PRIVATE BANKS AND PUBLIC INTEREST • HUSAIN HAQQANI ON PAK OBSESSION WITH KASHMIR

RACHEL DWYER ON THE IDEA OF SALMAN KHAN • TM KRISHNA ON CASTE AND CARNATIC MUSIC

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

When the Indian Premier League (IPL) began, no one could have correctly predicted how enormous it would become in terms of money and star power. But that is exactly what has happened. And while there is no real 'dream team' in the tournament, one cannot deny the hold that IPL has over audiences across the country because it is where some of the top players of the game now come to prove their mettle. Despite a series of controversies and problems having afflicted this cricket tournament in recent years, it continues to draw crowds and investment. The IPL gets so much media attention that even its player auctions and pay cheques are a matter of discussion and debate. Whatever the politics and business of the IPL may be, no one can refute the fact that it is one of the highlights of the annual cricket calendar and something almost every fan of the game looks forward to with bated breath for the variety of talent on display.

P Khanna

DREAMS IN HINDI CINEMA

Dreams are an inseparable part of everybody's life ('The Intimate Fantasy' by Rachel Dwyer, April 16th, 2018), and dreams or nightmares do appear though a hidden backdoor during sleep, a unique state of being half dead and half alive, whether one likes it or not. It is everyone's right to dream, and without dreaming about things possible or impossible, one certainly cannot reach for, grab, surmount or achieve much in life, for dreams are our inspiration. People dream in their own individual way and even countries dream in their own fashion. They sometimes come true and sometimes get stuck in the middle and stay unfulfilled. They often have an inherent meaning, or no meaning at all. Since they are integral to human life, so also to Hindi movies. What cannot be conveyed through dialogues in a film is often put across via dreams and dream sequences. This is a form of art that adds spice to the movie and enhances the beauty of the work. The song *Ghar Aaya Mera Pardesi* in Raj Kapoor's *Awaara*, which has one such sequence, is so unforgettable that it stands out 67 years later as an exemplar of Hindi cinema.

Yusuf Shariff

Dream sequences in Hindi cinema end up telling us so much about a character's fantasies, desires, fears and personality. Often, some conspiracy or love story or hidden truth emerges in a movie through a dream that a character might have. It is true that lust and desire in particular are shown through dreams in most Hindi films; this is perhaps because it is more acceptable to dream about desire than speak of it.

Chandni Sharma

FLIRTING IS NO OFFENCE

Flirting is a healthy way of expressing one's interest in another person as well as a form of harmless fun ('Responsible Pleasures' by Amrita Narayanan, April 16th, 2018). Very few people actually get offended when they know that they are the object of someone's attention. It is thus unfortunate that flirting has fallen victim to the #metoo campaign. Of course, no one should be allowed to make another feel threatened or uncomfortable. But harmless, casual, fun flirting should be allowed and not considered a sexual threat. There have to be some limits to what is threatening. How else will men be free to express themselves?

S Shekhar

LET WOMEN TAKE CHARGE

It is indeed good news that self-injectable contraceptives are making their way into the market ('A Liberating Shot', April 16th, 2018). In India, so often unwanted pregnancies arise and end up ruining a young person's life and career. It is good if women are self-sufficient and able to take complete charge of their own health and bodies.

Pritika

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

THE CAPITAL IS in the grip of 'sealing'. Yes, the official lock-down of residential premises illegally used for commercial purposes. It's being done at the behest of a Supreme Court bench. A decades-old court-appointed committee, headed by a former bureaucrat, Bhure Lal, was woken up from deep slumber to go and seal illegal restaurants, shops and other commercial establishments. The committee, in turn, commandeers the staff of relevant municipal corporations—Delhi is saddled with three such white elephants—and goes out and inflicts financial and mental trouble on small and mid-level businesses. Even this would be fine, given that the properties sealed are mostly residential but are being used for commercial ends. Various residents' associations that have had their open spaces and freedom of movement snatched from them by excessive commercialisation are pleased.

However, the above is not what excites much conversation on the drive. Rather, it is the seemingly selective nature of it. Who next will find himself locked out of his shop and where appears to depend entirely on the whims and fancies of a handful of people. Such selective sealing has caused resentment. For instance, the Kapada Market, popular with middle-class women, in Amar Colony, off Lajpat Nagar Market, was shut down. It probably deserved to be. Its tiny shops rising three floors up were originally 40-yard plots given to refugees from Pakistan for housing. Over time, they converted them into shops. Even common toilets turned into multi-storey outlets, with each such unit commanding a premium of tens of crores in cash.

What really angers those now staring at huge financial losses is the failure of the Bhure Lal Committee to 'touch' Khan Market. Among Asia's most expensive commercial pieces of real estate, commanding stratospheric rents, it largely remains unaffected even though much of it is now illegal. The original double-storey structures, with the first floor earmarked for residential use, once had a Connaught Place-like colonnaded walkway in front of the shops. In time, as the market acquired a pricey tag, it got consumed by the shops, which extended outwards and thus also facilitated the extension of first floors, which are now commercial joints, most of them expensive eateries lacking even the standard safety measures.

With rentals in the vicinity of Rs 1,500-1,800 per square foot, additional space was unearned largesse at public expense. But the sealers have not lifted a finger to undo the illegal extension of Khan Market shops, while those in less affluent markets have had to face closure, rendering tens of thousands jobless. Khan Market's elitist tag and its patronage by the rich and the famous, including top judges and bureaucrats, might be the reason it has survived unscathed thus far, some suspect. Or is it a case of the proverbial darkness under the lantern?

FINANCE MINISTER Arun Jaitley's illness due to kidney-related complications has not escaped the viciousness of the usual suspects in the pseudo-liberal sections of the city's polity and media. Needless controversy was sought to be kicked up by malcontents, suggesting that Jaitley had violated the prescribed norms to get a donor for a kidney transplant. Of course, this was complete hogwash. Having rendered generous financial and other help to several people in his personal staff and outside during his long stint as a top-shot lawyer, quite a few came forward to offer their kidneys. Besides, there were members of his own and his wife Sangeeta's extended family ready to donate theirs.

But medical parameters had to match. Eventually, a suitable donor was found from within and the requisite permissions required under the law taken. Why do some people expect Jaitley, a lawyer, to be on the wrong side of the law merely because he is now a powerful politician? Why should anyone find it so surprising that politicians can be proper in their private dealings as well? At the time of writing, word from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences was that the transplant had been put off for a few days and is now scheduled for sometime later this month.

Meanwhile, Jaitley, a highly gregarious man and an engaging conversationalist to boot, is fortunate to have two parallel sports events keeping him company even as he spends time in near isolation at home or in the hospital. The ongoing IPL championship and the Commonwealth Games help him keep boredom at bay as he marks time to become fighting fit again and resume his routine. ■

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

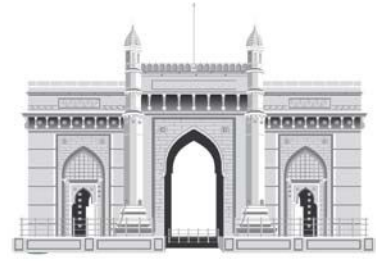
Anil Dharker

ARE THERE TWO people inside every politician? This thought came to me when Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman came to Mumbai for an Indian Express Adda.

For two-thirds of the conversation, she wore the Cabinet Minister's hat. Here, she was most impressive, confident in her replies to detailed questions, interspersing her remarks with an occasional humorous aside, which always helps in lightening the mood. She was articulate about having to prove herself at work because she is a woman: her tone was matter-of-fact, neither emotional nor aggressive; it's a society where patriarchy is well-entrenched, so at every step a woman has to 'do more' than a man. (A contrarian thought from me, for which I will probably get a tonne of bricks from feminists: Isn't it possible that in a patriarchal society, so little is expected of a woman in the intellectual sphere, that mere competence can be seen as brilliance?)

Of course, while she did seem to have well thought-out answers to all questions, you realised later that, in fact, she had been evasive. For example, asked the important question of whether our defence forces were adequately funded, she asked if anyone had read the report of the committee in its entirety. Frankly, why should we have done that? That was for the Ministry to do. She then reeled off very large figures allocated to defence, and added that utilisation was 105 per cent for the Air Force, 95 per cent for the Army and something similar for the Navy.

Sounds impressive? Yes. But it doesn't answer the question. The outlay for defence may be huge, but is it adequate for our needs, which, to use a Trumpism, is huger? Secondly,



if utilisation of funds is almost cent percent, that may speak well of the efficiency of our armed forces, but could it also not signify that they are underfunded, so they need to use every rupee available?

When asked about the outrageously political comments of the present Army chief, she answered, "We have a democracy." True, but does that permit a serving officer to make inflammatory statements? Or is the Army chief already preparing for a post-retirement career as a politician? He has the precedent of General VK Singh, who has been seen in an RSS uniform, and the former Police Commissioner Satyapal Singh, who has just discovered a new theory of human evolution.

But in spite of a politician's practised evasiveness, Sitharaman came across as a person in full control of what she was doing. However, when the conversation turned to politics, the second and hidden personality emerged, thumping the air for emphasis, denigrating previous governments, attacking opposition leaders... Oh dear, you wanted to say, save the bluster for an election rally. We are here to talk, which is an entirely different thing, if only politicians knew it.

LITERATURE LIVE'S release of Sourav Ganguly's *A Century Is Not Enough*, on the other hand, showed us that once a cricketer, always an entertainer. Ganguly has always been one of cricket's characters: a brilliant batsman with the left-hander's natural grace and the most elegant cover drive, combined with a quirky sense of mischief which enabled him to get under an opponent's skin without sledging. There was the famous (infamous?) incident where on India's victory, Ganguly took off his shirt and twirled it around in the players' balcony. The Indian *captain* doing this, and that too at *Lord's*? ("And he doesn't even have a six-pack!" butted in Sachin Tendulkar.) Or his habit of being late, whatever the occasion, even a Test match toss; he once kept Steve Waugh waiting long enough for the Australian to get really riled up.

Mind games, all. Tendulkar, looking more cherubic that ever, and Ganguly obviously have a relationship where banter is the norm, and each pulled the other's leg so often, you wonder how they stood up at all. They told many amusing anecdotes, which young Rohit Sharma listened to in awe. (In a few years—what's the betting?—we will have a Rohit Sharma-Virat Kohli dialogue.) The best story, though, was told by Boria Mujumdar. After a Test match toss, Ricky Ponting, captaining Australia, went back to his dressing room looking completely befuddled. "What happened?" his team mates asked. "Well, when we tossed," Ponting said, "I am sure I heard Ganguly say 'Headtail', and when the coin landed, all I heard was a quick 'Great! We won the toss, we will bat' from Ganguly..."

Heads I win, tails you lose is good. But headtail is better. It covers all options. No wonder Sourav Ganguly was India's most successful captain ever. ■

BY ROHIT CHAWLA

Agrasen ki Baoli, New Delhi, April 5, 2018

On an Operatic Quest

The Paris Opera's exploration of India began with the visit of Madame Myriam Mazouzi, director of the Academy of the Paris Opera, and Christine Neumeister, director of costumes, who were in Delhi to work on developing projects in alliance with The Neemrana Music Foundation. They are also in talks with the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Ambedkar University and National School of Drama to bring the best of worldwide opera to the country.

OPENINGS

SAURABH SINGH

NOTEBOOK

POLITICS BOWLS A BOUNCER IN CHENNAI

NO INDIAN CRICKET captain in recent times has been more umbilically tied with Chennai than Mahendra Singh Dhoni. During N Srinivasan's Chennai-based reign as the dictator of BCCI, he co-opted Dhoni as part of his inner cricketing universe. It was a relationship that worked well for both parties and when Chennai Super Kings (CSK), Srinivasan's IPL team, bought Dhoni to lead it, no one was surprised. And, yet, it is now Dhoni's curious fate to somehow be forced to leave the shores of that city and get repeatedly pulled into Pune. When CSK was suspended for two years, Dhoni played for the Rising Pune Supergiant team. After he returned to CSK for this IPL, once again he finds that all the team's home matches are now going to be played in Pune—because Chennai has been pronounced unsafe to host them.

A few things led up to it. When the match between CSK and Kolkata Knight Riders was being played on April 10th, a shoe came hurling out of the stands and fell near Ravindra Jadeja. He was a CSK player and it was a Chennaite who had thrown the shoe. Jadeja later tweeted an image of the offending projectile on the ground along with this line: 'Still we have a lots of love and care for our csk fans.' Then there was the fact that jerseys of the team had been burnt in another part of town. The team had done nothing to deserve such anger from the very people who had once showered them with adulation.

For this, the blame must fall on the unique dynamics of the politics of Tamil Nadu and a river by the name of Cauvery, which has for some time now been making Tamilians and their neighbours, Kannadigas, go into paroxysms of rage and violence. Its waters flow into both states, with Karnataka being along the upper dammed reaches and therefore with the power to regulate the flow. However, since it is part of India, it cannot

unilaterally decide how much Tamil Nadu should have. The dispute goes back over a century and no committee or tribunal or solution or order to resolve it has made either party happy. The latest trigger was a Supreme Court judgment in February which reduced the amount of water that Tamil Nadu would get. Predictably, it led to outrage in the state.

This might still have been in the normal vein of things without any bearing on the IPL, if not for the fact that J Jayalalithaa, the Chief Minister who led the AIADMK, was dead, leaving a political vacuum the size of a giant black hole in the state. Being the autocrat she was, there was no second rung leadership in her party to take over the mantle. If the name of the current Tamil Nadu Chief Minister was asked in a quiz competition, most participants would lose the point. The opposition DMK is equally rudderless with its patriarch K Karunanidhi ailing at the age of 93. To fill the space that these leaders have vacated are a couple of superstars, Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan, along with their fan clubs that now aspire to be the new political vanguard. You had the making of the perfect political storm: the splinter political organisations that find their moment in the sun through violence over an emotive regional issue, powerful upstarts out to make an impact piggybacking on such a movement and, finally, in IPL, an event they can target so that the issue's resonance reaches the rest of the country.

Two days before the match, Rajinikanth said that it might be better for the match not to be organised in Chennai and termed it an 'embarrassment'. If it went ahead, he suggested CSK players wear black bands in solidarity. It was an absurd demand to ask players from different parts of the country and abroad to take a political stand on an issue that is of no concern to them. Plus, they also have to go to Karnataka to play and it is easy to imagine how they would be received there after making such a protest. Rajinikanth was speaking in the backdrop of an event by the Tamil film industry to protest against the delay in the formation of a Cauvery Management Board as ordered by the Supreme Court. Kamal Haasan was also present at the event, making it a double endorsement of sorts. TTV Dinakaran, who as nephew of Jayalalithaa's arrested confidante Sasikala, leads an offshoot of the AIADMK, had also called for a ban on the IPL. MK Stalin, Karunanidhi's son and DMK's heir apparent, issued a veiled caution, asking the League's organisers to take an appropriate decision.

There was really no hope for IPL in Chennai once the prevailing wisdom had it that hosting it was to go against the Cauvery agitation. If cricket has been a religion of the masses in India, then it is inevitably also a political weapon. The late Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray started the trend, using the hatred that Indians feel towards Pakistan to forcibly prevent matches being hosted with that country's team. He was wildly successful at the publicity he got for what was negligible effort. It took just a few of his thugs to vandalise a pitch and block a match—like it took just a shoe to make Chennai a no-go IPL zone. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

AFTERTHOUGHT

TRUMP'S TRADE WAR

Lurking behind the US president's economic agenda is a bigger problem

TRADE WARS ARE not new. If anything, free trade is an exception to mercantilism practised in one form or another. Yet, there is something to be said about the looming end of the current system of free trade that began with the signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in October 1947. There are no two ways of looking at the situation after US President Donald Trump imposed a 25 per cent tariff on steel and 10 per cent on aluminium imports. Coming from the country that single-handedly pushed freedom of trade since World War II, this is especially ominous for a world full of barriers against goods, ideas and people.

In theory, Trump's measures are aimed at Asian countries like China and South Korea, which he accuses of unfair practices. In reality, these measures affect the entire world as the US has specified that exemptions will be made on a case-by-case basis, a classic recipe for trade preferences and mercantilism.

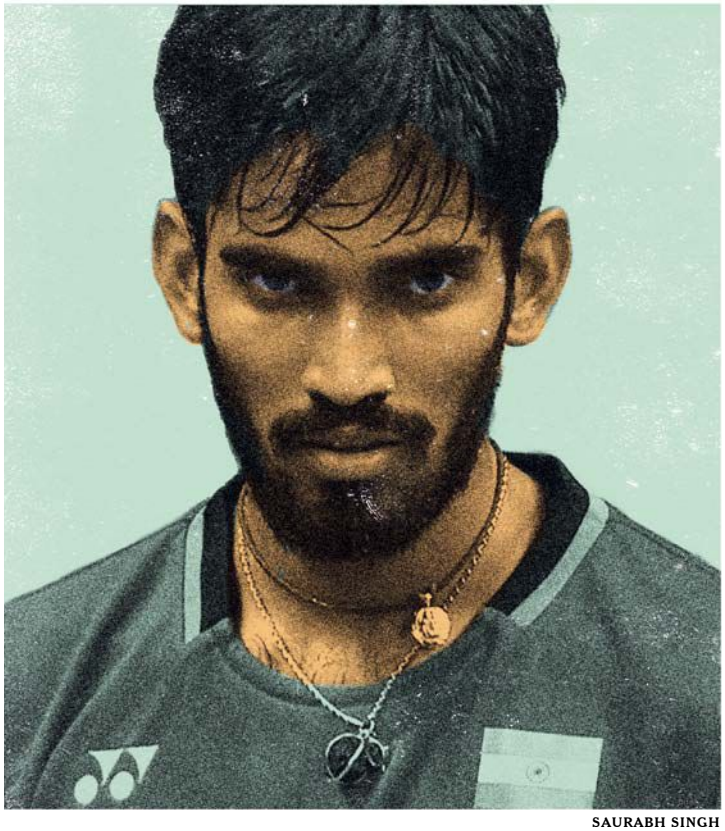
Behind Trump's measures lies an attempt to fix two problems that plague the US economy. One, the loss of jobs in core industries like steel and automobile manufacturing; and two, the country's vast trade deficit. On both counts, tariffs are unlikely to work. Anne Krueger, a renowned trade economist and an intellectual force behind trade liberalisation worldwide, has said that erecting barriers against foreign steel and aluminium may save a handful of jobs in America's metals sector, but will lead to far heavier job losses in those industries that are dependent on cheap imports of these metals. Similarly, the big macroeconomic problem of the US is one of savings and investment, and trying to reduce the trade deficit won't address that.

Lurking behind these economic calculations is a much bigger problem. Offering open market access to once-poor Asian economies like South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand helped Washington keep them away from communism. Their rapid export-led growth and rejection of a self-defeating import substitution policy had a disproportionate political effect on Asian geopolitics of the 20th century. These countries were part of the international movement in favour of institutions like the World Trade Organization. If the US retreats from the global arena—as it is doing now—China will want to take its place. That won't be an easy world to live in. ■

PORTRAIT

SHUTTLE SERVICE

K Srikanth becomes the world's top male badminton player



SAURABH SINGH

KIDAMBI SRIKANTH IS in an unchartered territory. Apart from a few other Indian personalities unassociated with cricket—so few that you can perhaps count them on your fingertips—Srikanth, just 25 years old, now finds himself at the very top of his sport.

Just a week after beating an Olympic great—Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei—in straight games, and helping the Indian team win the Commonwealth Games mixed team gold, Srikanth has now become India's first men's singles world No 1 in the modern era. This happened when Srikanth displaced the Danish player Viktor Axelsen in the Badminton World Federation's latest rankings, with 76,895 points.

You expect such feats in a sport like cricket in India. Every few generations, you expect the rise of cricketers like Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar or Virat Kohli, people considered to be the best in their game, purely because of the intense focus and resources trained on cricket. It is something else, though, when someone else emerges from another sport to top its global rankings. Before him, only Saina Nehwal and Prakash Padukone achieved these feats—the latter managing to do it in 1980, before a computerised ranking system was introduced.

Srikanth's rise in fact has been meteoric, from an unknown player ranked 240 back in 2012 to World No 1 now. Early in his life, there was little that marked him for such success. Unlike, for instance, someone like PV Sindhu, born to professional volleyball players, who started training under P Gopichand at the age of eight, Srikanth was born to a family of farmers in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. He picked up the game simply because his elder brother played. Not particularly great at studies, Srikanth would take part in the occasional tournament. Many of his earlier coaches and acquaintances often speak—somewhat incredulously, given his current success—of how unfocused and lazy he used to be. He liked playing, but did not enjoy training and monitoring his diet. He participated in everything—singles, doubles and mixed doubles—so that he could escape the need to train hard. His parents eventually sent him to Hyderabad and enrolled him at Gopichand's academy, because it appeared the most convenient of choices. His elder brother had moved to the academy a few years ago.

When he arrived at the academy, a fresh-faced somewhat lazy 15-year-old, he was unsure of what he was going to do with his life. Gopichand put him under the pump. His cellphone was taken away, his outings were curtailed, he was made to consume non-vegetarian food, something he didn't do before, for more protein, and his trainings were made more rigorous. He would very often be the first at the court, sharp at 4 am. His entire life in the academy was made to revolve around badminton.

Many expected Srikanth to become World No 1 when he won four Superseries titles last season. Only three other players have managed this feat: the top Chinese players Lin Dan and Chen Long, and the Malaysian Lee Chong Wei, each of them former chart toppers. But an injury meant he could not achieve it last year.

Along with PV Sindhu and Saina Nehwal, he is the most famous of Gopichand's students. Perhaps he may very well turn out to be the best. He has certainly achieved more than his coach ever had. According to Gopichand, Srikanth can still vastly improve his game, especially on slower surfaces. It is a fearful thought. But if there is one person who can spot it, it is perhaps Gopichand. Srikanth is just 25 years old. And it is possible that he may soon join the league of India's most celebrated sportspersons. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

ANGLE

EATING DISORDER

It's a bad idea to regulate food prices in multiplexes

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

MOST PEOPLE IN metropolitan cities now watch movies in multiplexes and it is with secret hatred that they stand in the queue to buy food and drink during the interval. The margins are clearly beyond anything reasonable. A pack of popcorn whose cost price must be about Rs 10 is sold at 15 to 20 times that much. One multiplex chain only stocks a particular brand of mineral water that is more expensive and, unlike cheaper alternatives which are at least sweet, has a flavour of hard water. The food is a little over airline quality and that is not saying much. Any glee that low-carb dieters first experienced on seeing a stall with salad vanished the minute they got the first leaf into their mouth.

Once he enters the gate, frisked and relieved of any nibbles being smuggled in from outside, the multiplex customer is a hostage. The choice he faces is to either meekly submit or not partake. The market is a monopolyand all this is on top of the price paid for the movie ticket itself, which is also multiple times what it would be at a single-screen cinema hall. In effect, he is paying more to pay more.

