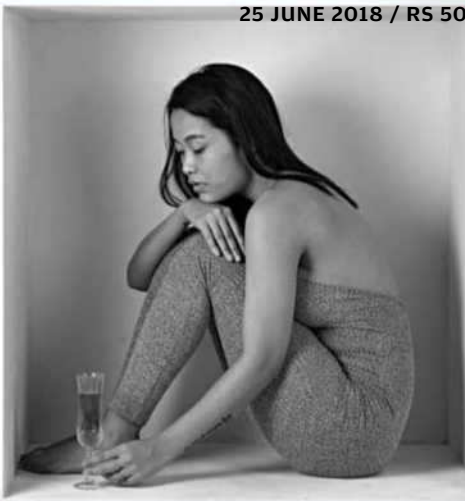


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FOR THE NEXT INDIA

CONTENTS

25 JUNE 2018

6

OPEN DIARY

By *Swapan Dasgupta*

12

BUSINESS

Market myopia
By *Aresh Shirali*

14

OPEN ESSAY

Triumph of faith over fact
By *Sunanda K Datta-Ray*

18

LONELY

The new urban epidemic in India
By *Rahul Pandita and Lhendup G Bhutia*

26

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The RSS is not known to seek validation by outsiders, but the furore over Pranab Mukherjee's visit to its headquarters reveals a failure to appreciate its acceptability today
By *Siddharth Singh*

30

IN GOD WE MISTRUST

The Marathwada region of Maharashtra is buffeted by a new wave of Islamist radicalisation
By *Ullekh NP*

36

POLITICS OF BLOODLUST

Violence between the Left and the Right in Kerala shows no sign of ending despite their secret parleys
By *Ullekh NP*

40

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

The politics and poetics of Rajinikanth
By *Nandhu Sundaram*

44

MEET THE MANAGERS

The most important non-players at the World Cup
By *Aditya Iyer*

48

JOINING THE DOTS

Movements and conversations of modern Indian art
By *Ritika Kochhar*

52

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

Move over bromance, it's time for female bonding
By *Shaikh Ayaz*

56

BILL RETURNS TO THE OVAL OFFICE

Being inside the head of the world's most powerful man is enough to make you clutch pen and paper tight
By *Shylashri Shankar*

58

TRAVAILS OF JUSTICE

A portrait of the Indian judiciary as a symbol for everything that has gone wrong
By *Madhav Khosla*

64

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

John Travolta on his role in Kevin Connolly's *Gotti*
By *Noel de Souza*

66

NOT PEOPLE LIKE US

A refreshingly candid relationship
By *Rajeev Masand*



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OPEN MAIL

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

Even if India is not playing in the FIFA World Cup, there is ample interest in the tournament across the country. The World Cup Issue (June 18th, 2018), was a good mix of politics, entertainment and analysis of the game and its top players. It is no doubt true that certain teams and names are favourites and there are die-hard fans supporting them. Millions are keen to see who will go on to win the Cup. Last time's champions, Germany, will surely be under more pressure than other teams, given the trend of defending title holders getting eliminated from the reckoning right at the group stage. It is good that *Open's* issue went beyond the obvious on the world's favourite game to examine emotions and other aspects of football that make the Cup so exciting to so many. It remains to be seen how the tournament in Russia will turn out and whether it does anything for that country's image. Hopefully, hooliganism will be contained and fans will accept a loss as much as they wish to celebrate a win.

Manish K

PASSION FOR FOOTBALL

Indians like to go where the action is ("What Are We Doing There?" by Deepak Narayanan, June 18th, 2018). This is why World Cup fever has not only gripped Indian cities, but many of us are flying over to Russia to watch the games live. It doesn't matter if our country has a team there or not, for football fans have adopted countries that they support as much as they would do their own. The enthusiasm for World Cup matches will be evident in the number of big city restaurants and pubs that will be playing the games on large screens with promotional offers to attract football fans. It will be visible in merchandise on sale and private parties that will be held to watch various face-offs. This shows that passion is not related to your own country's participation.

Anusha Goel

ALIA INCLUSIVE

Alia Bhatt, ("The Wonder Girl of Hindi Cinema", June 11th, 2018) is not only a rising star who has achieved critical acclaim, but is also paving the way for a more inclusive Bollywood. Her film *Raazi*, having garnered both commercial and critical success, is opening doors for more female-centric films. While Alia has had a bumpy ride in the media, there is something to be said about the persona she exhibits in the public space, which is distinct from that of other celebrities. It is her rawness and ability to not take herself too seriously that makes her relatable to fans. Also, she is an extremely talented actor and no one can deny this who has seen her recent films and the kind of diverse, challenging roles she has taken on. Her films are fun and well made.

Lavanya Walia



THE SHAME OF TUTICORIN

It is political leaders, past and present, who are collectively responsible for the establishment of Sterlite's copper plant in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, and the violence which came about recently ("The Truth about Tuticorin" by Nanditha Krishna, June 11th, 2018). The government of Tamil Nadu and police are responsible, for their complacency and mishandling of the situation on the ground. The big questions are why Sterlite was allowed to function and expand its activities and not shut down even after it was found to have flouted several pollution norms; why the concerns of activists and protestors were ignored for so long; why the protests were allowed to take a violent turn; and most importantly, why the police did not go step by step in tackling an unarmed crowd and instead took the extreme measure of opening fire indiscriminately. The loss of lives, damage to property and loss of employment for those who depended on Sterlite would not have taken place if the state government had acted appropriately in time.

Yusuf Shariff

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OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

A FEW MONTHS AGO, the student body of a famous British university wrote asking whether I would be interested in participating in a debate on the legacy of Winston Churchill. The question posed was: Is Churchill someone Britain should be ashamed of?

Since a debate involves selecting a side, I chose to inform them that I would like to defend Churchill's legacy in Britain. The doughty prime minister who inspired his nation to doggedly resist Hitler at a time when the German war machine was all powerful may well have a more contested legacy in India. Here, his contemporaries regarded him as the leader of the group that contested almost every clause of the Government of India Act, 1935, recalled his description of Mahatma Gandhi as a 'half-naked fakir', and bristled with indignation over his role in facilitating the Bengal famine that killed some 3 million people. There are also those who see his hand in encouraging Muhammad Ali Jinnah to stand firm in his demand for Pakistan during negotiations with Britain's Labour government between 1945 and 1947.

From an Indian perspective, therefore, Churchill does not emerge as a very admirable figure. Yet, as a 10-year-old, I remember the wave of nostalgia when he died at a ripe old age in 1965. I recall many relatives listening to the crackling short-wave radio coverage of his state funeral on a winter morning. My school, which prided itself in its Anglo-French inheritance, even put up a framed portrait of Churchill in a corner of the Assembly Hall, so deeply did some people feel the loss.

Yet, since the proposition involved viewing Churchill's legacy from the viewpoint of the UK, I felt compelled



to suggest to the organisers that I wouldn't be rubbishing the great war hero. My choice was determined by two considerations.

First, I am one of those from a vanishing tribe—in intellectual circles at least—who believe that all history is national and that a principal task of 'national' histories is to tell stories that inspire. Churchill too was a great believer in the national history project. His only advice to his Education Minister Rab Butler during the formulation of the iconic Education Act of 1944 was: "Tell the children that Wolfe won Quebec."

Secondly, despite his record as an unreliable politician and a pig-headed imperialist who didn't know when to effect a strategic retreat, Churchill must always be remembered as the leader who inspired an entire people—and, for that matter, the entire British Commonwealth—to fight Hitler and his ambitions. He was one of those who was consistent in his then-unfashionable belief that National Socialism was a curse on Western civilisation. And after the fall of France in 1940, he inspired an entire people to endure suffering for a larger cause. He was the man who brought out the best in the British character—now, alas, a bundle of existential confusion.

The debate never happened. I was informally told that the student body

was taken aback by the fact that both the desis they had approached preferred to honour Churchill's memory rather than rubbish it. The spectacle of two ex-colonials singing Churchill's praises while a handful of radical White Britons tore into his legacy would, in my opinion, be quite amusing. However, this amusement would involve demolishing 'post-colonial' stereotypes that have been so utterly widespread in universities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Last year, Nigel Biggar, the Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford, proposed a project on the 'Ethics of Empire' and even secured some funding for it. His suggestion that the imperial project was not based on crass commercial motives and crude racism alone drew howls of protest from the standard bearers of political correctness—broadly the same crowd that cheered on those who wanted to dismantle the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford. A petition signed by some 170 tenured academics chipped in with a denunciation of Professor Biggar, questioning his temerity to even suggest that Empire was anything but pure, undiluted evil. That respected academics can be so grounded in absolute certitudes and feel that controversies in history can be settled by petitions and shows of hands is frightening. It is indicative of the growing one-sidedness of academic discourse, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, and the overbearing pressure on students to conform or perish.

The threat to open-mindedness isn't emanating from 'evil', right-wing fascists. It is the growth of a fascist left and the acquiescence of frightened, careerist liberals that explains a new menace that we also experience in India. ■

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O PENININGS



Gorkha soldiers stand guard at the meeting venue

REUTERS

NOTEBOOK

GUARDIANS OF THE TRUMP-KIM SUMMIT

AS GORKHA SOLDIERS stood guard away from the spotlight during the summit held in Singapore between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Lieutenant General Shokin Chauhan's mind raced back two decades. In October 1999, as commanding officer of the 2/11 Gorkha Rifles of the Indian Army, he had landed with around 500 soldiers in cyclone-ravaged Bhadrak in Odisha with rations for six days. When their food stocks ran out, authorities told the unit to use the supplies being brought in as relief material for the storm-hit locals. "The soldiers came up to me and said they will survive on one meal a day but not deprive the people of food," recounts Lieutenant General Chauhan. It took a fortnight for the soldiers' own supplies to reach them.

The Army officer says his heart was filled with a sense of pride when he heard that the Singapore Police's elite Gorkha soldiers, who are of Nepalese origin, would be deployed during

the high-profile meeting between Trump and Kim. "I can't think of better soldiers being chosen for this job. They are efficient and impartial," says Lieutenant General Chauhan, a third generation soldier who was commissioned with the 11 Gorkha Rifles in December 1979 and retired in March this year. His father was also from the same regiment, and Chauhan, who in 1958 was born where they were posted, effectively spent his entire life among them.

The famed valour of Gorkha soldiers is best described by Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, one of India's most decorated military officers, who had said, "If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or he is a Gurkha." The legendary commander of Indian forces in the early 1970s knew them intimately, having been transferred to the Gorkha Rifles at the end of 1947.

Unlike in India, where the recruitment of Nepalese youth to the Army's Gorkha regiments is done through an open rally

in some part of the country followed by a test, in Singapore they are selected by the British army directly from Nepal. This is done through an online application system, which is now also being followed in India. In Singapore, they have been part of the police force since 1949. The soldiers retire at 45 there and have to return to Nepal along with their families. In India, which has around 39,000 Gorkha soldiers in current service, around 70 per cent retire in their mid-thirties—between the ages of 35 and 37. While it is not mandatory for them to leave India, which has had them as part of its armed forces for over 200 years now, they generally return home since they continue to get their retirement benefits in Nepal.

The British, impressed with their courage, had begun taking them into the British Indian army under the Raj. After India got independence, six regiments remained in the Indian Army and four joined the Gorkha Brigade of the British army. The 11 Gorkha Regiment was introduced to accommodate soldiers who refused to join the British army. Ever since, the dauntless Gorkhas, with their *khukris*—those inwardly curved traditional Nepalese daggers—tucked in their waist bands, have been an integral part of Indian war campaigns. Having mostly grown up in the tough mountainous terrain of Nepal, they have been deployed in various theatres, from fighting in World War I and II under the British crown to helping contain Ebola in Sierra Leone in 2014.

Their contribution to Independent India's war efforts are not only well known, it has upheld their reputation as fierce warriors. During Operation Vijay of the Kargil War in 1999, a Gorkha officer was killed a day before the 5/8 Gorkha Rifles and Nagas operating in Tololing Ridge were to capture an important peak. The next day, a Pakistani officer was killed, but this came to light only after the peak was captured, according to sources.

