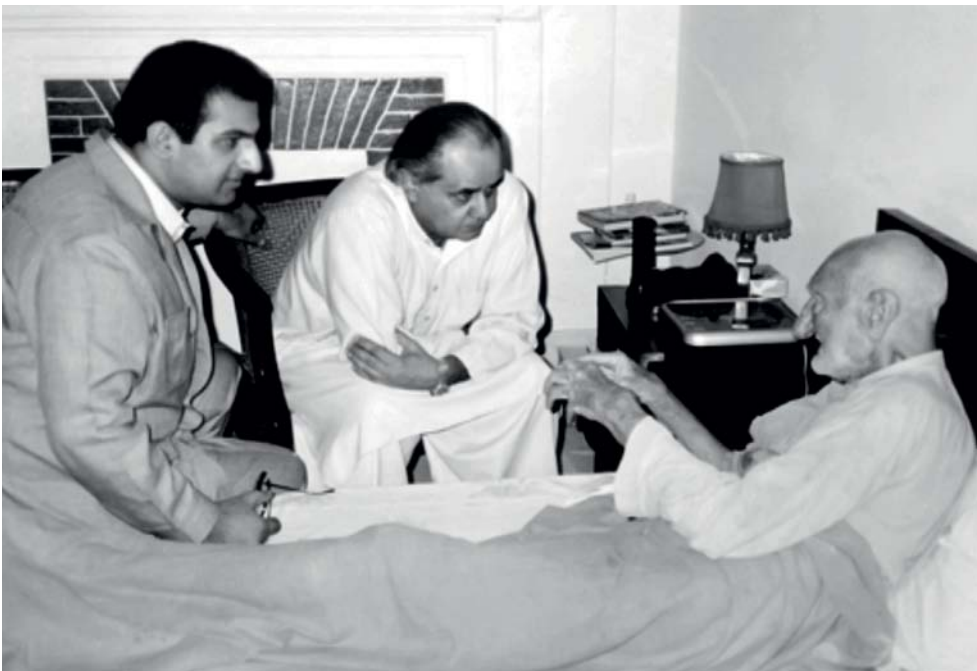
us about our future. Instead, the referendum about opting to join Pakistan or Hindustan was forced down our throats; and we were treated as pawns and bargained away in this deal. The sacrifices were given by us, our blood was shed, our properties and wealth were ruined and the benefits went to others. The leaders of the Congress would consult me on all issues and would not do anything without having first consulted me. But on this all-important matter, let alone consulting with me, I was not even informed. I am annoyed over the fact that even the Congress working committee showed no sympathy or extended any help to us. They tied us by the feet and hands and handed us over to the Muslim League. We had defeated the Muslim League in the elections, then what was the need for another election? If someone wanted to contest the referendum with us, then they should have, on our demand, done so on the issue of Pakistan or Pukhtunistan. This referendum was over Hindustan and Pakistan, and we, on account of the betrayal by the Congress, were not opting for Hindustan. That is why we did not wish to participate in this referendum and decided to boycott it.

The British used to tell us to leave our association with the Congress, so that when they would give anything to Hindustan, they would give us more than that. But we did not abandon the Congress, they abandoned us. The more unfortunate thing is, what have we done to them, and what have they done to us? I have no complaint against Sardar Patel and Rajagopalachari. I have a complaint against Jawaharlal and Gandhiji; that they too agreed with them in this matter. The Congress leaders said that the conditions were such that there was no other way, other than Partition. But who created these conditions? They themselves are

Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mahatma Gandhi



I AM ANNOYED OVER THE FACT THAT EVEN THE CONGRESS WORKING COMMITTEE SHOWED NO SYMPATHY OR EXTENDED ANY HELP TO US. THEY TIED US BY THE FEET AND HANDS AND HANDED US OVER TO THE MUSLIM LEAGUE. WE HAD DEFEATED THE MUSLIM LEAGUE IN THE ELECTIONS, THEN WHAT WAS THE NEED FOR ANOTHER ELECTION?



Last photo of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, New Delhi, 1987

the Sikhs and the Hindus, such love and affection for each other, and awakened such brotherhood in the minds of the people, that up to now, those Hindus and Sikhs, who had been forcibly driven out of the Frontier Province, still refer to themselves as *Khudai Khidmatgar*. Whenever I have visited Hindustan, I have felt the same love and affection in the hearts of the Hindus and Sikhs. When, at the time of Partition, violence and riots broke out in Hindustan, the *Khudai Khidmatgar*, for the protection of the lives and properties of the Sikhs and Hindus, had to face a lot of troubles and difficulties. And wherever the *Khudai Khidmatgar* were, they had managed to save them from harm's way, and had saved their lives and property. On the other hand, see what the Congress did; it created so much hatred in the hearts of the Hindus and Muslims of Hindustan, and see how much violence they resorted to. But the fact is that non-

SEE WHAT THE CONGRESS DID; IT CREATED SO MUCH HATRED IN THE HEARTS OF THE HINDUS AND MUSLIMS OF HINDUSTAN, AND SEE HOW MUCH VIOLENCE THEY RESORTED TO. BUT THE FACT IS THAT NON-VIOLENCE WAS THEIR POLICY AND IT WAS OUR IDEOLOGY AND STILL IS

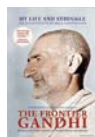
responsible for them. If they had not partitioned Hindustan, then Hindustan and the Hindus would not have experienced such bloodshed. Whatever happened, has happened, and, in the words of Maulana Azad, 'Whatever I have seen was no more than a dream.' But I am of the view that this was a grand intrigue; this was disloyalty; this was a betrayal to which we were subjected.

In our land, there are certain people who, on the instigation of our ill-wishers, ask what have the *Khudai Khidmatgar* done? And they also ask what has non-violence been able to accomplish? And if a few of our people, who in their simplicity are taken up by what these few selfish people say, I must remind them that the *Khudai Khidmatgar* had two objectives; one, to liberate the country and the other to spread love, brotherhood, nationalism and unity among the Pukhtuns.

Just have a look at this—awareness has been created, and the country also has been liberated. Then consider that all this has been achieved through non-violence. There has been no violence. Also consider that the *Khudai Khidmatgar* have created in the people, in the hearts of the Muslims,

violence was their policy and it was our ideology and still is. We had been liberated and the British were about to leave our land, but on the instigation of Lord Mountbatten and Sardar Patel, we became the slaves of slaves. I am not saddened by this fact so much, because if the Pukhtuns, in fact, become Pukhtuns, then nobody can in fact enslave them. But I am saddened that the movement of the *Khudai Khidmatgar*, which had been created with such effort, difficulty and trials, has been destroyed and its tried and tested structure has almost been demolished.

*De zra pe bagh may gallai wushwa,
Boya chay biya sparlay rashee wuspalree Guloona!*
The hail has struck my heart's garden,
Denuded it of flowers;
Ah! If only spring would come,
and make the blossoms bloom again! ■



This is an edited excerpt from My Life and Struggle by Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988), translated into English for the first time by Imtiaz Ahmad Sahibzada (Roli; 576 pages; Rs 650)

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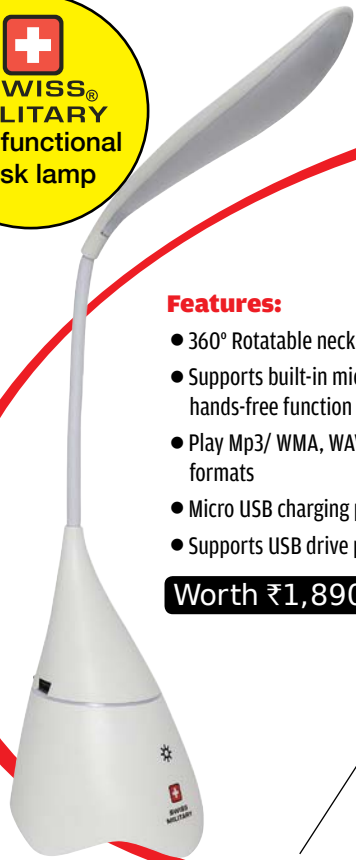


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MODI

IN THE MARKETPLACE

ON FEBRUARY 10TH, WHEN NARENDRA MODI, IN A FIRST FOR AN INDIAN PRIME MINISTER, DEFENDED THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN PARLIAMENT, IT SIGNALLED THE COUNTRY'S READINESS TO EMBRACE ITS WEALTH CREATORS, ENDING A PROLONGED INJUSTICE

BY PR RAMESH AND SIDDHARTH SINGH

IN HIS REPLY TO THE MOTION OF THANKS TO THE President's address in Parliament on February 10th, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "I would like to remind my friends in the Congress that if the public sector is critically important for the economic growth of the country, so is the robust participation of the private sector. The culture of damning businessmen and entrepreneurs as outright crooks and wringing political capital out of name-calling them in public may have served parties well at the hustings in the past. But that has to stop. Wealth creators have a crucial role to play in



PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking in Lok Sabha on February 10

the economy. Fruitful employment cannot be generated in a vibrant, youthful nation unless private enterprise distributes its wealth by setting up companies and employing people.” The prime minister went on to list the achievements of the private sector in the pharmaceutical and the telecom sectors—the former instrumental in making India the key pharmacist to the world and the latter in making the country a global IT hub and backroom office.

It was the most categorical statement so far of Modi 2.0’s economic roadmap, an unabashed batting for private enterprise and a significant dialling down of the populist, socialist perspective that dominated India’s economic narrative for years. The timing of the assertion was significant, coming as it did when the roads to the national capital were sought to be choked with opposition-backed choruses against private enterprise. It was politically risky and not, by any stretch of the imagination, a time for tough pronouncements. In a society where the dominant political narrative-crafting powers have remained the domain of the entrenched Left, the premium has been on misery-mongering even decades after economic liberalisation, with slogans like “*Tata, Birla ki yeh sarkar, nahin chalegi, nahin chalegi*” of the 1970s replaced by rants against “crony capitalism” in current times. Far from focusing on concrete and realistic blueprints to fuel economic growth, employment and all-round prosperity, these slogans tended to fix attention on swaying popular emotions and swelling the electoral kitty of political parties in the past.

Tied to a past buried long ago, these angst-ridden soundbites of yesteryears tilt at the windmills today, in an age when a youth-driven, aspirational India demands opportunities rather than charity from a *mai baap sarkar*. The slogans vesting virtue to anti-private sector sentiments have been inhibiting growth and curtailing the optimum expression of entrepreneurial potential. The timing of the prime minister’s decisive pronouncements—which at once destigmatised wealth creation and celebrated private enterprise—could have been fraught with political risk but Modi, the consummate politician, was confident of his standing and political capital. The concrete foundation for the economic growth blueprint of Modi 2.0 was laid in the five years of Modi 1.0 after 2014, when the prime minister single-mindedly burnished his welfarist image with a plethora of targeted schemes, including Swachh Bharat, the Ujjwala scheme, last-mile electricity access for villages, payment of honoraria to farmers, and so on. This was followed by the successful management of the pandemic to help migrant labour, economically weaker sections and the marginalised through leak-proof schemes like Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, besides beefing up the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Free rations to the poor for eight long months of the lockdown as well as distribution of honoraria among farmers had already cemented Modi’s standing among the poor.

The aspirational classes received Modi’s words celebrating entrepreneurship positively, the first time in modern India that

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on her way



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the economically weaker sections and the middle class joined hands in consolidating behind the prime minister. The only other time these two sections had joined hands was during the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare, which had culminated in the ousting of Congress from power and the ringing in of the Modi Government in 2014. This coalition of the two classes behind Modi is proving to be an unbeatable combination. Having already created a strong constituency of the poor in the five years that followed 2014, Modi now appears to have gathered the confidence to move decisively in the direction of full-on growth without resting solely on an overburdened government and a creaky and loss-making public sector as the fulcrum of economic progress.

For the political opposition to Modi, this coalition of classes spells doom for the desperate narrative of an ‘anti-farmer government’ that it has been crafting. Despite all the efforts to bring international attention to the ‘kisan andolan’—and to paint Modi as an autocratic, corporate-promoting, anti-poor prime minister—it is proving to be a damp squib, with the farmers’ protest itself restricted to Punjab and pockets of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected a 13 per cent growth and Christopher Wood, global head of equity strategies at Jefferies, concluded that “India looks, right now, Asia’s best post-Covid recovery story”. That means



IT WAS THE MOST CATEGORICAL STATEMENT SO FAR OF MODI 2.0'S ECONOMIC ROADMAP, AN UNABASHED BATTING FOR PRIVATE ENTERPRISE AND A SIGNIFICANT DIALLING DOWN OF THE POPULIST, SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVE THAT DOMINATED INDIA'S ECONOMIC NARRATIVE FOR YEARS. THE TIMING OF THE ASSERTION WAS SIGNIFICANT. IT WAS POLITICALLY RISKY AND NOT A TIME FOR TOUGH PRONOUNCEMENTS

good news for the economy and, consequently, funding for new schemes. Analysts, who till recently were complaining about the lack of reforms, have begun admitting that the prime minister has created a seamless blend of targeted welfarism and free-enterprise evangelism.

TO TRULY UNDERSTAND the statements of Prime Minister Modi in favour of the private sector, one has to go back to 2014. That year, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a clear mandate for Lok Sabha. This was in no small measure due to expectations that Modi would launch a reforms drive like the one that had made Gujarat a model investment destination and a byword for economic prowess. On July 18th, 2014—four days after presenting the Budget—then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said in Lok Sabha: “...there is no contradiction in being pro-business and being pro-poor. In fact, if you stop business activity, then you would not have enough resources to service the poor as far as this country is concerned. So, I see no contradiction in this.” It was very clear that the Government led by Modi would do everything to revive India’s economic fortunes that had come under a cloud after the policy paralysis that had gripped the country in the last years of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). What Jaitley said

on that day was the clearest hint about the mix of policy choices the Government would follow in the years ahead.