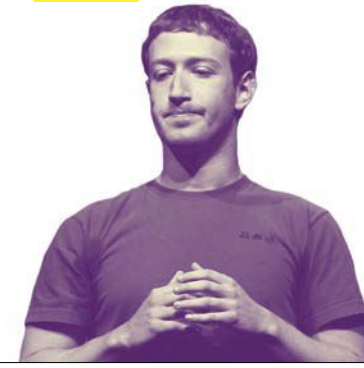
A few days ago, the Bombay High Court decided that this was unfair. It was hearing a public interest litigation against the prohibition on outside food taken into multiplexes. The petitioner argued, as per an *Economic Times* report, that 'there does not exist any legal or statutory provision that prohibits one from carrying personal food articles or water inside movie theatres. The multiplexes sell food and water inside, but at an increased price, he said. Agreeing to this, Justice Kemkar said, "The price of food and water bottles sold inside movie theatres are, indeed, exorbitant. We have ourselves experienced it. You (multiplexes) should sell it at the regular price."' The court asked the state government to frame a policy on this, which will presumably happen soon.

While this will draw cheer among movie-goers, it is still a flawed idea to tell businesses that they can't make a profit, especially since going to a multiplex is a free choice. There are plenty of single-screen theatres with torn seats and betel juice stains that offer cheap popcorn. A good experience comes at a price. It also comes at a cost. Those granite floors and reclining sofas need to be paid for.

Also, it is certain that if such a law came into place, not a single customer is going to benefit. The effect will be quite the opposite. Multiplexes will just increase the prices of tickets to keep their margins intact. Instead of only those who buy food paying extra, all customers will then have to make up for the shortfall. Will the government then decide at what price tickets can be sold? If they do that, you can bet there will be some other way found to make up for the gap. This is how businesses survive, by growing. If you over-regulate, the business becomes unfeasible and shuts down.

Many of the evils of capitalism are necessary. The simple solution is to enter a multiplex with a full stomach. ■

IDEAS



APOLOGY

'Sorry', at present, does not appear to be the hardest word going around. Everyone everywhere seems to be tendering an apology. Steve Smith and David Warner tendered full-throated tearful apologies. Arvind Kejriwal seems to have just called a halt to his apology tour. Mark Zuckerberg has said sorry yet again, this time to the US Congress. Emboldened by Zuckerberg's latest *mea culpa*, back home, Ravi Shankar Prasad is asking Rahul Gandhi to apologise. A public apology is of course a powerful tool. Delivered well, with apparent sincerity, for instance the one offered by Smith, can change a narrative. Calls for his head a day earlier turned to forgiving tweets the next. A rinse-and-repeat type apology approach like Zuckerberg's doesn't cut it. Of course the worst type is the one Kevin Spacey employed after being accused of molestation: he apologised 'if' it happened, and then tried to change the subject by declaring himself gay. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Never ruin an apology with an excuse'

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

By Bibek Debroy

Statute of Liberty

Why pass a new law unless we are clear about its objective?

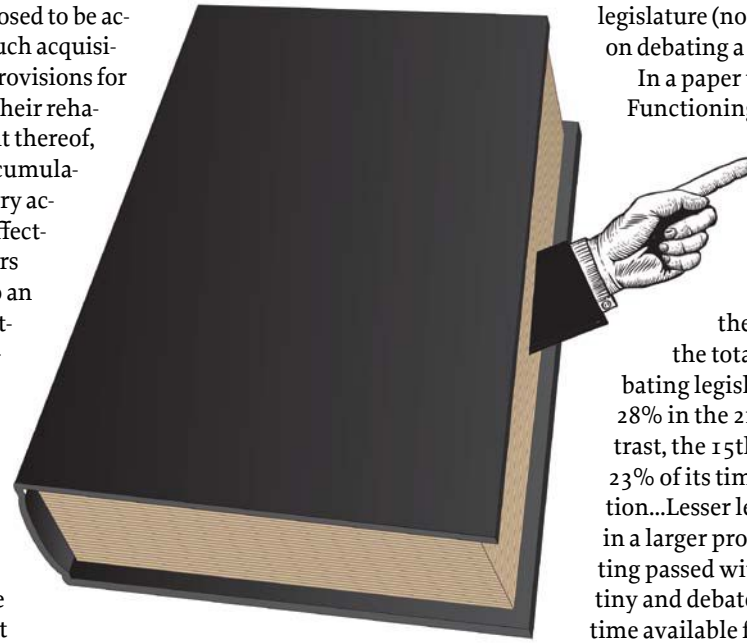
WHY DOES THE LEGISLATURE pass a statute? In addition, why do governments use executive powers to pass orders and regulations, also part of the 'law' in a broader sense? All laws are meant to mould human behaviour, by prohibiting certain activities, or encouraging others. Should there be a law to prevent people from picking their noses in public? Most people will not pick their noses in public, despite there being no law against it. Let's now leave the 'in public' bit out. Should there be a law to stop people from picking their noses anywhere outside their own toilets? Should it be illegal to do this, say, in their living rooms? There are several books, sites and articles describing crazy laws in various countries. The trouble with these is that you are never quite sure whether what has been stated is true. For instance, evidently, in Arkansas, men are not allowed to beat their wives more than once a month. Why was such a law passed? What were legislators thinking of? Closer home, think of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (IPC): 'Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.'

I am not about to discuss the pros and cons of repealing Section 377. That's not the intention. Why should legislators get into what is a private activity? As most people probably know, the IPC in 1861 mirrored Offences against the Person Act (1861) of the UK. Before that, the UK had its Buggery Act of 1533, with a death sentence for the crime. In addition, if you were convicted, you not only lost your life, but also your possessions; the next of kin didn't get them. They were seized by the crown. There is evidence to suggest that in 1533 Henry VIII wasn't interested in the prevention of buggery. He was interested in people's possessions, primarily land. The legislation was used to execute monks and nuns and seize monastery land. The objective was different from what one assumes. There is a lot of literature on the philosophy of law. When economists look at law, they use a lens slightly different from that used by lawyers, jurists and judges. The focus becomes one of efficient decision-making. There is quite a bit of such literature on law and economics: by Gary Becker, Richard Posner and Ronald Coase, among others. The thrust of their argument is simple: let's not pass a statute, or order, because I feel like solving the problems of the world through legislation and because I, in my role as a legislator, feel I have the power to do so. I have to establish a case for enacting the statute or order. What are its benefits? What are the costs if one doesn't pass it? Are there any costs associated with enforcing it? As in many other areas of decision-making, we must undertake a complete cost-benefit exercise before enactment with some degree of precision.

You might think I am talking about judicial impact assessment, but not entirely. In 2008, there was the report of a Task Force on Judicial Impact Assessment. This was chaired by Justice M Jagannadha Rao. Let me quote from this report (it actually quotes from an earlier report by Justice Rao and that is what I am also quoting): 'Further, there must be 'judicial impact assessment', as done in the United States, whenever any legislation is introduced either in Parliament or in the State Legislatures. The financial memorandum attached to each Bill must estimate not only the budgetary requirement of other staff but also the budgetary requirement for meeting the expenses of the additional cases that may arise out of the new Bill when it is passed by the legislature. The said budget must mention the number of civil and criminal cases likely to be generated by the new Act, how many courts are necessary, how many judges and staff are necessary and what is the infrastructure necessary.' Fair enough, but what I am suggesting is broader than that. It's more like Statute Impact Assessment. In addition, there is some discussion on Regulatory Impact Assessment, an evaluation of what regulators do. What I am talking about is not quite that either.

You will legitimately argue that the Statement of Objects and Reasons accompanying the Bill does precisely that. The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act was passed in 2013 and is a major piece of legislation. This was preceded by the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill of 2011. The Statement of Objects and Reasons said, 'A Bill to ensure a humane, participatory, informed consultative and transparent process for land acquisition for industrialization, development of essential infrastructural facilities and urbanization with the least disturbance to the owners of the land and other affected families and provide just and fair compensation to the affected families whose land has been acquired or proposed to be acquired or are affected by such acquisition and make adequate provisions for such affected persons for their rehabilitation and resettlement thereof, and for ensuring that the cumulative outcome of compulsory acquisition should be that affected persons become partners in development leading to an improvement in their post-acquisition social and economic status and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.' A lot of flowery language. But from that 116-word long quote, do you get any sense of precision? Alternatively, for the National Food Security Act of 2013: 'A Bill to provide for food and nutritional security, in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices, for people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.' Why do I need this statute? What happens if I don't have this statute? This sentence has only 42 words. But it doesn't answer these questions. More importantly, it doesn't feel the need to ask these questions.

I have talked about old statutes in an earlier column. In this column, I am focusing on new ones. Why pass a new statute unless we are clear about its objective? Let me make three additional points. First, in many parts of the world, there has been a plain English movement. Simple, short and unambiguous sentences, shorn of unnecessary jargon and Latin expressions. (Note that ambiguity in language contributes to litigation and statutes also have to be translated into languages other than English.) A Plain English template would shudder at 116 words in a sentence.



SAURABH SINGH

Second, a statute is not amended every day, unlike a rule, order or regulation. The former is legislative, the latter is executive. The former has to be passed by the legislature, the latter is only placed (for information) before it. Logically, only that part which will last for some time belongs in a statute. The statute then provides the enabling framework for passing rules, orders and regulations. Yet, in statute after statute, there is a temptation to bung everything into it, and we have to wait for amendments/repeals to wind their way through legislature. A statute should be no more than skeletal; let the rules, orders and regulations provide the flesh and blood. Third, I will talk about composition and productivity of legislatures in subsequent columns. However, for the moment, how much time does the legislature (not just Parliament) spend on debating a statute?

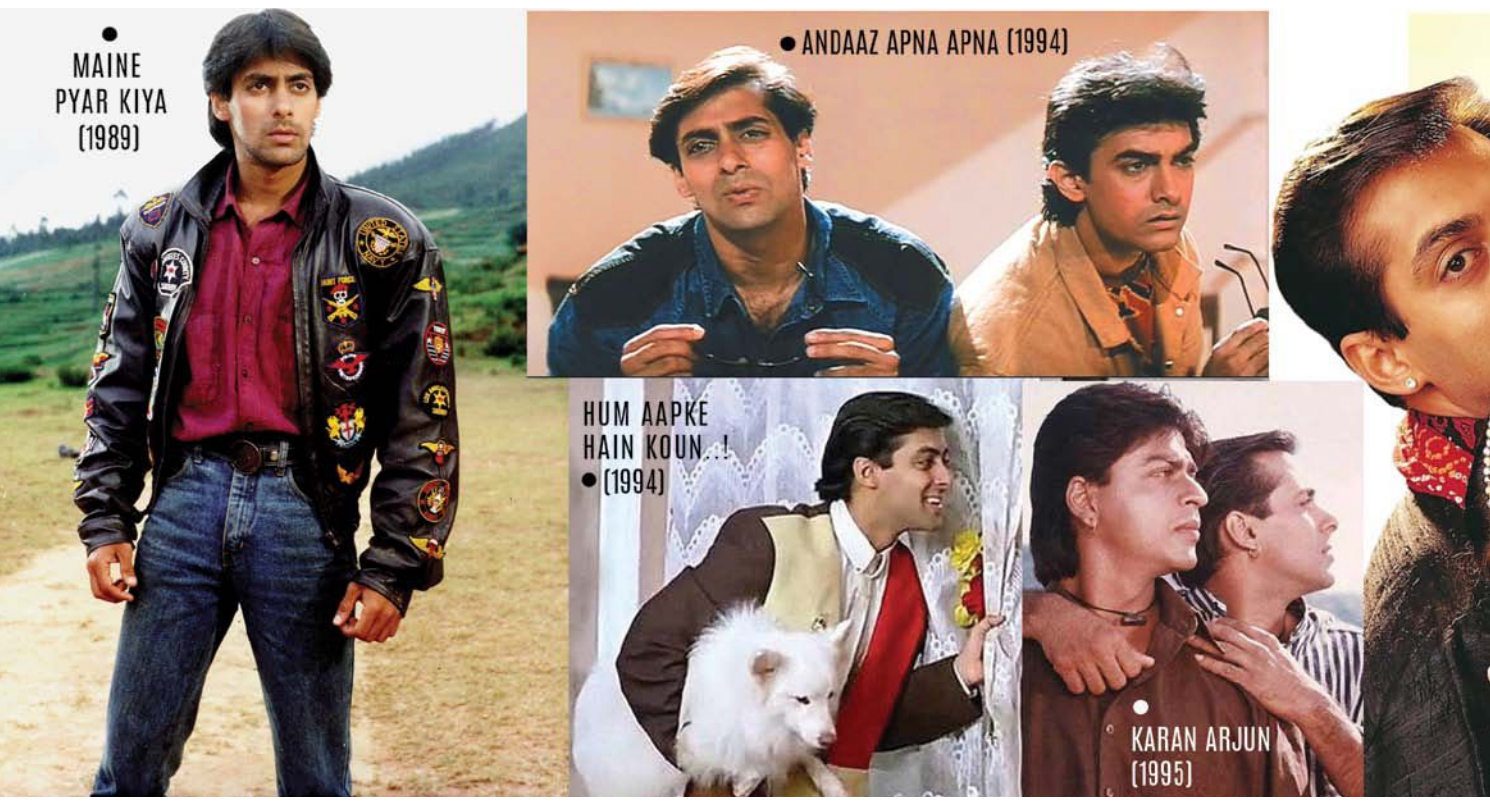
In a paper titled 'Rethinking the Functioning of Indian Parliament', PRS Legislative Research wrote, 'An overview of the 15th Lok Sabha shows a slowdown in legislative activity. In the 1st Lok Sabha, 49% of the total time was spent on debating legislation. This dropped to 28% in the 2nd Lok Sabha. In contrast, the 15th Lok Sabha has spent 23% of its time debating legislation...Lesser legislative time results in a larger proportion of Bills getting passed without adequate scrutiny and debate in the House.... With time available for debating and passing legislation shrinking, there is a need to strengthen the legislative process to make it more rigorous and time bound. Currently there is no institutional mechanism to ensure that stakeholders give their feedback on a law before it is introduced in Parliament. Public participation and feedback in the pre-legislative process would strengthen a draft Bill by ensuring that differences in viewpoints are addressed before its introduction.' That's Parliament. From a blog by PRS Legislative Research: 'In most states, Bills are passed with little or no discussion. Most Bills are introduced and passed on the last day of each session, which gives Members hardly any opportunity to examine or discuss legislation in detail. Unlike Parliament, where most Bills are referred to a department related standing committee which studies the Bill in greater detail, in most states such committees are non-existent.' That's the state of a statute. Surely, we ought to do better, and surely, this should be on the agenda for reform. ■

OPEN ESSAY

By RACHEL DWYER

BEING SALMAN KHAN

The matinee masculinity of Hindi cinema's biggest star



BEING A FAN of Salman Khan may lead to guilt by association, namely accusations of supporting the killing of endangered species, drunk driving and abusing women. How do we Salman fans reconcile these charges with our pleasure in watching his films? Why is he one of the most dependable stars of Hindi cinema, the last of the great Bollywood stars?

Some may say Salman was unfairly treated by the law, being the only one sentenced for poaching black bucks in Rajasthan, that he wasn't driving the car at American Express Bakery in Mumbai, and that his abuse of women is only rumoured. Moreover, these events happened long ago and his sentence will cause major losses to his producers. I cannot comment on the legalities, but can say only that no citizen is above the law and we must wait for the courts to make their final decisions.

However, I am interested in why these events, whatever their exact nature, don't dent his stardom but may even increase it. What is Hindi film stardom and what does that of Salman Khan mean?

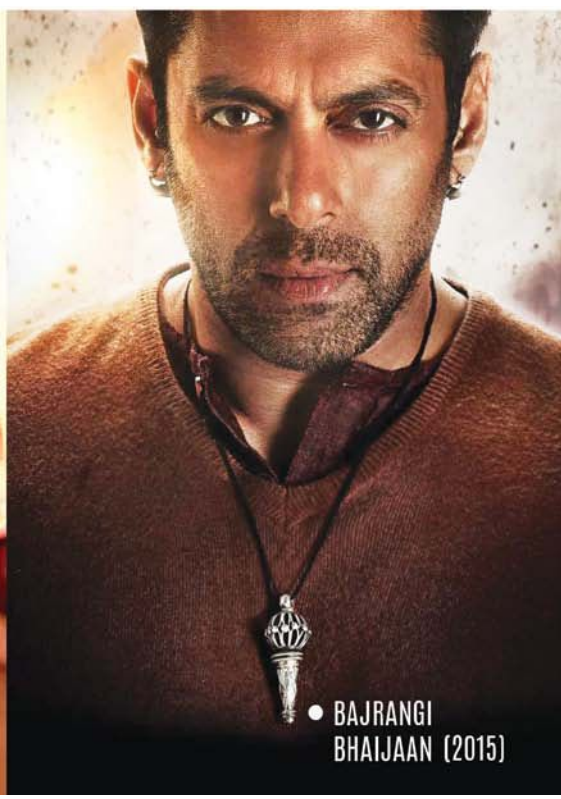
Hindi cinema has produced most of India's greatest stars. While other media generate stars, film stars seem greater than others, seen on giant screens, in close-ups, acting out dramas which matter to us often beyond the film viewing experience. Stardom needs media, and film stars appear in many media beyond cinema, such as television, advertising andmodelling. Their films build up an image of stardom, as heroes and heroines, and their images beyond that may be controlled by the press or influenced by rumour, while the real person is largely unknown although we may feel we know them through gossip, social media and images that circulate through the media.

Film stardom is different from celebrity status such as that produced by cricketers and other sportspeople, who are famous for their achievements in their field. They may become famous beyond their sports, but they don't have the additional layer of

Salman is now the most commercially successful star in Hindi cinema. He seems part of the old Hindi film world, not the glossy, super rich, sophisticated new Bollywood, or an authentic character but a masala hero

● HUM DIL DE CHUKE SANAM (1999)

● DABANGG (2007)



● BAJRANGI BHAIJAAN (2015)

the screen roles which create a parallel text in their lives.

Stars have an almost indefinable quality that marks them apart from others. Usually identified as charisma, they communicate with us in ways that other people can't. They seem almost godlike, their beauty and talent contributing to the image, but there is still this extra elusive quality. Perhaps it is their ability to make us feel their emotions, our wish to emulate them, to do what they do, live as they do, look like them, dress like them, or is it our desire to be their lovers, their friends, their chosen ones?

A star combines this charisma with acting or performance talent and represents or becomes the ideal beauty of the moment. They are also associated with particular attitudes and concerns. Hence Raj Kapoor was the citizen of newly independent India who sought love and family in this changing world, while Amitabh Bachchan embodied a righteous anger against a corrupt system in the 1970s.

India also has transferable charisma, not unlike the British royal family, where being born to a star makes a person likely to be star. There are many examples of this not happening, but the example of the Kapoor dynasty which has produced the top stars of Hindi cinema throughout its history is striking. Talent, looks and selection of roles have been part of it, but the criticism that star kids seem to be the only stars today is not only untrue but also surprising, given that the film industry is a collection of family businesses, and, like other Indian businesses, is passed down the generations. The starting place is not equal, but no amount of parental help can sustain a non-charismatic star or untalented actor.

Abdul Rashid Salim Salman Khan, born in 1965, is the oldest child of Salim Khan and Salma (née Sushila Charak). Salim Khan came to the industry to work as an actor; he is famously seen in an opening shot of *O Haseena Zulfon Waali* as the drummer in Rocky's band in *Teesri Manzil* (1966). He was certainly handsome, but while he never became an acting star, he and Javed Akhtar became screenwriting stars, creating the legendary Vijay roles of the superstar Amitabh Bachchan.

Salman's first lead role was as the romantic hero, Prem, in Maine Pyar Kiya (1989) which made him an instant star. The simmering sexuality in his labouring sequences performed to prove his love were constrained by a strict observation of sexual mores. Suman (Bhagyashree) was modest, 'simple' and coy (except in one rooftop sequence), meeting all the requirements of a wife he described to his mother, including the ability to shell peas. Their love was about friendship, although the beloved had to say 'I love you' in English rather than the *MPK* of the title.

Prem returned with the superhit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994), where innocent love in a family setting was celebrated until a tragedy led to the romantic couple being willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family. Fortunately, divine intervention via a Pomeranian ensured a happy ending.

Although Salman played other romantic heroes (such as *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, 1999), and action heroes (along with Shah Rukh in *Karan Arjun*, 1995), it was in his roles as a comic, roguish, action hero—where his big muscles and shaven chest had to be exposed by the removal of his shirt—that he became the box office success he is today.

In *Partner* (2007), Salman played this role, his awkward dancing style set alongside the talents of Govinda, but his wicked charm was coupled with kindness. A striking feature was his acceptance of his girlfriend's child, no questions asked.

It has been argued that Salman embodies a toxic masculinity. Is his massive fandom due to his normalisation of such behaviour? It is said that Salman's fans are mostly male. Perhaps they like the roles where he plays the innocent and good man who can flare up and fight when provoked

One of Salman's outstanding films is *Dabangg* (2010), where he plays the roguish policeman Chulbul Pandey who lives in a dystopia. His mother takes a second husband; he is a Brahmin who marries a potter; he is a drunken and corrupt policeman who honeymoons in luxury in the UAE; he wears overtight clothes, his sunglasses on the back of his collar to see his enemies from behind, and dances in a deliberately dreadful style. The fights become comic action sequences, notably one referencing *The Matrix*, which has him dancing to his opponent's ringtone, and another where farm implements are deployed as his shirt rips like that of the Incredible Hulk as he recalls how his opponent insulted his mother. I can't imagine another actor performing pratfalls to a romantic Rahat Fateh Ali Khan song, *Tere Masst Masst Doh Nain.*

Salman starred in one of my favourite Hindi films of recent years, *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015), playing Bajrangi, again a Brahmin, this time the son of an RSS leader. Failing as a wrestler due to his ticklishness, he finds his inner heroism through his love for a mute girl who attaches herself to him at a Hanuman festival. Bajrangi, as a follower of Bajrang Bali, is first seen emerging from the crowd after we have begun the song with giant statues of Hanuman. The identification of him with the deity is reinforced by his devotion, his sense of right and the courage this gives him. The song tells devotees to take selfies, but these seem to feature Bajrangi rather than Bajrang Bali, conflating ideas of *darshan* and stardom.

Bajrangi's love for the girl he calls Munni is not shaken as he finds out more about her identity. First, he must confront her dislike of vegetarian food and love of chicken, so he reas-

sures himself she must be a Kshatriya. Then when he sees her offering prayers as a Muslim, he—despite his seeming fear and incomprehension of Muslims—cannot give up his love for her. Even when Munni gives herself away by cheering for Pakistan in an India-Pakistan cricket match, his love is such that he knows he must now do anything he can to return her to her parents, even crossing India's western border. His capers in Pakistan include wearing a *burkha* but also finding peace in a *qawwali, Bhar Doh Jholi Meri*, where he finds that just as Hanuman protects him, so does Munni has her helper.

The final scene on the Thajiwas glacier, where Munni utters her first word, 'Mama', has the black-blanketed figure of Bajrangi throwing her in the air, showing love suspended on the LoC, even as Pakistanis belong in Pakistan and Indians in India. The plea for the acceptance of religious difference that the film makes is powerful and entertaining, all seen through the eyes of our hero.