Lieutenant General Chauhan, who went to Odisha a few months after returning from Operation Vijay in Kargil, recalls another story. Back in 1982, a 'buddy' of his, a soldier working with him who was dying of cancer, had asked him to give his insurance money to his mother back home in Nepal. To honour the commitment, Chauhan, along with another soldier, took off for his village in Bhojpur, which meant a 11-hour-long walk after getting off the bus. They walked for about 8 km and it was getting dark by the time they reached the Arun river, but the boatman who was to get them across was done for the day. It was a cold December evening, and they started looking for a place to stay. They found a lone one-room house where a young woman lived with her child. She offered them her cowshed to spend the night. In the morning, before they left, the officer asked the young woman if she was not afraid allowing two strangers to stay there. She said her husband was serving in the Gorkha Regiment in Kashmir and an officer of the Indian Army coming to her home was like God visiting her. ■

By AMITA SHAH

AFTERTHOUGHT

WAITING FOR PEACE DIVIDENDS

What the US-North Korea thaw means for India and Pakistan

US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S recent summit meeting with the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has spurred hopes for a political dialogue well beyond the Korean Peninsula.

After the Trump-Kim meet, Shehbaz Sharif, a leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) and the brother of unseated Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, expressed hope in a tweet: 'If the United States and North Korea can return from the brink of a nuclear flashpoint, there is no reason why Pakistan and India cannot do the same...'

That reflects admirable sentiment, but little else. For starters, the Indo-Pakistan problem is structural and is far more knotted than the mere de-nuclearisation of a recalcitrant country even if the latter task is also a tough one. Pakistan has waged a number of wars with India to wrest Kashmir. None of these military adventures brought that country any closer to its dream. One, in 1971, ended in a splitting up of the country as it was formed in 1947. If it were led by realists, it would have realised that taking over India's northern-most state by force is an impossible goal and left it aside. Pakistan has not done that.

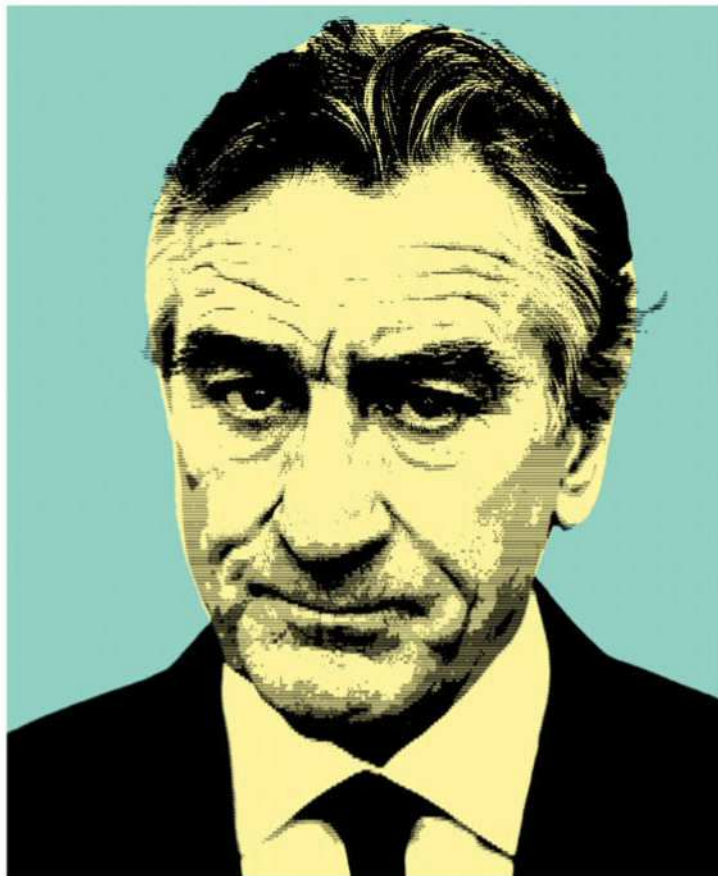
That raises a very different question: why has Pakistan pursued the objective of detaching Kashmir from India when it knows that it cannot be done? The answer goes back to the very foundation of Pakistan, when leaders of the Muslim League sought parity with Hindus and not just a patch of land for a new country. That quest for parity was quixotic even then. Since 1947, it has led Pakistan ever farther down the path of folly. Kashmir—a Muslim-dominated part of the diverse state of Jammu and Kashmir—is what it calls the 'unfinished business' of Partition. This kind of atavism in international relations is hardly conducive to a peace deal between the two countries.

Since then, Pakistan's attitude has hardened to Kashmir as the end-all of Delhi-Islamabad ties. That makes any durable peace extremely difficult to achieve: India is unlikely to allow any change of borders or transfer of population, while Pakistan won't rest until it gets Kashmir. There is an option that has been explored since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru: transforming the Line of Control (LoC) into a border. For India, that would be a big concession, but it is too little for Pakistan. 'Irrelevant borders' was another idea that was broached, but then deemed impractical. Firing across the LoC goes on. Peace? Not really. ■

PORTRAIT

RAGING BULL

The greatest living actor talks Trump to Trump in his new role



SAURABH SINGH

THE FIRST RECORDED instance of the word ‘fuck’ in the English language, it appears, occurred sometime in 1528. It had occurred twice before, at least in other languages—hidden encoded in a 1500 satirical Latin poem and as ‘fukkit’ in a 1513 Scottish poem. In 1528, in a copy of the moral conduct guidebook of a monastery, an anonymous monk scrawled out the words ‘O d fuckin Abbot’. Back in the 1500s, the real obscenity for the monk was not the word ‘fuck’, but the word starting with ‘d’, probably ‘damned’, which he refused to spell out. Half a millennium later, in a world of varied new swear words, where extreme obscenities have lost their power to shock and ‘damned’, the more obscene companion of the word ‘fuckin’ in the 1528 scrawl, has lost all its bite, the f-word continues to remain steady. It is a versatile word that can be used to convey a variety of thoughts.

But when Robert De Niro steps on to the stage—mouth in a snarl, teeth clenched, mean eyes looking upwards, hands held up as if to claim victory at the end of a boxing bout, even though he is visibly old now—and delivers the

four-letter word in that delicious way learnt through decades of work in gangster movies, it can mean only one thing. ‘Fuck Trump.’ His F-bomb, delivered at the Tony Awards and censored on TV, was a call not to talk it out, but a sort of primitive tribalistic call to settle matters through a fight.

In that moment, it appeared De Niro had found the mojo that has all but disappeared from his on-screen roles. It is clear to anyone that De Niro isn’t all that interested in his work. He does quickie parts in cartoonish films these days, from roles in *Little Fockers*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows* to *Dirty Grandpa*, that probably have more to do with his pay cheque than an interest in cinema. It is as though he knows he is nearing his finish line. Someone born on the other side of the century would never know the kind of electric appeal he brought to the movies in the 70s and 80s, especially his partnership with Martin Scorsese in *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver*; and other iconic performances in films like *Godfather 2* and *The Deer Hunter*.

But the election of Donald Trump has ticked something in him. It has given him a macho and combative stance that once made him so appealing in his films. When you see De Niro saying ‘Fuck Trump’, you see the psychotic, mohawk-sporting Travis Bickle at the violent blood-splattered end of *Taxi Driver*; the person who has just asked his mirror image, “You talkin’ to me?”

Other personalities from the cultural Left have been equally critical of the US president, but in a way that is more accommodating of the concerns of those who find resonance in Trump, and certainly in less profane terms. De Niro, in contrast, has been at Trump’s throat for some time, calling him various things, from ‘a punk’, ‘dog’ and ‘pig’ to ‘baby-in-chief’. A while ago, he even expressed an inclination to “punch him in the face”. Now, in his latest attack, he reaffirms that there is no mellowing down. His F-bomb is a ‘fuck it’. It is ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

Characteristically, Trump couldn’t let this one slide and tweeted that De Niro had had his head knocked too often by real boxers in movies.

It is somewhat embarrassing how all of this is playing out: two men in their 70s, one a president and the other arguably the most iconic actor of this generation, swearing at each other.

De Niro’s call to arms is not going to make Trump lose an election. It might even do the opposite. When you say ‘fuck’ and nothing else, it’s merely amusing; at best, a piece of trivia, like the monk’s frustrated scrawl in the guidebook. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

ANGLE



PRISONERS OF HISTORY

Atul Kochhar and the absurdity of fuming over perceived past humiliations

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

EVERYONE IS allowed a political ideology, but a little bit of common sense must accompany it. Otherwise what awaits is the fate of Atul Kochhar, a chef based in the United Arab Emirates, who fell into the dangerous illusion of the social networking public square which goes thus: people spew, joust and rant on forums like Twitter thinking it is a drawing room conversation, whereas what it actually is like writing an op-ed in a newspaper under your byline and receiving instant letters to the editor. Indians are overwhelmingly communal and casteist in private, but in public most know enough to be decent and inoffensive. On social media, this distinction gets blurred. And people like Kochhar get sacked. There can be no rational explanation for someone throwing his survival instincts to the wind and making an anti-Muslim tweet while dependent on an Islamic country for his livelihood.

But let's turn to his tweet and explore another affliction that it exhibits. He had written his reaction to Priyanka Chopra for showing Hindu terror in *Quantico*: 'It is sad to see you have not respected the sentiments of Hindus who have been terrorized by Islam over 2000 years. Shame on you'. The dates are obviously askew. Two thousand years ago, Islam didn't exist. Some Muslim rulers did oppress and turn Hindus into second-class citizens, and that is the nature of conquering aliens until (and if) they assimilate. Even so, it is not a straight line of oppression, with tolerant kings like Akbar. Also, Islamic power ended with the British Raj.

What Kochhar and millions like him suffer from is a flawed cultural memory, a hangover of a humiliation of another era. Unless there is a 500-year-old Mughal emperor living in India without an Aadhaar card, the players of that drama are long gone. To bring the slights of history into the present is useful for politicians and filmmakers, but chefs, who stand to gain nothing by holding such grievances, especially if based in Dubai, are better served making peace with the history books they studied in school.

Kochhar is just one infinitesimal symptom of this disease. Twitter is replete with Hindus who feel they're part of a crusade to reclaim a land that is already theirs. When Aurangzeb's name is removed from road signs in Delhi, it is as if Hinduism has finally triumphed against the bigot. Except, where is Aurangzeb and the Mughal Empire? Not even Indian Muslims look upon him with any reverence. If a chariot is found in an Indus Valley Civilisation site or the DNA of two skeletal samples from Rakhigarhi shows no trace of Steppe descent, it is as if the Hindu claim to India has been finally proven. But it proves nothing and does not need to be proven either. To extrapolate from one chariot anything conclusive about events and people 4,000 years ago is absurd. Even if the Vedas were written in Delhi and Mumbai back in that period and transmitted around the world by Hindus on horses, it makes not the slightest difference to who India belongs to. ■

IDEAS



RAUL IRANI

THEATRICALS

After a hiatus, Arvind Kejriwal is back to his public drama, the tack that he had used to such good effect to become a political force and then quit when he saw that as a chief minister in power, it didn't usually work the way he would have hoped or wanted it to. His sit-in at the Delhi Lieutenant Governor's office might sound ridiculous, but the purpose of theatricals is not always victory; it can also be publicity. In Kejriwal's case, the idea is probably to inform the residents of Delhi and his own supporters among them that he is not responsible for any lack of governance or instances of corruption in the city. He is back in the headlines, even if he has attracted criticism for it. To that extent, the objective of his latest protest has been achieved. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Politics with me isn't theater. It's performance art. Sometimes, for its own sake'

ROGER STONE
US political strategist

Market Myopia

FOR A WHILE, it looked as if India would be left out of the great global squabble over world trade. But then, there's always US President Donald Trump to count on. In his latest spectacle of spite, he stormed out of a G-7 summit in Quebec City, called Canada a country led by a 'dishonest liar', likened America to a 'piggybank that everybody is robbing' and then directed some of his ire at Delhi for good measure. "This isn't just G-7," he reportedly said, "We have India, where some of the tariffs are 100 per cent—a hundred per cent. And we charge nothing. We can't do that."

On a scale of 'honest lies' that the post-truth world order has given us, Trump's rant perhaps lies somewhere between Meatloaf's *I Would Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)* and Harley Davidson's 'Define your world in a whole new way' slogan; which is to say, somewhere between too-fuzzy-to-figure and too-flaky-to-foil.

In general, it's true that India has upped its import barriers in a tiny reversal of its post-1991 open market policy (the idea of which was to turn local producers globally competitive by exposing them to foreign competition). The Budget for 2018-19 has raised Basic Customs Duty on a wide range of imports, from cars and phones to silk fabrics and fruit juices. The US grumble over India's jumble of levies is not fake either: after the basic duty, an inward shipment gets slapped with an additional duty, a special duty and an education cess. All added up, though, most imports can still be retailed here at no more than 33 per cent extra over their landed cost, a far cry from the closed economy days when some stuff was forced to sell at four times its original price.