As Jaitley promised, the Modi Government soon unleashed its first reform by a major rewriting of the 2013 land acquisition law that was widely believed to be anti-industry and a major impediment to India’s economic progress. But politics would intervene cruelly and multiple attempts to push the Bill failed in Rajya Sabha where the Government did not enjoy a majority. Soon enough, as if on cue, commentators in the national capital and elsewhere began making a distinction between a government being pro-business and being pro-poor. The veiled allegation was that Modi’s Government was pro-business and not pro-poor. In making these assertions, the role of the opposition in stalling reforms in the Upper House was conveniently forgotten.

That did not deter Modi from pursuing the other leg of his policy programme: giving the poor citizens of India the basic goods and services they had been denied for long. From LPG gas connections—which were a middle-class privilege right into the 21st century—to toilets, from low-cost housing to a government health insurance programme, and more, were unleashed in these years. This had a curious effect among economic commentators who had expected rapid-fire economic reforms: Modi was no longer hailed as a harbinger of reforms and was increasingly seen as a

populist leader. Jaitley's carefully worded statement in Lok Sabha was quickly forgotten.

It is another matter that the Government continued pushing far-reaching economic reforms during this period. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), a vital financial and corporate sector reform, was passed in May 2016. Just a year later, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), an idea stuck at the drawing board and merely the subject of animated debates, became law. Independent India's most ambitious tax reform required political heavy-lifting and certain compromises without which its fractious politics would never have allowed such a reform to proceed.

These impressive achievements were not enough for critics who had till then praised Modi for his economic performance in Gujarat. What mattered ultimately were land and labour law reforms—and unless he crossed that bar, little of what he did to help the people of India was worthy of praise. They did not cut him any slack for the fact that the opposition was united in one goal: no economic reform that hit special interests and entrenched vote banks—labour unions, rich farmers and others—would be allowed.

There was an unstated political calculation as well. In case

these reforms did get through, the possibility of India getting on a high-growth trajectory was very real. The credit for that would undoubtedly go to Modi. And that eventuality was unacceptable. This aspect of politics in those years (2015-2018) is never discussed in terms of what it actually stood for. The political hope, all along, was that the failure of these reforms and the certainty of lower economic growth would hit Modi politically. None of that came to pass. Modi not only remains a popular prime minister but he has also won back-to-back victories in two General Elections.

THEN, SOMETHING CHANGED and in the most unusual fashion. 2020 turned out to be a year of very difficult challenges but also one of opportunities for India. Modi lived up to the challenge and made the most of opportunities at hand. The prime minister not only successfully addressed the problem posed by the pandemic—India flattened the curve with far fewer deaths than countries comparable with it—but also ushered in vital and much-awaited reforms during this difficult period. Labour laws were successfully bunched into a single labour code. But unexpectedly, Modi also undertook a set of re-

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Workers in a leather tannery in Jalandhar, January 2017

forms viewed as politically impossible: reforming India's agricultural markets that were hostage to an unholy cabal of rich farmers, bloated intermediaries and state governments that had fattened at the cost of the Union Government's largesse. In June, the Centre issued three ordinances offering farmers an alternative to sell their produce instead of being at the mercy of the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs).

If one cancels the white noise in the five months since the laws were finally passed by Parliament in September, one can see the same political playbook visible from late-2014 to early 2015 when efforts to change the land acquisition law were defeated. But there are two crucial differences now. For one, Modi is not hobbled by the absence of a majority in the Upper House. For another, the Indian electorate and the average Indian are now far better informed about the political machinations behind the attempts to derail economic reforms. The result is that Modi finds himself on a very strong political wicket even as attempts are made in a synchronised fashion domestically and globally to make him back off from what India needs in economic terms. The same sordid 'denial of credit' is at work in the case of agriculture sector laws. The Who's Who of Indian politics that endorsed these reforms


in the past now dubs these as 'black laws'. A more venal example of politics overtaking national interest would be hard to find.

It is against this background that Modi's stout defence of the private sector ought to be seen. There is economic logic at work here as well. After a terrible 7 per cent contraction in the economy, the Government has gone out of its way to give a spending push to revive the economy. What makes this attempt interesting in economic terms is that it is based on a large increase in capital spending instead of the usual nostrum of pushing consumption demand. This was the medicine offered by 'respectable' economists during the middle of the pandemic last year, ignoring the basic fact that in an event of exceptional uncertainty the recipients of cash would hoard it and not spend it. That, however, did not come in the way of the Government giving emergency cash handouts to poor citizens and essential rations to the backbone of the Indian economy—its workforce—during those terrible months of Summer 2020. What the Government did not do was splurge money in a manner that would allow its cornering by corruption. That did not go down well with critics. But it did not deter the Government from doing what was necessary.

The timing of these reforms and disinvestment is appropriate. In the years from 2014 to 2018, when the Indian economy was undergoing a painful process of fixing the 'twin balance sheet problem', there was little appetite for the private sector to either borrow more money or to find ways to invest using its own resources. The loss of impetus to follow through reforms in land and labour markets was in no small measure due to the absence of demand for them. To be sure, there were desultory opeds that made a case for these reforms, but it's one thing to say these are needed and an entirely different thing in terms of necessity and timing. That 2014 moment is back again now—and at the right time.

The Budget was notable for its ambitious privatisation programme where non-tax revenue of Rs 1.75 lakh crore was sought by selling off government stake in public sector undertakings (PSUs) and financial institutions (FIs), including two public sector banks (PSBs) and one insurance company in the next fiscal. This makes immediate economic sense as well: the Government needs resources if its fiscal push is to be implemented in a meaningful manner. Then again, this is not a simple sell-off of 'family silver', to use a once evocative but misleading expression. The Government made it very clear that its aim was to exit business for good, except in a tightly defined set of strategic areas. Even in these areas, the number of companies operating is to be limited. Much of this is borne out by the 70-odd years of experience in running government companies as by the need to give the private sector a running chance to play the role it is best suited for: running a business.

The economic and political imperatives for reform were one matter. Modi's statement showed a shifting of ideological gear; no Indian prime minister has come out this strongly in favour of the private sector as he did on the floor of Parliament. Even when a prime minister knew and appreciated the importance and necessity of the private sector, such was the ideological climate that he could never openly support the private sector or even control



THE ASPIRATIONAL CLASSES RECEIVED MODI'S CELEBRATION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP POSITIVELY. HAVING ALREADY CREATED A STRONG CONSTITUENCY OF THE POOR, MODI NOW APPEARS TO BE CONFIDENT ABOUT MOVING DECISIVELY IN THE DIRECTION OF FULL-ON GROWTH

his Cabinet colleagues from demonising India's wealth creators.

The year was 1986 and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was trying a makeover by attempting an economic liberalisation of sorts. His much-vaunted drive to modernise India by use of technology had garnered headlines for a while. Then came the 'raid raj' at the hands of his politically ambitious finance minister, VP Singh. In a span of a few months, Singh 'raided' virtually the Who's Who of Indian industry. Industrialist Rahul Bajaj's premises were raided; SL Kirloskar was arrested by a joint team of the Enforcement Directorate and the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence; officials of a unit of the Aditya Birla group were interrogated for two days. These were just a few prominent names: Indian industry itself was subjected to fear of a kind that it had not known for a while. The damage was enough for Singh to be shifted a few months down the line to the Defence Ministry in 1987. The rest is history. Two years later, Rajiv Gandhi was out and VP Singh became prime minister. As prime minister, Singh realised the same thing as his predecessor: the importance of letting the private sector breathe and get on with its job. But the debate on the role of the private sector had been framed in zero-sum terms: if the private sector gained, India's poor lost and if India's poor had to get their due under the sun, the private sector had to be shown its place.

It sounds unfair to single out a particular prime minister for a trend persistent for a long time. But VP Singh was just one, perhaps extreme, example of how the private sector was vilified for a long time. This was not always the case. In the years before India gained independence, the private sector was considered an equal participant in the task of rebuilding the country once the British would leave. This was much before the advent of polarising ideological debates that votaries of an economically liberal India finally lost. At that time, these debates were framed in terms of the need for a planned economy versus the classical laissez-faire doctrine. The magnitude of the task of reconstructing the country after two centuries of colonial rule made planning a 'common sense' idea.

IT IS A MATTER of historical record that India's private industry and its industrialists were never against planning. In fact, they were part of Congress' project to imagine an independent India. The Bombay Plan, published in 1944-1945, involved the leading lights of India's industry. JRD Tata, GD Birla, Lala Shri Ram, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, Purshottamdas Thakurdas and others fully backed the idea of planning as a necessity to overcome India's economic stagnation.

But what transpired after 1952 was a very different version of planning, one that was based on the wartime ideas of a controlled economy geared to meet the needs of a colonial power marshalling resources to fight its rivals in war. With the 'socialistic pattern of society' adopted at the Avadi session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in 1955, Congress asserted that the public sector should occupy the commanding heights of the economy. Implicit in this was a stigmatisation of private capital and enter-

prise. The private sector was put at the sufferance of the ruling power and its policies. Entire swathes of economic activity were reserved for government and the public sector. Even in those areas where the private sector was allowed, there was a high level of regulation, to the point of throttling industry. A web of licences, permissions, rationing of raw material, capacity limits, etcetera, were imposed in the name of planning.

Nothing is more symbolic of this state of affairs than the much-discussed encounter between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and JRD Tata. During the discussion, when Tata mentioned the need for the public sector to make profit, Nehru testily responded, "Never talk to me about the word profit, it is a dirty word." With that, India entered a dark age of sorts for the private sector. On the one hand, the Government literally took it to the cleaners and paved the road for the growing lack of accountability and efficiency in the public sector; on the other, a systematic leftist critique posited the private sector as the people's biggest enemy.

In the period from 1971 to 1990, it was not that prime ministers were not aware of the need to allow the private sector to flourish. The problem was that politics in the country was carried out in the name of the poor and for the eradication of poverty. The

Beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana outside



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contours of this politics and ideology had been etched so long a time ago that it became impossible for any prime minister, however powerful he or she may have been, to reverse the trend. Government was expected to do everything and it acquired a god-like set of powers and an attendant halo.

Nothing illustrates this better than the tenure of Indira Gandhi. Her political battles with her party rivals led her to ever more extreme leftist economic positions. Banks were nationalised in 1969 and finally, in 1976, even grain trade was considered for nationalisation. With each leftward turn in direction, India's economic problems increased, instead of ushering in the utopia that intellectual backers of the project had promised.

INDIRA GANDHI'S TENURE began an era when the private sector was manipulated by government policy to the point where, the size, shape, quantity and price of every manufactured product, from pins and needles to trucks and even bread, was dictated in the name of socialism and public welfare. Over the years, governments at the Centre and states spread their tentacles cutting across sectors in finance, trading, mineral ex-

ploitation, manufacturing utilities, heavy industry, hotels, jute mills and even pesticides.

The 1960s and 1970s were an era in which a schizophrenic duplicity was institutionalised in policymaking: on the one hand, government would dictate how, what and when to sell and at what price. In Parliament, ruling party leaders would wear 'pro-people policy' colours loudly during debates. On the other hand, its representatives would cut mutually agreeable 'deals' to conveniently tailor policy with individual industrialists and members of the business fraternity based on quid pro quos. Specific party leaders were assigned for working with 'friendlies' in the world of business and industry: SK Patil and Atulya Ghosh played the role in the 1960s for the ruling party and were succeeded by the likes of LN Mishra and Rajni Patel in the 1970s.

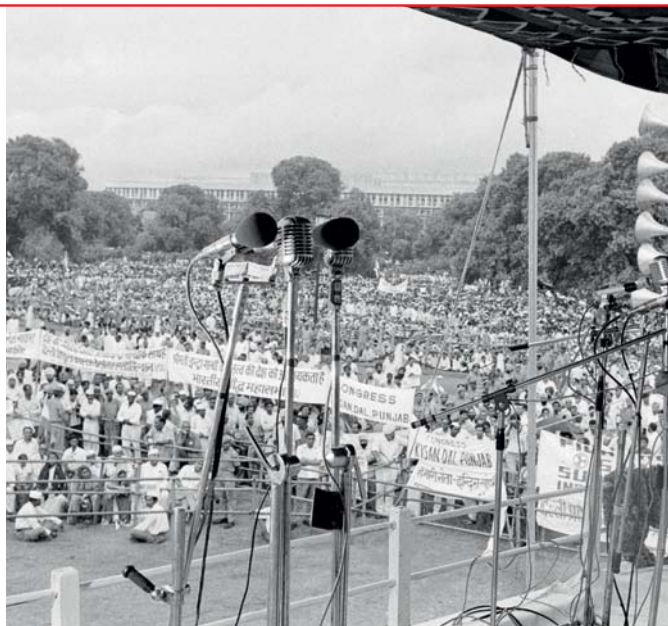
The Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Act, 1970, when enacted, sent chills down the spine of many in the private sector. It was made to control the sector stringently and suppress its natural entrepreneurial spirit. It allowed government to garner extensive information on all firms with assets exceeding Rs 200 million. Essentially, this was used to keep the private sector and its economic power on a tight leash. By the time

Parliament, August 2018



THE FOUNDATION FOR THE ECONOMIC GROWTH BLUEPRINT OF MODI 2.0 WAS LAID IN THE FIVE YEARS OF MODI 1.0, WITH TARGETED SCHEMES LIKE SWACHH BHARAT, UJJWALA, LAST-MILE ELECTRICITY ACCESS FOR VILLAGES, AND SO ON

(L-R): JRD Tata and Jawaharlal Nehru in Bombay, 1953; Indira Gandhi addresses a rally in New Delhi, 1975; VP Singh and Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi,