Salman became a superstar at the same time as Aamir and Shah Rukh. Aamir played a variety of romantic and *tapori* roles before establishing himself in 2001 as one of the most sophisticated producers of Hindi films. A popular actor, he was the good guy doing right, an image he has taken beyond cinema into *Satyamev Jayate* on TV and his social work. Shah Rukh began as an antihero but soon became the Yash Raj/Karan Johar romantic hero, the post-libereralisation star who often played an NRI but defined a new kind of Indianness.

Salman is now the most commercially successful star in Hindi cinema. He seems part of the old Hindi film world, not the glossy, super rich, sophisticated new Bollywood, or an authentic character but a masala hero. Quick to anger and retaliate for any slight, or to defend his family or woman, yet soft-faced and floppy haired, despite the increasingly muscled body. He can bring his star image to any role as the innocent man who will rise to any challenge and fight with all he has.

This image fits with his real life. Salman has never married and, despite rumours of fondness for drink and women, still seems a young man, a student-type, who lives with—or at least next door to—his parents, and whose father speaks on his behalf when he is embroiled in a controversy.

While no one has any doubt that Salman is a superstar and a great performer, he has also shown his acting ability in films such as *Bajrangi* where his dilemmas and his will are clearly marked; and his comic talent from *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994) with Aamir to the present is undisputed.

It has been argued that Salman embodies a toxic masculinity. Is his massive fandom due to his normalisation of such behaviour, in a way? It is said that Salman's fans are mostly male. Perhaps they like the roles where he plays the innocent and good man who can flare up and fight when provoked. There is also his everyday generosity, whether one-off grand gestures of large gifts or his Being Human charity that funds schools. He is seen as reckless and has the bad luck to get caught when he goes astray.

Salman's fans are said to be mostly lower-class men, who see his innocence, family duty and generosity and closeness to his family as important, while passing off his misdemeanours as reckless and impetuous behaviour. Salman's hardcore fans seem to be little concerned about his wrongdoings, taking his view that he has been wronged.

Salman Khan's offscreen activities, if he is found guilty once the appeals have gone through, are condemnable. We know little of his private life and as long as it is within the law, it is none of our business. Let the courts judge Salman the Indian citizen

Many feel that Salman is victimised as a Muslim, although he has claimed in court that he is an Indian, a Hindu and a Muslim, rather than one or the other. He has rarely acted as a Muslim, although played one in the popular song *Mubarak Eid Mubarak* from *Tumko Na Bhool Paayenge* (2002), but it is said his following is high among Muslims.

It is not unusual for fans to refuse to judge stars in the same terms as other people. Many female stars' real lives are glossed over, whether it is their affairs with married men or their alcoholism. Stars from Hollywood and elsewhere have been embroiled in controversies over underage sex, mafia connections, drugs and so on. Their fans remain loyal.

Even if Salman is a criminal, there is no need to avoid his work anymore than we stop listening to Richard Wagner because of his political views. Many politicians and figures who hold public office have criminal cases ongoing and it seems that there needs to be a deeper engagement with the wider problem of public morality.

Salman's place in the history of Hindi cinema is assured as one of its most popular performers who has starred in many significant films. Salman's offscreen activities, if he is found guilty once the appeals have gone through, are condemnable. We know little of his private life and, as long as it is within the law, it is none of our business.

Let the courts judge Salman the Indian citizen. Let us think about why we celebrate him as a film star and study seriously the kind of masculinity he performs and why that has made him such a superstar. ■

Rachel Dwyer is Professor of Indian Cultures and Cinema at SOAS, University of London. She is an Open *columnist*

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Most southern states are up in arms against the disadvantage they fear they might suffer if the Central pool of tax funds is shared the way they suspect New Delhi wants. Their complaint is that they are being penalised for their good performance. Is there an anti-south bias?

By ULLEKH NP and SIDDHARTH SINGH

'GLORIFIED MUNICIPALITIES' is an expression that Kerala's Finance Minister TM Thomas Isaac has lately been using to describe what he claims would be the likely fate of India's better-performing states in the face of escalating 'fiscal terrorism' by the Union Government. What has aroused the ire of this economist-politician is an order issued by the President constituting the Fifteenth Finance Commission (the panel that recommends how to share the Central pool of tax funds among states), whose Terms of Reference (ToRs) prompted him to convene a first-of-its-kind conclave of finance ministers of southern states on April 10th. Last year, Isaac had earned plaudits from Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his quality inputs during discussions held in the run-up to the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, an indirect tax that has replaced several others in the country since. But now, he is at odds with the Centre.

The one-day meet held in Thiruvananthapuram, attended by leaders of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry, apart from Kerala, concluded with a decision to call another such gathering in Visakhapatnam within a fortnight to chart out an action plan to voice the concerns of 'progressive states' that they argued would bear the brunt of a new 'aggressive and unitary' posture adopted by the Centre.

For the next summit, Isaac hopes to enlist Tamil Nadu, which pulled out of the April 10th one despite having initially agreed to participate, as well as the northern and eastern states of Delhi, Punjab, West Bengal and Odisha. He has said he is not averse to the idea of inviting BJP-ruled states, such as Goa and others, to discuss "injustices" meted out to states doing well on the achievement of social development targets.

In Thiruvananthapuram, leaders of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh spoke out against a new brand of policy that they contend is emerging: of the Centre penalising successful states and incentivising laggards. In an interview with *Open*, Isaac says that neither he nor others at the conclave are against the idea of equity, nor are they against helping states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh emerge from their backwardness.

Krishna Byre Gowda, the agriculture minister of Karnataka, has been quoted as saying that the group voicing dissent is ready to engage with the Fifteenth Finance Commission in an effort to have their grievances redressed. While a win-win solution is possible, goes his argument, the Union Government should not create winners and losers. His disgruntlement stems from the ToRs. These, he alleges, are designed to hurt progressive states for they give the Centre the discretionary authority to "play as it pleases"; by this, he implies it may want to favour some and disadvantage others. "By weakening the strongest parts of the Union, you are weakening the Union itself," he states.

Speaking to *Open*, C Ponnaiyan, a former finance minister of Tamil Nadu and organising secretary of the AIADMK who is now a close associate of the state's Deputy Chief Minister O Paneerselvam (who also hold the finance portfolio), calls the conclave a "paper tiger". It is not unusual for Union governments to display such unitary tendencies, he says, especially *vis-à-vis* states south of the Vindhyas. S Thirunavukkarasar, a Congress veteran from the state, says that the Tamil Nadu government's "last-minute" refusal to attend the conclave of April 10th smacks of slavish mentality and is symptomatic of the state's current lack of strong leadership. Rivals decry the post-Jayalalithaa AIADMK, which holds power in Chennai, as a collective of indecisive leaders with no charisma. "They are scared to even stand up for their rights," says a Congress leader, "After all, Tamil Nadu is one state that will be worst hit by the ToRs."

Andhra Pradesh's Finance Minister Yanamala Rama Krishnudu, who attended the meet, has also lashed out at Centre for using the Finance Commission as a "political tool". So has Puducherry Chief Minister V Narayanasamy, who made his point clear in his address at the gathering.

AT VISAKHAPATNAM, the group expect to draft a joint memorandum against the ToRs they have such strong objections to. As Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan tells *Open*, "This is not just a south-versus-north issue, but a Centre-state relations debate." For some southern states, the contentious clauses of the ToRs include the use of 'population data of 2011 while making [the Commission's] recommendations', as opposed to the figures of 1971 or a mix of 1971 and 2011. Some states are also peeved that the ToRs lay down conditions for tax sharing, which they say is a violation of the Constitution. According to Isaac, the document suggests that the increase in states' share of tax revenue from 32 to 42 per cent made by the previous Commission was an excessive step. The group also condemns the attempt to boost Centrally sponsored schemes, arguing that several progressive states have their own schemes that deliver better outcomes.

The question, then, is: how justified is this anger?

At an administrative level, the controversy over the use of population data from the 2011 census instead of the 1971 one appears superfluous. Under the ToRs of the previous Finance Commission, it was asked while making its recommendations to 'generally take the base of population figures as of 1971 in all cases where population is a factor for determination of devolution of taxes and duties and grants-in-aid'. But those ToRs had also added that 'the Commission may also take into account the demographic changes that have taken place subsequent to 1971'.

The conclave concluded with a decision to call another gathering to chart out an action plan to voice the concerns of 'progressive states' that they argued would bear the brunt of a new 'aggressive and unitary' posture adopted by the Centre

On April 10th, Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley clarified this point in a Facebook post, in which he said, 'The 14th [Finance Commission] had no specific mandate for using the 2011 census. Yet, the 14th FC rightly used the 2011 census population data to capture the demographic changes since 1971 to make a realistic assessment of the needs of the States. It allocated 10% weight to the 2011 population.'

The real reasons for the disquiet—apart from the usual myopic political ones that arise close to elections—are different. The forum of leaders who met in Thiruvananthapuram had even hinted at them. Kerala's Vijayan was explicit on that score when he said, "Reframing of the Terms of Reference is imperative to strengthen the federal structure of the country on the one hand and to reinforce the unity and integrity of the nation on the other."

There are two ways to look at the issue. One is to consider it from the old lens of the Union Government trying to control the states. There's plenty in the ToRs that can be spun that way. Take the clause that asks the Commission to consider the 'conditions that Government of India may impose on the States while providing consent under Article 293(3) of the Constitution'. This

(L-R) Puducherry Chief Minister V Narayanasamy, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, Andhra Pradesh Finance Minister Yanamala Ramakrishnudu, Kerala Finance Minister TM Thomas Isaac and Karnataka Agriculture Minister Krishna Byre Gowda at the conclave of southern states' finance ministers held in Thiruvananthapuram on April 10

PRASANTH/PRD PHOTOS

"A win-win solution is possible and the Centre should not create winners and losers. By weakening the strongest parts of the Union, you are weakening the Union itself"

KRISHNA BYRE GOWDA
agriculture minister, Karnataka

"Neither I nor others at the conclave are against the idea of equity, nor are we against helping states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh emerge from their backwardness"

TM THOMAS ISAAC
finance minister, Kerala

article limits the power of states to borrow money if they have not fully repaid a loan given to them by either the Union Government or any other lender to which the Centre had provided its assurance as debt guarantor. The Constitution empowers the Union Government to lay down the parameters under which such consent can be given, something which it has asked the Fifteenth Finance Commission to do.

The other way to look at the issue is to consider this an attempt to nudge the states to carry out economic reforms that they have been reluctant to. This is the nub of the problem: the Centre is under constant pressure to keep the country's overall fiscal deficit—the combined deficit for the Union and state governments—under check. In recent years, states have recklessly been spending, which complicates the overall task of macroeconomic management—keeping both the deficit and interest rates low. This has an adverse impact on the whole country's economic growth.

That overriding concern is clear from New Delhi's attempt to craft performance-based incentives that the Finance Commission has been tasked with. Some of them are political red rags. For example, the Commission has been asked to take into account 'control or lack of it in incurring expenditure on populist measures' by the states. Anyone familiar with India's political economy knows

AP

'The 14th Finance Commission had no specific mandate for using 2011 census. Yet, 14th FC rightly used the 2011 census population data to capture the demographic changes since 1971 to make a realistic assessment of the needs of the States. It allocated 10% weight to the 2011 population'

ARUN JAITLEY Union finance minister

that at the state level, the name of the game is to spend and win polls, with the expenditure calibrated to get the biggest bang for every buck. To expect that a reversal of populist schemes would be accepted tamely by the states—even if a body of technocrats has been given the mandate to look at the issue—is politically naïve.

There are a slew of such ToRs for the Commission, something that no government in the past has had the courage to ask for. In that sense, the present dispensation at the Centre has bitten the bullet of moderating populism. A look at these ToRs shows that claims of partiality towards northern over southern states are unfounded. To cite one example, the Commission has been asked to consider proposing incentives that take into account 'efforts and progress made in moving towards replacement rate of population growth'. If such measures are framed, accepted and implemented by the Union Government, then UP and Bihar would be the biggest losers, contrary to the furious debate about southern states 'subsidising' northern laggards.

What has been forgotten in the noisome north-versus-south argument is that all constitutional bodies use a number of factors while deciding on issues within their purview. The Finance Commission is no different. If population is a factor for deciding devolution of taxes and so on, then so are countervailing and special circumstances as well. This time, the Commission has been asked to look at incentives—or more accurately disincentives—on managing population. After Andhra Pradesh was divided in 2014, the previous Finance Commission was asked to look into the availability of resources after the division of the state well after it had begun its proceedings. When the final award was presented in December that year, Andhra Pradesh was given Rs1.69 lakh crore as its share in the divisible pool of Central taxes from 2015 to 2020, a substantial increase over the Rs 1.14 lakh crore awarded by the previous Commission. In addition, the state was also given help to bridge its revenue deficit due to revenue losses after Telangana was hived off.

Yet, four years later, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu argues that tax revenues from south India are being used to fund development activities in the north. Such claims contradict other arguments made by the state. If tax collections from Andhra are disproportionately high, then surely it has enough commercial activity not to need Special Category status, which is meant for underdeveloped states that do not have such an advantage and require extra finances from the Centre.

The Raghuram Rajan Committee that examined the issue of which states deserve this tag had devised an underdevelopment index based on per capita Net Domestic Product. States like Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh are far needier than Andhra Pradesh on this index, and yet, none of them qualify for Special Category status. Andhra Pradesh suffers from none of the usual debilitating features such as poor terrain, lack of development, etcetera, that many of India's remote states do. It was a political accident that it was bifurcated.

Historically, none of the reasons offered by better-off states for a greater share of resources has had any merit. At one point, Punjab used to make an argument similar to the one being made now by southern states. The state's grouse was that due to its relatively small population, it received less from the Central pool of taxes. In its support, Punjab claimed that it had 2 per cent of India's geographic area but contributed as much as half the Central pool of foodgrains, thus playing a major role in India's food security at a time when virtually all other states had a food deficit. Much like Karnataka's argument about 'progressivism' today, what Punjab left unsaid was that its supplies to the Central pool were fully paid for by the Union Government from tax revenues raised across the country.

Meanwhile, a Government official who was closely involved in the parleys over drafting the ToRs says that the language used in the Presidential order may have aggravated matters. He says that the "original wordings" were terrible and what is in the public domain now is a "much diluted" version compared with the one "that a senior official wanted". He also believes that certain aspects of the order need not have been there. "That includes assertions such as 'the Commission may also examine whether revenue deficit grants be provided at all'". In his opinion, it is not the Finance Commission that is meant to make such statements, but the Finance Ministry. He also takes exception to conditions placed on states to avail of loans, and is piqued that the ToRs refer to the earlier Commission while the new one ought to have started off on a clean slate. Such criticisms apart, this official is more worried that institutions are being undermined by various forces even though contentious issues can be sorted out through confabulations. Though he does not elaborate, he says that the Special Status demand by Andhra Pradesh could have been handled better had a senior official not shown lack of dexterity.

As for the language and content of the ToRs, NK Singh, chairman of the Fifteenth Finance Commission, would like to remind everyone that the body has no role in drafting them. "We just receive it from the President after it has been cleared by the Cabinet," he tells *Open*. Likewise, Dr Anoop Singh, a member of the Commission and adjunct professor at Georgetown University, has this to say in an email response: 'I should reiterate that we are guided by and bound by the terms of reference given to us by the President.'

"The Commission has no role in drafting the language and content. We just receive it from the President after it has been cleared by the Cabinet"

NK SINGH chairman, Fifteenth Finance Commission

"One should recognise the constitutional role of the Commission. All states invariably hold discussions with it, and therefore all grievances have to be submitted to it"

BIBEK DEBROY chairman, Economic Advisory Council and NITI Aayog member

Bibek Debroy, head of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and a Niti Aayog member who has often spoken of a trade-off between equity and efficiency, tells *Open* that states should ideally present their case to the Finance Commission. "One should recognise the constitutional role of the Commission," he says, "All states invariably hold discussions with [it], and therefore all grievances have to be submitted to it." Subhash Chandra Garg, secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, has not responded to *Open*'s specific queries so far on three issues that have irked the southern states: the ToR's increased stress on Central schemes over states programmes; the suggestion to relook at the 42 per cent tax devolution to the states; and a likely review of the provision of revenue deficit grants. Another government official, however, says that the Centre has genuine reason to worry about reduced resources at its command.

Professor Prerna Singh of Brown University, the author of *How Solidarity works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India*, says it is true that some southern states for decades have been characterised by much lower fertility rates and higher social indicators than northern states, and that these have been the result of explicit social policies. "These social policies have required a great degree of political will to enact and societal mobilisation to implement," she says, "Southern states such as Kerala, and also Tamil Nadu, made social welfare a priority in the decades after Independence and devoted precious budgetary outlays to social schemes. At this time, some of these southern states such as Kerala were actually in a more precarious financial position than north-central Indian states such as UP. Yet, they chose to make this commitment to social welfare. And so it is under-

GETTY IMAGES

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu argues that tax revenues from south India are being used to fund development in the north. Such claims contradict the state's demand for Special Category status

standable that they do not wish to be penalised for this early and sustained commitment to social welfare that is reflected in their lower fertility and higher welfare rates today."

However, as Professor Singh adds, "It is important to keep in mind that talking about 'laggard' northern states versus 'progressive' southern states obscures important differences between these states within these regions. Andhra Pradesh, for example, at many points in the last few decades has been characterised by social welfare indicators at par with the Hindi heartland. In the 1990s, Rajasthan saw an important commitment to and consequent jump in educational indicators. Recently, there has emerged a significant and unprecedented focus on social welfare in Bihar."

On the possibility of southern resentment resulting in the rise of subnationalist forces within these states, Professor Singh says that tensions between regions are not unusual in a federal setup. "But jurisdictional changes that structurally disadvantage or are perceived to disadvantage certain regions as compared to others have historically been important triggers for the development of regional discontent. At various points in time—for example, in the 1970s—discontent because of Central policies that are perceived to disadvantage their state has fuelled subnationalism in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that in India certain states have historically been the site of powerful subnationalist movements." Her book delves into how such subnationalism has been a significant force behind the social policies of these states. "So, increased regional discontent in the context of long-standing, deeply rooted, powerful subnationalisms could be an especially potent challenge to Indian federalism," she says.

At the moment, the divisive effects of high population in India are being debated in terms of Finance Commission awards. But there is a deeper reason behind the southern unease. In 1971, the combined population of UP and Bihar was roughly 125 million. The four southern states then, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu accounted for 145 million people. By 2011, the preponderance had inverted: the two northern states now had 303 million people and the southern states (including Telangana, which was a part of Andhra Pradesh then) had 251 million. As of now, the number of seats each state has in the Lok Sabha is based on numbers from the 1971 census. The Vajpayee Government had frozen that arrangement until 2026. When a new delimitation exercise is carried out based on 2011 census data, the southern states would lose several seats in Parliament while the cumulative representation of UP and Bihar would rise substantially. Even now, the two states account for a vast chunk.

When that happens, the sheer weight of northern states in Parliament, and consequently in politics and policymaking, has the potential to overwhelm almost all others. There is virtually nothing that can be done to fix that skew. In a democracy, representation is a matter of numbers, and these favour the north. It is not clear if there is a constitutional solution for this. Even if compensatory measures are taken to assure the south its voice in national affairs (say, by granting it higher Rajya Sabha representation), it would call for a constitutional change, which would perhaps face resistance in any given political scenario. However, if the current trend of increasing northern dominance persists, geographical fissures could emerge in the country. This would pose dangers. Northern states being split into smaller ones might relieve the state-wise disparities of power, but the north-south divergence would still require other modes of addressal.

In their efforts right now, the southern states could be making a strategic mistake: if they succeed in altering the ToRs they are ranged against, the northern states may end up demanding delimitation based on the 2011 census, which would reduce the south's influence in New Delhi. Perhaps a way to prevent that outcome is some sort of trade-off between letting states such as UP and Bihar get a larger share of financial resources now, in return for a correction in political representation at a later stage. Southern states also seem to discount the fact that the Finance Commission may make a greater allowance for 'progress made in moving towards replacement rate of population growth', as stated in the ToRs, than what they seem to assume.

The current debate that has generated much heat has made one thing clear: population and its political and economic effects can no longer be ignored. Left unaddressed, India runs the risk of a Malthusian quagmire. ■

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BATTLE FOR KARNATAKA

Reclaiming the Coast

V SHOBA follows the taproot of Hindutva politics in Dakshina Kannada

Photographs by HARSHA VADLAMANI

TO LAND IN coastal Karnataka in poll season is to enter a climate of frustration. In the sweltering heat made worse by brief spells of rain, political pugilists are preparing to win or to go down swinging—anything but a breathless draw. The 19 coastal constituencies from Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Uttara Kannada districts are among the most keenly contested in the elections to Karnataka's 224-member Assembly scheduled for May 12th. They are a matter of pride and honour for the BJP, whose taproot of Hindutva runs deep here. Despite the Sangh Parivar's machinations ahead of the 2013 elections, and perhaps as a result of them, the party won only one Assembly segment each in the three districts, a snub that has festered like a wound. The Parivar has since stepped up the game, making Hindutva an irreducible reality in these parts and forcing Congress leaders to visit temples, give out doles for religious places and *poojas*, and react to allegations of cow theft, 'love jihad', 'land jihad' and communal killings. The fight this time, says V Sunil Kumar, BJP MLA from Karkala in Udupi district, is between Allah and Ram. "I had made a statement that in Bantval constituency, it is Ram versus Allah, not BJP candidate Rajesh Naik versus Congress Minister B Ramanath Rai. But I can say this is true in all constituencies in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi," says Kumar, who has a shot at retaining the Karkala seat. "The Congress has systematically cheated Hindus over the past five years and we are telling them not to remain quiet about it." Thirty-five per cent of Bantval's population is Muslim, and the BJP's best efforts to wrest it from Rai, district in-charge minister and Minister for Forests, Environment and Ecology who has won the seat six times, may not prove effective. Three other Congress MLAs from Dakshina Kannada—Minister for Food and Public Distribution UT Khader

BJP workers on a door-to-door outreach drive in Boloor near Mangalore; (left) BJP MP and firebrand orator Nalin Kumar Kateel at an event in Mangalore to felicitate RSS workers who fought against the Emergency

(Mangalore, formerly Ullal), K Abhyachandra Jain (Moodbidri) and K Vasantha Bangera (Belthangady)—have won from their respective constituencies several times in a row. The BJP also lost Mangalore City North in 2013 to BA Mohiuddin Bava, Mangalore City South to former bureaucrat JR Lobo and Puttur to Shakunthala T Shetty. Halady Srinivas Shetty, who won as an independent from Kundapura in Udupi district, was inducted into the BJP earlier this year and will contest under the party banner despite murmurs of discord among partymen.