So what tariffs is Trump talking about? One suspect could be the levy India imposes on American walnuts, raised recently from 30 to 100 per cent in token retaliation to the 25 per cent US burden on Indian steel and aluminium. Given Trump's attention span, however, the figure he likes to echo might have less to do with symbolic brain food like walnuts and more to do with the hyperbolic road swag of big bikes. In February, he had echoed Harley Davidson's Indian market woes thus: "When they send a motorcycle to India... they

have to pay 100 per cent tax—a hundred per cent." He did, of course, acknowledge that Delhi had eased the way for 800-cc-plus bikes. "Now, the Prime Minister [of India], who I think is a fantastic man, called me the other day and said, 'We're lowering it to 50 per cent.' I said, 'Okay, but so far we're getting nothing.' So we get nothing, he gets 50, and they think [they're] doing us a favour. That's not a favour."

Since import barriers aren't level, Trump insists, America is getting ripped off. In this formulation, the only way trade can be fair rather than foul—or 'fool' in his vocabulary—is if each country offers the other equal market access. As rhetoric, it's seductive. As a formula, it's reductive. Or so free-trade theorists would argue. After all, it's supposed to be in one's own interest that a country keeps itself open. David Ricardo's original call to openness is about the mutual gains to be made by trade partners opting to specialise in what each is relatively better at. While this is just another academic model, as easily laid low by real conditions as any other, both history and theory suggest that an economy which operates under the pressure of global rivalry eventually gets ahead regardless of what others do. For longer than anyone can remember, Free Market mavens have held America up as a paragon of this principle.

So what explains Trump's stance? A loss of confidence? Or, worse, a bad case of myopia? For clues, turn to his trade advisor, Peter Navarro, a business analyst who wrote strategy books before he joined Trump's team and revealed his own reservation policy for hell. The first that I chanced upon was Navarro's 2001 *If It's Raining In Brazil, Buy Starbucks*, which explains how odd weather patterns affect share prices. Five years later, I reviewed his *The Well-Timed Strategy*, all about how an enterprise could calibrate itself to business cycles and maximise profits. By the time he published his 2011 *Death by China*, he had gone half apoplectic on the need to shield US firms from Beijing-backed businesses. Common to all three books is their focus on the money that Wall Street makes.

Is that what US leadership of the 'free world' has reduced itself to? All the more reason, one would think, for India to resist going the reactionary way. ■



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By **SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY**

TRIUMPH OF FAITH OVER FACT

Let there be peace in Trump's Kimdom

'**B**

UT 'T WAS A famous victory.'

It had to be. Both participants desperately needed it. Donald Trump had to show some success somewhere. As for the 34-year-old Kim Jong Un, he craved fiercely to demonstrate to his patron in Beijing and rival in Seoul, to say nothing of Korea's former rulers in Tokyo, that he now walks and talks and sups with kings.

He has shown himself to be the smarter of the two, not boasting on Twitter or rambling on at press conferences, spilling beans no one had heard of before. Unlike Trump who has made promises galore since the tête-à-tête, Kim is bound only by the vague wording of their joint statement which he can interpret as he likes, when he likes. That is how his country, arbitrary relic of World War II and the 1945 Potsdam conference when the Korean peninsula was divided along a line that made 'no political, geographical, economic nor military sense' (quoting the US State

Department), has survived. In contrast, Trump needs constantly to boast to justify himself.

Trump had repudiated the Paris agreement on climate change, discarded the nuclear deal with Iran which was his predecessor's achievement, not his, and insulted Canada's personable young prime minister. He had flown out of Quebec City refusing to endorse the final section of the G7 statement about commerce. He couldn't afford to fail in Sentosa, Singapore. Unlikely as it may sound, he also yearns for the Nobel Peace Prize. So the 'Rocket Man' whom he was going to destroy with "fire and fury" was miraculously transformed into an "honest and direct" leader whose "words can be trusted", a "very talented man" who "loves his country very much". They would meet "many times". Trump would invite him to cosy fireside chats in the White House. Kim, who is striving to bring peace and prosperity to his country, would "very quickly" demolish his bombs.

Koreans are so concerned with the level of heads that they dragged out taller and taller stools at the 1953 Panmunjom talks in a scene that might have come straight out of the film *Anna and the King*. Possibly briefed on this obsession, the host, Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, who spent \$20 million on the summit convinced it was investment in peace, made elaborate arrange-



ments to ensure absolute parity. Trump and Kim drove to different entrances of Capella Hotel on Sentosa island, and then walked towards each other with measured steps and no question of precedence. They might have been in the ornate Durbar Court of London's old India Office which the British designed for four Indian princes of equal rank to enter simultaneously.

International meetings are often imaginatively sited and choreographed. Nothing can beat the glitter of the Field of the Cloth of Gold where King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France talked, jostled, feasted and made love from 7 to 24 June 1520. The raft on the Niemen river where Napoleon I and Czar Alexander met on 25 June 1807 was no less dramatic. For the Trump-Kim summit some Americans would probably have preferred the poignancy of the railway siding in the forest of Compiègne, 40 miles north of Paris, where two trains came to a halt on 8 November 1918 in the utmost secrecy. One was the permanent home of the Allied commander-in-chief, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, whose guests aboard included Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Rosslyn Wemyss. From the other, formerly the imperial train of Emperor Napoleon III, shambled a tired and exhausted group of Germans led by Matthias Erzberger, a politician leading his country's delegation.

Trump said in Singapore that it takes not the five seconds he had mentioned earlier but a mere second to size up the other party. **Kim** probably doesn't need a meeting at all to get the other person's measure. Trump calls him "a very smart negotiator". He goes by the record

As Erzberger and his party crossed the 100 metres to Foch's dark-blue wagon-lit, the marshal leaned across to his interpreter and said: "Ask these gentlemen what they want." Erzberger replied he had come to hear the Allied armistice proposals. "I have no proposals to make" was Foch's reply. Count Alfred von Oberndorff, from the German foreign ministry, then said in French that his delegation was there to seek "the conditions for the Armistice". Foch replied: "I have no conditions to offer." Weary from their overnight journey through the front lines,

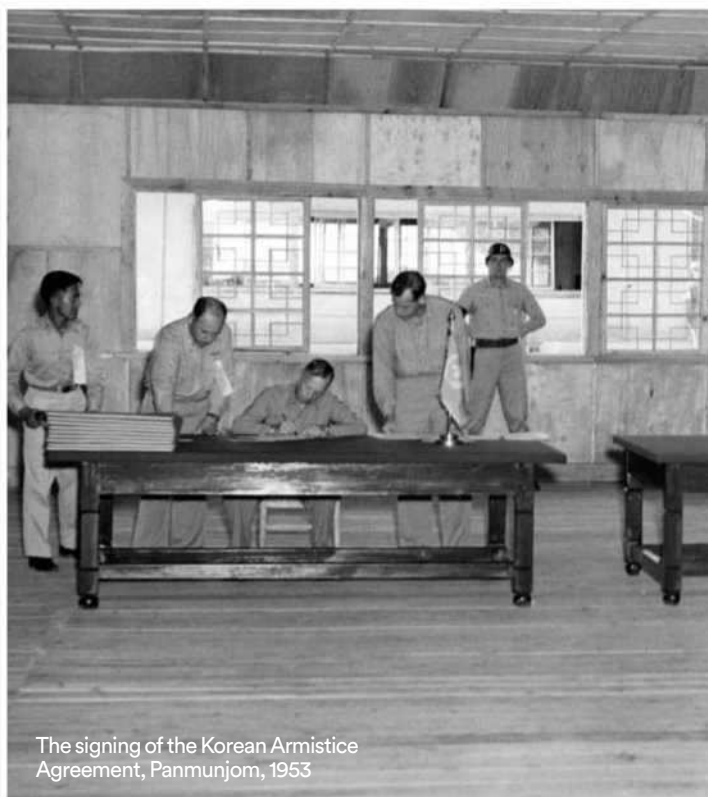
the Germans realised that after four years and three months of the most horrendous war yet known to man, there were to be no negotiations. They were to grovel in humiliation and plead for an armistice. The victorious Allies would dictate the terms.

It wasn't like that on Sentosa. Some Americans grumbled that Kim didn't need to indulge in one-upmanship. Merely clasp the hand—only just recovering from Emmanuel Macron's bruising grasp in Quebec City—that Trump extended is supposed to have sent Kim's prestige soaring in the Asian world. Rudy Giuliani, New York's former mayor, would have us believe Kim “got back on his hands and knees and begged” for the meeting. ‘Got back’ implies he had done so before, of which there is no evidence. With the blood of three generations of rulers coursing in his veins, the young Kim must be an astute student of mankind. Trump said on Sentosa that it takes not the five seconds he had mentioned earlier but a mere second to size up the other party. Kim probably doesn't need a meeting at all to get the other person's measure. Trump calls him “a very smart negotiator”. He goes by the record.

Donald Trump Jr's globetrotting tours to sell flats, Ivanka Trump's entrepreneurial appearances, reports that she and her husband Jared Kushner made at least \$82 million in outside income while serving as senior White House advisers last year, told him all he needed to know. He may have promised the Trump Organisation carte blanche to dot North Korea with soaring glass and marble Trump Towers. He could also have promised unlimited outlets for American fast-food franchises. Profit is as integral as regime change to American diplomacy. George W Bush Jr told the Asia Society in Washington on the eve of his 2006 visit to India that the country's fabled 300 million-strong middle class could spell prosperity for Whirlpool, Domino's and Pizza Hut.

THE ARTIFICIAL PARADISE of Sentosa, meaning ‘peace and tranquility’ in Malay, highlights the tantalising contrasts of ‘the lands of charm and cruelty’, an American author's sobriquet for Southeast Asia. The memory of one of the longest-serving political prisoners in the world haunts the resort. Chia Thye Poh was a Physics teacher who marched with 30 activists to Singapore's Parliament House on 8 October 1966 to hand over a letter demanding a general election, the release of political detainees and revocation of ‘undemocratic’ laws. Chia could have bought his freedom at any time by promising to sever ties with the Communist Party and renouncing violence. But, as he argued, “to renounce violence is to imply you advocated violence before. If I had signed that statement I would not have lived in peace.” He was never charged, never brought to trial during more than 30 years of confinement, the prisoner in the theme park of Sentosa.

The island's only redeeming feature for me was the life-sized figure of General Kodandera Subayya (Timmy) Thimayya in a tableau depicting Lord Mountbatten and his colleagues accepting Japan's surrender. The actual ceremony was in Singapore's



The signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, Panmunjom, 1953

City Hall, but the 27 waxworks are displayed in Sentosa's Surrender Chamber. Commentators made much of the fact that the resort was chosen for the Trump-Kim meeting because the single road that serves for entry and exit can easily be secured. But I remember taking guests to Sentosa by cable car from Faber Peak where you can't get taxis. Not that Trump and Kim either needed taxis or shared cable cars.

Their rendezvous was the Capella Hotel, whose red tiles, pillars and portico create an illusion of colonial graciousness. Singapore is good at creating illusions. Waiters go round the famous Long Bar of the island's other iconic hotel, Raffles, scattering peanut shells before opening time to create an illusion of the rough and ready clientele that once quaffed gallons of Singapore Sling and carpeted the floor with the residue of munched nuts. The setting encouraged Trump to masquerade as peacemaker. “Anyone can make war, but only the most courageous can make peace,” he intoned, unconsciously echoing Jawaharlal Nehru's comment on the Korean War. “It's *always* wrong to assume you can succeed by pursuing military means to the utmost and the last,” Nehru told the distinguished British writer, James Cameron, when North Korea invaded the South on 25 June 1950. “Every major war there's ever been has shown that—the last one (meaning World War II) created plenty of problems just for that reason.”

Nehru was deeply conscious of the inconsistencies of his own position. “In India, now we have spent our lives trying very



The Korean Armistice Agreement to ‘insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved’ was signed three years and 54,000 American casualties later in 1953

imperfectly to follow the spirit of a great leader,” he confided in Cameron whom he treated as a friend. “He talked of non-violence, and here we are now in charge of Government, and Government keeps armies and navies and air forces and indulges in violence pretty often. What do we do about it?” Nehru thought Americans more “hysterical as a people than almost any others except perhaps the Bengalis”. Americans called his ambassador in Peking, Sardar Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, ‘Mister Panicky’ for daring to relay Zhou Enlai’s warning that China would intervene if North Korea were attacked. Only the *New York Times* believed that the struggle for Asia ‘could be won or lost in the mind of one man—Jawaharlal Nehru’.