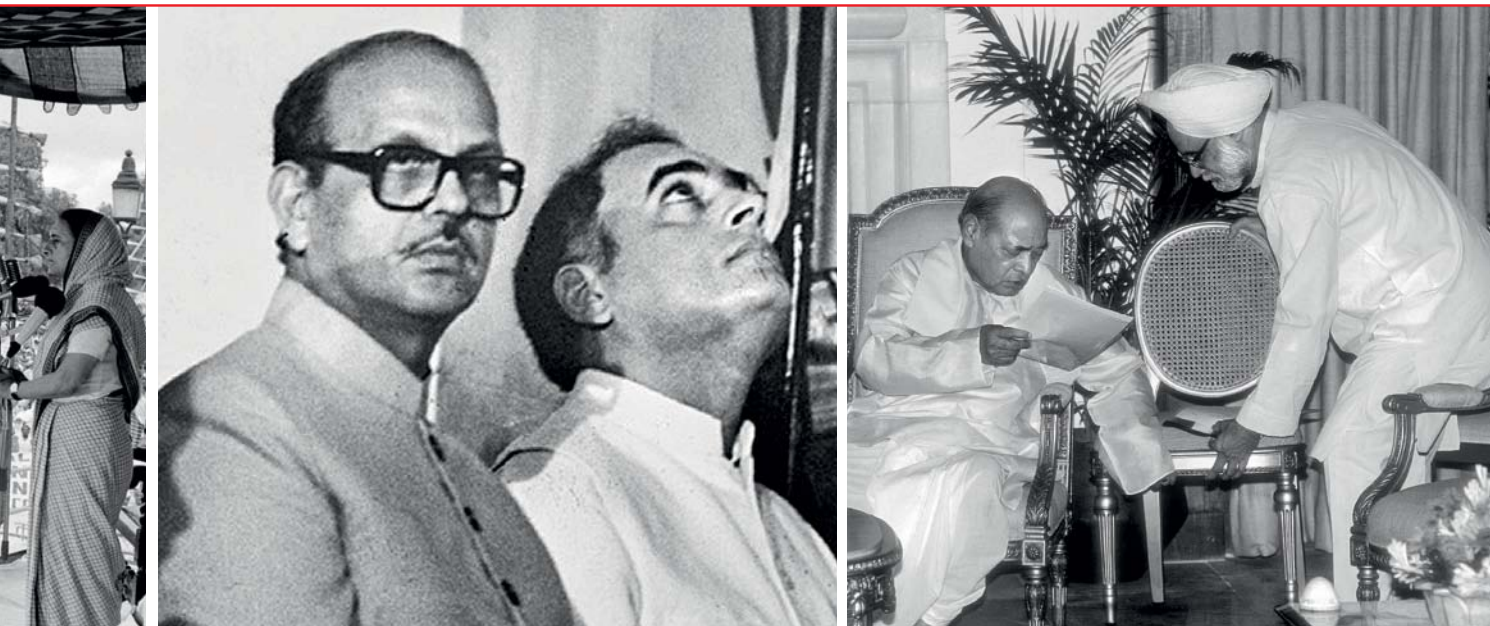
INDIA'S PRIVATE INDUSTRY AND ITS INDUSTRIALISTS WERE NEVER AGAINST
VERSION OF PLANNING BASED ON WARTIME IDEAS OF A CONTROLLED ECONOMY.
STEALTH: A TINKERING WITH SOME SPECIFIC FEATURE HERE, SOMETHING

Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980 and sought to reverse the trend of stifling government control across every sector, it was too late and the damage could not be undone in haste. The country by then ranked among those with the highest tariff levels in the world (146.4 per cent for intermediate goods; 107.3 per cent for capital goods; 140.9 per cent for consumer goods and 137.7 per cent for manufacturing goods). The prime minister then assigned several reports to reverse the blows to the private sector. Despite that, the word 'profit' remained as dirty as ever and the private sector never actually managed to regain its place in the eyes of policymakers as an equal partner with the public sector in the country's economic progress.

WHEN ECONOMIC REFORMS were finally initiated under duress during the tenure of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in 1991, they were designed and sequenced in a manner that would not draw the ire of his party colleagues with socialist leanings. In effect, despite how politically astute Rao himself was considered, even the much-praised reform decisions by the Rao-Manmohan Singh duo were carried out stealthily, as if with a forked tongue. This was how: the Rao Government's industrial policy pushed aggressively for liberalisation in the morning in Parliament. Manmohan Singh's 'epochal budget', which came

later, was couched in language lauding Nehruvian socialism and assertions that Nehru had batted for moving away from public-sector dependence. Rao's industrial policy was drafted by his Principal Secretary Amar Nath Verma and Chief Economic Advisor Rakesh Mohan. The policy, among other things, dispensed with the licensing restrictions for all industries except a select few related to security, strategic concerns and safety and environmental issues. In a bid to boost foreign investment, it showcased a plan for investment up to 51 per cent foreign equity participation to be prior approved and to sell government stakes in PSUs while restricting their presence to essential areas such as infrastructure, mineral exploration and defence manufacturing. As crucially, the fearsome MRTP Act, meant basically to collect information on structures and finances of companies with assets of over Rs 200 million, was dumped.

Singh, meanwhile, presented a Budget on July 24th, 1991 that focused on fiscal deficit control by slashing PSU expense and fertiliser and sugar subsidies. It supported reforms broadly, with a new trade policy that aided exports through devaluation of the rupee against the US dollar and capped tariff rates at 150 per cent, as well as lowering rates across the board and reducing excise duties. Singh posited his measures in Nehru's "advice" for "maximum flexibility in running the economy". Prime Minister Rao had cleverly won the day with a finessed strategy on economic



PLANNING. BUT WHAT TRANSPIRED AFTER 1952 WAS A VERY DIFFERENT EVER SINCE NARASIMHA RAO, REFORMS HAVE BEEN CARRIED OUT WITH THERE, BUT NEVER A THOROUGH CHANGE IN FAVOUR OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

liberalisation, couched in nuanced language.

There was disquiet in Congress though, and a suave Rao quickly constituted a panel headed by former Gandhi household retainer ML Fotedar to review the Budget proposals. With some token changes and a Rs 100 crore grant to the newly formed Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the 'epochal' Budget was stamped with the party's seal of approval. Ever since Rao, reforms have been carried out with stealth: a tinkering with some specific feature here, something there, but never a thorough change in favour of the private sector.

WELL INTO THE 21st century, this lip service to 'socialism' has persisted. During the UPA years, the National Advisory Council, populated with leftist activists, did not allow the Manmohan Singh Government to go anywhere near land and labour reforms, the same thing that critics used to attack Modi in later years. In the UPA years, expenditures on populist schemes and 'entitlement-based approaches' ensured that no government after the UPA could carry out economic reforms in an open and straightforward manner. Call it a poison pill or a scorched earth approach, it was a travesty that in the second decade of the 21st century, India's leaders still had to step very gingerly while espousing optimum

growth in the country.

It is to his credit that Modi has figured that the way out of this morass of lies is not just in batting openly for the private sector but also in doing so after first ensuring those basic goods and services to the poor that they had been deprived of for the last 70 years, even as governments were formed and parties fattened themselves in their name. In the run-up to 2014, Narendra Modi had told *Open* in an interview: "Delhi is being controlled by a cabal that has vested interests in the status quo. I will break the status quo. The country is facing trouble on all fronts because of maximum government. It is interfering with every aspect of life; it is not for changing the lives of people, but to benefit a few rent seekers who think it is their God-ordained right to rule." Six years down the line, the reformist in him is fully aware that the private sector is imperative to generating wealth. Just as sharply as he was aware that the first task that awaited him was to wash away the toxic ideological legacy that made reforms all but impossible. When he rose in Parliament this month to say that the private sector was welcome, it was a clear indication that India was ready to embrace its wealth creators, bringing a prolonged nightmare to an end.

Modi's detractors may still be hoping to construct a narrative to trounce him. But in his own words, the "*andolanjeevis*" will no longer find it easy to survive. Modi may not be off the mark. ■

DISPATCH

ACROSS T

Tunnels and drones from Pakistan along the international

A BSF PATROL ALONG
THE INTERNATIONAL
BORDER IN JAMMU'S
SAMBA SECTOR,
FEBRUARY 12

Photograph by ASHISH SHARMA

THE FENCE

border in Jammu pose a new challenge to India's security

By **RAHUL PANDITA** in Samba Sector, Jammu



ON FEBRUARY 12TH, the Jammu and Kashmir Police arrested a terrorist, Zahoor Ahmed Rather, from a Muslim locality in Bari Brahmana, an industrial town in Jammu's Samba district, near the International Border (IB) with Pakistan. Rather belonged to TRF (The Resistance Front), a frontal group for the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Toiba. He had taken a house on rent in the locality and lived here with his wife and children. Last year, he

had killed three workers of the Bharatiya Janata Party and a policeman in South Kashmir. The police had prior information about his movements. According to them, Rather was to collect a consignment of weapons, which his handlers in Pakistan were supposed to drop with the help of a drone, somewhere along the border in Samba.

The IB in Jammu has now become a new hotspot for terrorist activities from Pakistan. In the past few months, Pakistan has used drones to drop drugs and weapons easily across the fencing on the border onto Indian territory. At the same time, it has built tunnels to enable the infiltration of terrorists from organisations like Jaish-e-Mohammed. Both weapons and terrorists are then picked up by a Kashmiri network of terrorists and overground workers, ultimately making their way to Kashmir.

"The aim of these tunnels and drones is to beat our line of interception along the border," says NS Jamwal, the inspector general of the Border Security Force (BSF) in Jammu, responsible for guarding the IB in the sector, including the



POLICE SOURCES SAY THERE COULD BE MANY UNDETECTED TUNNELS
WILL CONTINUE TO USE TO CARRY OUT TERRORIST ACTIVITIES IN

Photograph by **ASHISH SHARMA**



A BSF PATROL AT A RECENTLY UNEARTHED TUNNEL IN THE SAMBA SECTOR, FEBRUARY 12; (RIGHT) THE HEXACOPTER DRONE SHOT DOWN BY THE BSF IN JUNE 2020

one in Samba.

On January 23rd, the BSF detected a tunnel in the sector during the unearthing of a patch of land, close to the border fencing. It was 30-feet deep and estimated to be about 150-feet long. This was the second tunnel detected in 10 days and the fourth in six months in this sector. It appeared to be a few years old, and according to BSF officials, in use for a long time.

When BSF officials began to explore it, they realised that the tunnel was quite sophisticated. The top of the tunnel was dome-shaped and both sides had been lined with sandbags at the exit to prevent caving. “You could run trucks and tractors over it and still not suspect that there was a tunnel beneath,” says a senior BSF official.

The selection of the Samba sector for tunnelling suits Pakistan well. The area is favourable to digging as the water table here is low. BSF officials suspect that Pakistan uses satellite imagery to select proper tunnelling routes. The tunnels work like this: on their side of the border, the Pakistani army has kept the area totally unkempt. They allow the growth of foliage, especially *sarkanda* or elephant grass which requires very little to grow. From here, the experts start digging and go beneath the fence, past BSF fortifications and patrols to emerge in Indian territory in the middle of a similar growth. “These tunnels are an engineering marvel,” says Jamwal, “it is a collaboration between the Pakistani army, their engineers and their scientists.”

For years, the BSF had been keeping an eye on the ground for possible attempts at infiltration. Sometimes, infiltrators broke the fence somewhere and entered. Sometimes, they would just walk along *nallahs* like Tarnah to enter. While the BSF kept a tight vigil over these, it did not know that the Pakistani army was deploying other means.

The first tunnel in this area was detected in 2012. It was about 500 metres long, with 150 metres inside Indian territory. But in the recent past, smaller or shorter tunnels, in the range of 150 metres, have been detected.

To make it easier for them to be detected on this side, the BSF has now begun to encourage villagers to cultivate land. “This year, we assisted them to grow wheat. Gradually, they have begun to get interested in cultivation close to the border,” says a BSF official posted in the sector.

In June last year, a BSF patrol heard a whirring sound. When



IN THE SECTOR THAT PAKISTAN
KASHMIR AND ELSEWHERE



'THE AIM OF THESE TUNNELS AND DRONES IS TO BEAT OUR LINE OF INTERCEPTION ALONG THE BORDER,' SAYS NS JAMWAL, BSF INSPECTOR GENERAL IN JAMMU, RESPONSIBLE FOR GUARDING THE BORDER

they looked up, they found a hexacopter (large drone) flying low. It had developed a technical snag due to which its batteries had been exhausted. The patrol commander shot at the hexacopter, after which it crashed into a field nearby. The BSF found a Chinese-made clone of an M14 rifle, pistols and grenades attached to its belly. But in this case the BSF had just got lucky. Had the hexacopter not developed a snag, it would have gone unnoticed. "It would have crossed over us right up to the national highway, where in all likelihood someone from Kashmir would have picked them [the arms and ammunition] up," says a BSF official.

It is not clear if the consignment the TRF terrorist Zahoor Ahmed Rather was supposed to pick up from Samba had entered Indian territory on a similar drone. But police sources say that many such drones with weapon consignments have landed in Indian territory.

In November, the police intercepted a truck at a toll plaza near Nagrota on the outskirts of Jammu city. There were four Jaish terrorists hiding inside the truck. In the ensuing encounter, all four were killed. In the episode, the police were tracking the overground Jaish workers who had been sent to the border to meet the infiltrated terrorists and ferry them on the truck to Kashmir. A huge consignment of weapons, including 11 AK series rifles, 29 grenades, 7.5 kg RDX and three pistols were recovered from the truck. The Jaish terrorists, according to the police, had come to carry out attacks to disrupt the District Development Council elections being held in Jammu and Kashmir around that time. A GPS recovered from one of the slain terrorists was examined. It led investigators to retrace their journey, ultimately reaching the exit of a tunnel in Regal village in Samba from where they had entered India.

A few days before Rather's arrest, a joint team of police from Jammu and Kashmir arrested a terrorist, Hidayatullah Malik, from Kunjwani in Jammu. Malik is from South Kashmir's Shopian district and was heading an organisation called Lashkar-e-Mustafa, which the police believe is a front for Jaish. Malik had come to Jammu to meet his wife, a lawyer, who upon interrogation revealed that she had divorced her husband in order to marry him. They had travelled in the past to Jammu and Chandigarh, staying at prominent hotels. Sometime earlier, Malik had taken a flight to Delhi to conduct a recce of the office of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. He had made a video of the location and sent it to his handler in Pakistan who went by the code name of Doctor Sahib. The investigators have now identified the handler as a Jaish commander, Abu Talha.