The gulch between Hindu and Muslim society is widening. Beary Muslims have traditionally enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Mogaveeras, a fishing community and an OBC that is among the most populous in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, with the boat-owners and retailers being Hindus and Muslims controlling the wholesale fish trade. Mogaveeras and Billavas (traditionally, toddy tappers) are the footsoldiers of the RSS and Bajrang Dal, which form the BJP's backbone in coastal Karnataka. With elections approaching, the communities, on edge, are clinging to a thin film of civility. On a visit to the house of slain RSS worker Sharath Madiwala in Kandur, a hamlet with dirt roads located in Sajipa Muda gram panchayat near Bantval, our driver for the day, a young Muslim from Mangalore with an iPhone and a diploma in safety engineering, gives a fake Hindu name. Madiwala's father, 68-year-old Thaniyappa, who owns a laundry store on BC Road at a stone's throw from the BJP's Bantval office, is sympathetic to both Muslims and Hindus who have lost their sons to the sanguinary politics of the region, but our friend does not want to take any chances. "I was a fan of Ramanath Rai's son Deepu, an icon

for Muslim youth in my college. But I have been reading about how politicians are orchestrating revenge murders of Hindus and Muslims and creating tension in society. I am wary now," he would later tell us. What he left unsaid was that violence had become so endemic to Mangalore that it didn't take much for even the most innocuous relationships to go pear-shaped. Sharath, a 28-year-old RSS worker, was knifed outside the laundry shop in July 2017 by a group with ties to the radical Muslim organisation Popular Front of India (PFI). He succumbed to his injuries. In the polarised atmosphere of Bantval, his murder was interpreted as retaliation for the killing of Ashraf Kalayi, a 35-year-old leader of the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), an offshoot of the PFI, barely two weeks ago.

Thaniyappa, bare-chested and sweaty from supervising work at the washing house, settles into an armchair by the window, where he spends much of his time these days. He tries not to dwell on the conniving opportunism of politicians. "We knew Sharath was into social work, but only when 10,000 people turned up at his funeral did we realise how many lives he had touched," Thaniyappa says. "This is what I think about now." While he is angry at the Congress government's "indifference", especially Ramanath Rai's, whose household has been a customer for years, his elder daughter Mallika Kunder, 35, who is visiting from Pune, is offended by the BJP's appropriation of Sharath for its Jan Suraksha Yatra earlier this year. "BJP leaders including Yeddyurappa and Nalin Kumar Kateel have shared in our grief and we appreciate their support, but it was insensitive to take out a procession with Sharath's picture displayed in an open truck. It may be an important poll issue for them, but did they pause to think how we must have felt?" she asks. Sharath's motorbike and Maruti Omni, the rear glass imprinted with the words '*Chandan hai iss desh ki maati* (the soil of this country is like sandal)', are still parked at the Madiwala residence, but Thaniyappa uses his autorickshaw to ferry laundry to the shop and back. "Sharath wanted me to retire and live in peace," he says. "But he did not know what a dangerous environment prevails here."

"AS FAR AS the coastal districts are concerned, Hindutva is the only election issue this time," says PS Prakash, CEO of *Hosa Diganta*, an RSS mouthpiece published in Kannada. "It is a head-on fight between the Congress and the BJP. The high percentage of minority votes is a problem for the BJP, which cannot hope to attract them. But what it has done this time is consolidate the Hindu vote by awakening the Hindu consciousness," says Prakash. The paper's Mangalore edition has carried reports of over 100 cows gone missing from coastal districts over the past few months. The theft of a cow from a *gaushala* in Kairangala, near Konaje, run by controversial Swami Raghaveshwara Bharati of Ramachandrapura Math, snowballed earlier this month, with BJP MP from Dakshina Kannada Nalin Kumar Kateel and RSS strongman Kalladka Prabhakar Bhat delivering charged speeches at the *ashram*. The seer had been accused of rape in 2014 and the case took several dramatic turns, including five High Court judges recusing themselves, before he was acquitted. "The Congress government is guilty of pedalling soft Hindutva in the Mangalore belt. It has not been able to give the Muslims a sense of security. It looks the other way when Kalladka Bhat or Raghaveshwara Swami is involved because it cannot afford to alienate Hindus," says BV Seetaram, who owns and manages *Karavali Ale*, an irreverent Mangalore daily. "There is no single leader in active politics who can tour the entire coastal belt and pull crowds. In the absence of Oscar Fernandes and with Veerappa Moily falling off the radar, there are fringe leaders from Dakshina Kannada dictating strategy for the entire coastal belt," he says.

Like Union Minister Anant Kumar Hegde who represents Uttara Kannada in the Lok Sabha, this constituency's two-time

"Go through the list of promises that I made to you in the last election and tell me if I have failed you anywhere. If I haven't, then hire me again. I am confident about my performance"

PRAMOD MADHWARAJ Karnataka minister for Sports and Youth Affairs

"To uphold law and order and the rights of Hindus is the main thing and that is how we are consolidating our vote. There is a saying in Kannada: 'You don't need a mirror to see your own palm.' Here, everything is out in the open"

RAJESH NAIK BJP candidate from Bantval, Dakshina Kannada

MP Nalin Kumar Kateel has gained credence by rhapsodising on Hindutva. "I talk about the ideology I believe in. I am not making hate speeches," he says, surrounded by fawning admirers at the party office in Mangalore where silver-haired RSS veterans are to be felicitated today for their struggle against the Emergency. A waspish orator, Kateel, who beat veteran Congressman Janardhan Poojary twice in a row, outsells all other BJP leaders from the district. "The candidate would not have mattered. It is our *sangathan shakti* and the development focus of our national leadership that win elections for us," Kateel says. "We have been improving our performance in local body polls, and thanks to Modi*ji*'s rallies and the Congress' divisive politics, Hindus are stronger now and capable of defending themselves." The Parivar is known to reward smug petulance with a chance to contest the polls, but in Bantval, it is again fielding political greenhorn U Rajesh Naik, an award-winning organic farmer who lost to Ramanath Rai in 2013. "That was during the state BJP's worst period. Now there are real issues. To uphold law and order and the rights of Hindus is the main thing—and that is how we are consolidating our vote. There is a saying in Kannada that 'You don't need a mirror to see your own palm'. Here, everything is out in the open," says Naik. He has just shaken hands with half a dozen Congress workers who have switched over to the BJP. "There are other issues—sand mining, the potential for tourism along the Netravati, and proper sanitation. And with the SDPI further splitting Congress votes, we stand a good chance." Naik's name, say sources, was floated by Kalladka Prabhakar Bhat.

BJP workers in Dakshina Kannada claim that without the 'Doctor', as Prabhakar Bhat is known here, the party cannot organise itself and rout the Congress from one of its last remaining bastions. "He knows every taluk in these parts like the back of his hand. He is always travelling, energising Hindus." K Krishnappa, the manager of Prabhakar Bhat's school in Kalladka, a small town that lies south of the Netravati river in southern Karnataka, has an unenviable task. He has to convince Muslims to vote for the BJP. A 'page *pramukh*', Krishnappa is in charge of canvassing among 30 voters who take up one page of the Election Commission's list for Balthila, booth No 154. "Seventeen of them are Muslim," says the VHP taluk president for Bantval, laughing at the irony. "If I can get three to five, it will be a big deal." A Muslim-majority town that witnessed a slew of communal acts last year claiming three lives, including that of Jaleel Karopady, a gram panchayat vice-president, Kalladka is home to a school, a pre-university college and a degree college run by Bhat's trust. Perched on a tree-lined road with an unbroken string of saffron streamers, the green environs of Sri Rama Vidya Kendra make top party leaders like chief minister candidate BS Yeddyurappa and BJP MP from Udupi-Chikmagalur Shobha Karandlaje, flock like migrant butterflies. For young Sangh Parivar politicians hoping to hustle their way up the ranks, stooging about in the campus could determine the course of their career.

"IN COASTAL KARNATAKA, Prabhakar Bhat is the man with the remote. He presses the button when convenient," says Mangalore-based rationalist Narendra Nayak, whose security was recently enhanced in apprehension of an attack on him. Nayak and other activists in Mangalore have been demanding justice for Vinayak Baliga, a BJP worker and RTI activist who was murdered in front of his house in Kodialbail on March 21st, 2016. The prime accused in the case, Naresh Shenoy, founder of the Yuva Brigade, is said to be close to the RSS and a senior BJP leader from the district. Baliga's photograph featured in Karandlaje's now-famous letter to Rajnath Singh demanding a probe into

"Only when 10,000 people turned up at his funeral did we realise how many lives Sharath had touched. He wanted me to retire and live in peace, but he did not know what a dangerous environment prevails here"
THANIYAPPA MADIWALA father of slain RSS worker Sharath

the 'murders' of 23 Hindus in Karnataka since the last Assembly elections, some of whom are alive or died natural deaths. Baliga's name, however, was missing from the list. "The BJP wants people to forget the case where their own man was targeted and killed for exposing the irregularities in the accounts of a Hindu *math*. This is the scary reality of the Sangh Parivar," Nayak says. "I doubt voters will be fooled by it."

Dakshina Kannada, however, has continued to keep its appointments with blood-soaked horror. On January 3rd, Deepak Rao, a BJP worker, was murdered in Katipalla, near Surathkal, triggering a reprisal in which a Muslim youth from the area lost his life. "My constituency is a Hindu majority area, and I have been extra vigilant. This incident has been the one black mark on my entire term," says BA Mohiuddin Bava, the Congress MLA from Mangalore City North, who had issued a statement saying he prayed the courts would award death to the accused. At his busy office in Surathkal, Bava launches into a publicity spiel about the projects commissioned by him in the past five years, but he knows full well that religion is the flavour of the season. He recently came under attack for retrofitting the tune of a popular Ayyappa *bhajan* with a campaign song—an inadvertent mistake, he says.

IN THE NEIGHBOURING district of Udupi, the tone of campaigning is less pungent. At Minister for Sports and Youth Affairs Pramod Madhwaraj's resort-home tucked away in Kolaligiri, across the Suvarna River from Udupi, a bevy of petitioners sit slumped in plush chairs in an air-conditioned room, waiting to be ushered into an inner chamber with an arched wood ceiling and plusher sofas. Madhwaraj emerges in a green kurta toting gigantic finger rings and an aristocratic smile. The darbar begins: a cancer patient's mother trying to acquire cheap land to build a home, a student who needs medical aid, a party worker who wants to shake his hands, they all get assurances and advice. The minister scarfs down a handful of pills handed to him by a secretary before he heads out in a Land Rover to 20 booth-level engagements over the course of the day. Among his people, he is no longer the patrician but a man who touches elders' feet and poses for selfies. At an intimate gathering in the shade of a porch in Handadi, with no more than 40 people in attendance, he likens himself to a sincere agricultural worker who deserves to be hired again. "Go through the list of promises that I made to you in the last election and tell me if I have failed you anywhere. If I haven't, then hire me again," he says. A shapeshifter who nearly defected to the BJP, Madhwaraj is confident his performance has earned him enough goodwill to last another term.

"We are not leaving anything to chance," says Jagadish Shetty, 47, a BJP worker from Boloor, a Mogaveera-majority neighbourhood on the outskirts of Mangalore where a team of volunteers is wrapping up its door-to-door outreach, moving like a swarm of bees on a hot, listless day. It is a taxonomic exercise to identify "our" votes, and occasionally, to try and turn the others by ventriloquising Amit Shah and Narendra Modi. They do not brandish caustic sentences or affect a pose of superiority. This is good old friendly banter. "There are 1,039 votes in this booth—No 81 of ward No 27—and we know each one. We have never collected this much data. We even have phone numbers from each house, and since we know which way they lean, we plan to add the supporters among them to WhatsApp groups," says Shetty, a *ghazal* singer with close-cropped afro hair who runs a not-for-profit school. The Congress' ground level campaign may seem attenuated in comparison, but with the Siddaramaiah wave cresting at the right time, the party is not overly worried about anti-incumbency even as the BJP gets busy at the Hindutva switchboard, flipping everything on. ■

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: COMPANIES GOING BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

The culture of giving has been an age-old practice in India. Individuals, as well as the business community, have not only contributed to the country's economic growth, but have embraced social issues with equal zeal, providing critical support to the government to meet the growing challenges of collective growth.

Corporate's social responsibility, however, took on a new meaning when the company law changed in April 2014. Subsequently, supporting community development became more about meeting stated goals and complying with the norms, rather than a philanthropic activity for many Indian companies.

According to the rules, companies with net worth of Rs 500 crore or more, must spend 2 percent of net profits on corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes. This rule also applies for businesses with a turnover of and above Rs 1,000 crore, or those with net profit of Rs 5 crore or more in a financial year.

However, of late, things seem to be moving in the right direction, with India Inc. going beyond the call of duty to embrace the art of giving. More and more companies are reaching out to the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the society, to uplift socially and economically backward groups, besides making efforts to protect national heritage, art and culture.

But there's a catch. Over the years, businesses have also realised that CSR is not just about charitable acts, but also gives better brand visibility. This has also led to companies integrating CSR into their businesses like never before.

How companies are spending on CSR projects

In the initial years, not all companies showed eagerness towards spending on charitable activities. However, over the years, the scenario has changed with more and more companies complying with the norms and spending more on development of the society.

Consider this: In the past two years, the telecom sector has increased its CSR spending by 400 per cent, followed by a 234 per cent jump across pharmaceutical companies.

Besides, companies are also rising up to a wider set of responsibilities, and providing critical support in areas where one cannot depend on the government's efforts alone.

Education and healthcare have benefitted the most, accounting for more than 50 per cent of the total spends of top 100 Indian companies by way of market capitalisation.

In fact, corporate India has been spending substantially on education, a sector that has seen investments going up by a whopping 92 per cent in the past three years, while aggressively addressing various health-related issues – from running hospitals to conducting awareness campaigns.

Where companies are spending on CSR projects

According to the 2016-2017 KPMG report, the top 100 companies in terms of market capitalisation spent about Rs 7,216 crore on philanthropic activities, up 41 per cent from the figures of 2014-15.

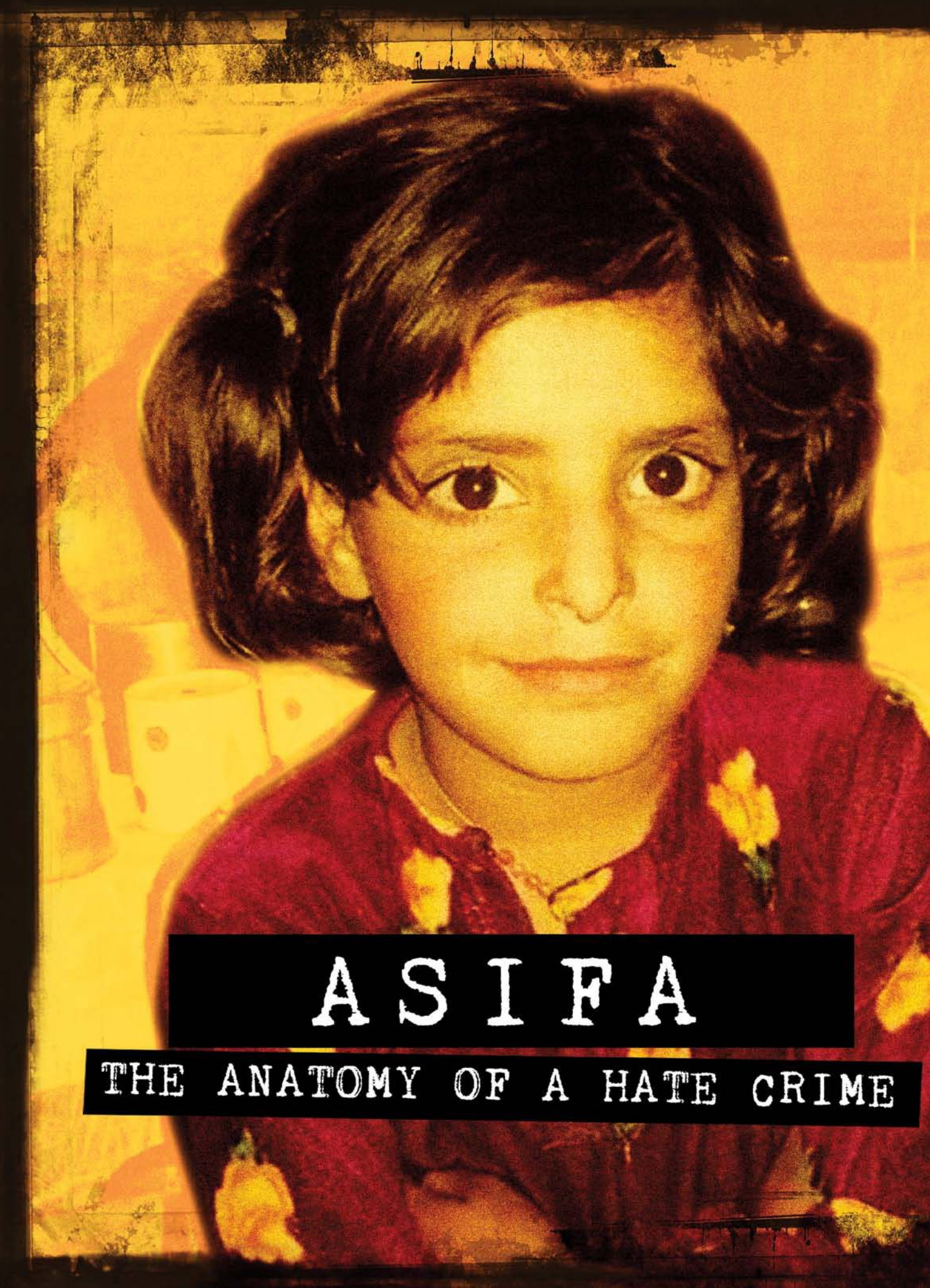
Having said that, the socially responsible management are doing much more than what is required under the law – contributing far higher than the prescribed limit. In fact, 22-plus companies had set aside higher CSR budget in 2016-17 compared to 10 companies in the previous fiscal year.

The situation has also improved, when it comes to spending the allocated amount. Statistics say, the number of companies that have spent less than 2 per cent has come down by 29 per cent – from 52 in 2014-15 to 37 during 2016-17.

The efforts have made a real difference on ground – Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha have emerged as the biggest beneficiaries with the highest number of projects. The north-eastern states, including, Manipur and Tripura, however, need greater attention, with less than 10 projects for the region.

India was the first country to implement expenditure on social causes. But the rule book's contribution has been far greater given that India Inc. seems to have become socially even more aware, going beyond profits, to contributing on a much larger scale for social and economic development of the country.

Today, corporate India is spending more on resources and giving more time for CSR activities, overcoming the challenges of achieving economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. ■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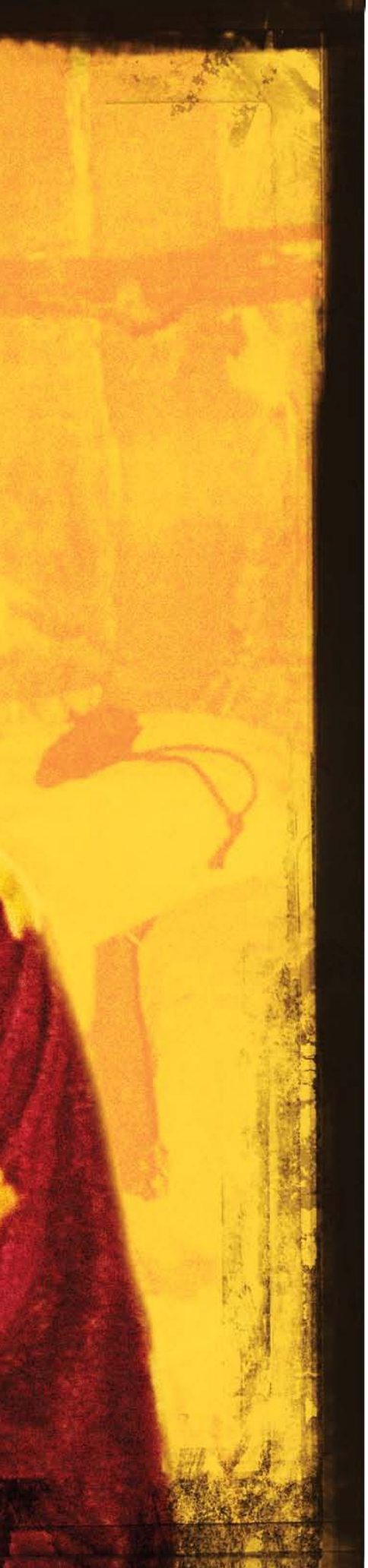

Photo imaging by SAURABH SINGH

The police chargesheet on the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Jammu reveals horrifying details of her last five days

By RAHUL PANDITA

MOHAMMED YOUSUF DOES not remember exactly when he decided to settle in Rasana village in Jammu region's Kathua district. But he says it must have been about 10-12 winters ago. Yousuf is a Bakerwal, a nomadic tribe of Jammu & Kashmir. His community spends summers at high altitude and winters in the plains, where they move along with their livestock. After his two children died in an accident, Yousuf decided to adopt his sister's newborn child in 2010. She was named Asifa. In the last few years, the Bakerwals in Jammu province have been facing opposition from local Dogra Hindus. Many Hindus in Jammu fear that the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley has plans to change the demography of Hindu-majority Jammu by resettling Muslims here from elsewhere. The settling of a few hundred Rohingya Muslim families in Jammu had fuelled these concerns. In towns and villages along the international border with Pakistan in particular, tension between some sections of Hindus and Bakerwals has been running high. It is this suspicion and hatred that consumed the life of eight-year-old Asifa. The details in the chargesheet filed by the J&K Police's Crime Branch in a local court on April 9th and 10th against eight accused reveals horrifying details of her last five days after she was abducted on January 10th this year.

"We have solved the case, but what makes me really sad is that police officers were involved in this," says Ahfadul Mujtaba, Inspector-General, Crime Branch.

Asifa's body was found in a forest next to Rasana on January 17th, seven days after she went missing while looking for her ponies that had ventured far while grazing. Two days later, the local police arrested a juvenile boy who they said had confessed that it was he who had abducted the girl and later killed her with the blow of a stone to her head.

But as Bakerwals and others mounted pressure on the government to transfer the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), it was turned over to the Crime Branch on January 22th. After sustained interrogation of the juvenile boy and an investigation involving conventional and modern methods, the police say they identified the main two accused in the case—a local 60-year-old villager, Sanji Ram, and a Special Police officer, Deepak Khajuria.

The story that has emerged after the Crime Branch investigation, now a part of the chargesheet, is as follows:

Sanji Ram had decided to put together a plan to scare Bakerwals away from the area. He had been observing Asifa for a few days; she often grazed her ponies on forest land around his home. He decided to kill Asifa in order to instil fear among other members of her community. Ram shared this idea with Deepak Khajuria and the juvenile boy, his nephew. The boy had been expelled from his school three months earlier because of 'bad behaviour' with girls. His parents had then sent him to his uncle's home, where he took care of the cattle.

To facilitate Asifa's abduction, Khajuria first went to a chemist shop, taking along a prescription of his maternal uncle who has psychiatric problems. He asked for a medicine used for treating seizures and sleep disorders. The chemist did not have the specific drug, but gave him the same formulation under a different brand name, Epitril. Khajuria then sought Ram's nephew's help in abducting the girl,

promising that in return he would help him clear his exams through cheating. The boy shared this plan with his close friend, Parvesh Kumar alias Mannu. On January 9th, the boy and Mannu went to a nearby town and purchased four doses of a local drug, Manar.

On the afternoon of January 10th, Ram's nephew heard Asifa enquiring from a woman about her missing ponies. He told Asifa that he had seen her ponies and led her to the jungle, accompanied by Mannu. According to the police, by this time the girl had sensed trouble and tried to run away. But Ram's nephew caught hold of her and pushed her to the ground. Then he forcibly fed her a dose of Manar, after which she fell unconscious. It is here that he raped her. Afterwards, Mannu tried raping her as well, but could not.