Cameron appreciated Nehru’s dilemma. Neither of the two

Korean contestants, Kim Il-Sung and Syngman Rhee, did. Nor their principals in Moscow and Washington. Cameron, who covered the war, painted a grim picture of brutalities and bestialities on both sides. The Korean Armistice Agreement to ‘insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved’ was signed three years and 54,000 American casualties later, the North-South talks being trapped in testy issues such as the exchange of prisoners of war and the location of a demarcation line. Sixty-five years later, the Korean peninsula is still at war with some 30,000 American troops in South Korea in addition to the ‘permanent aircraft carrier’ of Guam, naval bases and seaborne troops dotted all over the Indo-Pacific region, and approximately 50,000 military personnel in Japan. North Korea and China are the obvious targets of the annual joint military exercises between the US and South Korea which the North denounces as ‘intentional military provocation’.

The terse 400-word statement the two leaders issued in Sentosa promised an end to belligerence. Trump will pull back his troops. The exercises will end. With his fans chanting ‘Nobel! Nobel! Nobel!’ he can reach for the peacemaker’s halo even if there are plenty of Golda Meirs around to mutter that what he really deserves is an Oscar. Kim will end testing and destroy his bombs and missiles. Watching from Beijing, China hopes the end of sanctions will lessen its financial burden in respect of North Korea. It was a relief that there was no sign of Trump trying to persuade Kim to do to China what Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, instigated by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, did to the Soviet Union. India, too, should look forward to Trump’s Indo-Pacific vision and to a denuclearised North Korea no longer having to enrich corrupt Pakistani generals and politicians with millions of illicit dollars for hi-tech secrets and equipment from the Pakistani scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The four-point statement represents a triumph of faith over fact. The hint of promise without commitment recalls Talleyrand’s famous dictum which has been variously translated, one English rendering being ‘Language was invented so that people could conceal their thoughts from one another’. The document’s most explicit statement is ‘President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.’ What that entails will become known only when Mike Pompeo, the US secretary of state, and an as yet unnamed ‘relevant high-level’ North Korean official try to work out details.

Even then, we will not know the answer to young Peterkin’s questions ‘What they fought each other for’ and ‘What good came of it at last’ in Robert Southey’s poem *After Blenheim*, from which my opening line is taken. We must be content with Peterkin’s grandfather’s reiteration, ‘But ’twas a famous victory.’ Winning is all that matters. ■

Sunanda K Datta-Ray is a journalist and author of several books. He is an Open contributor

COVER STORY

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Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

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The new urban epidemic in India

By RAHUL PANDITA and LHENDUP G BHUTIA

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VERY MAN IS an island, she says, paraphrasing John Donne. She is a software engineer, and lives with her husband of six years in a ninth-floor apartment in Gurugram. In the morning, there is no time to talk. They return from work around the same time and say polite things to each other, like “How was your day?” and “God, it is too hot!” They usually have dinner together and then watch something on Netflix in their bedroom. Sometimes she asks him if he will have an ice-cream; he often reciprocates by asking her if she needs something from the kitchen as he gets up to go there. During the day, her smartphone keeps flashing group messages on WhatsApp—from her college friends, family, and husband’s extended family. Her mother calls her every other day from Lucknow. But she says she feels no connection at all. “I am in a dark well of sorts from where I am trying to reach out and I cannot, and now I have given up,” she says.

We are meeting at a café near her house. She is a friend of a friend, who responded to a post we had put up on Facebook asking people to get in touch if they felt lonely. Within an hour, we were flooded with private messages from those who said they did and wanted to talk about it.

In the café, the software engineer orders a latte and shows a private blog she started a few months ago on the advice of a counsellor she went to. He asked her to put down all her feelings on it. “Don’t get me wrong,” she says, “I have everything: a successful career, supportive parents, a smart husband, and a nice house that we jointly own. But there is a hollow within.” She wants to talk but feels that no one is really listening. A few months ago, she says, the feeling of loneliness became like a black cloud over her head and she broke down in the office bathroom. It is then that she looked up the internet and sought an appointment with the counsellor. “Basically, I just paid money to speak to someone and feel that somebody is really listening to me,” she says.

That ‘black cloud’ is hovering over an increasingly large number of people, young and old, in cities across India, according to mental health experts. “It is an epidemic,” says Dr Rajat Mitra, a Delhi-based clinical psychologist. “One major reason is that many among us are feeling alienated from our roots and are unable to

find meaning in our lives,” he says. As old family structures break and more and more people find themselves in cities, pitched in the middle of modern life with all its entanglements and toxicity, people are turning into tiny islands floating amidst a mass of people, many of whom may be islands themselves.

In the West, loneliness has received a lot of attention. A recent article in *The New York Times* quotes Vivek Murthy, the former United States surgeon general, saying loneliness and social isolation could cause a reduction of one’s life span as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day could. In her research, Lisa Jaremka, director of the Close Relationships and Health Lab at University of Delaware found higher levels of inflammation in the blood samples of lonely people; this has been linked to heart disease, arthritis and Type 2 diabetes. Recently, Britain appointed its first minister for loneliness. But in India, many still consider it a part of the mental health spectrum that any mention of remains taboo. According to John T Cacioppo, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, being surrounded by friends and family, like the software engineer who lives in Gurugram, is no guarantee against loneliness. A 2012 study at the University of California found out that most lonely people are married or live with others. Mental health experts say that in many cases, such feelings may be a direct result of modern marriages. “We often copy our parents and imbibe their ideas about the opposite sex. But in the modern world, the traditional roles of man and woman have changed. So the institution of marriage needs to be redefined. Marriage now has to be a supporting institution. When it is not, the husband or wife or both may feel lonely,” says Dr Mitra.

Consider the case of a fashion designer based in Hyderabad who owns a small boutique. She is in a relationship with a research scholar, but feels “terribly lonely”. “I have friends and we meet often for movies or for a drink or for shopping, but I always feel tired after meeting them and have found myself avoiding them, of late,” she says. Her partner, she says, is unable to pay her attention even for a minute. “It is not that I have to share some big things with him every day. But I want to tell him what is going on in my life—the small and the mundane—and he seems to be least bothered about it,” she says. Has she discussed it with him? “Yes,”



MANY PEOPLE IN THEIR TWENTIES AND THIRTIES FEEL LONELY DUE TO THE LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS IN BIG CITIES. THIS SORT OF URBAN ISOLATION OFTEN HARMS THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

she says. “But he always says I am over thinking.” Now she is no longer sure whether she wants to marry her boyfriend.

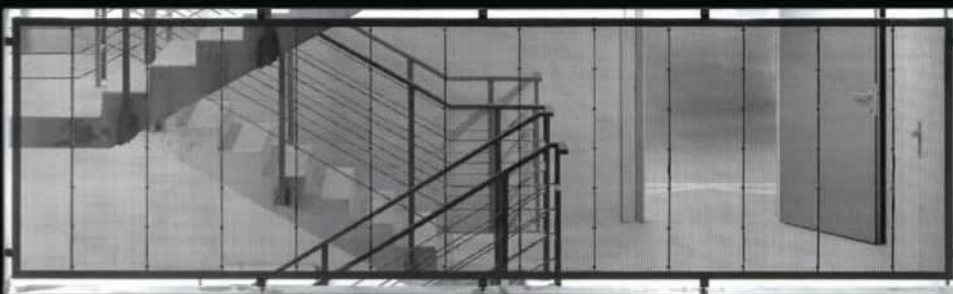
In response to our Facebook post, we received a message from another acquaintance, a professor in Jaipur. “I am 42, I am married and I have a child. And yet I feel lonely,” he writes. Later, when we ask him to say more, he says he is no longer comfortable sharing his story.

That people are feeling lonely in today’s world seems ironical. We are better ‘connected’ than ever—at least on social media. Today, one gets the instant gratification of sharing something with others and watching the ‘likes’ and comments come in. Duke University psychologist Jenna Clark and her team have pointed at the superficiality of what they call ‘social snacking’, where one browses the Facebook timelines of other people for a sense of be-

longing. “Social media just gives the appearance of intimacy,” says Dr Vishal Sawant, a Mumbai-based psychiatrist. “A few years ago, if we got bored in a place like Mumbai, we would go call a friend. But now we open our laptops. Something has got to give.”

“Social media as a supplement is great,” says Dr Mitra, “but it cannot be a substitute. Physical connection with people is of utmost importance. Normal human contact results in the release of endorphins. This is why in the US today, we have a poster which reads: ‘Did you hug your child today?’”

In cities, many people are coming to terms with loneliness and slowly accepting it as part of their lives. A 30-year-old teacher at a college affiliated to Delhi University says that loneliness is just another aspect of her life, like her academic job. She has been in



Delhi for eight years now, finishing her doctorate, after which she began to teach. “My father was in the Central services, so we kept on moving from one place to another. So I felt very detached from everything; the idea of home was lost,” she says. In the last few months, she has felt lonelier than ever. Some close friends of her recently decided to move out of country. “I see my students who are young and all they talk about is ‘Netflix chill’. And I wonder what human connection will they have?” she says. Does she see marriage as an antidote to her loneliness? She speaks of some of her friends and colleagues who are in relationships and yet have the dating app Tinder on their phones. “I will settle down, as my relatives call it. But for that I don’t necessarily need to get married,” she says.

Kavita Suri, member of the J&K State Women Commission, has also chosen to be single. “Do I feel lonely? Yes. But now I have gotten used to it,” she says. Suri remembers a time when, as children, she and her siblings and cousins would spend a lot of time together. “We were so close to each other,” she recalls. But something has changed, she feels: “We have become insensitive and desensitized. Couples married for two decades are getting divorced.”

ACCORDING TO EXPERTS, people who feel lonely may not be clinically depressed. But in some cases, loneliness has been linked with depression.

It was sometime last year, when a marketing professional we spoke to realised she needed help. She was working in a stressful environment in Mumbai then, and had always had a fierce temper. She would find herself snapping at people at the slightest provocation. But this time, her anger was different. It had no identifiable cause.

A clothes hanger had fallen to the floor as she reached for something in her cupboard. “I don’t know what came over me then,” she says. “I just got really, really angry.” For about a minute, in a blind fit of rage, she began to grasp and hurl all the hangers to the floor. “When this happened, I knew it was something else. I needed help.”

She consulted Dr Sawant who diagnosed her with depression. Various factors could have contributed to it. Her marriage had ended in divorce a few years earlier; job stress had taken its toll over the years, and she would have little time for herself even on weekends. Away from her parents in Dehradun, she lived in rented apartments with flatmates in Mumbai. But one of the big-

gest causes, she says, was perhaps loneliness.

She has had a small circle of friends for several years. In the period leading to her diagnosis, she remembers how she would often feel extremely low for no apparent reason. "I used to be moody, low, not as productive at work.... And I was in a relationship then, but I was very needy even in it," she says. "I realise now what it was. I was lonely and I had no self-love."

During that phase, although by outward appearances everything looked well—she hung out with friends, went for parties after work—inwardly, she found herself retreating further and further into herself. She remembers how for some periods she fell into a certain pattern of repetitiveness. Hit the bed, go to office, hit the bed, go to office. Wash, rinse, repeat. And then when she wasn't at work, she would find herself alone at home, spending countless hours in front of the TV set, watching show after show on Netflix.

She had come to Mumbai in her early twenties. She recounts with nostalgia her arrival in Mumbai with her grandfather, who was undergoing medical treatment in the city; how she was charmed by the freedom the city had to offer a young woman like her. But 10 years later, she felt the vastness of the metropolis, one that's so easy to vanish into, had begun to consume her.

According to Dr Sawant, cases like hers are not rare. Many people in their twenties and thirties are increasingly coming to see him with complaints of loneliness and depression. "In cities,

it because although it helped with her panic attacks, she feels it started to make her feel apathetic and untouched by things she wanted to get excited about or feel happy for.

A year since the panic attacks at work, she says her mood still swings between extreme hyperactivity and excitement to feeling detached and low, but her anxiety is under control. "But the days I feel super anxious [it] would manifest in heavy breathing, breakdowns where I would cry and feel overwhelmed and most importantly small things that wouldn't faze me on a regular day would seem magnified and out of proportion in my head. I would know deep down that I was over reacting to something but somehow my emotions would be overwhelming," says Iyer.