Malik had also been involved in creating a vehicle-borne IED for a possible attack on security forces, just like the one used in Pulwama in February 2019. But timely action by the police saw the vehicle being intercepted in Pulwama in May last year. The explosives were later blasted in isolation by the bomb disposal squad.

Malik's interrogation had one more shocking revelation. He told the police that he had escorted a Jaish terrorist, Ashiq Ahmed Nengroo, and his wife and children from Kashmir to a tunnel in Samba in December 2018. From here, Nengroo and his family had fled to Pakistan.

Nengroo played a key role in the revival of Jaish in Kashmir. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), while investigating the Pulwama suicide attack, learnt that between October 2017 and September 2018, Nengroo had made seven trips to Punjab and Jammu in three trucks owned by him and transported 33 hardcore Jaish terrorists to the Kashmir Valley. All of them had completed the most advanced training, called Daura-e-khas, in Pakistani terrorist camps. All of them infiltrated into India across the international border in Punjab and Jammu. One of the Jaish parties that Nengroo had helped enter Jammu from Samba, and subsequently move to Kashmir, happened to be the one led by Jaish chief Masood Azhar's nephew, Umar Farooq. It is he who planned the entire attack in Pulwama—resulting in the deaths of 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel—including motivating the suicide bomber, Adil Ahmed Dar, to carry out the attack.

As Nengroo came under the scanner, he quietly left Kashmir with Malik's help. Malik told interrogators that 20 minutes after entering the tunnel in Samba, Nengroo had called him. Nengroo had told Malik that he had reached his destination safely and was then having tea with his Pakistani handlers.

This tunnel in Samba's Galar village was detected by the BSF in August last year. Like other tunnels, it was also re-enforced with sandbags carrying markings of Karachi and Shakargarh (the area just across the border in Pakistan's Narowal district).

But sources in Kashmir Police say that there could be many undetected tunnels in the sector that Pakistan will continue to use to carry out terrorist activities in Kashmir and elsewhere. They say that security agencies in the neighbouring Pathankot district of Punjab had also been alerted about the possibility of infiltration through such tunnels. The urgent need, says a senior police officer posted in the area, is to invest in technology that could help security forces in the detection of these underground and overground invasions. ■

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THE SURPRISE SU

BY Vijayendra, BS Yediyurappa's son and the architect of unlikely



BY Vijayendra with BJP workers celebrating a bypoll victory in Sira, Karnataka, November 2020

CESSOR?

bypoll victories, bides his time **By V SHOBA**

THERE IS NO room in BJP for a third family member, I know,” concedes BY Vijayendra, right off the bat. Yet, here we are, in the sitting room in his apartment furnished with modest velveteen teal couches, talking about his place in Karnataka politics. His father, four-time Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa, is about to turn 78 amidst rumours of a change in leadership, and his brother BY Raghavendra is a Member of Parliament from Shivamogga. At 45, Vijayendra, Yediyurappa’s second son and the youngest of five siblings, is a state BJP vice president—an elevation from his last-held post of Yuva Morcha general secretary that came in July 2020 in recognition of his role in wresting KR Pet, a constituency in the Janata Dal-Secular [JD(S)] pocket borough of Mandya, in the December 2019 Assembly bypolls. In 2018, the party had, at the last hour, decided not to field Vijayendra in Varuna against then Chief Minister Siddaramaiah’s son Yathindra. His father was upset, but Vijayendra took the disappointment in his stride, settling for tilling the soil of the Old Mysore region to sow the seeds for BJP’s emergence. “Had I contested and lost in Varuna, I would have lost to a sitting CM in his home constituency. Had I won, I would have been a headline,” he says. Vijayendra liked a challenge and he wasn’t about to be interrupted. In KR Pet, asking 90,000-plus Vokkaligas to vote KC Narayana Gowda, the sitting JD(S) MLA who had defected to BJP, back to victory and repose their faith in a Lingayat chief minister seemed downright silly, but a young campaign squad led by Vijayendra, backed on the ground by BJP MLA from Hassan, 39-year-old Preetham Gowda, camped for nearly a month in the constituency, hoping to slowly win over women and young voters. It helped that BJP had been going all out to woo Vokkaligas, 11 per cent of the state’s population, for the first time in its history with help from Deputy Chief Minister CN Ashwath Narayan, other leaders from the community, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s rapport with the Adichunchanagiri pontiffs. But it was a fortuitous personal connect that allowed the team to get up close and personal with voters. The ‘B’ in BS Yediyurappa stands for Bookanakere, the town in KR Pet taluk where he was born, although his political *karmabhoomi* is Shivamogga in the

state’s Malnad region. “We never took Old Mysore [comprising Greater Bengaluru, Mandya, Hassan, Mysore, Chamaraajnar, Ramanagar, Chikkaballapur, Kodagu and Chikkamagalur] seriously. We had gifted it away to JD(S) by not appointing booth agents and instilling confidence in our *karyakartas*. Campaigning in the region showed me that BSY is not just a Lingayat leader,” Vijayendra says. The day after the poll results came, leaving JD(S) leaders feeling as though they were descending the stairs in an MC Escher drawing, he received an unexpected call—it was Amit Shah, congratulating him on the victory and extending an invitation to Delhi. This was special, not only because Vijayendra looks up to the master strategist but also because it was a signal that the national leadership had taken note of him—not just as the son of the chief minister but as an urgent new leader emerging through the state unit.

Central to BJP’s winning streak in subsequent bypolls in the region is the party’s newfound confidence that besides exploiting JD(S)’ existential crisis and convincing leaders to switch sides, it could also break new ground on its own. “BJP can win on its own strength. We have good leadership, but we have to work on the

THE INDUCTION OF MORE VOKKALIGAS INTO THE CABINET AND INTENSIVE BOOTH-LEVEL WORK HELPED BJP WIN BYPOLLS TO SIRA AND RR NAGAR IN NOVEMBER 2020—BOTH VICTORIES THAT PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI TERMED ‘EXTREMELY SPECIAL’ AND WHICH THE PARTY ATTRIBUTED, AT LEAST IN PART, TO BY VIJAYENDRA’S STRATEGY

ground,” says Vijayendra. The induction of four more Vokkaligas, including Narayana Gowda, into the cabinet and intensive booth-level work helped the ruling party secure RR Nagar in Bengaluru and Sira in Tumkur in bypolls held in November 2020—both victories that Prime Minister Narendra Modi termed “extremely special”, and both attributed by the party, at least in part, to Vijayendra’s strategy and mobilisation. The strategy, he says, was simply to camp for three-four weeks in the constituencies to build a rapport with people and to get young leaders from communities across the state to campaign together. “BJP cannot afford to win just 104 or 110 seats in the next Assembly polls. Winning Old

Mysore is key to winning a comfortable majority. And I believe many seats are winnable if we apply ourselves to the task—we already won Gundlupet in Chamarajanagar district in 2018; we can also win Hanur, Kollegal and Chamarajanagar. In Mysore Rural, HD Kote and Hunsur are well within reach.” The 2018 election had thrown up a hung Assembly, with BJP emerging as the single largest party with 104 seats in a house of 224 and forming the government, only to be supplanted within days by a Congress-JD(S) coalition which had the requisite numbers. A shaky marriage to begin with, the coalition, however, collapsed in 14 months, in no small part due to BJP’s active interference. Yediyurappa was once again chief minister, thanks to 16 ruling-coalition MLAs who had been coaxed to switch sides. “It is well known that Vijayendra helps his father maintain the peace with many rebel MLAs. If Yediyurappa is the architect of the government, Vijayendra is the engineer who goes around troubleshooting,” says B Sriramulu, Minister for Social Welfare. “What I can confirm is that he has never interfered in ministry affairs.”

Vijayendra studied at the Sri Jagadguru Renukacharya College of Law in Bengaluru, not far from the chief minister’s residence, and briefly practised law in Shivamogga before getting married and settling down in Bengaluru. “If I have one regret in life, it is that I didn’t practise criminal law.” A decade has passed since a Lokayukta report indicted his father in an illegal mining case, forc-

ing him to resign as chief minister following a directive promptly issued by the party’s central leadership. The most serious charge was contained in Chapter 22 of the report, which held him a party to irregular financial transactions between South West Mining Company and Prerana Education Society, a trust owned and managed by his family in Shivamogga. Ahead of the 2018 Assembly election, a special court of the Central Bureau of Investigation acquitted Yediyurappa of all charges of accepting kickbacks from mining companies when he was chief minister and gave a clean chit to 12 others in the case, including his two sons. Other cases against him, including a corruption case from the denotification of a housing project proposal for middle and low-income groups on 26 acres in Bengaluru, are still underway in courts. “No other sitting chief minister has been subjected to such humiliation, dragged behind bars and vilified by his own colleagues on baseless charges. We have been working away at the dozens of cases foisted on him. To come back from all that and become the chief minister again took a lot of inner strength,” says Vijayendra, who feels dutybound to clear his father’s name. At the same time, he wants to be known as more than the chief minister’s son. “You don’t just become a leader by virtue of a position, you have to win the acceptance of the people.” It is a statement he repeats over a phone call from Shivamogga a week later.

Rumoured to be fielded from Basavakalyan in north Karna-

BY Vijayendra and father BS Yediyurappa campaigning in Sira



taka, one of two Assembly constituencies where bypolls are due, Vijayendra has just been made in charge of the campaign in Maski instead. If he feels thwarted, he doesn't show it. "I am in no hurry to be elected MLA. I am not interested in becoming an MLC. I am enjoying this phase of working for the party," he says. He pauses before addressing the elephant in the room: "There is a big leadership vacuum across all three parties in Karnataka." The BJP high command in Delhi is casting about for a successor to Yediyurappa. "The party needs an organisation man, not an individualistic leader," says a senior party functionary from Karnataka, on condition of anonymity. With many seniors regarding Vijayendra with open hostility, he finds his privilege to be a double-edged sword: "As much as being the CM's son is an advantage when I campaign, it poses a hurdle to my relationship with a few leaders within the party." "A few" doesn't begin to describe the challenges Vijayendra faces—from veteran leaders who are hoping the baton will be passed to them; from contemporaries who have come up through the ranks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and BJP and are still waiting for ministerial berths, in short supply due to promises made to rebel MLAs from Congress and JD(S); and from ministers who fear he may undercut their authority. "Without holding a position in state government, Vijayendra has become a power centre," says a Lingayat MLA, accusing him of "filtering" information that reaches the chief minister. He also alleges interference by Vijayendra in allocating funds for constituencies, and in transfers and appointments of government officers. "Yediyurappa is grooming him as his prodigal son, and this does not sit well with party loyalists," says the leader. "There is no denying he is a charismatic and shrewd young leader with a bright future ahead of him. But neither the BJP national leadership nor state leaders will promote a dynasty, especially not at a time when core BJP workers hold very few posts in government."

Vijayendra vehemently denies these charges and says he is a soft target for anyone looking for chinks in Yediyurappa's armour. "I am a party worker, and I help the CM coordinate with other party workers. To say that I interfere in government matters is transparently false." Though widely considered his father's political successor, Vijayendra has not betrayed an intention to make power play for the top post. He is a pragmatist who sees a future harnessed to the success of BJP in Karnataka—and this, he says, is contingent on returning grassroots work to the heart of politics. He also knows the party cannot risk unseating a Lingayat chief minister—a lesson the Congress learnt after Rajiv Gandhi's dismissal of Veerendra Patil cost the party a 17 per cent loss of vote share in the 1994 elections, reducing its tally from 179 to

VIJAYENDRA FACES CHALLENGES FROM VETERAN LEADERS; FROM CONTEMPORARIES WHO HAVE COME UP THROUGH THE RSS-BJP RANKS; AND FROM MINISTERS WHO FEAR HE MAY UNDERCUT THEIR AUTHORITY

36. "Besides being a popular leader, the CM's biggest strength is his accessibility to all legislators. So even though we don't agree with every decision, we reconcile because of the effort he puts in to accommodate everyone. Some of us are unhappy with the bifurcation of Ballari district to carve out Vijayanagara, but he said to me, we have to accommodate the demands of defectors [in this case, Anand Singh, Minister for Forest & Environment, Ecology and Tourism]," says G Somasekhara Reddy, MLA from Ballari City. "Whoever succeeds him may not succeed in keeping all sections of the party together."

To be sure, Vijayendra is not his father. He remembers growing up in Shikaripura under the watchful eye of Yediyurappa, who, he says, was a disciplinarian with his children. "He would make surprise visits to the school on his way to the farm and beat me if I bunked classes, but when it came to making a career decision, he left it entirely up to me," he says, adding that he "stumbled into politics by chance and became hooked". Though not as religious as his father—after three daughters, Yediyurappa had asked Raghavendra swami to pray that he beget a son, whom he then named after the guru—he enjoys his visits to the Manjunatha Swamy temple in Dharmasthala. Does he consult astrologers? "I certainly can't remember consulting one in the past two years—there hasn't been a need to," he says, laughing. Vijayendra takes long careening trips across the state—"I am away for three days in a week"—and plays golf to relax when he is not working.

His sharp memory, organising skills and personable demeanour have made him popular with young leaders in the party. "He is the sort of leader who nurtures young MLAs and second-rung leaders in the party. He has given first-time MLAs like me both the responsibility and the credit for by-elections," says Preetham Gowda.