Asifa's body was found on January 17

The girl was then taken to a small temple managed by Sanji Ram. The next day, SPO Khajuria and Ram's nephew went back to check on her. The nephew, says the chargesheet, lifted her head and Khajuria slid two tablets of Epitril down her throat. In the evening the nephew went again to the temple to light a lamp and found the girl still unconscious. The same night, he called up his cousin, Sanji Ram's son, Vishal Jangotra, who is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in agriculture in Meerut. The boy asked Jangotra to come immediately if he wanted to satisfy his lust.

Jangotra arrived the next morning. Two hours later, they went to the temple where Asifa was given another three tablets. All this while, she was on an empty stomach.

By this time, Sanji Ram had taken into confidence another policeman, head constable Tilak Raj. On the afternoon of January 12th, after Mohammed Yousuf filed a complaint with the police, the search for the missing girl began. Both Deepak Khajuria and Tilak Raj were a part of the search party and kept up the pretence of looking for the girl.

According to the police, Sanji Ram visited his sister the same day and confided in her that her son was involved in the kidnapping and confinement of the girl. Through her, a packet of Rs 1.5 lakh was sent to Tilak Raj. Through him, an offer for sharing a total of Rs 5 lakh was made to the investigating officer of the case, Sub Inspector Anand Dutta. He is now one of the accused.

On the morning of January 13th, Sanji Ram, his son and nephew went to temple where the uncle-nephew duo performed rituals. After Sanji Ram left, his son raped Asifa. Then she was again raped by his nephew, the juvenile. After this, the boy fed Asifa three tablets of Epitril and kept the other two under a heap of garbage. These have now been recovered by the police.

It was the day of Lohri. After the festivities in the evening, Sanji Ram told his accomplices that the time had come to kill the girl. That night, she was taken to a culvert in front of the temple by the nephew, his friend Mannu and Jangotra. Shortly afterwards, Khajuria reached the spot as well and said he wanted to rape the girl before she was killed. After doing it, Khajuria put her neck on his left thigh and tried to strangle her. He could not. Sanji Ram's nephew then came forth and killed her by pressing his knee against her back and strangulating her with her *chunni*. Then, to make sure that she was dead, he hit her twice with a stone.

The body was taken back to the temple. On the morning of January 15th, the body was thrown in the forest.

But once the case got too hot to handle for the police, the accused decided to direct all guilt at the juvenile and have him confess falsely that he had conspired to kill the girl along with a local shepherd. On sustained interrogation, however, the boy broke down and narrated the whole story.

Sanji Ram, it turns out, was dead against Bakerwals settling in the area. He always urged his community not to provide any assistance to them. He was known to harangue one of his neighbours for having sold a piece of land to a Bakerwal. Head Constable Tilak Raj and Khajuria, according to the police, also had a prejudiced view of Bakerwals. They suspected them of indulging in cow slaughter and drug trafficking, says the chargesheet.

The case has assumed a political hue in Jammu with some members of BJP, Congress and other parties coming out in favour of the accused SPO, Khajuria. On April 9th, when the police approached the Kathua court to file the chargesheet, a group of lawyers tried to stop them. The police have filed an FIR against them.

"We had no pressure from anyone," says Ramesh Jala, SSP, Crime Branch, who supervised the probe. "We were reporting the developments of the case to the High Court almost on a weekly basis." The 15-member team of the Crime Branch, say senior police officials, has an impeccable record. Jala himself has survived several terrorist attacks during his stint in Kashmir Valley.

IN PLACES ALONG THE PAKISTANI BORDER, THE TENSION BETWEEN SOME SECTIONS OF HINDUS AND BAKERWALS HAS BEEN RUNNING HIGH. IT IS THIS HATRED THAT CONSUMED THE LIFE OF ASIFA

The fate of Mohammed Yousuf and his people in Rasana is not clear yet. After Asifa was found, locals did not even allow the family to bury her body on Yousuf's own land. It had to be buried in a neighbouring village where Yousuf's relatives live. In the wake of the chargesheet, the life of Bakerwals in this region is bound to get more difficult. ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

By ARESH SHIRALI

THE IRON

Private banks must be

BANKS ARE IN the business of inspiration, as a grandee of finance once said, and their fundamental job is to inspire trust. In India, they inspire everything from awe to expletives, but their basic survival depends on the faith placed in them by the faceless millions who lend them money: if depositors were to suddenly withdraw their deposits in fear of losing them, they'd suffer a 'bank run' and fall apart. Not only must people feel assured that banks aren't playing loose and reckless with their money, they need to trust one another not to panic on rumours of any such thing.

The rarity of bank runs is among the marvels of this age, surely, one that even the rational rigour of Game Theory can't entirely explain. As an analogy, consider a game that illustrates the woes and wonders of social cooperation. It's called the Stag Hunt. Imagine a group of hunters lying in wait with their bows stretched behind the bushes along a deer trail in a forest. If they all choose to cooperate, stay perfectly still and let not a leaf rustle, they'll get to have a hearty feast. But as time wears on, everyone begins to lose patience. And then, instead of the long-awaited stag, a hare comes hopping into sight. Now what? Each archer can opt for this easy prey and save himself starvation, but the shake-up is bound to scare their original target off, leaving the rest hungry (and himself underfed). What should a rational player do? Gauge the intent of others, of course, while settling for either

a 'Nash equilibrium' of greater gains for all in pursuit of a unified goal, or a 'gnash standoff' with everyone's selfish aims implying less for each. How the scenario resolves itself, nobody can foretell.

Banks, in contrast, are lucky. They can count on most of their creditors to stay put and not flee. For the industry, this is optimal. Even those on the verge of bankruptcy are kept stable by *aam* customers. But here's the thing. Is this plain and simple inertia? Or an unspoken expectation that a higher authority will ensure they don't lose their savings? And what if the stability of banks is sub-optimal for the *rest* of the economy?

The Government's domination of

As a regulator, the RBI insists that all banks operate under a strict set of rules designed for safety. Their primary job, after all, is to funnel cash where it's best used. For this, they borrow cheaply from the masses and lend at higher rates of interest to a few, and if they squeeze their overheads within this 'spread', they turn a profit for shareholders. In line with global norms, however, they must have some money of their own too: as a capital cushion, their equity base needs to have about a tenth of the value of their risk-laden loans, deemed sufficient to cover defaults. If unpaid loans exceed this cushion, it needs to be restuffed with cash from shareholders; else, it goes

could suffer an unforeseen slump and doom a worthy project. On the flipside, in a market where the quality of information is poor, error avoidance results in credit inefficiency: either too few loans are disbursed or good borrowers get slapped with higher rates for the sins of the shady. Even so, bad loans tend to average out over time, and so long as they remain a tiny fraction of good loans, private banks thrive.

THE MOMENT *mala fide* intent enters the story, however, all bets are off. Since corporate loans are so large, just a few risk reports fudged and advances

Y OF CREAKY VAULTS

held accountable for them to serve the public interest

India's banking sector since 1969 appears to have lulled large numbers into seeing any bank as a bank, a place where their money is safe. This is assumed to be so even if a Public Sector Bank (PSB) gets robbed every now and then; the country's exchequer, after all, is big enough to refill its vaults. A private bank, however, is just another business—as vulnerable to failure as any other. Indeed, many have had to down their shutters: Global Trust Bank, Lord Krishna Bank and Bank of Madura, to name some. If account holders didn't lose anything, it was only because their operations got taken over by other banks. But fail, they did. And now that a scandal has erupted at ICICI Bank, with dodgy loans extended to a business group suspected to have enriched its CEO Chanda Kochhar's family, the popular notion that privately-owned banks operate on a superior plane of integrity has all but come apart.

If state control of money corrupts, any control of money could corrupt. Absolute control, absolutely so.

bust. The RBI is also supposed to define and monitor internal processes so that nobody dupes or bullies a bank for credit. At PSBs, these systems bear cracks that crooks can exploit, as the Nirav Modi scam appears to have revealed. At private banks, fraud isn't so easy. But while they might adhere to RBI norms a whole lot better, they often prove just as bad on what's beyond regulatory oversight: case by case lending.

All credit entails risk, a 'price' for which is extracted by way of a higher rate of interest charged. The lender's job is to assess myriad factors—say, of a start-up's prospects—and price that risk accurately. The discretion this calls for could spell genuine errors of judgement; an economy, for instance,

Every ambitious business chases size in a country of such vast potential. For a bank, size is a measure of its 'assets', the sum of its loans, regardless of what they're really worth over their lifespan

approved in return for secret favours could cause losses; and if the books get smudged with red ink far too frequently, the entire enterprise could be thrown into jeopardy. This problem afflicts all kinds of banks, and if badly managed, private banks in rapid-expansion mode perhaps even more so. Every ambitious business chases size in a country of such vast potential; for a bank, size is a measure of its 'assets', the sum of its loans, regardless of what they're really worth over their lifespan. Since most loans have long payback periods, it's an industry that almost lends itself to business myopia.

The onus of adding on assets that don't end up as non-performers is squarely on a bank's

management. In ensuring this, its CEO, the one in charge, is accountable to shareholders, who in turn are represented by a board of directors. Headed by a chairperson, this board's role goes beyond setting business targets—and awarding the CEO a multi-crore pay package—to include such matters of governance as staying alert to any violation of principles.

Alas, that's only on paper. In reality, shareholders are largely aloof and boards rarely vigilant. The wider the dispersal of ownership, it seems, the worse this negligence can get. If nobody owns more than a thin sliver of a bank's shares, no 'owner' has much to lose by way of reputation or investment if things go awry. In a business that's Greek to most outsiders, this can prove perilous. Unlike, say, Kotak Mahindra Bank, whose promoters have both their names affixed and also direct control, ICICI Bank is owned mostly by a scatter of institutional investors with no 'principal' to speak of.

So long as they're satisfied with its stock price—a function of quarterly earnings, popular perceptions, market sentiments and other factors of dubious relevance—they are unlikely to pay close attention. Like retail investors, if they aren't too pleased by what they see on the ticker tape, they can simply sell and move on.

Under those sort of circumstances, why would anyone bother to question the CEO of a profitable private bank?

Ah, but there's also a chairperson, is there not? If there's anyone with a mandate to look after a bank's long-term interests, it's the person who chairs board meetings. But a mandate is one thing, actual empowerment another. At some banks, the chairperson and CEO are the same. This appals gurus of corporate governance; but even at banks where they're separate, the CEO's aura of authority is often enough to deter challengers of his or her wisdom. In any case, it's just the big numbers that get onto the big table. Clues of any graft within are not easy to spot.

As for ICICI Bank, it was only after its dud loan to a business partner of Kochhar's husband came under the CBI scanner for an alleged conflict-of-interest that its board began to stir, and that too with unseemly lethargy, having defended its CEO at first (nothing was amiss, it argued). With profits being logged and bad loans still under a tenth of its total, perhaps few directors saw any cause for alarm. Investors at large appear calm too. After scaling a peak in January, ICICI Bank's scrip slid on allegations against Kochhar in March, but then staged a recovery in early April once the board expressed confidence in her leadership.

The tacit assumption that India's Government would save private lenders from their follies poses the same moral hazard as in America. If bad assets cause no grief, why worry about quality?

Meanwhile, as the spotlight turns on private banks overall, the RBI has begun to nudge boards to get tough with CEOs. Axis Bank's denial of a fourth term as CEO to Shikha Sharma is a direct upshot of this. But given the flaws of the operative model, such specific interventions usually make more news than a difference.

The details of a private bank's internal affairs may escape oversight from above, but what about peer surveillance? Every decision involves multiple points of clearance, and credit committees presumably have more than one member. Yes, say bankers privy to such things, but it's a complex process riddled with grey zones, so the earnest have little incentive to go against higher-ups—or the general drift—if it means putting a career at stake right now for the sake of being proven right later. Plus, while the typical corporate hierarchy brooks no defiance anywhere, a culture of deference to bosses is especially acute in India. All in all, confide these bankers, it's a mug's game to take on a bank's big shots. And if anyone catches a whiff of something rotten, it's often pointless to cry foul. What's done is done, and in a business of trust, keeping smelly stuff suitably sanitised may well be a sane option.

WHAT HAPPENS when a bank *does* go bankrupt? If it's a PSB, the Centre usually bails it out. If it's a private bank, the Government is under no obligation to save it. Since banks owe one another vast sums of money at any given point, however, the crash of a single lender could set off chaos across the entire economy, a 'systemic risk' that has led many to assume that no bank 'too big to fail' will be allowed to. A recent precedent for this was set by the US after the Great Recession of 2008-09 when the Obama administration plugged private losses with public funds. It was a one-off, but it effectively meant that banks on a roulette roll got to make big profits on high-risk bets while the going was good but had the whole country pick up the tab for their excesses once their fragile assets crumbled. Expedience overcame ethics.

Systemic risks in India are low, given the RBI's restrictions on banks, but they do exist. Yet, the tacit assumption that India's Government would save private lenders from their follies also poses the same moral hazard as in America. If bad assets cause no grief, why worry about quality? And if one's survival isn't ever at stake, why crib about corruption? Badly managed banks could simply whistle along like they always have, enriching a few at the cost of the rest.

For half a century or more, no Indian bank has vanished with people's money, nor is one likely to now. Deposit insurance of up to Rs 1 lakh also acts as a safeguard of sorts. No depositor needs to break into a sweat. Yet, each bank scandal is a reminder of the cost the country bears for the pelf that tends to accompany power. Bad banks, let's face it, retard no less than aid the economy. The irony is that for this to change, India might finally need to break the spell cast on them by public concern for their safety. Else, teeth agrit, even a gnash equilibrium might begin to look like a best-case scenario. ■

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Dead Man Walking

THE LIGHTS WENT out. The knell was struck. And through flames of dry ice (lit up by soft blue light), The Undertaker, pro-wrestling's greatest gimmick, made his entry into pro-wrestling's greatest stage—World Wrestling Entertainment's annual pay-per-view, Wrestlemania, which rolled out its 34th edition on April 8th. For a major part of my existence (Wrestlemania and I were born a few days apart), this was the moment I looked forward to more than any other on live TV. Not just in anticipation of eventually watching a seven-foot man dressed like the grim reaper wrestle similarly outlandish characters; which, of course, was a sight to behold as well. The real draw to this moment—the moment when the arena turns dark and 'Taker waits behind the entry curtains—lay in his slow and long walk to the middle of the ring. It was a feast for the senses.

Through a haze of pealing bells and choir voices set to falsetto, he would appear, shadow-like; in a black trenchcoat and matching Stetson hat, perched atop a gush of curly black hair. Back in the 90s, the Stetson was pulled down to the bridge of his nose and his throat was wrapped in a grey wide-neck tie. But even in the 2000s, when the tie was replaced by a tattoo of his then-wife's name inked below his voice box, The Undertaker's visual appeal remained remarkably the same, thanks to the incredible props he made his entry with. Sometimes he walked behind a coffin-on-wheels, and once, during Wrestlemania IX, he even entered with a vulture. But mostly, it was with his trusted manager Paul Bearer, his pale and ghostly sidekick, who, in turn, walked in with a golden urn (according to WWE's incredible storylines, the urn held the wrestler's soul).

The schtick wouldn't end even after he entered the ring, where the lights would begin to brighten as he peeled off his coat, one long arm at a time, and took off his hat. Now, and only now, the eerie music would stop, the arena's bright bulbs shone and when they did, the broadcast cameras would focus on his eyes—white as milk, the black of his eyeballs embedded somewhere at the back of his skull. Mike Tyson, the most intimidating boxer the world has seen, once said that he won most of his bouts even before he threw his first punch. 'Taker's pre-match routine was nothing but a personification of that intimidation, embellished to the point of perfection in the make-believe world of pro-wrestling.

Eras changed. Attitudes changed. And even the wrestlers changed (some of his contemporaries from the 90s even died, in real life). But The Undertaker, and his Dead Man Walk to the squared circle, remained an undying constant. Constant, though, is not always a good thing. On Sunday night, April 8th, at the SuperDome in New Orleans, US (Monday morning in India), when the lights went out and the gongs were sounded, it filled pro-wrestling fans around the world, including me, with dread—and not in the way 'Taker or WWE's scriptwriters intended. For, in the last few years, the man stepping out of the dry ice hasn't been Undertaker but a tired old man visibly fed up of his only trick. The hat and trenchcoat were still in place, the former barely concealing the wrinkles and jowls on his withered face and the latter unable to cover his sagging chest and bloated stomach, not even with the aid of darkness.

From the middle of the ring, John Cena—a younger, faster and stronger babyface—waited for Undertaker to complete his entrance, a walk so slow that one assumed it wasn't due to the demands of his character but due to the demands of a battered, 53-year-old body. 'Someone give him a walking stick already!' wrote a fan on Twitter. Soon after the Dead Man took off his hat in the ring and revealed his hairline, another Tweet read: 'My eyes! For the love of god or devil or whoever he prays to, stop for the sake of our childhood.' It only got worse.

The match was a highlight reel of his trademark moves. From bell to bell, the fight lasted a total of three minutes, a minute-and-a-half shorter than his entrance. Even those three minutes felt like a stretch

The Undertaker hadn't 'competed' since the previous Wrestlemania, where he had 'lost' (to new-age superstar Roman Reigns) only for the second time since 1993. Back then, in 2017, something remarkable occurred as he ducked under the ropes to leave the arena. On his

The Undertaker at Wrestlemania 34

way out, 'Taker left his hat and trenchcoat in the middle of the ring—a telltale sign that the bosses were finally doing what was long overdue—wiped tears from his eyes, waved goodbye to the crowd and disappeared behind the curtains, forever. Or so we thought.

Just like a great TV series that stretched its viewers' patience in its final few seasons and even rolled out a finale, only to return as a movie (*Entourage*, for example), The Undertaker had yet again entered a Wrestlemania ring. Such moves—primarily driven by money—in the film industry tend to focus less on content and far more on inside jokes. It was the same case with The Undertaker's return. The match was a highlight reel of his trademark moves, the wrestling equivalent of his greatest hits. From bell to bell, the fight lasted a total of 3 minutes, a minute-and-a-half shorter than his entrance. Even those 3 minutes, at times, felt like a stretch.

About a minute into the contest, 'Taker set up his Snake Eyes-Running Big Boot one-two. The idea is to throw his opponent, Cena in this case, face first into the turnbuckle (Snake Eyes) and as he ricochets and wobbles, The Undertaker will fell him with his shoe (Running Big Boot). Only, as 'Taker bounced off the ropes and painfully held out his leg, Cena had slipped to the ground before a semblance of contact. To cover up for the gaffe, the pair quickly assisted the old man to pull in his money shots—the Flying Clothesline, Old School (where he walks the top-rope) and one lethargic Chokeslam.

Now it was time for The Undertaker's finishing move, but no pay-per-view match of his is complete with him Rising-From-The-Dead. So, Cena pinned him to the floor and mechanically 'Taker hoisted his upper torso 90 degrees, one creaking spine bone at a time. The misery was over instantly, as the Tombstone Piledriver (the best finishing move, in its heyday) was conducted and the Dead Man got up on his feet to his theme music and dimmed lights. "The 'Taker has returned to New Orleans, known for its cultural voodoo, to exorcise some bad juju," the WWE commentator said, killing any stray hope of a permanent retirement. "He has righted the wrong here at the SuperDome." Allow me to explain.

Sometime in the mid-2000s, it came to the attention of WWE's bosses that their scriptwriters had, wholly by chance, allowed The Undertaker to go undefeated in Wrestlemanias. The faux pas was renamed The Streak and repositioned as a money-spinner. And year after long year, The Undertaker was brought back to headline and win at Wrestlemania. In 2014, however, Brock Lesnar—a real-life powerhouse returning to the WWE after a long sabbatical—had to be promoted and 'Taker's streak was sacrificed, at the SuperDome in New Orleans (hence, the juju). Back then, it was a hard pill to swallow for us fans—witnessing live the killing of a great character. But we realised it was the right move for the business, given how jaded the routine was becoming.

But The Undertaker returned the year after that, in Wrestlemania 2015, and again in 2016—defeating jobbers (pro-wrestling speak for those who routinely lose matches) on both occasions. Then, in 2017, after his loss to Reigns, his second defeat in four years, we, the fans, and perhaps even The Undertaker, were certain that they had finally killed off the Dead Man for good. But his gimmick is built around returning from the dead. And this time when the lights went out and the knell was sounded he did so literally, looking rather zombie-like. ■

OPEN conversation

with

HUSAIN HAQQANI

Pakistani diplomat and former ambassador to the United States and Sri Lanka

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

‘My advice to Pakistan: Stop inventing history’

HUSAIN HAQQANI WAS Pakistan’s ambassador to the US from 2008 to 2011, when he was ousted from his position by the country’s powerful military and intelligence establishment. A leading public intellectual of his country, he is a powerful voice for sanity in a nuclear-armed South Asia. Haqqani has written several notable books, including *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (2005), which explores Pakistan’s dalliance with Islamist groups, something that has haunted his country for long. In *Reimagining Pakistan: Transforming a Dysfunctional Nuclear State* (Harper Collins, 2018), his latest

Photograph by **ROHIT CHAWLA**

book, he retraces the missteps of India's restive neighbour and tells a story of what went wrong in his homeland. In an interview with *Open*, he answers questions about Pakistani's folly in trying to wrest Kashmir from India, the possibilities and limitations of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the measures that India ought to take for sustainable peace in South Asia.

In three months, Pakistan has a general election. On the eve of these polls, what's your assessment of the health of democracy there?
I think democracy in Pakistan has not recovered from the multiple shocks it has been given over the years. Right now, basically it is on life support. We will go through the motions of democracy. But unless and until Pakistan's military establishment lets the civilians make the choices.... First of all, let them present the choices to the people on a whole range of issues—not just distribution of patronage at the local level but the overall vision for the country—and then let them execute it once they are elected. Unless that happens, I don't think Pakistani democracy will move forward.

In your book you have pre-dated Pakistan's problems by almost a decade from 1958 when the first coup took place—to perhaps even before 1947. Historians tend to date those problems to 1958, but you differ. Why is that?
My argument is that the terms of Partition which gave Pakistan 19 per cent of British India's population, 17 per cent of its revenue resources and 33 per cent of the army set the stage for what happened later. It is time to start understanding how the lack of preparation for a new country by the Muslim League led to the circumstances that made the Pakistani army the central institution of the country. In my book, I have detailed through declassified papers and documents how Muslim League leaders as well as some British officials were only thinking about Pakistan being the home of a very large section of the British Indian army. Pakistan inherited the Northern Command of that army, but it did not inherit a functioning capital city—like Delhi was for India—and it did not inherit a functioning civil service because very few of the Indian Civil Service officers were Muslim and were willing to serve in Pakistan. This is why Pakistan ended up having British officers for almost a decade after Independence, both in the military and the civil service. So it is important to try and understand where the seed lies for the sapling that started growing in 1958.