Iyer says she has significantly reduced socialising. She limits herself to a small circle of close friends in Mumbai and Bengaluru. She is part of a mental health community, filled with people who have various mental health challenges, which she calls her safe space. The group helps her not to feel alone. And whenever she breaks down, she reaches out to this group. "I binge watch Netflix on weekends, I run. I am training for a half-marathon this year. I talk to my therapist only during sessions because I do not want to be overly dependent on her. I talk to my close friends as and when the need arises too. But most importantly, my work is my saviour. I work in the social sector and am very passionate about what I do," she says. Sometimes when she feels like not talking to anyone

WITH THE BREAKING DOWN OF OLD FAMILY STRUCTURES AND THE TOXICITY OF MODERN LIFE, MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE TURNING INTO TINY ISLANDS FLOATING AMIDST A MASS OF PEOPLE, MANY OF WHOM MAY BE ISLANDS THEMSELVES

there is no real social support. It is great if some of them can get into meaningful relationships. But otherwise we are getting more and more inward." As he describes it, many young people now feel extremely isolated, which often means their physical health declines and some of them even resort to substance abuse.

Rachana Iyer, who heads the corporate social responsibility department at a financial institution in Mumbai, was diagnosed with depression and anxiety with symptoms of borderline personality disorder last year. As a teenager, she would frequently undergo phases of feeling very low, she says, but last year she began to get anxiety attacks at work during the day. "I realised that this feeling was physical and not in my control," she says over email.

Loneliness, according to her, was a big part of her anxiety and depression. "Today, a year later [after visiting a therapist], I feel less lonely. But the times I do feel lonely, it manifests [itself] in very subtle ways. I start to wonder and feel like I am the only peculiar one with my emotions and 'feeling too much'. It manifests as a voice in my head constantly leading to self-doubt, and I feel like I don't deserve to be loved and in the company of people," she says.

Iyer took prescribed medication for a few months, but stopped

in her circle or family, she signs on to mental health forums and chat rooms. Since there is no expectation of a stranger, she feels, it is easier to express oneself without the fear of being judged.

THE PEOPLE MOST at risk of loneliness are the elderly. In 2014, Dr Alka Subramanyam, a psychiatrist at Mumbai's Nair Hospital, was part of a study that looked at loneliness and depression, and the link between the two, among both depressed and non-depressed elderly. The study, published in the *Journal of Geriatric Mental Health*, found that the phenomenon was much higher among depressed patients than the non-depressed. Compared to depression, Dr Subramanyam says, loneliness appeared as a distinct factor which seems to have a link with depression. "Loneliness is in fact an important distinct factor in predicting depression in the elderly," she says. "It is a bit like the pre-diabetic stage, where the sugar [level] is border-line high. If you are able to spot loneliness, then you can intervene and perhaps stop full-blown depression coming over you." Although the researchers specifically looked at loneliness and depression among the el-

A 2014 STUDY IN THE *JOURNAL OF GERIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH* FOUND THAT VARIOUS FACTORS, FROM ADVANCING AGE TO THE ABSENCE OF A PARTNER, WERE ASSOCIATED WITH AN INCREASED RISK OF LONELINESS



derly, according to Dr Subramanyam, the connection between depression and loneliness is probably applicable to all age groups.

The study found that various factors—from advancing age, the absence of a partner and dependency to institutionalisation and health impairment—were associated with an increased risk of loneliness. “In some cases, we found that seniors living in old-age homes were better off and less lonely compared to those who live in families,” she says. This is probably because old-age homes afford greater interaction and friendship among the elderly.

As Dr Subramanyam says, although the team of researchers only looked at loneliness and depression among senior citizens, the issue deserves attention regardless of people’s age. She cites various reports to say that India is among the countries hardest hit by a mental health crisis. “Our social fabric is really changing. Technology has further changed things,” she says, “There should be something like digital hygiene [where access to technology like phones and laptops is disciplined] like sleep hygiene, but that’s not happening, obviously. At least one meal a day should be consumed on a table with all the family together. But that too rarely happens.”

Iyer, who has always been gregarious, says she believes there is a distinction she has to make between being ‘lonely’ and ‘alone’.

“I am slowly starting to enjoy my own company, unlike before when I constantly felt the need to speak to people and have someone around. I have always been a big extrovert and a very social person,” she says. This is why, she says, people often get shocked when she tells them that she has a mood disorder. “They think that because I seem so in-control, confident and strong on the surface, my mental health should be more or less stable,” she says.

There is a heart-wrenching story of a few years ago that Dr Mitra narrates about two young women from India’s North-east, one of whom was abducted by a few men while walking along Delhi’s Ring Road and raped. During their counselling sessions later, the women said they were lonely and did not want to return too soon to their rented room after work. So they decided to go out somewhere, an eatery, to be among people.

What is worrying is that the black cloud is only becoming bigger, accentuated by a superficiality that seems to pervade our daily lives. A doctor who spoke to us said that he is concerned about what his young daughter watches on TV: images that shift so fast, he cannot make anything of it. He says he once asked the girl if she was able to hold on to what she saw. Her answer: “Is there a need to hold on to [something]?” ■

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FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The RSS is not known to seek validation by outsiders, but the furore over Pranab Mukherjee's visit to its headquarters reveals a failure to appreciate its acceptability today

By SIDDHARTH SINGH



Photos AP

Pranab Mukherjee with Mohan Bhagwat (to his right) and other RSS leaders at the Sangh function in Nagpur on June 7

assimilation of ideas over centuries,” he added, “Secularism and inclusion are a matter of faith for us. It is our composite culture which makes us into one nation.”

On a regular day in India’s TV studios, or on the usual op-ed pages, or in any other public setting, this would be music to the guardians of India’s ideological frontiers. Mukherjee had more to offer along those lines: “Manifestations of rage are tearing our social fabric. Every day, we see increased violence around us... We must free our public discourse from all forms of violence, physical as well as verbal. Only a non-violent society can ensure the participation of all sections of people in the democratic process, especially the marginalised and the dispossessed. We must move from anger, violence, and conflict to peace, harmony and happiness.” If anything, these could be read as oblique hints of criticism of the present dispensation at the Centre.

The former President, however, did not limit himself to these political homilies and went on to highlight the contribution of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in forging a modern India. He also added that, “Many dynasties ruled till 12th century when Muslim invaders captured Delhi and successive dynasties ruled for the next 300 years.” Taken together with his homage to Hedgewar, this was enough to draw a flurry of criticism.

The real show stealer, however, was the speech by RSS Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat. For someone who claims to be heading an apolitical organisation, Bhagwat’s address was highly political, aimed as it appeared to be at defanging Mukherjee’s predictable bits on inclusiveness, tolerance and democracy. He was far more expansive on all these lofty themes than Mukherjee himself was. This was in keeping with the RSS’s known claims of being an inclusive and tolerant outfit, but on that particular evening, it served the purpose of neutralising the ‘Pranab holds tolerance mirror to RSS’ type of spin that many would have liked to give the proceedings in Nagpur.

Viewed dispassionately, Mukherjee’s speech—watched by millions of Indians

THERE WAS SOMETHING about former President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to the headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Nagpur on June 7th that observers could not get enough of. It is unlikely that Mukherjee ever met the RSS founder KB Hedgewar in person, but the crossing of their paths was very real: the former president described him as a ‘great son of Mother India’, words that incensed ‘secular’ politicians no end in the days that followed.

This was not the first time that the organisation had invited an ‘outsider’ as a

guest to one of its key functions—a ceremony marking the completion of training for its senior cadres—but it certainly attracted controversy way beyond any such event in the past. Some said that the RSS had been given publicity as never before, while others argued that the event had legitimised the organisation. As is often the case with such political tempests in India, the gap between reality and rhetoric is large.

Mukherjee’s speech was standard fare for the most part. “The soul of India resides in pluralism and tolerance,” the 13th President said, softly but firmly. “This plurality of our society has come through

glued to TV sets—was nothing out of the blue. It could have been something straight out of the pages of a tome penned by a Tara Chand or even a Patabhi Sita-ramayya. But for a section of intellectuals and political partisans of the Congress, what Mukherjee said bordered on sacrilege. For them, any talk of ‘Muslim invaders’—a historical fact—is taboo. When combined with a mention of Patel, the entire subject becomes radioactive.

That is exactly what happened when reactions to what Mukherjee said began being aired, even as he was winding up his speech. At one extreme, vulgar punditry began almost instantaneously on social media. At the other end began a hunt for ameliorative words and phrases in his lecture. Mukherjee said, “The construct of Indian nationalism is ‘constitutional patrio-

tism’, which consists of an appreciation of our inherited and shared diversity...” One public intellectual was quick to point this out as his ‘most important statement’ as it clearly meant that Indian nationalism is based on India’s Constitution. This, of course, makes nonsense of the sequence in which the two came about: India as a nation—and even before that, Indian nationalism—emerged much before the first word of the Constitution was even written. But such is the acute fear—and disdain—of a rightist conception of Indian nationalism that clutching at anything that can work against the idea is normal now.

It was also held in the next few days

Narendra Modi with RSS
workers at a temple in
Adalaj, Gujarat

that Mukherjee had given the RSS the oxygen of publicity that it so craved. This is a strange claim to make. The RSS has never looked for validation from anyone. After all, the BJP not only runs the Union Government, but holds power in most states as well. What irks commentators and intellectuals alike is that their invisible lines have been crossed. For one, with each passing month and year, the degree of ostracism the RSS faced in its 93-year history is going down. Mukherjee’s visit did not lead to this state of acceptance but it was a visible confirmation—like the breaking of a mirror that serves as a reminder of reality—of how much things have changed. And when political images get shattered, the sight is not always pleasant.

The reaction of the Congress party—to which Mukherjee once belonged—



was equally hollow. The various appeals, letters, petitions urging him not to go to Nagpur were hypocritical in their own way: Once a person assumes the office of President, he ceases to be a participant in party politics, and this holds so even after the individual demits it. The manner in which the Congress reacted to the event showed that it has not come to terms with that reality.

The real reason why any engagement with the RSS attracts opprobrium is the post-Ayodhya (1992) categorisation of the organisation as a menace to democracy and even as a 'fascist' outfit. cursory reflection shows this as not only misplaced but mischievous. At no point in its history has the RSS advocated overthrowing democracy. The label 'fascist' is laughable: the severe crisis of capitalism in the inter-war period that led to a breakdown of democracy in Europe has never been seen again in the world. To talk of a sinister organisation running riot in a country where economic growth routinely exceeds 7 per cent every year, where civil society, a free press and other institutions often hem the functioning of governments, is a plain misreading of facts that also betrays a lack of understanding.

But beyond the realm of ideas lies a practical world. Over time, Indians have come to accept the RSS as just another organisation that is engaged in different kinds of social and cultural work. This 'normalisation' is what alarms those who dub the RSS a danger to democracy. Today, some of the most important people in government have RSS backgrounds: President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are notable examples. Has that made India undemocratic or subverted what the country stands for? No. Politics is not even the primary focus of RSS activity. The organisation does lend the BJP its personnel—at the level of *pracharaks* and others—for political tasks, but those are only temporary assignments.

The actual work of the RSS is largely social and cultural. To give one example, long before the Government was able to spread its educational infrastructure in the Northeast in a meaningful way, during the 1950s alone, the RSS and its af-

INDIANS HAVE ACCEPTED RSS AS AN ORGANISATION ACTIVE IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL WORK. THIS IS WHAT ALARMS THOSE WHO DUB IT A DANGER TO DEMOCRACY

filiates brought a number of the region's school-going children to other parts of the country—and big cities like Bombay—where quality educational facilities existed. Over time, its other institutions, such as the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Vidya Bharati, stepped in for the cause of people's upliftment. The ground work done by these has gone a long way in ensuring that RSS is seen as a social organisation and not viewed with mistrust, in spite of sustained propaganda against it.

Why Indians view the RSS in positive light is almost never spoken about either within the scholarly community—where its image as an extremist Hindu organisation continues to be fashionable—and among opinion makers. Historically, the RSS saw a rise in its membership during Partition, when millions of Hindus were displaced in the Subcontinent. The number of its members and count of *shakhas* (branches) in 1947 was exceeded only in 1970, after a gap of 23 years. Stressful conditions have been a significant motivating factor for people joining the RSS. Since 1980—and especially after 1989—its membership has taken an upward trajectory. These were years when India was subjected to terrorist attacks from Pakistan, when Kashmir got embroiled in an insurgency sponsored from across the border. These and a host of other anxieties about India's territorial integrity, communal violence after 1993, and, by the turn of the century, aggressive secularisation in a country that is deeply conservative, were left largely unaddressed. To each of these

phenomena, an uneasy political silence was the seeming response.