The by-elections have helped Vijayendra construct an identity in party circles of a strategist who can accurately predict electoral outcomes and venture into uncharted territory. "He is one of many young leaders the party has been encouraging," says KS Eshwarappa, Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj. "In BJP, it is PM Modi's image and the principles of the organisation that count, not whether you are a Lingayat or a backward caste representative." But if 29-year-old Tejasvi Surya became BJP's favourite youth leader from Karnataka by winning Bangalore South, a true-blue party bastion if there ever was one, after being handpicked by the national leadership, Vijayendra, despite coming from privilege and partly because of it, has had to prove his worth to the party. Amidst agitations by Kurubas, Panchamasali Lingayats and Valmikis demanding enhanced quotas and special status, BJP would do well to back leaders who have their ears close to the ground. ■

Old Money

How Covid-19 changes are pushing businesses to target a largely ignored demography of the elderly

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



Last year, around the time the lockdown was lifted across the country, an advertisement appeared on our TV sets. It begins with an elderly lady waiting for her family at a restaurant, presumably meeting them for the first time since the lockdown. And within seconds, they materialise: a young couple, a millennial sister of the husband, and an army of children, each one of them representing some of the medium's favourite demographics. A commercial like this can go anywhere, making a lead of any of the cast of just-materialised characters to sell whatever product it wants. It does not pick them and sticks with the original elderly lady as her voiceover reflects on the difficult months that had gone by. (Perhaps more unusually, this reflection involves no banking or insurance product for the retired; this, after all, being a toothpaste ad for Colgate.) As her voiceover narrates the loneliness she experienced during the pandemic, an elderly man appears at the table, puts an arm around her, and as her baffled children look on, she raises her engagement ring by way of explanation. 'Celebrate a new kind of freedom,' the ad says. 'Get started with a new smile.'

This wasn't the only ad to feature a silver-haired protagonist. A spate of commercials released during the pandemic, and featuring some of the country's biggest brands, has chosen to focus on this particular demography. Be that a group of old men, their masks on their chins, choosing to buy an ornament for their young caregiver (Tanishq); or an old woman chatting with her nurse over a messaging app during the lockdown (WhatsApp); or a nervous professor logging in for his first Zoom lesson (Vi)—each one of these representing an activity we rarely see seniors perform on a television commercial, from using a new technology to buying something expensive.

At one level, this is understandable. The pandemic has affected the elderly more than any other group. And ad filmmakers would want to reflect such concerns.

But at another level, this is entirely new. Although there have been occasional ads in recent times that have cast older people as protagonists, the advertising landscape for the longest period has refrained from featuring wrinkled faces unless to parrot an insurance ad or play cute in the background. The conventional wisdom being that India is a country of young consumers; the old, if they participate in the economy, do so in only limited ways.

But the pandemic is making advertisers and businesses have a fresh look at this largely ignored demography. This trend has begun to pick up more steam in several foreign countries, with many of the top consumer goods launching new products just for the elderly or developing new verticals to target them. Several companies—from Nestlé, the Activia yogurt maker Danone SA, Colgate-Palmolive to IKEA—are doing so, accord-

told the *Wall Street Journal*.

In India, several startups and businesses have sprung up to target this segment. There are e-commerce sites for senior citizens, plush real estate projects for the old, apps that help them navigate the internet, specially designed products such as phones and music players, and several more. One such product is the hugely successful music player Carvaan (brought out by Saregama, which is owned by OPEN magazine's parent company, the RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group). To a millennial who listens to music through music-streaming apps such as Spotify or downloads them to his music player, the appeal of the product may seem baffling. But to the elderly segment, with its ease of design, harking back to an older time, and the thousands of tunes pre-loaded on it, much of these of an older vintage, the product has been immensely attractive.

“The overall potential of the market driven by senior citizens is as large as Rs 1 lakh crore, excluding the real estate, BFSI and pharma products categories. Of this, only 10 per cent has been addressed so far”

TAPAN MISHRA founder, Seniority



ing to a *Wall Street Journal* article. Nestlé in China has come out with a powdered milk drink that it claims enhances mobility during ageing; Colgate launched anti-ageing products, such as an amino acid toothpaste in China which it claims can reverse visible signs of gum-ageing; IKEA, elsewhere, has come out with furniture pieces for the elderly; Procter & Gamble has launched a razor intended for caregivers of those with ageing-related needs in Canada; and Danone has set up a new healthy-ageing unit and launched a whey protein product that claims to aid muscles, joints and bones. “We clearly see healthy ageing, even more now in the Covid world, as a huge trend,” Danone’s CEO Emmanuel Faber

Many of these businesses and products for the elderly had come up long before Covid arrived on Indian shores. But the pandemic, the founders say, has increased demand and expanded the scales of their businesses. Covid has brought with it insecurity and fear among the old, but it is also pushing them online and increasing their appetite for products and services for their wellness and comfort.

MP Deepu, who along with Rahul Gupta, co-founded the Gurugram-based Senior World, a platform that comes out with products and travel services for the elderly, noticed an opportunity for such a business when he saw the struggle many of his elderly relatives went through. “If you just look around, you will notice that

while so many things have emerged that make our lives so convenient, there's been very little for the elderly," he says. One of his company's first forays has been in technology. They have come out with several iterations of a mobile phone for the elderly. Called Easyfone, this phone comes with features many large mobile phone-makers rarely consider for older users, from its large font sizes, well-spaced keypads, to the ability to amplify sounds and, in one version, even compatibility with those who use hearing aids. It even allows others, presumably a son or daughter, to set alarms and reminders and configure the phone remotely. According to Deepu, about two lakh individuals currently use the phone, and the company is now developing a smartphone version of it.

Senior World also has a travel vertical where they organise domestic and international trips only for the elderly. "We don't allow younger people to join, even those who want to accompany their older relatives. People don't understand, older people want to do their own thing," Deepu says. Trips with Senior World are organised differently, he says. The itineraries are more easy-paced, the hotels booked are elderly-friendly, buses play old music and carry ice boxes for items like insulin, and the tour guides who accompany the elderly are carefully selected. "There has been a lot of change among the elderly compared to the past. They are so full of life, they have their own lists, places they want to go to, things they want to do. They want to engage with the world on their own terms," he says.

The demography of senior citizens in India is rapidly changing. They are living longer and more fulfilling lives, many continue to work long past their retirement age and, just like their younger countrymen, have disposable income, which they are willing to spend on their comforts and wants.

India might have an attractive market featuring one of the world's largest youth bases. But, as businesses have begun to realise, at least 6 per cent of this population is 65 years old and above. They are living

longer—from a life expectancy at birth of 47 years in 1969, 60 years in 1994 to 69 years in 2019, according to the State of World Population 2019 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—and the share of those aged 60 and above is expected to rise to nearly 20 per cent by 2050.

And the market catering to such a population is also exceptionally underserved. Tapan Mishra, the founder of the startup Seniority, which runs an e-commerce site and a few offline stores for the elderly, points to a Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) report that claims the medical and lifestyle market for the economically independent senior urban population stands at about Rs 43,000 crore. "The overall potential of the market driven by senior citizens is as large as

there would be retail outlets and an online store. "However, we quickly realised that contrary to popular belief, seniors were quite comfortable shopping online and exploring solutions relevant for them. This gave us the confidence to convert to an online-first model," he says. Mohit Nirula, the CEO of Columbia Pacific Communities, which develops and manages plush residential projects for senior citizens across India, also points to this change in the mindset of the old in India. "In the past there was this notion that once people retire, they set aside all their material possessions for their children. That has completely changed."

When the Sathiamurthys, a Chennai-based couple in their 50s first laid their eyes on a residential project for the elderly



“There has been a lot of change among the elderly compared to the past. They are so full of life, they have their own lists, places they want to go to, things they want to do. They want to engage with the world on their own terms”

MP DEEPU co-founder, Senior World

Rs 1 lakh crore, excluding the real estate, BFSI [banking and financial services industry] and pharma products categories. Of this, only 10 per cent has been addressed so far, which implies that there is a tremendous scope for the elder care industry to grow and thrive," he says. Mishra also believes there are prominent psychographic shifts that are going on in this segment. "Seniors are becoming more independent and conscious of their health and well-being. Today, they not only have greater disposable incomes, but also more willingness and savviness to spend on themselves, engage in hobbies, travel the world, and even fulfil their dreams," he says. When the startup was first being conceived, Mishra claims they thought the business would have to work as an omnichannel platform, where

in Coimbatore built by the Columbia Pacific Communities group, they instantly fell in love with the place. "You can see the hills on one side, and there are trees everywhere, and you can go for long walks among them," says Sujata Sathiamurthy. Although purchasing a home here involved a sizeable investment and they already owned a house in Chennai, the two, still in their 50s, decided to retire from their jobs (Sujata worked at ONGC and her husband worked as a financial consultant in Chennai), purchase a villa here and begin living in it.

"We thought we should move [to a retirement home] at a time when we can still care for ourselves," she says. When the pandemic broke out, they weren't particularly perturbed, she says, but a sense of dread began when the newspapers stopped

being delivered. The Sathiamurthy's spent most of their time before the pandemic in an after-hours school for the underprivileged nearby. With that shut, they turned to an online course to learn Sanskrit.

"We had also been planning to do a trip to the Northeast [of India], with some of our friends joining us there. But then the lockdown happened. We are waiting for this [the pandemic] to end so that we can go for that trip," she says.

PPKanthan, an 87-year-old former bureaucrat based in Bengaluru, began to look for a new home for himself and his wife Rajalakshmi a few years ago because the neighbourhood around his then house had become crowded. Several buildings and roads had come up nearby, pollution levels had gone up and traffic snarls were

These homes are designed in such a way as to be more elderly-friendly—from homes with large passageways that allow for wheelchair access and grab bars in bathrooms, to a concierge service, tie-ups with hospitals, a ready ambulance, along with large clubhouses for activities and games. Although the ownership of the house passes on to the next of kin because of the high costs of living in such an assisted place, most youths look to rent the place out to other seniors or to sell it.

Nirula, the CEO of Columbia Pacific Communities, says that when the Seattle-based group first came to India two decades ago, it decided to invest in only the Columbia Asia chain of hotels and not their senior homes, because it felt the market was not ready for such a concept. "But

and for the first time, I now have a waiting list," he says. The group is currently developing its tenth such project in Bengaluru, and plans to develop four more in Bengaluru, Pune, Chennai and Kolkata.

But even as more businesses and products get launched that target this elder demography, and many seniors are more than willing to access them, challenges remain. The most prominent being the internet.

Mumbai-based Aparna Thakker, an educational technology entrepreneur, noticed an opportunity here when she saw the struggle old people go through when going online. Her startup, Empowerji, looks to bridge this gap through a learning app that helps senior citizens navigate the online world, and another app, EJI, which helps older users perform online tasks like paying bills or shopping online through a simple chat interface. "There has

"The internet has brought so many opportunities and things to enjoy. But the old have missed out on these. That's why we see old people standing in long queues to pay their electricity bills when there's a much simpler online process"

APARNA THAKKER founder, Empowerji



so frequent that it had become impossible to live there. The two, whose children live abroad, moved to a township built for the elderly (by the Columbia Pacific Communities group) on the outskirts of the city.

"It was a wise decision," Kanthan says. All their needs—from food to laundry—are taken care of, and they have built friendships with many other residents over long walks and the various games and activities in the club. Just a few weeks ago, his wife won a Scrabble tournament at the club. "These activities like the arts, dance or music are quite essential because they say things like depression and Alzheimer's are kept at bay," he says. "Besides, it makes life worthwhile."

Several real estate companies have begun to target this demography by building and managing homes for the elderly,

while culturally not much has changed, circumstances have changed drastically," he says. "Old people stay alone now. It's not because their children have fought with them. It's because their children work in other cities or countries. In fact, they are happy for their children," Nirula says.

According to Nirula, the old idea of retirement homes being dismal places filled with bitter geriatrics has also transformed. "Seniors are more than happy to live in a place with like-minded people," he says.

Those who build such homes claim that since the pandemic—with the difficulties the lockdown brought upon old people who need support and assistance in their homes—enquiries and bookings into such assisted-homes have risen. "I run nine communities [across five cities]

been this big change for us [with the arrival of the internet]. It has brought so many opportunities and things to enjoy. But the old have missed out on these completely. That's why we see old people standing in long queues to pay their electricity bills when there's a much simpler online process," she says.

Like much of the rest of the country, the pandemic has also pushed the elderly to go online. Mishra of Seniority claims orders from their e-commerce site has skyrocketed. "More of them had resorted to online shopping in the earlier days of the nationwide lockdown because of the constraints related to stepping out of the house. And despite the lockdown easing all over the country now, the convenience has become a habit, converting them into permanent online shoppers," he says.

Although the pandemic has brought a lot of difficulties, especially for the elderly, it has also pushed many of them to get over their fear of technology. "In the early part of the lockdown, for our workshops, it would take hours for my team members to get seniors to just download and go by each step to set up a Zoom account," she says. "Now everyone has it." ■

ART



BHURI BAI WITH A MURAL BY HER AT THE MADHYA PRADESH TRIBAL MUSEUM

“This bird is a *bheldi*, out looking for food with her chicks. Having found this tree, the *bheldi* plucks the berries from it while her chicks watch”

BHURI BAI
artist



UNTITLED (C 1980)



UNTITLED (2018)

Courtesy FARAWAY ORIGINALS



THE ARC OF LIVING

THE NATURAL EXPERIMENTATIONS OF BHURI BAI

By Rosalyn D'Mello

AS A SEASONED chronicler of artists' anecdotes, I can sense the 'nut graph' of the story they want to tell the most through what they tend to repeat the most. By sifting through their subconscious reiterations of a fact, an idea or a feeling, one can unwittingly arrive at the unspoken truths that mark their narrative cliffhangers. In the case of the indigenous artist intellectual, Bhuri Bai, though, the plot thickens substantially, especially since her repetitions are echoed through translators and curatorial agents. Her repetitions seem informed by the threat of erasure.

Born in the mid-1960s in Pitoli in the Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, Bhuri Bai seems to regularly stage a resistance to the epistemic violence historically inflicted by the literate upon the illiterate. She reiterates, at every given opportunity, the pioneering nature of her intervention within contemporary art history, so much so that the second line itself of the introductory text of the online exhibition, *Bhuri Bai: My Life as an Artist*, by the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) firmly establishes the crux of her legacy. 'She was the first woman from her community—the Bheels—to paint on paper and canvas.' The further one explores the exhibition, curated by Nathaniel Gaskell, Shrey Maurya and Mustafa Khanbhai in collaboration with Bhuri Bai, the more glaring this biographical detail becomes. Through the caption texts that are infused with her voice, we are guided by her subjectivity, a possible corrective to Bharat Bhavan's early strategy of

captionlessly displaying Adivasi art.