To address more contemporary concerns, how would understanding those foundational problems—or the seed of the problem, as you say—help in the present time?
It will help us understand that the circumstances of 1947 created an environment which resulted in policy choices and decisions that have brought Pakistan where it is today. And if we are going to undo those choices, it is important to understand how this started. So in 1947, you only have a military and your biggest concern is to pay for that military. That makes you join international alliances and [America was] the choice. Unlike other countries that raise a military to fight a threat, you already have a military, so therefore you have to raise the threat proportionate to the size of the military. If we understand that these were circumstances that were peculiar to Pakistan's birth, then we can actually think about undoing them. We can then think of Pakistan as a territorial state as opposed to being an ideological state. Now there are many countries in the world that came about because of historical circumstances that did not make them nation-states in the classical sense of the word. I give the example of Belgium in my book. Belgium now thinks of itself as a nation-state and not as the sole possessor of French or Dutch culture. It is a territorial state that plays a very important role in Europe. Where Pakistan is today is where Belgium was in the year 1900. Think about it: If Belgians had made the policy choices that Pakistanis have made, of just going ahead and building military capability, pursuing a constant state of competition with a much larger neighbour, insisting on reinventing history to say that this country was made because of inherent incompatibility with the majority community of our neighbour, then Belgium would not be the land of peace that it is today. What I am saying to Pakistanis is, 'Understand the circumstances of your origin, stop inventing history, stop trying to describe yourself as an ideological state and be content with the fact that you have a country. Now make it work.'

For 70 years, religion has continually been injected into Pakistan's public life. How would you rate its chances of becoming a 'normal' state in, say, a decade or two?
Pakistan has no choice but to become a normal state at some point. Does it turn into one as a result of some aggravated circumstances? Or does it do by choice? That is the real question. What I am proposing is that if debate in Pakistan opens up and at least some people who make arguments—such as the kind I am making—are allowed to speak up, we may actually have some potential for people to say that 'Maybe this is a choice we can make or should make.' Japan before World War II ended up becoming a highly militarist state. That state ended up collapsing at the end of the War and had no intention of reforming itself even after defeats in South-East Asia. The Japanese would not have surrendered if the Americans had not used nuclear weapons. Does Pakistan want to be a state that takes its extremist ideology to a point where others 'solve' the 'Pakistan Problem'? Or does Pakistan want to say, 'No, we are not a problem, we are a nation and we can make a choice'? Henry Kissinger had once remarked that Iran has to make the choice whether it is a country or a cause. If it's a country, then its interests can be accommodated by the rest of the world. But if it is a cause, then causes have no choice but to either win or be vanquished. Pakistan also has to make a choice. It should see itself as a country—and that's what I am recommending—and not

see itself as a cause with an unending agenda. As a country, Pakistan's interests can definitely be accommodated by Afghanistan, by India, by the US and by the rest of the world. But if it is a cause and says 'We have to have all of this because we believe this is what we are entitled to', then there is no room for compromise and negotiation. And that is not a very good scenario, going forward.

Pakistan imagines itself as a national security state. But such states cannot exist in a vacuum without strong economic foundations. Has Pakistan's 'establishment' thought about this problem?

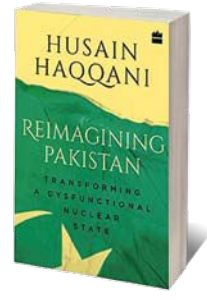
In economic terms, 200 million Pakistanis account for less productivity than a handful of million people in Singapore, to give an example. That is a cause for concern. Pakistan is the sixth-largest country in the world by population and it has the sixth-largest army in the world, but it is the 26th largest economy in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms. It is ranked 42nd in terms of nominal GDP. That is not a healthy picture. Pakistan's military-intelligence complex sees the economic picture only in terms of managing the economy because they are not willing to look beyond their ideological paradigm. I believe Pakistan can be a very prosperous and successful country. Pakistanis have all the tools to be able to accomplish that, but Pakistan has to invest in its people. Education and healthcare have to receive higher priority. Human capital development has to improve. Economic circumstances have to become different from what they have been. There has to be an end to this business of anti-corruption purges every few years that destroys the existing business atmosphere. There has to be an end to national security related decisions undermining economic choices. To give one famous example, a contract for copper and gold mines in Balochistan was cancelled because of so-called national security considerations and all it resulted in was a huge fine for Pakistan from an international court as well as huge losses, as the mines are not being exploited. All of that has to end. Do Pakistan's military and intelligence leaders understand that? I am not so sure. The reason being economics is not something that is taught in the military academy.

Do you think the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is going to take Pakistan's economy in a more positive direction?

I have argued Chinese investment is no panacea for Pakistan. The reason is very simple: At the end of the day, Pakistan has to have the fundamentals of its economy correct, and the building of infrastructure, which is what China is doing through high-interest loans, is not necessarily a recipe for making Pakistan productive. Infrastructure is useful if you already have economic activity. An airport is good if you have lots of flights landing. A port is good when you have many ships coming. Railroads and highways are useful if there is traffic for moving goods. If Pakistan is only going to be used as a dumping ground for cheap Chinese products, I don't think its economy will necessarily take off. And Pakistan certainly does not need a huge debt burden. Can Pakistan make use of CPEC positively? Absolutely, but for that Pakistan will have to make certain economic choices as well and even more fundamental choices about improving its human development, which it has not done so far.

The scale of China's investment in CPEC is qualitatively different from that in any other project—say, in a port or a railroad. Is Pakistan's government aware of the dangers that accompany such heavy debts and their political consequences later?

People have debated this in Pakistan, which is very positive. There has been a debate on the potential for a debt burden and many have said we do not want to end up as a Chinese colony. But at the same time I think the need for something to 'feel good' has been so strong that Pakistan's decision-makers would rather have some activity than no activity for fear of huge debt. It is a kind of attitude that says, 'We'll deal with the debt problem later, let's have the building done now.' That said, CPEC can be transformative if Pakistan's economy as a whole is re-oriented. The real fear here is that Pakistan ends up with the debt, with the infrastructure, but with no connectivity which is productive. If it is all about a North-to-South connection and no East-to-West connectivity, then Pakistan will not necessarily be able to take economic advantage. CPEC will become much more useful if it comes with East-West connectivity as well and Pakistan gets connected to India, Afghanistan and subsequently to Central Asia and Iran as well. Is anybody thinking about it? I don't think so. Investment decisions should always be based on sound economic calculations. When you turn them into strategic decisions, you do not get the returns that an investment should bring. The strategic gains are also very short-lived. The port of Gwadar will eventually have to have ships come on call. Why would that happen unless



"Pakistan has no choice but to become a normal state at some point. Does it turn into one as a result of some aggravated circumstances? Or does it do by choice?"

there is a lot of import or export activity? The way it can all work is if Gwadar and the two ports near Karachi, Karachi and Port Kasim, become not only ports for Pakistan but also for neighbours. India already has a high growth rate, needs more stuff coming in and going out. If western India can start using Pakistani ports and the railway network, they become productive. But that is something that has not been spoken of so far. The mantra in Pakistan is 'We first need to resolve Kashmir before we will even consider trading with India.' That limits Pakistan's options of doing business.

> "Kashmir has become a cause instead of a policy. All policies have a cost-benefit ratio and have an end date. Seventy years of pursuing Kashmir, and we are still where we were in 1948"

Is Kashmir now subject to some kind of 'sunk cost fallacy' in Pakistan? That having invested so much political capital in it, you cannot withdraw from the present course of action?

Kashmir has become a cause instead of being a policy. All policies have a cost-benefit ratio and have an end date. You realise that we will do such and such thing up to this point, and if it does not work, then we end it. Seventy years of pursuing Kashmir and we are still where we were in 1948. Let's be honest: what is today the Line of Control is the Ceasefire Line of 1948. Nothing has changed. Several times there have been some adjustments in territorial control during a war, and then, as part of the settlement after the war, they have always gone back to where things were before. Now that doesn't mean there's no need for India to solve its problems with its people in Jammu & Kashmir. That doesn't mean that human rights violations do not take place in J&K, something that needs to be dealt with. It also does not mean that Pakistanis don't have a tremendous sense of grievance over not getting Kashmir when they should have because it was a contiguous Muslim-majority territory. But the pragmatic conclusion should be that maybe this is one of those claims that we cannot immediately pursue or successfully gain. China believes that Taiwan is an integral part of its territory, but it knows it cannot get Taiwan through military means and that trying to get Taiwan will provoke the US. So China has realised that the status quo is the best course. It has not given up its claim nor has it pursued it. Why can't Pakistan have a pragmatic approach like that? And just start normalising relations with India and maybe normal relations with India will someday result in a resolution of the Kashmir dispute as well. Insisting on resolving the dispute first and continuing to invest in solving the dispute one way or another is undermining Pakistan's potential in so many other areas. That is something Pakistan's leaders need to think about. Ironically, I think of a quote of Chinese President Jiang Zemin when he came to Pakistan and said to parliament that when a dispute cannot be solved it is best to set it aside and move forward on other issues. What was he talking about? He was definitely talking about Kashmir. But such is the myopia in Islamabad and Rawalpindi that nobody paid attention to his remarks.

Last year, you issued a report along with Lisa Curtis, then a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, that recommended strong steps in dealing with Pakistan on the issue of terrorism. For a country that is so prickly to any criticism, can such an approach work?

Being thin-skinned about criticism or being unwilling to look at policy options is never good for countries. A nation must be prepared to look at a range of policy options. That is how good decisions are made. Pakistan has not been served well by denying space to contradictory policy recommendations. The report you talk about was not written for Pakistan. It was written for American policymakers. And very frankly, I think elements of it are being implemented by the Donald Trump administration. So whether Pakistan likes it or not and whether Pakistan accepts it or not, America will do what it will do. To the extent that American support has been useful for Pakistan in maintaining what I consider to be wrongful policies, it will be a good thing that America will now stop supporting those policies. Will that necessarily change the Pakistani calculus? Perhaps not in the short-term, but eventually Pakistan has to come to terms with the fact that it is part of the world. Pakistan has lot of discussion about Kashmir, but it does not have the international support that it had in 1957 that it can even bring a resolution on Kashmir at the United Nations today. Pakistan's own media may never acknowledge that. If I say that, I may come under a lot of criticism and abuse, but it does remain a reality. The same is the case with all other harsh, tough, policy measures that other countries will bring or are considering in relation to Pakistan. Those policies will affect Pakistan whether it allows people like me to debate it within the country or not.

What can New Delhi do to change the way Pakistan deals with India? Are there realistic choices here for Indian policymakers?

I think Indians should, and will, pursue policies that are in their national interest. One thing they must understand is that talking about the breakup of Pakistan or the undoing of Pakistan is no longer in India's interest. It is in India's interest to have a stable, democratic and federal Pakistan that is at peace with itself and its neighbours. To encourage that, perhaps the best course for Indians is to make it clear that no grievance or anger is towards the people of Pakistan. In a way, this requires diminishing the capacity of Pakistan's establishment to keep its people in a permanent state of anger towards India. ■

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Photograph by ROHIT CHAWLA

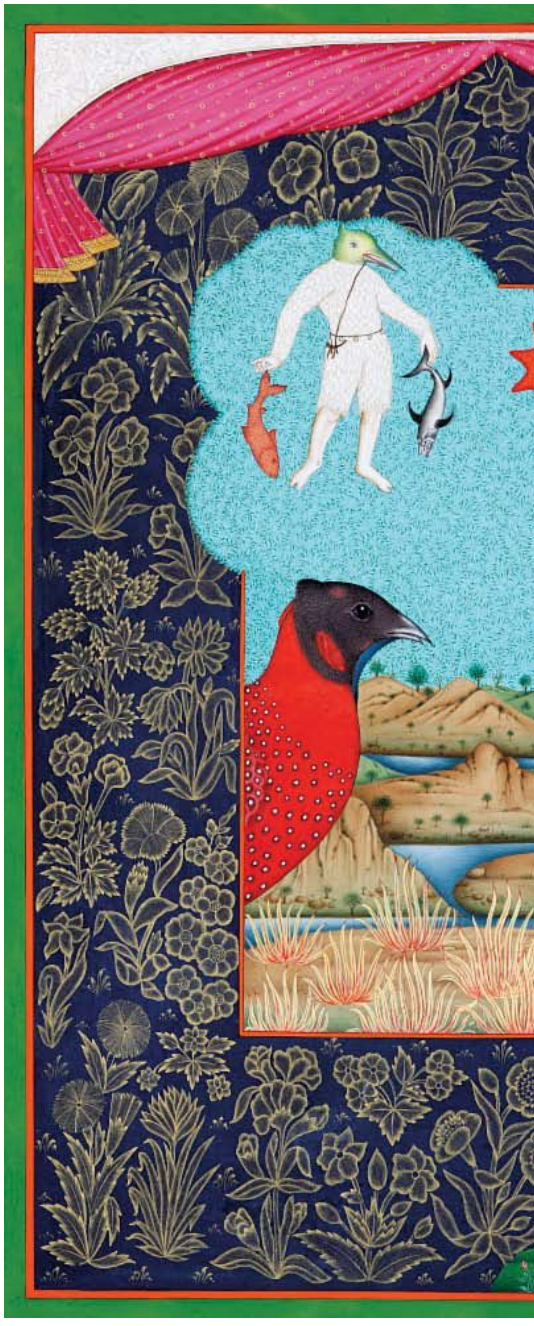
BETWEEN MATTER AND MEMORY

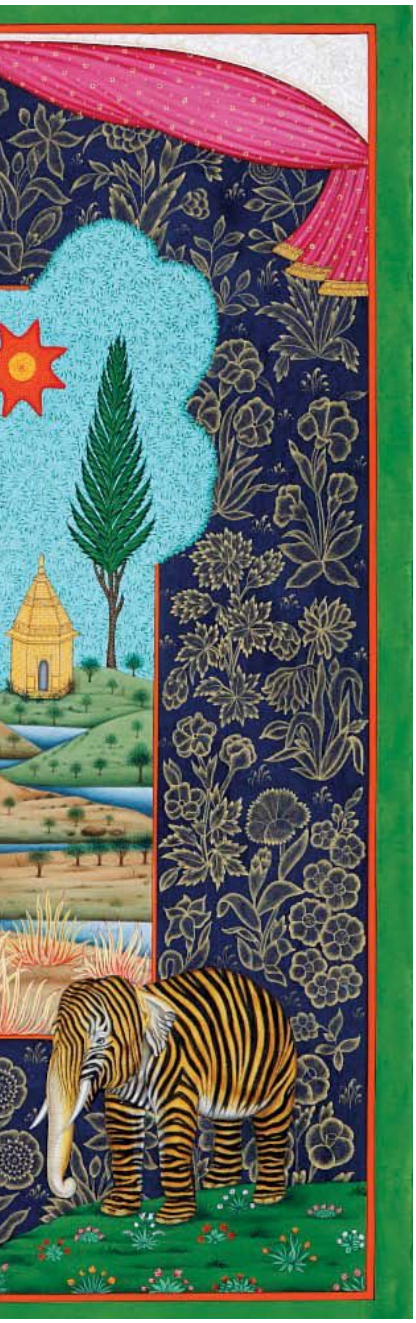
It is his humanist engagement with politics that sets Vivan Sundaram apart 52

Border Lines

A miniature exploration of the Subcontinent

By Ritika Kochhar





Silent Plea by Saira Wasim; *A Forgotten Place* by Alexander Gorlizki

A BEAUTIFUL MOTHER MARY with a baby boy and a flying angel form the centre of *Silent Plea*, one of US-based Pakistani artist Saira Wasim's three artworks at an exhibition in Delhi titled *Hashiya: The Margin*. Mary also balances a weighing scale in her arms. A malnourished baby lying on one side of the scales is far lighter than the gun lying in the other. The gun is pointed straight at the child. Even as you draw back in horror, you notice that the exquisite pink floral margin around the serene Madonna is filled with guns, grenades and caricatures of the American president. One of the caricatures shows him with a television screen in place of a heart. On the other side, he looks like a cherub holding a bow and arrow.

Once you start thinking about the term *Hashiya*, a Persian word that is most commonly used to describe a 'margin', it is difficult not to notice them all around you. In textiles; paintings; books; on the roads as footpaths or dividers; in geography; and even in political and economic inequalities—it's as if the margins are what define the mean. The art historian BN Goswamy mentions in the catalogue for the exhibition that the author Saadat Hasan Manto wrote a series of stomach wrenching short stories called *Siyah Hashiye*, or 'Dark Comments'. The title plays on the black border that outlines obituaries in newspapers, and each story is a snippet of scenes visited and dialogues heard after Partition in Punjab.

"It's a frame that conditions us to see something in a particular way," says Professor Kavita Singh from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), who conceptualised the show. "It is a space of adornment, in which the artist embellishes and pays homage to the things that lie at the centre. It is a space of commentary, where one artist comments upon, extends, deepens or subverts the work of another. It can also be a space where a contemporary artist reframes and re-presents an already-created work from the past. It is the space in the margin, where a hesitant voice can whisper its own stories about the 'main' image in the centre."

While her voice is anything but hesitant, Wasim has used precisely this idea of a *hashiya* to create devastating political satire and commentary. But then, Wasim—along with another Pakistani artist in the exhibition, Nusra Latif Qureshi—has been described by art critics as a leading contemporary miniature artist to emerge from the National College of Arts, Lahore. The show also features other contemporary masters of miniature art like Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, V Ramesh, Desmond Lazaro, Alexander Gorlizki, Manisha Gera Baswani and Yasir Waqas.

Nusra Latif Qureshi, who now lives in Melbourne, has taken the dazzling gold on inky blue borders that decorated the *hashiyas* of the Persian and Indian *muraqqas* or albums, especially the Gulshan album, and made them the centrepiece of her works.

Muraqqas were created to place together pieces of calligraphic texts and loose-leaf paintings that the Mughal emperors had collected over the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. While the individual artworks enclosed within the album were precious, there was great skill and artistry needed in assembling the albums so that paintings on facing pages offered meaningful juxtapositions and calligraphic panels spoke to one another. The task was given to artists or litterateurs, who gave careful thought to the work at hand. The artists who were set the task of assembling the albums (which involved the careful cutting, pasting and repairing of older works) began to see the *hashiya* as their own field of play and started embellishing them in many ways. They started by filling it with scrollwork, flowers and arabesques. But soon, they became aware of the narrative possibilities of the *hashiya*, where margins could 'speak' to each other across the turn of the page. Thus, as little birds fluttered across the patterned margins, the reader might see a bird pursue a butterfly on one page, only to catch it in the next.

The legendary Gulshan album was begun for Jahangir but probably completed in the reign of Shah Jahan, and can be called a king among *muraqqas*. This exquisite album, which was carried away by Nadir Shah in the 18th century, seems to be a collection of family heirlooms, including letters by Humayun, paintings by Bihzad (a famous Persian painter), and calligraphic works by famous calligraphers from Timurid times. The margins were beauti-

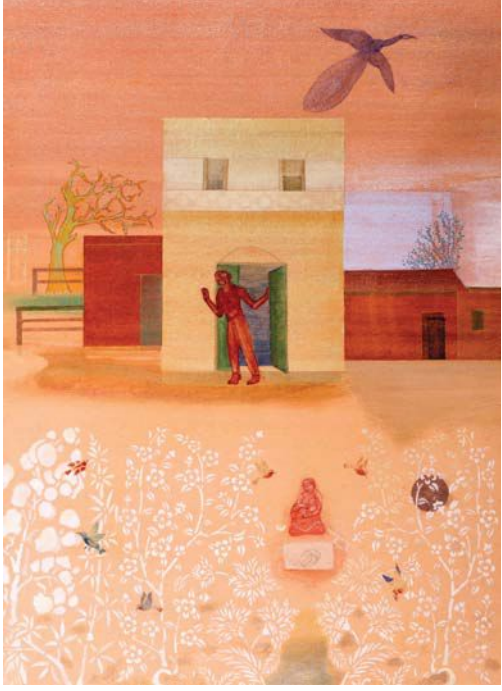
fully decorated with elaborate works in shades of gold, making the book even more precious while ensuring that the margins didn't overshadow the bright colours of the paintings or the bold strokes of the calligraphies that they framed. In the Gulshan album, the borders that framed pages with illustrations in the centre tended to have only gold-pen paintings of flowers, arabesques or other conventional motifs in the border. On pages with calligraphy, on the other hand, the *hashiya* often has drawings of human figures overlaid on the drawings of gold. These assumed particular significance when they were used to enhance and alter the meaning of the text at the heart of the page.

QURESHI HAS FOCUSED on gold *hashiyas* from paintings like *In the Presence of Ascetics*, a page from the Gulshan album that is in The Golestan Palace Library and Archive in Tehran. In her three works, *Laud the Three Metamorphoses*, inspired by Nietzsche's writings, she's taken the dazzling images of dragons fighting *simurghs* (mythical birds) that were used in the Gulshan album to metaphorically comment on a battle of wits between men of letters. Her use of *muraqqas* can in itself be an allusion to a dialogue across centuries, and re-creating the creatures that were originally on the margins creates another dialogue between the past that is filled with legends and the ordinariness of the present. It can even be seen as a statement on the lack of great intellectuals today.

Gulammohammed Sheikh has taken a painting from the Shah Jahan album (1650-58, Collection: Chester Beatty Library) called *Majnu in the Wilderness*. The original painting shows an emaciated Majnun who, driven to madness by his separation from Layla, is being counselled by a friend. In the border however, the artist shows us something Majnun cannot see: Layla, seated upon her camel is riding towards Majnun. The artist turns the border into a theatrical space, where another scene unfolds, invisible to the protagonists but visible to the audience.

Sheikh has inverted the picture in a way. His Majnun is a barely discernible figure on the outer margins, surrounded by animals as skeletal as him. There's a brief burst of wilderness, but the centre is an urban landscape of skyscrapers with no soul in sight. Goswamy quotes Ghalib to describe this painting—'*Bastiyaan jitni bhi theen saari keh veeraan ho gayeen*' (and nothing moves while buildings keep growing taller, and city lanes seem to lead nowhere in particular)—and asks whether we've reconciled to the idea of intellectuals and lovers being left to live forever in the desert while people themselves turn into barely tolerated margins.

Nilima Sheikh has been exploring *hashiyas* for a while, as well as issues like Kashmir and Partition, and it's tempting to read her works in the light of these and other migrations. Given their colours and themes, her two exquisite works can be read together. In *Departure*, there are three parts but no discernible *hashiyas*. A peacock flies away from the roof of a house and a man stands just outside the doorway, peering anxiously around, as if searching for someone. A faintly drawn woman sits nursing her baby in the bottom part of the painting; a bowl and a hand-fan by her side. She's surrounded by stencilled designs of flowering bushes and birds. A similar air of enigma clings to her other work, *Dream at Daybreak 2*. Here the stencilled bushes have grown and flowered and occupy the top of the painting. Below them is a courtyard with two figures sleeping under mosquito nets. A woman, perhaps the same mother we saw before, watches over them. But outside the house, a man crawls away. "For me, the subject was an extension of my work. I've used the concept of *hashiyas* conceptually. They are not binding. They aren't borders. And I've used the stencils to add another dimension. The scale of the figures adds another sub-text. I've played with the idea of what is literal and what is remembered," Sheikh says. "The old man coming out of the house, a young woman—this talks about another past. In that sense, it becomes another register. But an aspect of the painting has to be left to the viewer. If you say everything, what is left? In that way, you can compare it to poetry rather than text. You don't have to spell everything out clearly." But the sense of loneliness permeates both paintings.