In contrast, liberal intellectual opinion continues to harp on themes like 'fascism', 'Hindu extremism'—and after 2009, alleged 'saffron terror'. These have not gone down well among Indians and a part of the response has been a groundswell of support for rightist politics.

The overall result is a huge gap between the lived reality of organisations such as the RSS and the intellectual tropes being used to describe it. Matters have gone so far that the RSS is now seen almost exclusively in terms of an 'other' to describe what liberal India is not.

It took a recent conversation in far-away London between Yogendra Yadav and Amartya Sen to highlight this state of affairs. Yadav was candid when he said that to his mind, "the biggest failure of secularism has been to not sustain a conversation with the ordinary Hindu... I think over the last 70 years, we have forgotten to sustain that conversation."

Beyond the brouhaha, Mukherjee's visit and the reactions to it raise many questions that have no satisfactory answers. Consider the question of engagement with the RSS. For much of Independent India's history, any contact with the Nagpur-based organisation has been considered taboo. This has had its own share of twists and turns. For example, in 1949 Jayaprakash Narayan was one of the political leaders opposed to lifting the ban on the organisation that was imposed after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Yet, three decades later, Narayan had no compunction in seeking RSS help in his fight against Indira Gandhi of the Congress. Even if one ignores the actual interactions of politics in practice, does it make any sense to declare an organisation that is undoubtedly nationalist a pariah but make vociferous demands for talks with entities ranging from Pakistan to the Hurriyat Conference that routinely decry India? No doubt, some counter-argument could be found for it. But that does not rob the substance of the question: why single out the RSS for this treatment? This, however, remains a question that no one in 'secular India' wants to answer. ■

In God We Mistrust

The Marathwada region of Maharashtra is buffeted by a new wave of Islamist radicalisation

By ULLEKH NP in Aurangabad and Beed



ON QUILA ROAD in the Bir area of Beed in central Maharashtra, a number of star-and-crescent flags on electricity poles flutter in the morning wind as *burkha*-clad women walk past, chaperoning their children to school, and men, mostly wearing skull caps, ride motorbikes, slowing down every few moments to give strangers hostile stares. There are several such flags that resemble Pakistan's less than 500 metres ahead, opposite the Miliya College of Art and Science, swinging wildly to the astonishment of visitors. Not far from here is Hathikhana Muhalla, an address that has attracted much interest thanks to it being the home of Sayed Zabiuddin Ansari, who has other aliases: Riyasat Ali, Asif, Zabi, Sameer Hasan, Aazam Khan and so on. But the one that has an

immediate recall value is Abu Jundal, the Karachi-based handler of 10 Lashkar-e-Toiba operatives who launched the 2008 terror attack in Mumbai that left 188 people dead. A handful of people we speak to in Hathikhana Muhalla are uncooperative: they refuse to offer any help with directions towards the home of Ansari (Jundal), who has been in Indian custody ever since 2012, when he was deported to the country by Saudi Arabia, where he had gone on a Pakistani passport.

While Hathikhana Muhalla seemed like a locality in denial about a former resident as notorious as Jundal, locating the home of Fayyaz Kagzi—because of whom Beed has resurfaced in newspaper headlines—was a breeze. Kagzi was the one to indoctrinate his friend Jundal to join the Indian Mujahideen (IM), an entity formed by a section of former SIMI activists sworn



Masjid Jamil Baig stands next to Mahmud Darwaza, one of 52 gates in Aurangabad

“THAT THEY ARE NOT GETTING JUSTICE IS THE COMMON REFRAIN OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO TRY TO LEAD MUSLIMS ASTRAY EITHER ON THE INTERNET OR OUTSIDE”

FAIZ SYED founder, Islamic Research Centre



to waging a jihad against the Indian state, and later the LeT. He would have been 36 now had he not died in Saudi Arabia. Some weeks ago, Saudi authorities concluded after comprehensive DNA tests that the man who blew himself up outside the US consulate in Jeddah on July 4th, 2016, was Kagzi. The DNA samples collected by the Arab country matched those dispatched to its investigators by India.

Kagzi's name has kept cropping up again and again thanks to a large number of plots and conspiracies he has been a part of in India and abroad. Before the Jeddah blasts that brought his name to the fore, finally culminating in Saudi Arabia recently confirming his role in the foiled terror attempt of July 4th, 2016, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) and several other security agencies had identified him as the mastermind—as well as the fund-raiser—behind several bomb blasts and an arms-haul case. His name figured prominently in the 2010 German Bakery and the 2012 JM Road blasts in Pune. He had allegedly also trained in Hindi the LeT's 26/11 operatives, including Ajmal Kasab, who was later found guilty in court and executed.

Kagzi's was Jundal's mentor and the duo had recruited youth for the LeT to launch terror strikes in various parts of India. Both

were involved in the 2006 Aurangabad arms haul case, which had arms and ammunition being procured to target key spots in India with terror attacks. They had to flee India after security forces got wind of their plan and went after them. They fled to Pakistan via Nepal or Bangladesh and then, shortly after 26/11, shifted base to Saudi Arabia, from where they continued to remote-control the operations of the IM and LeT in India. Kagzi was reportedly also part of the 2006 Mumbai train blasts that killed 200 people. That incident, officials say, confirmed that central Maharashtra, from where many of the conspirators hailed, had become a hotbed for Islamist terror activities in India. Kagzi is survived by his parents, sister and brother, who still live there.

Riyaz Ahmed Kagzi resides in a middle-class home in Beed's Shensahnagar, close to Aqsa Masjid, which he is known to frequent. A former principal at Miliya, he still spends a lot of time with students who visit him seeking help with their studies. His neighbours are fond of him and he is popular in the area. One of them was keen to direct me to his home, saying he is the father of 'Shaheed' Kagzi. Kagzi Senior may be an avuncular figure among his neighbours, but he comes across as bitter and combative about radicalisation that is rising at a fast clip among Muslim youth. In a brief conversation with *Open* that ended with him asking us to leave his home, he, like his neighbours, referred to his son as *shaheed* (martyr), displaying no sense of pity whatsoever for the victims of terror. Instead, he sought to blame the media for chasing the families of "martyred souls". He retorted furiously when asked what community leaders can do to contain the menace of radicalisation through the internet and offline: "I can give no answer for that. It is a problem, just like rapes and suicides in this country. Delhi is the rape capital of India. What can one do about it?" In the background, his other son called out to warn his father against talking to the media. Piqued and reticent, they both ended the conversation abruptly. To be fair, reports in the regional media said that Kagzi Senior is afflicted with various ailments while his son is being treated for a mental illness.

A local police officer tells me that following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and as a result of riots in the 1980s and 1990s, hundreds of Muslims became radicalised, especially under the umbrella of SIMI. They soon found a sanctuary in Beed and several other areas in the Marathwada region that was once under the Nizam's reign. Besides Beed, places such as Latur, Parbhani, Nanded and Aurangabad remain fertile turf for radical outfits such as the IM. Intelligence reports suggest that lately they have become an easy recruitment ground for Islamist entities and terrorist groups such as ISIS. Indian security officials have stated in various interviews that they believe Kagzi to have joined the ISIS in 2014 before he was asked to carry out suicide strikes in Saudi Arabia, a country that, ironically, is home to financiers of Islamism worldwide. As teenagers, both Kagzi and Jundal were part of the hardline Ahl-i-Hadith group. Kagzi later pursued an undergraduate course in science and then did his BED from Maulana Azad College in Aurangabad.

"The anger that you perceived at Kagzi's home is typical of the anger that many others from the community feel in Marathwada



and, of course, many other parts of India where Muslims believe they are being victimised and treated as second-class citizens, especially after 2014 when Hindutva parties came into power,” a police officer in Aurangabad says. “Whether their grievance has any merit is another matter,” he adds, “But the perception is rampant, especially in the Marathwada region where polarisation along religious lines is deep and where Muslims account for a good chunk of the total population.”

A section of pundits and intelligence officials also say the rise in anti-India sentiment and an affinity towards ultra-Islamist groups in Marathwada are a result of a series of factors, including its backwardness as a drought-prone region, the sway that Islamic clerics hold, and other historical and political reasons. Apart from the region having had Islamic administrative influence in the past under the rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad, it became a nerve centre of discussion around nationalism and Islam in the 1980s and 1990s. It was in Aurangabad and Beed in the aftermath of the Ayodhya crisis that SIMI leaders made incendiary speeches that came to attract sedition charges. It was again in Aurangabad that SIMI and later the IM recruited new hires from among students through their anti-India speeches and videos.

STAR AND CRESCENT FLAGS FLUTTER IN THE MORNING WIND. THERE ARE SEVERAL SUCH FLAGS THAT RESEMBLE PAKISTAN'S IN THE BIR AREA OF BEED

In his book *Islamism and Democracy in India*, Irfan Ahmad argues that a masculine, exclusivist majoritarianism masquerading as democracy was behind the hardline stance that SIMI began to adopt in the 1990s. ‘The point is that Hindutva’s agenda of the Hindu state and its fierce anti-Muslim nature spurred SIMI’s radicalization. Worth noting is that over fifteen per cent of its total members came only from the state of Maharashtra where the Shiv Sena, a constituent of the Sangh Parivar, had been in power and involved in one of the worst riots ever in Bombay. This also explains SIMI’s diatribe against polytheism and Hindutva,’ he writes. He emphasises that ‘as long as the Nehruvian project of

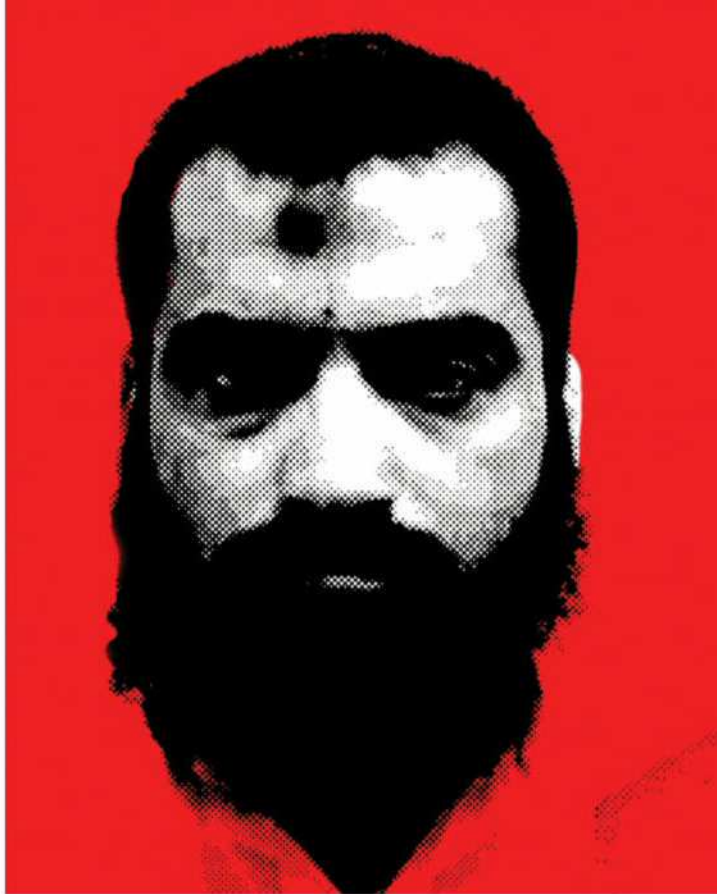
a plural, non-monopolistic, secular and democratic India was hegemonic, Islamist radicalisation was almost non-existent. Even a party as rigid as Jamaat underwent moderation.'

A VICTIM MENTALITY HELPS nobody, asserts Faiz Syed, a lawyer and founder president of the Aurangabad-based Islamic Research Centre. Seated in his office at the city's Rohilla Galli area, he says the life of Prophet Muhammad offers enough on how Muslims should live in a place where they are a minority. Syed, 38, who organises tuitions for school students, laments that the biggest scourge of Muslims in the Marathwada region is the educational backwardness within the community that makes them vulnerable to the blandishments of extremist groups. He works in tandem with state officials to dispel negative notions harboured by Muslim families in the region. "That they are not getting justice is the common refrain of those people who try to lead Muslims astray either on the internet or outside," he says, adding his team makes videos imploring members of the community not to fall into the trap of subversive groups. "I give talks against radicalisation and distribute them among social-media groups. We try to reach out to as many people as possible," he says. Trained in computer science, Syed later studied law before becoming a businessman (he sells watches). He is of the view that India offers Muslims social mobility and opportunities to come up in life. He has incurred the wrath of a section of clerics for discussing matters such as sexuality, women's rights, etcetera, on social media. His argument is that the Prophet himself had shown Muslims the way by allowing his wives to train in horse and camel riding, and that his first wife was famously adept in business.