What is she encoding through her consistent emphasis on the novelty of the material nature of her artistic undertaking? 'Over the course of our conversations with Bhuri Bai, it became clear that it was particularly important to her that she be recognised as the first to make a foray into the mainstream art world—it was part of how she took pride in her identity as a Bheel, as an artist, and as a woman,' writes Gaskell over email. 'She is also adamant about her position vis-à-vis other Adivasi artists and is quick to remind us that she was there before many other now well-known artists arrived at Bharat Bhavan. She has also very consciously and pragmatically marketed herself with this in mind, as her paintings are her primary livelihood.'

Is this underlying narrative about Bhuri Bai's prescient experimentations with paper and canvas a shorthand counter to the oversimplified narratives regurgitated by mainstream media, academic discourse and a capitalist art world that enshrine her legacy solely as someone who transitioned from being a daily wage labourer to a commercially successful artist, who was awarded the Padma Shri this Republic Day? Most writing about her neglects the colossal nature of the paradigmatic shift at the level of subjectivity and praxis she had to undergo in order to secure her art-historical legacy. As her early encounters with painting were ritualistic, the ability to expressively practise art as a form of livelihood was made possible through

"Even though there were no peacocks in my village, they are my favourite birds. Even as a child I loved imagining peacocks playing around me"

BHURI BAI



contact with art institutions. Yet, it could be argued that it wasn't necessarily always on her terms.

The MAP exhibition affords us a privileged glimpse into how Bhuri Bai claimed artistic agency, accommodating into her visual vocabulary the environments she was osmotically imbibing. Bhuri Bai handholds us through her childhood in the first part of the exhibition as her translated voice accompanies select paintings from her autobiographical series commissioned by MAP in 2018. She begins with a visualisation of the house in which she was born: "Before the monsoon, we would bring three types of *khakra*, tie the leaves together with the support of a bamboo stick and make our whole house like that." But of course, the mud house rarely withstood the rain, which meant they had to be continually rebuilt, "by repeating the same process of knotting leaves and plastering the walls with cow dung and sand". Pausing on this detail allows us to reflect on the symbolic relationship between the cow dung-laced mud walls that serve as the canvas upon which Pithora painting is ritually performed through community collaboration. Bhuri Bai locates her selfhood within her house. She hinges her narrative upon this domestic structure, reminding us of how it often didn't withstand the monsoons and had to be rebuilt.

This detail took me back to an anecdote about Taloi Havini, an artist born in the now autonomous region of Bougainville, curator Diana Campbell-Betancourt shared from an interview the latter did with the artist. "She said where she comes from, they burn the village huts, not because there's anything wrong with them, but so the community will remember how to make them," Campbell-Betancourt said. I was caught off guard by this casual wisdom about objects as carriers of

systems of knowledge and their position within indigenous place-thought, which was never respected by Enlightenment epistemologies that chose, instead, to vitrify them, extracting and isolating them from their native contexts, instituting a kind of plunder that relied on the uninformed complicity of indigenous people.

Bhuri Bai: My Life as an Artist has been cleverly adapted to accommodate the display possibilities of the online medium. The webpage serves as a wall. There is a gradual accretion of visual detail. The scene is set layer upon layer. Bhuri Bai begins with the mud house in which she was born and moves conceptually outward, at first immediately beyond the threshold presided over by her mother from whom she learns the basics of farming, and steadily into the forest, and then the infrastructural setups, like trains, that connected her community to cities while also enabling their displacement. Bhuri Bai, the second of five siblings, is recruited by her mother and taught the basics of grazing cattle, collecting fodder and de-weeding the fields. "But I was young, I didn't know

much. It was difficult for me so I would end up plucking the wrong plants and then my mother would scold me," she tells us, foreshadowing a harsh allergic reaction she would contract in her adult life upon contact with a poisonous plant, which she believes was cured by her art.

Her early life is intricately bound to an indigenous system of place-based relationality, which manifests in all her later drawings. Her signature dots, for instance, hark back to her memories of the dots in Pithora painting and their proportional relation to varying sizes of corn.

When Bhuri Bai was 14 or 15, her house in Pitoli in Madhya Pradesh burnt down. Though she was in Dahod in Gujarat with her father and her sisters, working as construction labourers building a landlord's house, her mother, a younger sister and a brother were trapped along with their animals. They were rescued, but their animals died. For days the family lived in a makeshift grass hut before they were able to rebuild. At 17, she moved to Bhopal with her husband, carrying with her the relational universe. She found employment as a wage worker at the construction site of the Charles Correa-designed Bharat Bhavan, along with about 100 other tribal and rural

"This is a family with five children going to attend the festival of Bhagoria that begins around eight days before Holi"

BHURI BAI



▲
UNTITLED
(C 1980)



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UNTITLED
(C 1980)

migrants. This information is important not only because it sets the scene for artist and writer Jagdish Swaminathan's 'discovery' of Bhuri Bai's artistic talent, but also because it subtly implies the irony of a museum that in part relied on the same extractive conditions that 'mine' indigenous thought the way colonial powers 'mined' native consciousness.

Bhuri Bhai manages Rs 6 a day in Bhopal, more than in Pitol. One day, Swaminathan approaches the labourers to enquire about their lives, communities, rituals and customs, asking if anyone among them knew how to draw. 'Encouraged by her sister and brother-in-law, who acts as a translator, Bhuri Bhai tells Swaminathan that she had made drawings on the walls of her home when she was a child,' a caption text informs us. Swaminathan insists that she make a

few paintings for him. "We didn't understand a single word of what he was saying," Bhuri Bai says. "We didn't understand Hindi back then. He had big hair, he was very scary-looking to me. He always had a cigarette or a *beedi* in his hand. I didn't know who he was!" Over the next five days, she occupied the stairs of a nearby temple and tried to navigate holding a paint brush, dipping it in poster colour and painting upon the flat surface of a roll of brown wrapping paper.

"At home we made colours using turmeric, soot, leaves and red soil and used chewed twigs or a piece of cloth to make dots," Bhuri Bai narrates. The first paintings she made used simple colours and depicted traditional tattoo motifs

as well as scenes from village life, which Swaminathan later bought from her. "It struck me that for each day of labour I earned Rs 6, and yet, just for sitting and painting, I earned Rs 10 a day! All this was a bit strange for me initially, but it felt good that they were paying me so much. I promised myself that the next time [Swaminathan] came I would paint more beautifully, whatever came into my mind. I would put more effort into painting. It was a great venture for me."

There was a challenging newness to Bhuri Bai locating her seated body in relation to paper. "If I sat on the right side of the paper today, I painted in that orientation," she says. "The next day, I sat on the left side, so I painted using that orientation. The paintings were all upside down, never facing one direction. The image was straight in my head, but I made it upside down, so Swaminathan ji liked it a lot. This is what he thought was special about my work." Over time she would make the medium her own. Perhaps for Bhuri Bai, the shift to working

on paper was so momentous because it demanded physiological and psychological rehabilitation.

The exhibition tenderly reveals how Bhuri Bai discovers her artistic self through her negotiation with an alien medium and how she goes on to become an institution herself by training others from her community, empowering them to explore their

subjectivities. Her pedagogical strategies may well embody what Papaschase Cree educationist Dwayne Donald theorises as 'Indigenous Métissage', a place-based curriculum informed by an ecological and relational understanding of the world, one that fosters reciprocal discourses in the coloniser and the colonised through the ethic of historical consciousness. ■

Bhuri Bai: My Life as an Artist *can be viewed at* map-india.org/exhibitions *till the end of February*

Photos courtesy of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru

"This is an amlī tree. A buffalo is napping under its shade and a man is climbing up to pluck the berries. The man is shoving away the monkey on top"

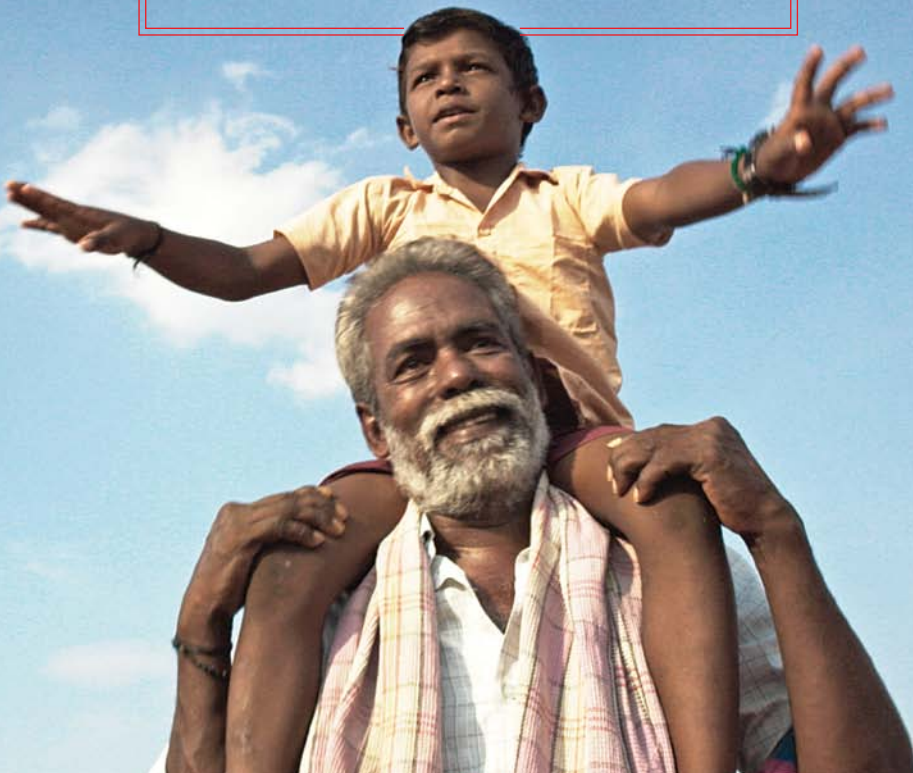
BHURI BAI

CINEMA

A SCENE FROM
KUTHIRAIVAAL

THE TAMIL WAVE

A SCENE FROM
SETHTHUMAAN



TODAY TAMIL INDIE FILMS CAN BE RECOGNISED FOR THEIR DIVERSITY BOTH IN CONTENT AND TREATMENT

By **Namrata Joshi**

WAY-OUT* IS an adjective that immediately comes to mind when watching the new Tamil film *Kuthiraivaal* (Horse Tail). The film, about a banker who wakes up one day, to find himself saddled with a horse's tail, defies expectations when it comes to both its subject and the telling. Fluorescent colours, MGR songs, Vivaldi, Freud, Van Gogh, Scotch, a cat, a murder and more come together in a heady mix. Combining dreams with reality, mathematical equations with philosophy, mythmaking with psychiatry, *Kuthiraivaal* takes the audience on a bewildering, beguiling ride. The debut film of Manoj Leonel Jason and Shyam Sunder is a celebration of the absurd, the essential irrationality of the human condition, even as it questions the power dynamics in life as well as cinema and renders them in new paradigms of self-expression that are artistic as well as polemical.

The film recently premiered at the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) and is part of the film programme at Berlin Critics' Week being held this year from February 27th to March 7th.

Kuthiraivaal is not the only Tamil film in the spotlight in the international film festival circuit. Debutante PS Vinohraj's *Koozhangal* (Pebbles), about a day in the bleak, impoverished lives of a father and son, resonated with the audience at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR) where it walked away with the prestigious Tiger award earlier in February. Set in Arittapatti, near Madurai, the film parallels the aridity of the place's landscape with the violence simmering deep within its destitute residents and their fractious relationships. However, at the same time, the film underscores the

humanity that can help tide over the endemic sense of despair.

Filmmaker Thamizh's *Seththumaan* (Pig) that premiered at IFFK is also about a similarly disadvantaged duo—a grandfather and his grandson forced to live on the margins of a teeming village. It looks at both the repressions and ambitions of its protagonists, their struggles to rise above the position they are chained in by society on the basis of their caste.

The universe of personal relationships gets framed within the caste and food politics of the region in the film that is cheeky, combative, abrasive, dramatic and emotional, all at the same time. Thamizh says that the inspiration for it lies in Perumal Murugan's short story 'Varugari' (Fried Meat) that talked about food and its politics. What is pure, what is not? Who is to be put high up and who is to be pinned down in the hierarchical food chain? Thamizh goes further than the vegetarian-nonvegetarian divide, focussing on the even more contentious politics of beef and pork.

Arun Karthick, the leader of this new pack of independent Tamil filmmakers, is himself at the ongoing IFFK with his

critically acclaimed sophomore feature *Nasir* that premiered at IFFR in 2020 and won the NETPAC award for the best Asian feature film. According to Deepti D'Cunha, India's leading programmer and the force behind the Viewing Room and Work-in-Progress lab at the NFDC Film Bazaar, Karthick's 2016 directorial

debut feature *Sivapuranam* (The Strange Case of Shiva), about its protagonist's obsession with the photograph of a girl, that opened at IFFR could well be seen as heralding the new wave of Tamil indies.

Nasir, an adaptation of Dilip Kumar's short story, 'A Clerk's Story', is a quiet, intimate yet devastating commentary on the religious fault lines that transform lives of common people—like that of the film's protagonist, an ordinary Coimbatore salesman. Karthick tells me that it's an unusual year for Tamil independent cinema at IFFK itself: "There are three varied films whereas most often you won't even find one."

According to him, indie Tamil cinema has been growing gradually in the last three-four years. Amshan Kumar's *Manusangada* (Cry Humanity) premiered at Mumbai Academy of Moving Image's festival in 2017 and

also played at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), Goa and the Cairo International Film Festival. Leena Manimekalai's *Maadathy: An Unfair Tale* had its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival in October 2019 before travelling to several more

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Thamizh director, *Seththumaan*



the world over. Balaji Vembu Chelli's *Nilanadukkam* (The Tremor) premiered at the Montreal Festival Du Nouveau Cinema in October 2020. Coming up next is Bengaluru-based Bharat Mirle's *The Road to Kuthriyar*. "A body of work is slowly emerging by a new generation of filmmakers who believe

in small films,” says Karthick. Which is significant given that Tamil cinema has been regarded as a force to reckon with largely for its mainstream movies.