(L-R) *Departure* by Nilima Sheikh; *Majnun in the Margin* by Gulammohammed Sheikh; *Classroom I* by Desmond Lazaro

The young award-winning Pakistani artist Ghulam Mohammad continues to create delicate collages of hundreds of individually cut out Urdu alphabet letters that he pastes upon hand-crafted *wasli* paper. The collages resemble dense miniature carpets created by beautiful calligraphic script that seem to spread from the centre and take over the borders. Manisha Gera Baswani's *Dusk on a Crimson Horizon* and *Desert Meets a River* have the delicacy of Chinese and Persian watercolours and V Ramesh brings the Sage Ramakrishna to the centre of one of his pieces, *The Ordinariness of Any Act: The Portrait of a Sage*. Amidst a busy border of text and trees that almost takes over the painting, the old sage sits quietly in a loincloth, reading a newspaper. "Ramakrishna was already known

as a spiritual soul, even an incarnation of Vishnu during his lifetime," explains Ramesh. "I wanted to show how, even in the middle of all the pressure, he gave even the smallest and most mundane tasks his entire attention."

Desmond Lazaro has also moved away from the traditional concept of borders to play with the concept of the Dymaxion Map, introduced by Buckminster Fuller in 1943. It is 'a flat map of the entire surface of the Earth which reveals our planet as one island in one ocean, without any visually obvious distortion of the relative shapes and sizes of the land areas, and without splitting any continents'. Lazaro's works also talk about global mapping and global routes, especially the 15th century mapping of the world by Gerardus Mercator whose map on a flat piece of paper allowed him to mimic the world's curvature. He felt the need to come up with this because the maps we still use cause humanity to "appear inherently disassociated, remote, self-interestedly preoccupied with political concepts" and to emphasise that borders separate, cut things and people apart from one another. Lazaro says, "Fuller often said, 'In space (a vacuum) there is no north, south, east and west'. When Europe has lost its position as the true north, North then appears in multiple directions. How do we look at migration today when there is no north, and the compass has shifted?"

Two of his paintings, *Classroom 1 & 2*, reveal his classroom at the age of six-seven, when the children are first shown images of the great explorers who they are told created the world as it exists today, and later at around the age of 14, when students start questioning what we mean by borders, margins and migration. There are also images from his sketchbook which show his preliminary work leading up to the paintings. "Most of my work takes place in the sketchbook. I wanted to show the place that I come back to because that's where I feel the safest," he says.

EQUALLY CHALLENGING are Yasir Waqas' works, *If that is what you mean, I am certainly without possessions* and *Will you take me across*. He interlaces pages of two dictionaries, one of Persian/Urdu and the other of Sanskrit/Hindi. Over these pages, he juxtaposes those words in the Persian dictionary that begin with the letter 'a', or 'alif', and those from Sanskrit that begin with 'a', the first vowel in the ancient language. Superimposed over this is a colourful graph in yellow and green. A bird appears on top of this with an aeronautical instrument at the centre. There are so many levels that it's difficult to pull apart.

"I've used the concept of *hashiyas* conceptually. They are not binding. I've used the stencils to add another dimension. I've played with the idea of what is literal and what is remembered"

NILIMA SHEIKH artist

"I've used these dictionaries to represent the languages respectively," says Waqas, "To someone alien to both these languages, they may seem almost identical. But when a distinction is made and both are identified as separate entities, it may be noted that both share more commonality than differences. Through this merger of these two languages, I show that the margin in this case occupies more space than the area it's supposed to divide. The area along with the margin shares more in common than the differences." *Will You Take me Across* is basically a desire to see what lies across the margin, to know the alien perspective and see how things look from the other side. The borders are where they have always been, in the minds of people. "In my work the borders have been included figuratively, representing those notions which bar one from looking at things from another perspective," says Waqas. ■

Hashiya: The Margin, *presented by Anant Art Gallery, is on view at Bikaner House, Delhi, till April 24th*

In my paintings, all my figures are static. In 80 per cent of cases, they are previously photographed,

Photograph by ROHIT CHAWLA

else posed" VIVAN SUNDARAM artist

Between Matter and Memory

It is his humanist engagement with politics that sets Vivan Sundaram apart

By Rosalyn D'Mello

MINIATURE terracotta figurines idle by the wayside. I am tempted, but do not dare touch them. As I await Vivan Sundaram's arrival, his artist-assistants, Arun and M Pravat, keep me company. They are responsible for producing this sculptural queue lining the entrance of Sundaram's massive, warehouse-like studio in Aya Nagar on the border between Delhi and Gurugram. It is half past noon, but the April sun is still forgiving.

Intriguingly, each sculptural unit seems compelled to wait too, which is ironic, since the premise behind their production was to interpret the urgency of movement through the gesture of repetition. They are perhaps best described as 'hybrid beings', the result of a compositional mutation or mutilation, depending on where you stand on the purist spectrum. Their sources are two-fold, though the progenitor is the same—Ramkinkar Baij's *Santhal Family* (1938) and *Mill Call* (1956). *Santhal Family* is considered the first instance of public Modernist sculpture in India. A life-size ensemble of a Santhal mother, father, and child, with their dog, is cemented in a moment of transit, as they carry their belongings in an act of relocation; an image that resonates only too familiarly all these decades later. *Mill Call*, too, is based on animation, friezing, as it does, a Santhal family rushing to work, the title suggestive of them having suddenly heard a siren announcing it's time to be at the factory.

Pravat informs me this freshly baked sculpture is being re-created for Haus der Kunst, a contemporary art space in Munich, later this year, where Sundaram's retrospective, *Step inside and you are no longer a stranger*—currently showing at Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA)—will open. One edition of these miniatures is on display just as you enter the retrospective at KNMA, past his other two more large-scaled tributes to Baij. Titled *409 Ramkinkars*, the genesis of the sculptural assembly is the eponymously titled performance-cum-art piece staged in 2015, in Delhi, Sundaram's collaboration with theatre veterans Anuradha Kapur and Shantanu Bose.

"The idea was that we created sets in relation to the theme, and the actors came in and performed in each of them simultaneously in

12 spaces," Sundaram tells me after we've entered the massive, high-ceiling, quasi-factory like warehouse upon whose floor sits the remainder of the still-evolving congregation of miniature Ramkinkars.The goal was to interpret Baij's work "very" freely. "As you can see, his is 10-feet high; this is on average one foot so we reduced the scale and changed the material. That is cement; this is terracotta with a wooden base. That is singular, monumental and epic; this is a collective, or multitude coming together, and both *Santhal Family* and *Mill Call* are now moving together."

HIS INTEREST IN working across mediums and disciplines makes it possible to have a space such as this, and also "to have good professional people who know how to help me". *Step Inside...* makes abundantly clear the 75-year-old artist's unabashed faith in the spirit of collaboration as well as his maverick relationship with material, both of which have fundamentally shaped his art-making practice. The existence of this particular studio since 1999 has been pivotal to the realisation of some of the more ambitiously scaled works in *Step inside...* including *Tracking* and *Trash.* It is also a storehouse for certain significant works that seem to have been mindfully excluded from the 50-year spanning retrospective curated by Roobina Karode, such as *Stone Column Enclosing the Gaze* (1992) and *Memorial* (1993), alongside excerpts from newer series, notably, wearable sculptures from *Gagawaka: Making Strange* (2011) and *Postmortem* (2013).

"Artists now have big studios, but this was a fairly early big studio," says Sundaram, who cheekily acknowledges finding out about the site through the "superstar" artist, Bharti Kher. "When I came back from the Shanghai Biennale [in 2004], I remembered a conversation with this Japanese artist. He was describing how Chinese artists and even the art schools have studios for photographers as big as my studio. They make huge sets, like a tableau, and they have people posing in them," Sundaram recounts. "In my entry into photography, I thought of making a set to take the photograph. The installation would be one part, but the main intention would be to think of it in photographic terms. In Early Renaissance paintings, the painter used to go on a hill to capture depth of field. I took that view. The other was the top angle view, or the planned view, where everything gets flattened out. I would make designs and patterns which would appear in the photograph as clearly as what was here, and digitally enhance it." Sundaram is referring to his iconic 14-panel work, *Masterplan*, each panel measuring 91.4 x 91.4 cm, which was part of his 2005 solo, *Living it. out. in. delhi.* The photographs reveal an aerial view of a miniature-scale city composed entirely out of trash, a commentary on the mindlessly consumptive, consumerist nature of the capitalist ideology that engenders the time we live in.

Even though the studio has been responsible for many significant large-scale works, Sundaram also acknowledges his previous and present engagement with various forms of labour outside its environs, from welders to marble inlayers to technicians to rag pickers. His series *House/Boat* (1994), also on display at KNMA, encompassing sculptures in paper, steel, glass and video, reflecting on issues of migration and nationalism in the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992, was facilitated in large part by a "crazy welder" named Vishwakarma who was based in Paharganj, Delhi. Sundaram says, "What you need, you go to different places to source, you find different skills, or the skills come to you, or your studio goes there to make the object."

This resourceful temperament has been Sundaram's definitive strategy. The ensuing interactions, which he admits relies on one's ability to surrender to the creative intelligences of his collaborators, have shaped the outcomes of his artworks.

Though his most famous collaboration dates back to 1989—while creating a glass mural for Shah House, Bombay, he'd invited his contemporaries Nalini Malani and Bhupen Khakar as co-creators—he had been actively fostering the spirit of co-authorship and residency-based work since 1976, when he established the Kasauli Art Centre in his hometown of Shimla. It held some the earliest contemporary art camps, international artist residency programmes, seminars, and workshops that encouraged a cross-disciplinary exchange between artists. "At Kasauli, quite a few paintings that I made were begun by others," says Sundaram. "Bhupen [Khakar] was around, so I would say, 'The canvas is there, why don't you make a figure', and then I'd say, 'You leave it. I'll finish it.' Or Nalini [Malini] would, or Nilima [Sheikh]. And it remains more or less as it is with some overlaps. The idea of an inclusive intervention by different creative and skilled hands has always informed the practice."

The engagements he enabled at Kasauli had a lasting impact on Sundaram's own artistic trajectory, allowing him to move away from painting at the time when the medium still constituted the crux of the art market. His access to sculptors like Nagji Patel and Krishnakumar, combined with his exposure to early installation art as a student of Slade School of Fine Art, London, back in the 1960s, where he was mentored by RB Kitaj, following his years at Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda, made him consider more seriously alternative mediums of artmaking focusing on the found object.

What did it really imply, I ask him, this movement 'away' from painting? Was he seduced by the idea of representing a kind of spatial movement that painting didn't necessarily allow? "In my paintings, all my figures are static. In 80 per cent of cases, they are previously photographed, else posed," Sundaram confesses. "If I can add a reference to Ramkinkar Baij, *Santhal Family* was done in 1938, Amrita Sher-Gil's *Villagers Going to Market* was also done in 1937, and he makes a jibe at her, saying hers are all like wooden figures, there's no movement in them. That's not incorrect, because she's posing all the figures. Even using a title like 'Going to Market' when there's a most minimal sense of movement. It's like the early Renaissance paintings, they're almost wooden-like, just a gesture of movement, it's not like when you get into High Renaissance where they're not only moving, they're flying. For me, also, I was always very diffident in drawing," he explains, suggesting that when he compared himself to his two good friends and fellow collaborators, Nalini

An untitled painting by Sundaram

> In Early Renaissance paintings, the painter used to go on a hill to capture depth of field. I took that view. The other was the top angle view, or the planned view, where everything gets flattened out"
>
> VIVAN SUNDARAM

Malani and Bhupen Khakar, he fell short as a painter.

Sundaram had an epiphany then, that he was good at structure, and he sought the fluidity that oil on canvas couldn't afford. The minute he moved into non-painting, using charcoal or soft pastels, he felt his work became much freer. His works made with these mediums are characterised by the same irreverence, sense of play and intensity that marked his Khajuraho doodles exhibited in 1966, when he was in his early twenties, which are a treat to behold at the ongoing retrospective.

Eventually, context began to define Sundaram's choice of material.

"By the end of the 80s, in a very, almost informally, unproblematic way, when we [Bhupen Khakar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jogen Chowdhury, Nalini Malani, Sudhir Patwardhan] proposed *Place for People* that went on for a whole decade, it was very strongly about the human figure and the context was painting and sculpture to some extent. So I felt restless. Even in this decade, I paint slowly, I didn't do a huge number of paintings, and the few I did are on display at KNMA," he says.

"But, when I go into another context, I go to visit my sister in Hamburg, it's very sunny, and Geeta [Kapur, his partner] has introduced me to soft pastels, and the sea is there, so a series begins about the sea. So, something about *Place for People* is context; it is local, it is 'national' or 'Indian'. I felt I needed to not be national or local or Indian. And soft pastel is really a delight. It isn't sticky like oil pastel. It is pure pigment."

People often ask him whether he gets the idea first and then decides on the medium. How did engine oil come into his hand, I ask. "The Gulf War," he says, but the back story relates to a previous series in charcoal, called *The Long Night*, after a trip to Auschwitz. "[NN] Rimzon always used to tease me, 'Vivan, you're always looking for disasters. You have to find it in your soul and your spiritual being,' and I said, 'You're Rimzon and I'm Vivan.'"

Sundaram's engine oil works, embedded in the narrative of the Gulf War, are perhaps the retrospective's biggest revelation. They mark a defining point in his trajectory, as the art historian Saloni Mathur writes in her essay *Art and Empire: On Oil, Antiquities and The War in Iraq:* 'For the first time the artist abandoned conventional painting; his pictures began to slide off the walls to inhabit other forms and relationships to the gallery space.' The series, viewed alongside *The Long Night* and *House/Boat*, hints at Sundaram's simultaneous roles as provocateur and activist, revealing also his key role in the founding of the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) as a collective response by writers, painters, photographers, designers, cultural activists and journalists to the murder of theatre activist Safdar Hashmi.

Above all else, across mediums, materials, languages and studio sites, at the heart of Sundaram's practice is his humanist engagement with the politics of memory. Even while 'making strange' through what he terms the process of 'distantiation', his oeuvre is speckled with seemingly quiet, minimalist gestures that are actually attempts at laying something to rest through a visual burial. One such work in *Step Inside...* is steeped in this poetic act of entombment. It is tucked away in an archival section that is an annexe to the massive, ship-like container in which the 2017 sound work, *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946*, recounts the symbolic act of resistance that was the naval 'mutiny' in Bombay that year. A printed photograph taken by Sunil Janah lies within the vitrine, its surface covered with layers of glass. "Rarely do you see 30 bodies just thrown into this hospital, and Janah just jumped up and photographed it," Sundaram says. "I thought, once you take these layers of glass, it acquires a green edge. At least it covers the bodies to give them a decent burial." ■

Vivan Sundaram's Step inside and you are no longer a stranger *is on view at the KNMA, Delhi, till June 30th*

The Caste of Sound

Can Carnatic music be de-Brahminised?

By TM Krishna

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL markers are drafted into every art form's nal structure. In every aspect of art, from learning to performing, they are passed on from generation to generation. Control systems are not external pressures; they are devised into the art and, through stories, images, presentations and performances, internalised by everyone who belongs.

Let me speak from personal experience. I am Brahmin and therefore a lot of what I received in music class, at Carnatic concerts and in conversations was only an extension of what I believed to be 'normal' culture. It was only in retrospect that I identified these as methods of indoctrination. Those who propagate these beliefs are not conniving or manipulating; they are just convinced that this is how it should be.

A Carnatic music class is not a place for musical exchange alone. It is a cultural space, a caste-specific cultural space. From the way students are expected to dress to the pictures that decorate the walls, the environment informs you of what is the norm. Girls almost always had to be dressed in salwar-kameez or what we call pavadai-davani (half-saree) in south India. There was no question of any other attire as far as girls were concerned but teenage boys could, of course, get away with jeans or even shorts. I also know of some (rare) teachers who insist that boys too have to be dressed in dhotis. The pottu (bindi) is an absolute must. If not worn, the girl may be handed one by a friend or the music class would be converted to an 'our culture' class. This is exactly how Hindu boys and girls are expected to dress when they enter temples. Now, all this has very little to do with music but is bundled in as a show of respect for the music. Carnatic music is, in their minds, Hindu—Brahmin—music! The classroom walls will not only have pictures of the great composers, but important Hindu deities too keep watch over us. I have never seen Hindu gods or goddesses such as Mariamman (a non-upper caste goddess) find a place in a Carnatic music classroom.

As we learn compositions, the teachers explain the meaning of the lyrics. Since most of Carnatic music is Hindu in content, we are also learning mythology. But it does not stop there. The composers are deified (avatar purushas), and folktales about their magical deeds are shared. At the end of a few years, we are convinced that they were superhumans who composed through divine benediction. Absolutely everything about them is perfect, morally correct and spiritually elevated. Missteps, if any, were only tests conducted by the divine overseer. A lesson for all of us!

Our teachers are of course only passing on what was handed down to them; nevertheless the impact is immense. Carnatic music becomes a symbol of chastity and purity. There is no room for the baser emotions of passion or sexual desire. Interestingly when we are taught padams or javalis (compositions that are erotic in content), the teacher would not bother to share their meanings! I wonder why.

THE TYAGARAJA ARADHANA, AN ANNUAL FESTIVAL THAT PAYS HOMAGE TO THE COMPOSER TYAGARAJA, IS A CLASSIC EXAMPLE OF HOW CLAUSTROPHOBIC AN ART FORM CAN MAKE ITSELF

This does not stop with the class. Attend a music concert and the stage, the homogeneity of the upper-caste audience, the nature of conversations, the introductions by the impresarios and the appearance of the musicians will make you feel like you are attending a Brahmin congregation. Whenever Carnatic musicians speak about their art, they invariably invoke deities and present themselves as priests or Vedic scholars. A few musicians have gone to the extent of distributing vibhuti to their fellow artists on stage. Musicians will, more often than not, speak of the composer's bhakti and the infallibility of these great souls.

A closer peek at the dais and up on the platform will reveal the entire pantheon of Hindu gods. I do not mean to criticize faith but the undeniable conflation of religion, caste and art comes to light when we pay attention to these habits. It is not just about praying to the gods for a successful concert. This merger on a concert stage makes everyone conflate art and faith, making art entirely dependent on belief.

We refuse to accept the music as just art. In fact, saying such a thing is blasphemous and hence musicians have to create the impression of being moral, pious creatures even if they are not. Or, maybe, like all of us, they compartmentalize their various selves. Even today, women musicians feel the need

Photograph by ROHIT CHAWLA

to de-sexualize themselves and radiate piousness. This is taken as a sign of their seriousness towards the art form. The less skin you reveal, the more divine your music. All this is bulldozed upon them in the name of appropriateness.

The presentation of a Carnatic concert is a representation of Brahminical culture. The modern structure of performance came into being in the early twentieth century and was propagated by vocalist Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Reasons attributed to this restructuring include reduced concert length, shift of concerts to urban proscenium stages and introduction of microphones. But, beyond these external needs, the structure was deeply influenced by the religious and moral values of the upper-caste Brahmin.

It is not just the performance; discussions and lectures on Carnatic music also hover, more often than not, around deities, rituals, Brahmin festivals, tantric practices and the sainthood of the great vaggeyakaras (composers). Listening to a Carnatic concert is not mere exposure to the music; it is a complete Brahmin brainwashing package. The Tyagaraja aradhana—an annual festival that pays homage to the eighteenth-century composer Tyagaraja, held in Thiruvaiyaru,

The author at a concert

and now in every remote town across the globe that has a sizeable Carnatic-interested Brahmin population—is a classic example of how claustrophobic an art form can make itself.

A note of caution to my Hindustani and other 'classical' counterparts in case they begin patting themselves on the back about the openness of their art form. Let me make it clear, *every* art form is opaque and sullied by human social organization. Just dig a little deeper into your-

self, and you will find a similar mess. I cannot elaborate on every art form's inner working here; it is up to people engaged in each to search with earnestness...

This inquiry cannot stop here. All these abstract thoughts have to be connected to what we are and what we do. Otherwise they are, as the critics would say, just emotional ruminations.

Why was the music not enabling many more such experiences? We were enjoying the music and heading home happy but nothing more was happening through the art. As I began probing my engagement with the art, I realized that everything that was built around the art—the scaffolding, paraphernalia, social constructions—were barricades. As a Carnatic singer I had to role-play, act as an interlocutor between my community and its moral, religious and cultural moorings. Every time I rendered kirtanas, expounded ragas or cracked arithmetic patterns, I was holding up my community flag and waving it with gusto. The entire environment participated in this celebration. There is no doubt that the music was beautiful but that it was constricted is also true.

THIS LED ME to a long journey into the archives of Carnatic music, its musicology, practice and social history. I was troubled by the thought that the music might collapse if I were to remove all its social anchors. I was seeking proof of a musical core, the actual components of the form that give life to this art—those elements that make it what it is and will remain irrespective of everything else that it may shed or acquire. I had to also be prepared for the possibility that there is no such truth. In which case, all these experiences would mean nothing.

But I did find something. Carnatic music depends only on three cardinal elements—raga, tala and the text. Art happens when the musicians and the audience remain drenched in the aesthetic charge that emerges from this tripartite correspondence. I know I have simplified what is a far more complex interplay but, in the context of this discussion, this ought to do. I speak of the art I know but every art form has an elemental self. Everything else has been organized to suit the people who assemble, perform and consume the art. In the need to satisfy community needs, aspects of music have been given slipshod treatment. So the glittering paint that covers the art not only reflects ornateness, it also hides the art's sanctum sanctorum. If any artist is willing to shake off all those exteriors, delve into the art, rediscover its marvels and bring back to the fore its aesthetic strengths, then suddenly the art is rejuvenated and its secret vault revealed.

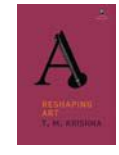
You could ask if this means discarding Tyagaraja or Muttusvami Dikshitar. It is not a question of disposing of the past. There is no denying that there are many aspects on which I am at loggerheads with them. Tyagaraja was an extraordinary composer, yet amidst the musical genius is his Brahminical import. He was a product of his social boundaries and we need to understand that. The problem arises from the fact that his understanding is accepted as the gospel truth by the insiders, requiring everyone to be in agreement with his thinking. The art's protectors believe that other viewpoints do not have a space here and that their very presence is polluting. This is one of the problems even with the spiritual—it can be casteist and doctrinaire!

What I sought was contestation. Can Carnatic music become a platform for social, cultural and political views that put Tyagaraja's thoughts in the dock? If the repertoire of Carnatic music could be expanded to bring in compositions that gave us very different ideas of living—voices from across the social spectrum—instantaneously the conversation would be enlarged. It was not just about newer voices; we also had to retrieve lost voices. The erotic compositions sung by the Devadasis and other Carnatic compositions that were not rooted in bhakti have to be brought back to centre stage and the structure of performance needs to questioned. This churning is still respectful of raga, tala and text but creates discomfort and vulnerability. The homogeneous upper-caste followers of Carnatic music may reject, disregard, criticize these attempts but they will provoke discussion. That is the first step.