Like Syed in Aurangabad, in many other parts of the country, influential Muslims have come out to fight the curse of young people being lured by organisations such as ISIS. In Mumbai, M Suhail Khandwani, vice-president of the Memon Chamber of Commerce, has hired cyber security experts and joined hands with official agencies to monitor the 'online' behaviour of fellow Muslims. As reported by *Open* earlier, the security experts especially observe the youth who are likely to be led astray by self-styled jihadists preying on the gullible to wage a war against the country—or to die in overseas conflicts in places like Syria and Afghanistan. Dr Abdur Rahman Anjaria, who heads the Islamic Defence Cyber Cell of India, has volunteers across the country scanning social media—from Facebook to Twitter to Instagram and beyond—for objectionable content, jihadist appeals and hate speeches on so-called '*kaafirs*' (infidels).

But then, terrorism is a hydra-headed monster that can attract even the most educated folks from privileged backgrounds. In several parts of India and the world, Muslim youths have joined organisations like ISIS and others for 'humanitarian reasons'—for instance, after watching the hardships of immigrants from troubled countries like Syria and Iraq on TV or video clips.

Tufail Ahmad, senior fellow for Islamism and Counter-Radicalization Initiative at the Middle East Media Research Institute, Washington DC, has travelled widely in the country to assess



SAURABH SINGH

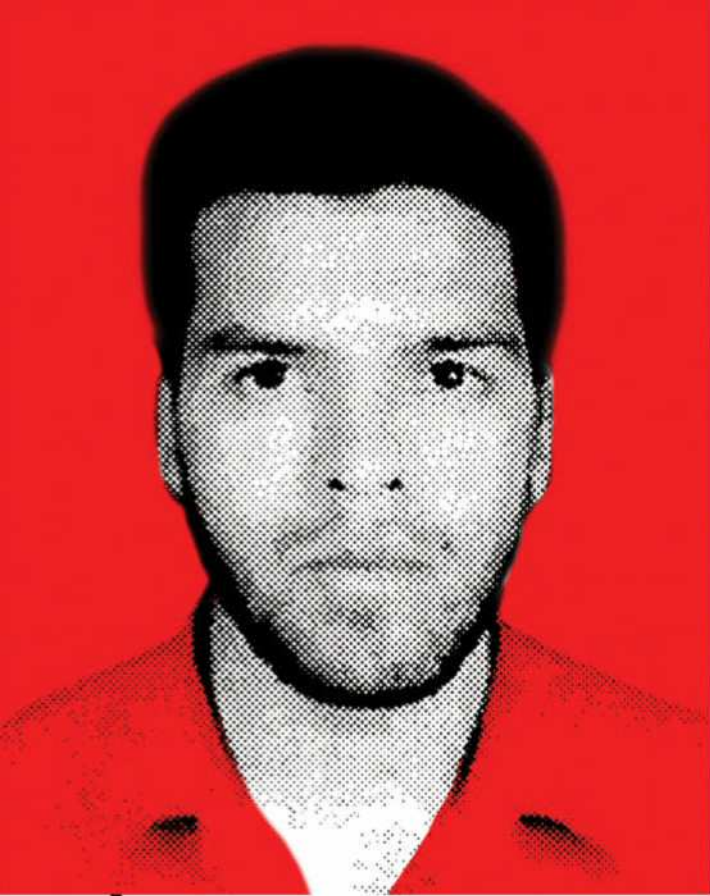
various degrees of radicalisation among Muslims and to find its causes and consequences. He believes that teachings by Islamic clerics, the celebration of historical wars by Muslim leaders, and propagation of Islamist ideas by Urdu and other Islamic media contribute to a gradual radicalisation of youths.

Notably, in Latur, during Ramadan—the holy month of fasting—Islamic leaders organised a conference to mark Ghazwa-e-Badr, the first Islamic battle fought by Prophet Muhammad. Speeches were delivered by Muslim leaders lauding the victory of Muslims over *mushrikeen* (idolaters) in Ghazwa-e-Badr on the 17th of Ramzan in March 624 CE, Ahmad points out. "Such events lead to reverse radicalisation of Hindu youths against Muslims and encourage radical Hindu groups such as Bajrang Dal, Hindu Yuva Vahini and others," he notes.

The next step, according to him, is a militant outlook towards social life and politics. Due to religious radicalisation, Muslim youths tend to pick up guns, he says. "Fortunately, in India the number of such youths is not high. The police and intelligence agencies can certainly contain such radicalisation if community leaders are roped in to help," Ahmad adds.

According to him, however, it will be erroneous to say Islam alone is a source of radicalisation. "Any conflict or war is essentially rooted in two sets of causes: long-term, fundamental and historical causes; and short-term, associated and transient causes. For example, radicalisation in Kashmir is backed by the Pakistani state and is historically rooted in India's Partition," he opines.

The short-term, associated causes for radicalisation include global geopolitics in which some youths is radicalised to fight against big powers, says Ahmad. And some states step in to help such young men with money and arms. "In the 1980s, Afghanistan, the US and Saudis backed the [anti-Soviet] jihad, now the



FAYYAZ KAGZI WAS THE MENTOR OF ABU JUNDAL (LEFT). THE DUO HAD RECRUITED YOUTHS FOR LASHKAR-E-TOIBA AND WERE BOTH INVOLVED IN THE 2006 AURANGABAD ARMS HAUL CASE

Pakistani state is backing the current jihad against the US and allies in that country. Similarly, in the Middle East, some countries initially backed the Islamic State (ISIS),” he points out.

Like Irfan Ahmad, he also believes that in India, some Muslim youths were radicalised over the years due to Hindu-Muslim riots. Such youths feel alienated and aggrieved because a number of Hindu leaders associated with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party tell them to ‘go to Pakistan’ or foster communal politics and anti-Muslim hatred from time to time to win votes.

Tufail Ahmad goes on: “I recently travelled through Gujarat where the Disturbed Areas Act, introduced by the Congress and now used widely by the BJP, ensures Muslims cannot buy land in Hindu areas and vice versa. The use of this Act is being encouraged by the BJP to create a Hindu political community to win votes. This fosters ghettos and alienation that will certainly result in the radicalisation of Muslims in future. Unless India gets a political leader whose intentions, not just promise, are to take along all communities together, some form of radicalisation will remain in society.”

What we must keep in mind, he says, is that Muslim radicalisation can always be contained effectively by the police and intelligence agencies because Muslims are in minority, but radicalisation of Hindu youths will be difficult to contain because it is not

easy to crack down against the majority community, especially not in democracies where some leaders so openly and shamelessly depend on youth zealotry to win votes.

In India’s context, thus, Muslim and Hindu radicalisation feed each other.

ARATHER TEPID AND frivolous argument put forth by certain sections of anti-terror experts is that one cannot dictate policies based on the requirements of a particular region. They insist on targeting the ideology responsible for the trouble. By this logic, the armed forces should have been pulled out of Kashmir. Besides, a section of intelligence agencies are already watching areas with a potential for turning into terror hubs. Kerala, Assam and Marathwada are some of them. “That these areas are watched closely stems from the realisation that Muslim youths from these places have left the country in large numbers in response to ISIS’s call to arms. Certainly, security agencies have to follow a geography-oriented policy in order to crack down on crimes and to track down wrong-doers and suspects,” says a senior Home Ministry official. He adds that in some places with high religious polarisation, there is hardly any case of recruitment from outside, which, he says, means that it is sometimes geographical proximity and historical links that spur radicalisation. Thankfully, as a proportion of India’s Muslim population, the country’s jihadist-inspired terrorists are among the fewest globally.

Yet, to not be on the guard would be a mistake that the country would live to regret, warn pundits and Islam scholars, including Washington DC-based Michael Kugelman and Mumbai-based Zeenat Shaukat Ali. After all, Marathwada was a haven for SIMI activists and it is where the police seized 43 kg of RDX, AK 47s and ammunition on May 10th, 2006. It was in Parbhani that the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) busted a module of ISIS two years ago for communicating with IS handlers. The likes of Nasir Bin Yafi Chaus and Sheikh Iqbal Sheikh Kabir Ahmed were charged with inciting youths to join ISIS, which, though it has lost territory over the past four years, continues to draw Muslim youths under its spell. ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had established a so-called ‘caliphate’ and grabbed hold of Iraqi and Syrian territory in June 2014 before the group began to lose its occupied territory.

Near Aqsa mosque, a shopkeeper named Asif prescribes a piece of advice for young Muslims whom he says are “excited” to hear the story of Fayyaz Kagzi and his martyrdom. “In the Middle East, Arabs don’t consider Indian Muslims as equal to them. Which is why they always use you as cannon fodder even if you join the ranks of the most ferocious organisation. You die like a dog, that is it. Nothing more, nothing less,” he says; 9/11 and the 2002 Gujarat riots, he believes, have altered Muslim minds everywhere.

In localities where star-and-crescent flags outnumber those of political parties, even such realistic remarks about Indian Muslims being despised by Arabs don’t seem to dissuade youths from being inspired by a *shaheed* like Fayyaz Kagzi, who, many have apparently been schooled to believe, will be rewarded with 72 black-eyed virgins in heaven. ■

Politics of Bloodlust

Violence between the Left and the Right in Kerala shows no sign of ending despite their secret parleys

By ULLEKH NP

ON THE MORNING of 30 July 2016, within two months of him taking over as chief minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, accompanied by leaders Kodyeri Balakrishnan and V Sivankutty, broke protocol and drove down to Mascot Hotel, a heritage building that once housed British officers during the First World War. There was no pilot jeep and no security paraphernalia accompanying them. It was a pre-planned meeting. Vijayan's mission was to meet Kummanam Rajasekharan, the Kerala president of the BJP; O Rajagopal, the veteran BJP leader and lone legislator of his party in the state assembly; and Gopalankutty Master, an RSS heavyweight in the state. The sole agenda of the meeting was to find ways to make peace.

Such a meeting was considered unthinkable and was not disclosed to the media for a while, for there was a mutual understanding to keep these talks low profile; the intention was to gradually communicate the need to bring the rank and file on to the same page. It had to be confidential, and the attempt was to thrash out, step by step, ways to bury the hatchet between the extremely hostile cadres on both sides.

The man who moderated the meet was Sri M, the Kerala-born, Madanapalle-based spiritual leader who is close to the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat as well as Vijayan and Balakrishnan.

After the leaders exchanged morning pleasantries and settled down to business, Sri M explained the purpose of the meeting—the violence that has scarred the state for decades, and taking place mostly in the chief minister's home district of Kannur, could not go on. Just that month in Kannur, after two consecutive murders of CPI(M) workers, a BMS leader was hacked to death in front of his family. It is also a fact that political murders rise in years when the CPI(M) and its allies are in power, and go down during the years of Congress rule—a number that is used by the Sangh to paint the Left as violent, and by the Marxists to indicate the increase in vicious provocation from the right wing.

For a state with the highest levels of literacy, a state with social indices comparable to Nordic countries, such violence was inexcusable, Sri M said, adding that one mustn't engage in a blame game

about 'who started it' if the goal was to make peace. The ongoing cycle of bloody madness had no place in God's Own Country, the catchphrase sold the world over to attract tourists. In such a highly aware, networked, considerably urbanized society, even a single death should make its leaders hang their heads in shame, he went on. The past was past. One couldn't have yesterdays impinging on tomorrows; it was time for reconciliation and give and take. A consensus to save lives of men across the political spectrum was long overdue; the political will to weed out this menace could not wait any longer, the sage goaded.

But the meeting did not get off to a good start.

The RSS's Gopalankutty Master was in a belligerent mood; he had his set of grievances and tonnes of pessimism about the negotiations that were going on. Despite repeated assurances over the decades, peace had remained elusive. He felt—as I understood after I met with him—that whenever the Marxists had come to power, the RSS, at least since the late 1980s, had been singled out for barbaric strikes by the CPI(M). Apparently, he sat with his legs crossed in a manner that was not only meant to be disrespectful to a chief minister—who also held the charge of the home portfolio—but also combative.