“Arthouse or auteur cinema has had no visibility because the popular cinema is so imposing. There has been no discourse on it as in Kerala. My film couldn’t go beyond the media to the public. In fact, in one and a half years since it came out, not a single review on it came out in the Tamil media,” says Manimekalai, who is getting ready to shoot her next film *Vaitarani* in April. She likens her cinema to activism as much as art; she transitioned into it from writing and documentary filmmaking with cheap cameras and editing software as her aids, and minimal budgets.

“The mainstream cinema is itself so unique, with such a huge talent pool and a committed audience,” says D’Cunha. According to filmmaker Vasana Bala, even the offbeat films happened within the mainstream in the ’80s and the ’90s with directors like K Balachander and Balu Mahendra picking up taboo subjects to work on. “Bala, Ameer Sultan, Vetri Maaran brought in the hinterland and the gritty, realistic,

arthouse zone into the commercial zone. Now Tamil cinema is shedding the commercial flab and going offbeat,” says Vasana.

What is apparent in the indie space is a diversity in every which way, be it the background of the filmmakers themselves or the subjects they are dealing with or their craft. On the one hand there are LV Prasad Film & TV Academy-trained Manoj and Shyam. On the other is a self-trained cinephile-turned-filmmaker Karthick. Thamizh, from Erode, the land of Periyar as he proudly asserts, is the son of a retired van driver in the Indian Railways and a homemaker mother. He is the first in his family to take to filmmaking. Though always interested in studying at the Film and Television Institute of India, he enrolled for a BSc in maths. That was not to be. Eventually after college he worked as an assistant director on a few films, notable among them being Rohan

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Arun Karthick director, *Nasir*



Krishna’s *Pattalam* and Venkat Prabhu’s *Biriyani*. His first feature comes after having made three shorts.

A school dropout, Vinothraj got attracted to cinema while seeing film shoots around his hometown of Arittapatti. He worked as a labourer in a textile factory for

over 10 years, sold DVDs by the roadside in Chennai and was initiated into cinema by watching the likes of Majid Majidi and Stanley Kubrick. He worked as an assistant director in two films by A Sagunam before beginning to make his own shorts.

Almost all of the young filmmakers are aware of the need of the film festival circuit. “The mainstream filmmakers have been secure with their audience and have never sought to be in the film festival circuit,” says D’Cunha. “There’s pressure to release a film commercially, then send it to festivals,” says Vasana.

Indie Tamil films are also catching the critic’s eye because big names are stepping in to back the small efforts. Actor Nayanthara and filmmaker Vignesh Shivan put their might behind *Koozhangal*, and Pa Ranjith’s Neelam Productions is behind *Kuthiravaal* and has also produced *Seththumaan*. Last heard, a big Tamil filmmaker will be presenting *Nasir* on a streaming platform soon. Vinothraj says that Nayanthara and Shivan have been instrumental in securing wider exposure for his film.

Manimekalai, however, is sceptical of such interventions, calling them “encroaching activity” by the “mainstream patronising saviours”. “It’s all about validating the junk they [otherwise] make in the mainstream space,” she says. According to her, they should stand in solidarity during the production stage, produce the film rather than stepping in to present it. “It hijacks the discussion



A SCENE FROM
KOOZHANGAL

from the film and filmmaker.”

Pa Ranjith says that he decided to back *Kuthiraivaal* because he liked the pitch Bible. “I knew that this would be a visually strong, offbeat film. The way they narrated the story and the work that was put into the conceptualisation of the film as well as their passion for the form were decisive factors for me to decide to be a part of the project,” he says.

“With the stranglehold that mainstream cinema has over normalisations, the avant-garde (as vague as the term is) is always fighting a losing battle,” write the *Kuthiraivaal* directors in their statement. Their hope has been to reach the maximum number of people ‘without simplifying the means of expression’. Thus the challenge always lay in making the film for a theatrical experience,’ they write.

Kuthiraivaal is marked by stylistic flourishes and a multiplicity of references both in its content and visual design. As opposed to that, *Koozhangal* is driven by a sparse but profound style which deploys the landscape as much as its actors’ faces to drive its narrative.

Kuthiraivaal has well-known actors like Kalaiyaran and Anjali Patil, but *Koozhangal* boasts of local people to make the film more rooted in its context. Apart from two actors, all others in *Seththumaan* are newcomers. Thamizh shot the film in villages in Namakkal district for authenticity just as Vinohraj shot his film in Arittapatti.

According to Pa Ranjith, Neelam Productions was set up to encourage the making of those stories that have not been told or have been suppressed in mainstream cinema. For him it’s about a strong cinematic form as well. And above all it’s about breaking the idea of arthouse as against commercial cinema.

Thamizh’s film is an interesting example of that. “A film should make an impact on the society or an individual,” he says. No wonder his film has tart, taunting, crowdpleasing dialogue that voices the pain of the oppressed, which the audience cheers along. Despite its indie nature, the emotional core of

mainstream cinema is inescapable. The brushstrokes are broader and more explicatory than subtle, as is the music. It’s what D’Cunha, in another context, describes as “laugh-empathy-cry arc”.

“It has to have all the *rasas*, the emotions have to be pitched higher, there has to be an amazing knack for dialogue, the messaging is important,” D’Cunha says of mainstream Tamil cinema.

It’s this paradox that Vasana finds interesting about Tamil indies. A Thamizh or Vinohraj could well be making a commercial, mainstream film next. “The filmmakers in Tamil Nadu believe in doing everything to ensure visibility. It’s rare to break out with the risk of not being famous locally. There is a confidence of culture. It’s uncool to not be a part of the mainstream, to alienate yourself from it,” says D’Cunha.

“It’s ingrained in them, flows in their veins. The filmmaking has drama in it, it’s not organic,” says Vasana.

He likes that a new set of secure young filmmakers believe in collaboration and supporting each other. “It was unheard of earlier. A newer form of collective is emerging,” he says.

The Tamil indie movement, however, still has a long way to go. There are a handful of committed financiers and producers like Mathivanan Rajendran, Samir Sarkar, Vivek Ramanujam but most films have to be self- or crowd-funded. According to Karthick, the system is still private equity based unlike Europe where indie cinema gets supported by grants. His own *Nasir* was supported by Hubert

Bals Fund which allowed it to be made as an Indo-Dutch co-production. “He knows of the infrastructural support and was able to make those connections,” says D’Cunha. Which are as important as your cinematic sensibility and the cinephile’s passion.

Ultimately, it’s not just about the financing and film sensibility alone. What also comes in the way is the uneven audience access and the supposedly diffused or non-existent market. International film festivals have begun to take note of the need to develop a finer eye and ear for Tamil indies. Vasana feels that the sound design of Tamil films needs to be toned down to reach a wider global audience. “It’s off the roof. They blast it at a certain level and need to bring it down in the mix,” he says.

OTT platforms have raised everyone’s hopes but they too are Bollywood inclined and have only recently started taking cognizance of the rich ‘regional’ fare that too in a mainstream zone. There is fear of piracy when it comes to the smaller, pay-per-view platforms. Also, the share may not be attractive for films that come with the capital and backing of a relatively bigger production

house that would much rather go for an outright exclusive sale.

The journey of Tamil indies has only just begun in right earnest. The hope is that there wouldn’t be a looking back but only a forging ahead. Manimekalai has the last word on that: “Having a strong, meaningful cinema culture is a long, protracted process and not a five-minutes-to-fame activity or a fast-food delivery.” ■

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Leena Manimekalai director,
Maadathy: An Unfairytale



The Imperfect Queen

Jindan Kaur's volatile relationship with the world

By Ira Mukhoty

TO BE A woman in India's mythological or historical tapestry is a changeable thing. Your identity, if indeed it is ever acknowledged at all, is subject to the vagary of every passing religious, political, and cultural wind. Complicated personalities are bur-nished into the smoothness of impossi-ble goddesses. When the record-keepers are colonial men, then an additional suffocating layer of prejudice is added. And so it is that Begum Hazrat Mahal, a leader of the 1857 uprising, was called a 'black Semiramide' (queen of Assyria) or a 'Penthesilea' (Amazon queen) while Rani Laxmibai was, confusingly, both a brave 'Amazon' and a licentious 'Jezebel' (biblical troublemaker), again according to British testimonies of the time.

Given this backdrop it is always re-freshing to see this narrative challenged, and to have an Indian-origin author write the life of a woman, as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has done with her latest book—a work of historical fiction on the life of Jindan Kaur, the last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Indeed Divakaruni has kept the lens firmly on women characters through a long and successful career—from her short story collection *Arranged Mar-riage*, to her fiction with *The Mistress of Spice*, to her mytho-logical re-imaginings with *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Ranjit Singh created a unified Sikh empire with its capital in Lahore in the 19th century but when he died in 1839, his kingdom faced the twin threats of a bloody succession struggle and

the voracious ambitions of the British Empire. Jindan was only 26 when she was widowed, with a five-year old son, Dalip Singh. With virtually no power-ful allies by her side, Jindan took on the dangerous task of trying to claim the throne for her young son.

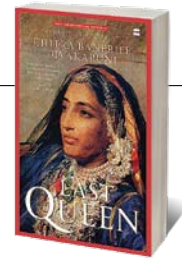
To her great credit, Divakaruni has not baulked at showing Jindan as a real human—with all her flaws uncomfort-ably exposed. If there has always been a tendency to venerate heroic women in India who are flawlessly perfect, then Jindan is altogether more sympathetic for being a woman who repeatedly fails. As a barely educated village girl in a volatile and simmering court, Jindan is hopelessly out of her depth. She is dan-gerously impulsive, vengeful, and short-sighted. She is sometimes tormented by clashing loyalties, as a mother, a sister and a lover. Despite all this we remain on Jindan's side, sometimes against our better judgement, through a life that would be deemed extraordinary in any

time and age, and which has been almost entirely forgotten in India.

Divakaruni is at her best when describing Jindan's relationship with the world, and the people around her—the conversations are crisp and believable, and the motivations sensitively de-scribed. This facility and ease of language and pace explain why many of Divaka-runi's works have been translated to the screen—there is a visceral and immedi-ate sense of belonging to Jindan's world.

If the book stumbles momentarily, it is briefly in the latter half, when the action moves out of Lahore fort and into the war-scorched battlefield of northern India around 1857. This was a momen-tous moment in India's history, filled with remarkable characters, as different regions rose in revolt against the British Empire. Moving at breathless speed, the narrative summarily deals with a number of famous names—Laxmibai, Tantia Tope, Mangal Pandey.

Unlike many women in Indian history, Jindan Kaur was well documented. A lot of that recording, however, was done by the British, who tried to counter her undoubted charisma by branding her 'The Messa-lina of the Punjab', after an infamously licentious Ro-man Empress. In *The Last Queen*, the story unfolds confidently in Jindan's own language, clothed in India's kaleidoscope colours. And so we have the story of an imperfect Indian woman in complicated times who dared to dream of glory. May this tribe of imperfect women increase. ■



THE LAST QUEEN
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

HarperCollins
372 Pages | Rs 599

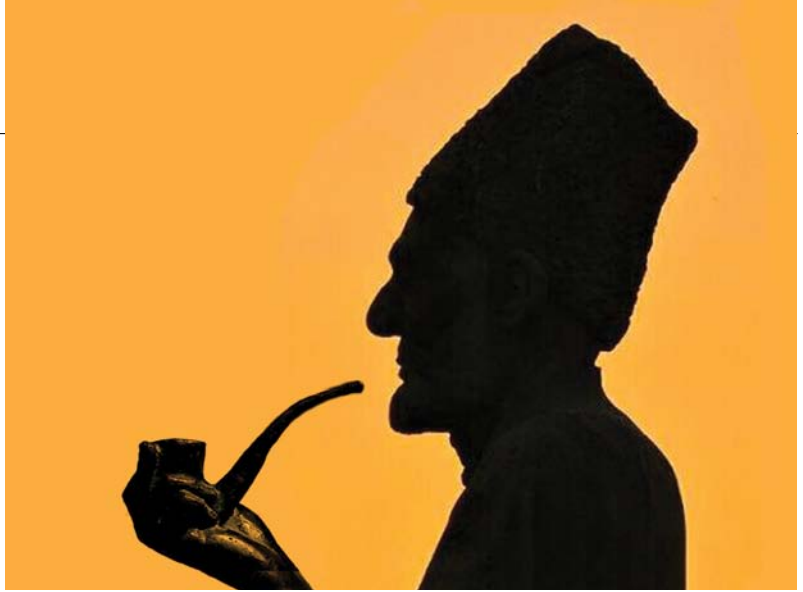


Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

Delhi Noir

Mirza Ghalib is a detective in this historical novel by Raza Mir

By Sanjay Sipahimalani



TEMPERATURES ARE RISING across the subcontinent. There is unrest in the air: north India is awash with reports of disaffected sepoys rebelling against the East India Company. In this febrile environment of 1857, a Mughal nobleman holds a grand *mushaira*, a soiree that will end with the murder of one of the poets in attendance. The person brought in to investigate the crime is one Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan, the 60-year-old poet laureate of the decaying Mughal Empire, better known as Mirza Ghalib.

This is the intriguing premise of Raza Mir's *Murder at the Mushaira*, a novel suffused with the sights, sounds and sensibilities of old Delhi. If Madhulika Liddle's tales of fictional investigator Muzaffar Jang in 17th-century Shahjahanabad are set in an era of Mughal splendour, *Murder at the Mushaira* deals with an age of decline and doomed hopes for the future. Many characters are in debt, yet keeping up appearances; others take to pawning heirlooms and jewellery; and the Emperor is old and toothless. As for Ghalib himself, he is portrayed as characteristically impecunious, as was the case in real life.