There are some who wonder whether an artist has to be loud and open about art's divisiveness. 'Can we not just do this quietly, in the way we make art and not announce it to the world?' Yes! It is distinctly possible, but the danger in this hide-and-seek is that the art world has an instinctive ability to snatch from undeclared countermovements its energy of questioning. Before we know it, the silent artistic protest will be turned into a proclamation of the art's perfectness and the artist will have become a champion of the art's impartiality.

I apologize for this personal foray but any social change begins with personal conflicts and I had to bring to the table my own uncertainty before we looked at the larger picture. ■

IF THE REPERTOIRE OF CARNATIC MUSIC COULD BE EXPANDED TO BRING IN COMPOSITIONS THAT GAVE US VERY DIFFERENT IDEAS OF LIVING VOICES FROM ACROSS THE SOCIAL SPECTRUM, INSTANTANEOUSLY THE CONVERSATION WOULD BE ENLARGED



TM Krishna is a Carnatic singer and cultural critic. This is an edited excerpt from his latest book, Reshaping Art *(Aleph; 128 pages; Rs399)*

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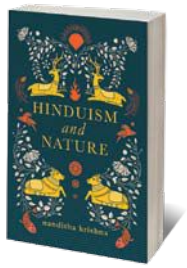


HINDUISM AND NATURE
Nanditha Krishna

Penguin
264 Pages | Rs 250

In a Sacred Grove

In praise of eco-friendly Hinduism

By Shashi Tharoor

'HINDUISM HAS A cosmic, rather than anthropocentric, view of the world,' explains Nanditha Krishna in this concise but comprehensive study of Hinduism and the environment. Hinduism's reverence for nature is not just built into its scriptures, but is encoded, as it were, in its DNA—its understanding of the cosmos and its devotion to the welfare not just of human beings but of all creation: plant, animal, or other.

Krishna, a historian and ecologist who heads Chennai's respected CPR Environmental Education Centre, covers the lot—groves and gardens, waters, plants, animals, nature itself—with reverence that befits a subject sanctified, for her, by divinity. She is a devoted Hindu and a passionate animal rights activist: 'The Divine is all and all life is to be treated with respect,' she affirms, buttressing her environmentalism with extensive quotations from and references to the Vedas.

The result is a detailed and thorough book which will provide plenty of material to anyone interested in textual evidence of Hinduism's respect for nature. Hindus are expected to see the world around us as something of which we are an interdependent part; we are embedded in, indeed part of, nature and individual humans are microcosms of the universe. The five elements—space, air, fire, water and earth—are the foundation of an interconnected web of life. The essence of the earth, the air we breathe, the water we drink, is no different from the tree we chop down, the cow we milk, or the mother we love: all are different manifestations of the same divine spirit or *atman* into which all will ultimately merge. The Hindu (and Buddhist and Jain) idea of *ahimsa* or non-violence applies to all forms of human, animal and plant life; violence against any of these harms the same divine essence of which we ourselves are a part.

Hinduism is therefore arguably more profoundly concerned with the relationship between humans and the environment than any other faith. The scriptures urge people to use the world *unselfishly* and with respect for the rest of creation. Environmental movements like the Chipko Andolan, in which hill-dwelling women hugged trees to prevent them being razed by timber contractors, and cultural practices like vegetarianism reflect a deep-seated respect for life and for the environment that is inbred in most Hindus.

Only Hinduism could have created such a strong belief in cow-worship and opposition to cow slaughter. Only Hindus could worship nature—many Hindus see the Ganga as a goddess, for instance—and see the presence of God in the environment. The Hindu respect for frugality and asceticism, the instinct to recycle and re-use rather than discard, are all born of consciousness that nature should be treated with care.

As Dr Krishna's extensive quotations testify, Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in its scriptures, in particular the Vedas, which reflect a strong practice of nature-worship, but also in the Upanishads, Puranas, and other sacred texts. Many Hindus recite mantras that reflect praise for and concern about the well-being of rivers, mountains, trees, and even animals. Dr Krishna argues that the Hindu belief in dharma includes the responsibility to care for nature, and that our treatment of nature affects our karma in the life beyond.

Hindu traditions envision the earth as a goddess, Devi, a mother deserving of our respect and gratitude daily for her sustenance of us. Many Hindus are brought up to touch the floor before getting out of bed every morning, to beg the goddess' forgiveness for walking upon her. Dr Krishna begins her book with the image of the Hindu housewife cleaning the space outside her doorway to create a *kolam*, a beautiful design made of rice flour—both as an offering to Devi and as an aesthetically pleasing work of art, but also as a practical way of keeping ants out of her home by feeding them outside.

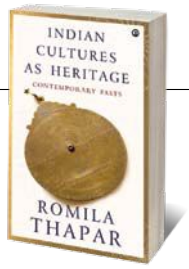
All this is beyond cavil. But if there is a criticism that can be expressed, it is that in her own reverence for Hinduism and for nature, Nanditha Krishna is insufficiently critical. Her account works better in theory than as a depiction of the reality we live in—our squalid streets with their overflowing mounds of garbage, the ubiquitous plastic litter that is a permanent stain on the environment, the sludge and toxic waste that blights our dying rivers, including the divine Ganga, the contrast between spotless Hindu homes and our indifference to dirty public spaces, and the rampant exploitation of the environment, of women and Adivasis (the very indigenous peoples whose right to live amongst nature we trample upon in our urge to achieve 'development'). When she talks about the 'proven antimicrobial properties' of Ganga water, one does not know whether to laugh or to cry: the sacred Ganga is a toxic sewer, bathing in which (downriver) is likely to leave you in need of a scrub.

However, as an environmentalist and environmental educator, she has spent the last 30 years fighting environmental issues in Tamil Nadu, training teachers and educating children about the environment, besides restoring 53 sacred groves. At least she has practised what she preaches.

Nonetheless, this is an important and useful addition to the volumes we have about Hinduism, since it treats a subject that many have for too long taken for granted, and does so with impressive mastery. Thoroughly researched and extensively documented, *Hinduism and Nature* provides more than enough material for scholars of religion to cite in defence of Hinduism as for environmentalists to base their justified condemnations of the actual behaviour of today's Hindus.

'Faith groups can play an important role in the effort to protect nature and the environment,' writes Dr Krishna. 'Hinduism, with its ancient tradition of respecting nature, should re-invoke its rich heritage to ensure that people, animals and all of nature live together in harmony, and recreate the beautiful environment of ancient India.' It's a tall order. But this book offers a good place to start. ■

Shashi Tharoor's most recent book is Why I Am a Hindu



INDIAN CULTURES AS HERITAGE: CONTEMPORARY PASTS
Romila Thapar

Aleph
222 Pages | Rs 599

A Million Multiplicities

The Indian self is a work in progress

By Ranjit Hoskote

AT 86, ROMILA Thapar is one of our most magisterial historians, and each collection of essays that she has published in recent years bears witness both to the depth of her engagement with ancient and medieval India, and the intensity of her preoccupation with our troubled present. The plurals in the title of her latest collection of essays offer a significant and salutary clue to her capacious understanding of 'what happened in history', to invoke Gordon Childe's memorable phrase. As against those who would impose a singular and homogenised culture—often paraded as a shared 'national culture'—Thapar reminds us that India is composed of many cultures, variegated and linked to region, caste, ethnicity, religious tradition, level of technology, shifting norms and customs, and numerous other factors. And as against those who would force us to subscribe to a singular narrative of the past—told from the viewpoint of a contemporary religiosity that is read back onto previous millennia, and used to erase the kaleidoscopic complexity of cultural confluence, migration, syncretic forms of belief, and the vigorously experimental life of the contact zones between cultures—Thapar asserts that we are, in fact, the inheritors of multiple pasts, both the accomplishments and the disquietudes that these pasts have generated.

Our habit of thinking of culture in the singular and attaching it to a society or nation, she points out, is rooted in a patrician and ultimately imperialist form of thinking about 'civilisations' as unitary and unique models of collective living, in which philosophical and material conceptions of value are defined by elite groups and disseminated through the rest of society. Through such a civilisational optic, we view an entire society or nation through the ideology, self-interest, and world-view of its dominant groups, which come to define our understanding of that society or nation. Thus, for instance, the 'American way of life' has often reflected an unexamined White ascendancy that has little space for the perspectives of people of colour; and thus, also, the vision of 'Indian culture' that is currently in the ascendant, which is premised on an upper-caste Hindu world-view and will not accommodate the perceptions and aspirations of Dalits and religious minorities.

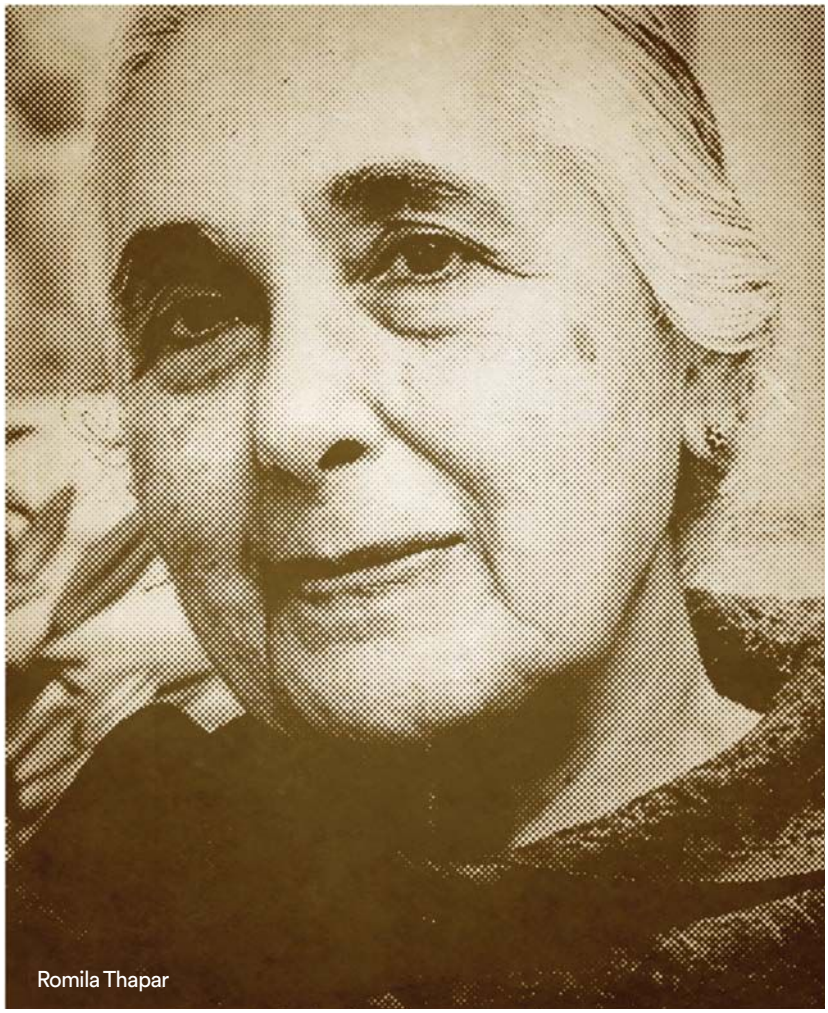
Indeed, if we turn back to the four components on which such a notion of civilisation was based—the homogeneities of 'territory, language, religion and the classical' in Thapar's formulation—all four break down. The further back we look in history, the more we see that frontier zones rather than centres were the leading edge of cultural vibrancy; that the civilisations of the past were polyglot, multi-religious; that the classical is only a name we give to the hybridity we have forgotten. Tradition is what we would like it to be, to legitimise our present choices; the past is shaped by the exigencies of the present.

The seven essays brought together to form *Indian Cultures as Heritage: Contemporary Pasts* engage critically with a range of subjects, including the concepts of time, infinity and tradition in ancient India; the cultural history of science and technology in India; the negotiations of women questors with religious traditions and social sanction; and the origins and mutations of the caste order. The animating and propulsive energy of this volume comes from Thapar's concern with the tension between culture as a pluralising repertoire of diversity, on the one hand, and a singularising contemporary politics of identity and self-assertion, on the other.

THAPAR REMINDS US INDIA IS COMPOSED OF MANY CULTURES, VARIEGATED AND LINKED TO REGION, CASTE, ETHNICITY, RELIGIOUS TRADITION, SHIFTING CUSTOMS, AND OTHER FACTORS

The condition in which this tension plays out was characterised by the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman as 'liquid modernity', with the processes of globalisation dissolving borders, interrelating economies through planet-wide mobility and access to ideas and goods in an epoch of accelerated consumerism. Two responses are possible in such a scenario. Either one might embrace such a condition and courageously refine its cosmopolitan potential; or one might yield to insecurity and defensiveness, and entrench oneself in what Bauman called a 'neo-tribalism'. It is this latter choice that instrumentalises culture into a ground of identity, designed to set boundaries to what is 'authentic' and what is 'alien', to privilege 'insiders' and stigmatise 'outsiders', and to project 'society' and 'nation' as aggressive, exclusionary constructs.

By contrast, Thapar explores the possibility—not simply as an academic exercise but as an ethical commitment—of approaching culture in a spirit of critical yet empathetic inquiry, in all its multiple dimensions and with all the challenges and dilemmas that it throws at us, as our true heritage. She invites us, accordingly, to unself ourselves, to step out of our naturalised social positions and consider



Romila Thapar

SAURABH SINGH

the locations of other participants in this drama of culture, identity and heritage. 'Multiple communities make up the body that we now call Indian citizens. Some identities come from having been imprinted by elite society, others go back a long way and are distinctively different from those of the elite,' she writes. 'The latter see their heritage as demarcated from that of the others, having its own history of origins. Do we include all these in what is labelled as Indian heritage today, or do we prefer to set them aside?'

This passage serves as a prelude to a brilliant, associative arc of argument, in which Thapar dwells on the pan-Indian prevalence of the horseman cult, and demonstrates how, although the horse is celebrated in elite Sanskrit texts, its iconography is more widely associated with rural low-status groups. The roadside hero-stone tells us a different story from the account of the Ashwamedha. Transiting from iconography to the theatre of political struggle, Thapar reflects on the recent agitation of the Dongria Kondh community to defend its sacred and environmental heritage in Odisha against the claims of bauxite mining. The Niyamgiri Hill, which they worship, 'hosts sacred groves of sal trees and has some of the finest pristine forests in India' and 'is a fine example of biodiversity'. Pointing out that the media reaction to the crisis of the Dongria Kondh community has been desultory, Thapar asks whether the same lack of interest would have met the attempt of a corporation to mine bauxite from 'beneath a temple or a masjid or a gurudwara'. In disdaining the legitimate claims of Adivasi communities, Thapar observes that we work from time-honoured elite prejudices against the forest people, evident in Kautilya's suspicion of the forest-dwellers, the otherwise magnanimous Ashoka's strictures against them, and Banabhatta's characterisation of them as 'primitive and alien'.

Indeed, some of the most urgent and extraordinary arguments advanced in this book have to do with the forms of discrimination that have been hard-wired into elite notions of Indian culture. Thapar traces these to the key conflicts of the first and second millennia CE, those between the Brahmanas and the Sramanas (the Ajivika, Jaina and Buddhist lineages), and between the Arya and the Mleccha. From the elaboration of these—I summarise Thapar's nuanced account crudely—emerged idioms of genetic purity and ritual pollution, inclusion and exclusion, social and spatial distancing, and, eventually, a logic by which to legitimise the derogation of the excluded as subhuman. Tragically, these idioms continue and have even assumed perverse new avatars in the age of print and digital communication and in defiance of progressive policy-making.

'Questioning exclusions and identities will explain how and why they came about, their contribution to the making of what we call our civilisation and our ethical values,' writes Thapar. 'It might also lead us to effectively annul that part of our heritage that denies social justice and is ethically unacceptable.' In reading Thapar, we are reminded of how schismatic the contemporary Indian self, how plural, a work in progress, to be crafted through critical vigilance and productive debate. By contrast, a triumphalist cultural selfhood that represses its contradictions would wish away not only the differences within itself, but also the bearers of difference outside itself. That is the road to annihilation against which Thapar cautions us. ■

Ranjit Hoskote is a poet and critic. His latest collection is Jonahwhale

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The Romantics

Love and longing through the prism of gender and sexuality, class and race

By Shikha Kumar

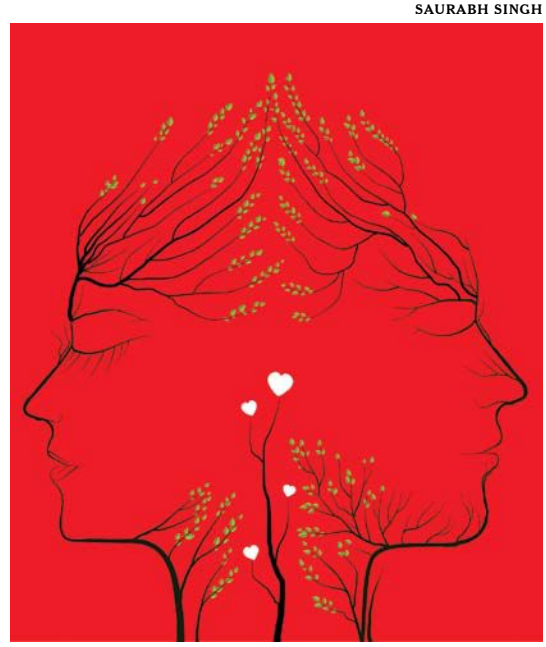
'IT'S A FACT that if there's a queer woman on a TV show or a movie, she is more likely to die than any other character. If she's non-white, double it. Since 1980, at least 156 queer women have been killed off, with 10 dying in 2016 alone.' In *Where Are My Lesbians?*, Sreshtha writes of how her sexual awakening, much like any self-respecting millennial's, was aided by books and films. But when you're Brown and queer, finding representation in popular culture can be extremely challenging.

Last year, she discovered Carmilla, a Canadian web series whose titular character is a vampire, and a lesbian. Despite its poor production values and bad dialogues, Sreshtha continues to watch it, for 'after years of looking for people like me in texts and hoping they survive, there is something to say about a queer immortal who simply cannot be killed'. The Brooklyn-based poet's stirring narrative on finding love and happiness as a queer person features alongside 10 other stories in *Eleven Ways to Love*, edited by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan. The anthology includes essays by journalists, poets and researchers, all of whom bring intensely personal stories to the fore, exploring love through the prism of gender, sexuality, disability, class and race.

Journalist Dhrubo Jyoti, whose work often focuses on the intersection of caste and culture, writes a series of letters to a former lover he lived with in Kolkata. Growing up queer and Dalit in a remote town in Bengal, the anonymity of internet chat rooms offered him refuge, allowing him to choose a new body and an upper-caste surname: 'Hiding was my first lesson in queerness because caste wouldn't let me be queer.' Summer evenings were spent on English TV shows, noting down words in notebooks. Validation came in the form of a question a senior asked him in the hallowed halls of St Xavier's, Calcutta: 'Oh, have you been a Xaverian all your life?'

In *The Aristoprats*, Shrayana Bhattacharya uses the lens of a former relationship to mull over why independent successful women indulge toxic lovers who consider them inadequate—the better your skills, the more they seem like disabilities in the dating pool. 'Men explained economics or my job to me, finding my obsession with it an ungainly, unattractive attribute for a woman,' she writes of Delhi's elite circles. Her essay is an extract from her debut book, *Desperately Seeking Shahrukh*.

SAURABH SINGH



In a literary landscape stripped of trans narratives, researcher Nadika Nadja's account offers much to ponder: how many of us, who belong biologically and sexually to the bodies we're born into, take our gender identities for granted. Nadja writes about dating as a trans woman and how the smartphone freed her to express her opinions and gender.

Activist and visually-impaired comedian Nidhi Goyal notes the absence of disabled romances in pop culture, and the tendency to portray disabled people as those needing caregivers or pity. As a 32-year-old who runs her own non-profit organisation and is single by choice, Goyal reminds us of the need to separate kindness from love—don't just fall for someone because they supported you in your disability.

While many stories make for inspired albeit intense reading, Reddy-Madhavan's own comes as a much-needed breather. In letters addressed to her younger self, she recounts—with a certain abandon we've come to associate with her writing—the rocky romances of her twenties, and how 'hindsight doesn't need glasses'.

Some essays, like Sangeeta's *Size Matters* on finding love as a fat woman and Maroosha Muzzafar's *When New York was Cold and I Was Lonely* underwhelm. The former, despite its intent to come off as empowering, veers into sob story territory, while the latter is just boring.

Despite these, the anthology is refreshing because it challenges conventionally-held perceptions. Love cannot be compartmentalised anymore. ■

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RAJEEV MASAND

Irrfan Khan's Health Scare

When **Irrfan Khan** announced that he was taking time off to attend to an unexpected health scare recently, it became clear that **Vishal Bhardwaj** would have to stop production on *Sapna Didi*, the film he was developing with Irrfan and **Deepika Padukone** in central roles. By the time the actor revealed the nature of his condition and the urgency with which it needed to be treated, it became clear to industry insiders that the film would probably not get made.

Now we have learnt that although Bhardwaj has told the media they will jump back into the film when Irrfan is better and resumes work, the project has in fact been shelved. Deepika has reportedly returned the signing amount she was paid for the movie after the makers decided not to replace Irrfan. Understandably, their focus is no longer on the movie. The team is praying for the actor's recovery.

New Film, New Strategy

By the time you read this, his new film will be out in theatres. But **Varun Dhawan** told me he's been feeling "awfully underutilised" in the weeks leading up to the release of *October*. The actor revealed that it was expressly mentioned in his contract that the producers required "very little" time from him for promotions. "Shoojit was clear that he wanted the trailers to do the talking for this film," he said of director Shoojit Sircar's strategy for the movie. It's an unusual approach at a time when stars are milked dry by studios to plug their films on every possible platform. "I've been made to do so much for other films, that I'm feeling positively underused," Varun admitted, adding that he grabbed the opportunity to travel to Dubai for a premiere "because I have no work to do here".

Don't mistake his eagerness to promote the film for a lack of confidence in it, though. "This was one of those unique experiences, and I'm grateful that I got the opportunity to work with Shoojit so early in my career," he said.

This could be an interesting year for Varun, who follows up the double whammy of last year's *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* and *Judwaa 2* with *October* and *Sui Dhaaga*. He's aware that all eyes are on him to see if he can carry off "performance roles", having already proved that he can dance and fight his way to box-office success. "It's not enough that my performance is appreciated. These films need to work," he said of both his new movies this year. Good luck.

Casting Grouch

Male superstars will tell you they don't interfere in casting decisions, but more often than not, they'd be lying. A-listers like to give the impression that they submit themselves to the vision of their directors, but anyone who knows how Bollywood works will tell you that the power on a movie set is usually concentrated with the film's leading man, especially if he's one of the country's top stars.

Like this one actor who, a few years ago, turned down a project being produced by his close friend because he didn't think the actress who'd been approached to star in it could pull off the role. The film was more or less centred on the female character and the director had locked this pretty but vapid leading lady for the role. When the actor was approached, he expressed interest in taking the role but made it clear he wouldn't do it if the makers were insistent on casting the actress.

The producer promptly dumped the female star when it became clear that the superstar's presence in the film would elevate the project considerably, and he was able to replace her with at talented young actress whom he also happens to mentor. Once the younger actress was in, the superstar signed up. And the film was back on track. ■

Rajeev Masand is entertainment editor and film critic at CNN-NEWS18

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