With historical crime fiction, there's a tendency for protagonists to display a somewhat modern outlook that could be out of place for their times, but not for the reader. Such attitudes are typically expressed in proto-secular sentiments, often with a dash of irony. Take Jason Goodwin's Ottoman Empire mystery series, with

investigator Yashim, Lindsay Davis' Vespasian-era Falco novels, or countless others. Raza Mir's Ghalib is cut from the same cloth, emerging as one who is both rational and wry in his interactions.

While this is par for the course and even enjoyable, the language can, on occasion, sound a bit anachronistic. 'Oh, I would never dream of gate-crashing this great reception!' says the poet at one point. In another episode, Ghalib's scientifically minded assistant asserts, 'If I had more access to world-class technology, we could have collected fingerprints too'—even though fingerprinting for identification was initiated only more than a decade later, by William Herschel in the East India Company's Bengal.

It's evident, nevertheless, that the author is writing from a place of fascination and even love for the period in which the novel is set. A sense of place is vividly evoked: 'the grand horizon...

with its framed outlines of the Red Fort and its Lahori Darwaza, the Sunehri Masjid, and the Gurudwara Sheesh Ganj Sahib', with sunlight reflecting off 'the canals of Chandni Chowk and the dull burnishments of the Ghanta Ghar'. Frequent portrayals of food and clothes add to the immersion.

However, if there is a word that can be used to sum up *Murder at the Mushaira*, it would be: profusion. What starts with a pleasing richness of detail soon becomes overwhelming. There is an abundance of characters, each one with secrets to spill; there is an excess of dialogue, often overpowering the action; and there is a surplus of description, so much so that virtually every character is defined by physical characteristics before anything else.

A typical example: 'The buttons of his tunic were strained by his girth, and a large fold of flesh neatly bisected into two by a tight belt gave his abdomen a sinusoidal shape.'

The details of the mystery fade into the background on quite a few occasions. Mir's intent appears to be not so much to write crime fiction as to paint a portrait of the city and the mood of its inhabitants during a fractious time. As Ghalib is told at one juncture: 'This is not a who crime, but more of a why crime. Of course, to find out the why, you may need to get to the who, but that would be the easier part.'

The intrepid Ghalib solves the 'who' with ease; as for the 'why', the resonances of that answer impart to *Murder at the Mushaira* a tone that is ultimately elegiac and moving. ■



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The Spice Route

What makes you enjoy your green chilli so much



By **Shylashri Shankar**

WHAT INFORMS A cuisine's choice of spices and how are they used? Why do some cultures like fiery cuisines while others don't? An oft quoted reason is that climate is the deciding factor. Spices are used in hot and tropical countries like India to stave off bacterial infection. A spice is a dried plant product used in flavouring food and drink. Most regional cuisines in India

use some combination of cumin, mustard, pepper or chilli, and garlic and/or onion (classified as spices by some but not by others).

Each spice has a unique aroma and flavour, which derive from compounds known as phytochemicals or 'secondary compounds' (because they are secondary to the plant's basic metabolism). Most spices contain dozens of secondary compounds. These, say researchers, are the plants' recipes for survival.

Studies have shown that spices have the capacity to kill bacteria. This is how it works: during evolution, pepper plants developed capsaicin synthesis as a biological weapon to protect themselves from herbivores, but not birds who also spread the plant's seeds. Spice use in cooking borrows this concept of a biological weapon to minimise the impact of microorganisms that colonise our food. Black pepper inhibits a deadly bacterium, clostridium botulinum. Studies by microbiologist Bhawana Pandey and others have found that turmeric, clove, pepper, *ajwain* and *dalchini* have significant antimicrobial effects.

If climate is the main determinant of spice use, we should expect to find that more spices will be used in hot climates where there is no air-conditioning and the food spoils quickly. J Billing and PW Sherman analysed 93 traditional cookbooks from 36 countries and quantified their use of spices. They found that as the average temperatures increased, there were significant increases in the number of recipes that called for at least one spice and an increase in the number of spices used in a dish.

They pointed out that India's cuisine included 25 spices when an average of about nine were called for per recipe. Whereas Norwegian cuisine included only 10 spices and called for an average of 1.6 per recipe. But how do we explain the use of chillies in the cooler parts of India? India's hottest chilli (*dalle khursani*) grows in Sikkim, which has a cooler climate than many other parts of the country.

Others like Arpad Szallasi express scepticism about capsaicin inhibiting *E coli* bacteria, saying such inhibition occurs only at very high concentrations (300µg/mL). Food usually doesn't contain such high amounts of capsaicin. Why some cuisines consume more hot pepper especially in the tropics is still a puzzle, he says.

Moreover, climate alone cannot explain the yen for spicy food. Korea and Japan have similar climates, but Korean food is far spicier. Climate, in combination with historical factors, may explain it better. The reason why Korean cuisine is spicy and uses chilli pepper is because its climatic conditions—a hot summer and a long harsh winter—traditionally promoted fermentation as the main cooking method and salt as the main preservative for the grains and vegetables prominent in their diet. However, the introduction of chilli pepper (arriving from the Americas via Japan) in the 17th century revolutionised Korean food and made it the spicy, pungent and intense cuisine it is today.

One theory is that Koreans adopted chilli pepper in the late 17th century after experiencing a period of intense Ice Age-like cold weather that disrupted salt production and hit food crops. The resulting famines and shortages of salt in that period may have promoted the adoption of chilli peppers. Climatic factors created changes in habits and thus influenced spice use in Korea.

Maanvi Singh writes that heavily spiced dishes with potent combinations of mace, cloves and nutmeg were the favourites of the tastemakers in Europe in the Middle Ages. But as spice prices plummeted in Europe in the 1600s, spices became widely available, and the imperial and aristocratic palates began to emphasise dishes with few spices and the focus was on bringing out the purest essence of the basic ingredient. Snobbery, she says, erased the thrill of spice from European palates.

In India, however, there seemed to be a different trajectory for the imperials. Cooks of early Mughal emperors like Babur, Humayun and Akbar in India rarely used green or red chillies in the food. Black pepper, salt, saffron and lemon were the main spicing agents in their biryanis and pulaos, kebabs and koftas. With Jahangir's ascension in 1569, we begin to see the use of ginger, black cumin and poppy seeds in the lamb kebabs and fish patties. Shah Jahan's kitchen used cumin, fennel, ginger and garlic paste, coriander powder and mint in *harisa badshahi* (broken wheat and lamb cooked to perfection). From this period, green chillies enter Mughal cuisine and stay, unlike in European haute cuisine.

Climate and history are not the only terms in the equation. Availability, including the ease and low cost of some spices, has been cited as a reason for their use by a population. Chilli pepper was introduced to India from the Americas in the 16th century



COOKS OF EARLY MUGHAL EMPERORS LIKE BABUR, HUMAYUN AND AKBAR IN INDIA RARELY USED GREEN OR RED CHILLIES IN THE FOOD. BLACK PEPPER, SALT, SAFFRON AND LEMON WERE THE MAIN SPICING AGENTS IN THEIR BIRYANIS AND PULAOS, KEBABS AND KOFTAS

as a replacement for long pepper. Though it is usually hard to change peoples' food habits without dramatic events such as cold or hot spells, change in rulership, wars and famines, the Indian populace adopted chillies more easily because chilli plants grew wild and were inexpensive and easy to tend as compared to pepper. These days, however, with the global network of trade and the ease of ordering online and the speed of delivery, availability is not as much of a factor in determining spice use.

Researchers, in fact, have found that there is no relationship between the countries in which a spice plant grows and the countries where the spice is used. It brings us back to the question: why are some spices used more in some geographies but not in others?

Let's examine spice use in India, Korea and Japan again. When we think of the cuisine from the three countries, we think of spicy curry, kimchi and sushi. The combinations of spices that are used vary highly between the three. It turns out that Korean and Japanese spice use favours the flavour principle of negative pairing (the more the compounds shared by two ingredients, the less likely one is to find them together in the same recipe). What differs between these countries is the choice of the spices used and the combinations they are used in.

In India, ginger, garlic, cardamom, coriander, mustard, red chilli, curry leaf and fenugreek are commonly used in Unani recipes. Ayurveda too uses a similar list but adds cumin and turmeric. Korean cuisine favours red pepper, black pepper, mustard, garlic, onion, ginger and scallion. Japanese cuisine however uses fewer spices. Wasabi, togarashi (hot red chilli peppers) and shoga (ginger) are used but their use of chilli pepper is not in the same league as the Korean. The Japanese, who were responsible for introducing chilli peppers to Korea, prefer

to use soy sauce as the flavouring ingredient in many of their dishes to create a balance of sweetness, acidity and bitterness.

The flavour principle also explains why the same spice can be used differently and create different flavours. Let's take the example of chilli pepper. The way we in India use chillies in combination with other spices is very different from how the Mexicans (the land of the hottest chillies) use it. The profile of a Mexican dish that uses chillies in combination with cilantro, cumin, coriander, garlic, oregano, cinnamon and allspice produces a very different taste as compared to an Indian dish. Mexican cuisine follows a positive flavour pairing, which means they use several ingredients that share similar compounds. Mole, a trademark dish from Mexico, has onion, tomatoes, ancho chillies, chipotle chillies, garlic, cumin, cinnamon, raisins, bittersweet chocolate and almonds. A good mole has a depth of flavour and a great balance between fiery and sweet but nobody would eat mole and identify it as a dish from India.

Historical factors add another wrinkle to the story of spice use. Think of bland British food prior to its coloniser days. Then the hybrid cuisines of the colonial era (mulligatawny soup and dopiazas). Now think of Britain today where curry reigns supreme. Climate can't explain the change in spice use here. Once changed, can their palate return to the non-spice avatar?

Even if a cuisine uses red hot chilli peppers, the tolerance for it varies within the same nationality. I cannot eat a green or red chilli, but several of my friends enjoy it. They welcome the burn, in fact they crave it. Psychologists have a term for it—hedonic reversal or benign masochism. Something happens in them that changes a negative evaluation into a positive one. Scientists are still trying to work out what causes it. ■

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

SUHANA KHAN

JUGAL HANSRAJ

TANNISHTHA
CHATTERJEE

↳ Entitled Siblings

By industry estimates, there are at least 50 star sons, daughters and relatives waiting to be launched in Mumbai movies. These include high-profile besties Suhana Khan, daughter of Shah Rukh Khan, and Shanaya Kapoor, daughter of Sanjay and Maheep Kapoor. But there are others as well in this long list of identity lifters who are related to those who were outsiders just a few years ago. Nupur Sanon, sister of Kriti, is one of them as are Isabelle Kaif, sister of Katrina, and Aman Preet Singh, brother of Rakul Preet. There is good reason for them to believe they can succeed where their siblings have. Take Aparshakti Khurana, brother of Ayushmann; Ishaan Khatter, stepbrother of Shahid Kapoor; Saqib Saleem, brother of Humayun Qureshi. Nor is the trend restricted to actors. Imtiaz Ali is helping brothers Arif and Sajid to become directors. Is it any wonder there is such a public pushback against these entitled and titled inheritors in the industry at a time when the world is divided deeply between the haves and have-nots? And the conversation is about meritocracy and not inheritocracy?

↳ Fire Again

Twenty-five years ago, Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das got the nation talking and the Shiv Sena stalking when they played sisters-in-law who fell in love in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). Now, Ekta Kapoor has got TV actor Ridhi Dogra and actor-singer Monica Dogra (no relations) to play two married women who fall in love with each other in

The Married Woman for ALTBalaji. The series, based on Manju Kapur's intimate 2003 novel *A Married Woman*, is set in the 1990s and is fortunately not being treated like some of ALTBalaji's made-for-the-masses entertainment like *Gandii Baat*. So expect the same sensitivity from the series as its literary progenitor.

↳ Return of the Masoom Boy

He was all of nine when Shekhar Kapur chose him for the role of Naseeruddin Shah's estranged son in *Masoom* (1983). One of the pretty boys in *Mohabbatein* (2000), Jugal Hansraj directed Yash Raj Films and Disney's joint production *Roadside Romeo* (2008) and the Uday Chopra-Priyanka Chopra-starrer *Pyaar Impossible!* (2010). But Hansraj believes a rolling stone gathers no moss and has developed a healthy career as a novelist for children and young adults. His forthcoming second book, *The Coward and the Sword*, takes off from Nichiren Buddhism teacher Daisaku Ikeda's aphorism that 'a sword is useless in the hands of a coward'. Hansraj, who divides his time between Mumbai and New York now, where he lives with his banker wife Jasmine and their three-year-old son Sidak, was last seen as the menacing Mohit Dewan in *Kahaani 2: Durga Rani Singh* (2016).

↳ Shah of Screen

Sohum Shah is one of a new breed of actors, like Vivek Gomber and Nikhil Dwivedi, who help manifest their

own work. Now, after *Ship of Theseus* (2012) and *Tumbbad* (2018), critically acclaimed movies which he produced and acted in, he is getting to work with Reema Kagti. She is directing him in the Amazon Prime Video series *Fallen*, with Gulshan Devaiah, Sonakshi Sinha and Vijay Varma.

↳ Talented Tannishtha

She's distinguished herself in several movies in India and the West since 2003 and now seems set to build an eclectic career as a director. Having directed *Roam Rome Mein* in 2019 starring Nawazuddin Siddiqui and herself, Tannishtha Chatterjee helmed 'Rat-A-Tat', one of the five short films in Amazon Prime Video's lockdown-inspired anthology, *Unpaused* (2020), and is now in charge of the streaming platform's popular *Four More Shots Please!* series. The all-girl series is fun, uninhibited in its display of sexuality and open in its exploration of women's freedom. Where Chatterjee takes the third season of the show, produced by Rangita Pritish Nandy, will be interesting to see.

↳ Did You Know?

The exodus of stars and their families to the Maldives since the lockdown was lifted is not accidental. The visits are being sponsored by the government of the island nation. All they want in return is a mention on social media tagging them. The bigger the social media presence of the star, the more lavish the treatment. ■

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