To everyone's surprise, though, the otherwise irascible Vijayan smiled and agreed to hear him out. The tone of the meeting changed. Sri M intervened mildly to suggest blaming one another would take the participants nowhere. Soon, sensing the chief minister's apparent preparedness to engage, Gopalankutty Master mellowed.

The idea behind keeping the high-level, unofficial rendezvous between the top leaders on both sides under wraps had also to do with the fact that people on either side could play spoilsport. After all, there were leaders, sidekicks and gangsters with strong party affiliations who thrived thanks to the violence.

The leaders dispersed after agreeing to convince their cadres about a ceasefire, as best as possible.

Both the RSS-BJP and the CPI(M) leaders would meet again, even in Kannur, but—despite the good beginning as is evident from the readiness to talk—the killings have shown no signs of subsiding yet.

The state ranks third in crimes whose motives are attributed to 'political' reasons. Given its social indicators, this is paradoxical



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

The trajectory of political assertion in Kannur and the nearby districts has shown no change of track. On the other hand, there are charges that there's an effort to import the 'Kannur model of politics' to the southern parts of the state as the RSS versus CPI(M) confrontations have begun to surface elsewhere, especially in Thiruvananthapuram where the BJP has been making some gains.

In such a situation, the optimism engendered by the government-initiated talks soon wore away.

The CPI(M) leaders believe that the RSS side hopes to reap benefits and make inroads into their turf by creating martyrs. The Marxists also hit out at the national campaigners of the RSS for seeking to generate optics as part of a nationwide campaign to taint opposition parties. They are of the view that the Sangh leaders in the state are simultaneously emboldened by their prospects nationally and crestfallen about their relatively slow gains in Kerala.

The RSS and the BJP lay the blame on the chief minister for his alleged failure to clamp down on the political murders in the state. While a section of their leaders based out of Delhi called for imposition of President's Rule in the state—one of them appealed to the RSS men in Kerala to gouge out the eyes of the CPI(M) cadres—the RSS men in the state offered a more balanced comment. Gopalan Kutty Master put such frivolous remarks to rest by stating that officially, the RSS was against dismissing the state government.

To those outside Kerala, the Redtrotty campaign has ensured the projection of a distorted image of the ground reality where the selective emphasis on the RSS versus CPI(M) narrative has

completely submerged the violence generated by the Congress, the PFI, the Muslim League and other parties. Using their considerable 'WhatsApp army', the right-wingers in other parts of India have continuously painted a picture of the CPI(M) as the 'butcher' of Kannur. The CPI(M), on its part, has no campaign machinery at the national level, something which Pinarayi Vijayan concedes. This is not to suggest that making the violence in Kannur an issue worthy of national debate has to be discouraged. The idea, as Nandakumar of the RSS himself tells me, is to let the truth out.

Though it is widely accepted that the registration of crimes in Kerala is high, the higher incidence of political crimes is a matter of grave concern. The state ranks third in crimes whose motives are attributed to 'political' reasons. In 2016, Kerala (with fifteen deaths) ranked third after Uttar Pradesh (twenty-nine) and Bihar (twenty-seven). This is paradoxical for a state whose social indices are comparable to that of the developed nations. For instance, dowry-related death was zero in the state in 2016 (in Jharkhand it was thirty-seven). Similarly, there have been almost no killings over caste, honour, love affairs and class conflicts (133 people were killed over love affairs in Gujarat in 2016; in Rajasthan, sixteen people died that year in class conflicts). Nor does water or money really create enmity here—while forty-five people were killed in Gujarat in disputes over these issues in 2016, in Kerala the figure stood at one. As for rape-related deaths in 2016, Kerala reported two, Maharashtra nineteen and Madhya Pradesh eighteen.

Besides, when it comes to Kerala, it isn't as easy as it sounds for

the ruling CPI(M) to 'influence' the murder cases with the help of the police. Most of the senior police officers, says former DGP Alexander Jacob, are apparently Congress or BJP supporters. It is only in the lower rungs of the police force that the CPI(M) holds sway. Vijayan has even come under attack in his party's district-level conferences for failing to lasso senior officers of the state police who, they allege, are out to tarnish the chief minister's image.

And so, if one glances even cursorily at claims by non-Kerala players in painting the state as a haven for murderers—and especially the contention that the communists are out to get the RSS-BJP workers—it is easy to see these are more or less politically motivated, and are not entirely based on truth.

Last year in Kannur, a group of assailants pounced on a local leader of the BJP, Sushil Kumar, attacking him with a sharp blade akin to a surgical knife. Kumar was seriously injured, but he survived. He lost no time in blaming the CPI(M) for this attempt on his life—and even claimed that he saw and knew some of his attackers. The initial probe led to a list of pro-Marxist hired guns he had 'identified'. After a few rounds of interrogation, the police decided that Kumar could be wrong about the men who had stabbed him.

Surgical knives obtained from medical stores had been used against a Muslim League worker in the district some time earlier, prompting the cops to examine the link between the two acts of crime. Weeks of investigation led to the arrests of workers of the Campus Front, a feeder outfit of the PFI. The Kannur town DSP, P Sadanandan, who was part of the investigating team, tells me that this attack on Kumar followed a spate of clashes between the Campus Front activists and the ABVP students who often brought in RSS toughies to the College of Commerce, a 'parallel college' (a private tuition centre of sorts) in town, to intimidate their rivals. The Campus Front members who were caught also complained that they were routinely harassed outside the campus by BJP-RSS workers. Yet, despite such constant bickering between the ABVP and the Campus Front in that part of the town, the Sangh student leader decided to name CPI(M) men as his attackers; he also claimed that he could identify some of them, but then retracted his statement when the police called his bluff.

DSP Sadanandan had been involved in the investigation of the TP Chandrasekharan murder case of 2012 which led to linking one of the accused, TK Rajeesh, who owed allegiance to the CPI(M), to earlier killings, including that of KT Jayakrishnan Master of the RSS.

There is no doubt that the CPI(M) has done its share in turning Kannur into a political battlefield, and the killings of TP Chandrasekharan—leader of a breakaway group, the RMP—and Ariyil Shukoor are a testimony to that. Shukoor was killed a few hours after he and a few other Muslim League workers had allegedly attacked a vehicle in which CPI(M) district secretary P Jayarajan and other party workers were travelling, on 20 February 2012, near Taliparamba. Shukoor was killed in Kannapuram, while his associate suffered stab injuries in the same assault. The case is being probed by the CBI.

But not all murders in the area have had to do with the CPI(M), as some national campaigns suggest. Earlier in 2012, another



The CPI(M), unlike the RSS, has no campaign machinery at the national level, something which Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan concedes

ABVP leader, Sachin Gopalan, was killed by the Campus Front activists. Prior to that, in 2005, thirty-year-old Ashwini Kumar of the RSS, who was also the Hindu Aikya Vedi district secretary, was bumped off by suspected workers of the National Development Front (NDF), avatar of the PFI. In retaliation, many Muslim homes in Iritty where Kumar was killed were torched and looted. Deep fissures within the district RSS over the issue meant that there were rumours about a 'financial settlement' between the top brass of the RSS district leadership and the NDF. And yet, several RSS leaders blamed the CPI(M) for the attack.

On 19 January 2018, a three-member gang of suspected PFI men slew Shyam Prasad, an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) student, on his way back to his home in Koothuparamba on a bike at a place called Kommeri at around 5.30 pm. He died on his way to the hospital. Several RSS men in and out of Kerala charged the CPI(M) with the attack though initial reports had made it amply clear who the attackers were. The PFI versus RSS clashes are now as common as the RSS versus IUML clashes earlier. Raghav Pandey, a research fellow with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (IIT Bombay), even used the occasion to launch into a tirade against communist atrocities and Stalinism.

The frequent murders in Kannur, followed by immediate polit-



In a pre-planned meeting to discuss ways to make peace, Vijayan conferred with **Kummanam Rajasekharan, the then Kerala president of the BJP**



For a state with the highest levels of literacy, one with social indices comparable to Nordic countries, such violence was inexcusable, **Sri M said**

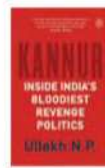
blame games, are ripe case-study material for criminal-law students wanting to know how perceptions are built around a crime. In a case involving the murder of PFI activist Mohammad Fazal that is being probed by the CBI, and in the process has courted controversy over its apparent lack of direction, the CPI(M) has alleged a witch-hunt by the investigation agency.

Inconsistencies in the probe by several independent agencies give credence to the CPI(M)'s version that both the RSS and the PFI are out to implicate them in murder cases because the communists are equally hostile to them both. Court records and CBI's own charge sheet in the case point to inconsistencies in the versions of key witnesses to the crime that took place between 3 and 4 am on 22 October 2006. Witnesses had later said that they were asked to lie to the police by a National Democratic Front (NDF) lawyer and say that it was not the RSS but CPI(M) workers who were behind Fazal's murder. Ajnas and Shahnad, two NDF workers who claimed to have witnessed the killing, later reversed their statement. In fact, one of them was in Coimbatore at the time of the murder.

More importantly, the police are in possession of a video disclosure by RSS worker Subeesh, an accused in the murder of CPI(M)'s K Mohanan at Valankichal. In an indiscreet moment, Subeesh spoke to an RSS leader about Fazal's murder on the

phone; the audio clip of the chat was leaked, probably by some rivals within the Sangh. He is heard telling the RSS leader, an audio that I was able to listen to, that in a bid to escape, Fazal had tried to break through the grills of a home. Subeesh goes on to describe all the details of the escape attempt to the RSS leader. After questioning by the police, Subeesh later publicly confessed that a group of RSS workers, including him, were involved in the murder of Fazal. Ever since, the CBI inquiry into the case has hit a roadblock.

The web of complex lies spun to implicate CPI(M) leaders has attracted much ridicule in local conversations, and given rise to several social-media memes and jokes on the subject, one of which depicts two RSS and NDF men fighting and crying while pointing accusing fingers at a CPI(M) passer-by. On a serious note, however, the botched CBI case strengthens the CPI(M) argument that their rivals lose no opportunity in framing and maligning them as part of a political agenda to weaken the party. However, given its own history of violence, the CPI(M) has been, as it seems, unable to gain political mileage from it. ■



This is an excerpt from Kannur: Inside India's Bloodiest Revenge Politics by Ullek N P (Viking; 232 pages; Rs 499)

CINEMA



THE
DARK KNIGHT
RISES

The politics and poetics of Rajinikanth

By NANDHU SUNDARAM



ALFWAY THROUGH *Kaala*, the latest Rajinikanth starrer, Harida, played by Nana Patekar, visits Dharavi, the turf of Karikalan alias Kaala. The host invites the politician into his house and makes the introductions in an act that should level the playing field between the upper-caste Harida and Kaala, a Dalit. Selvi (Easwari Rao) offers the minister a glass of water, which he turns down. He places his hands above the vessel and politely but firmly declines to drink it. When the women of the house remark that Harida seems to be a nice enough person, Selvi is quick to point out that he wouldn't even touch the water in their house. This scene highlights the politics (of untouchability) of the movie. It is little surprise, then, that Kaala has rightly been hailed as a 'celebration of the subaltern', with its well thought-out use of Ambedkar, the slogan 'Jai Bhim', the blue flag and other telltale symbols.

The film, mired in controversy before release, has done well at the box office after initial hiccups. Released to less-than-usual hype, *Kaala* has, according to trade analysts, crossed the Rs 100-crore mark worldwide in just three days.

The film's release saw stiff opposition from fringe groups in Karnataka, especially on June 7th, the initial date of its release. Rajinikanth's comments on the Cauvery river water dispute had caused much furore. But by June 8th, the film saw a full-on release in theatres to critical acclaim and commercial success.

Prior to the election results in Karnataka, the actor had said the state should release Cauvery water to Tamil Nadu irrespective of which government came to power. The statement sparked outrage, as the actor-politician's comments increasingly do, and the new Karnataka Chief Minister HD Kumaraswamy expressed security concerns over the movie's

release. The Supreme Court refused to ban the film a day ahead of its release, stating rather unusually that 'everybody is waiting for the film's release'.

Produced by Wunderbar Films and backed by Rajinikanth's son-in-law, actor Dhanush, at a cost of Rs 140 crore, *Kaala* is directed by Pa Ranjith and stars Nana Patekar, Easwari Rao and Huma Qureshi in other major roles. The film reunites the team behind *Kabali* (2016), the superstar's previous movie, with both cinematographer Murali G and composer Santhosh Narayanan coming on board again. Editor A Sreekar Prasad replaced Praveen KL.

Politically loaded, the film chronicles a protest of the Tamil speakers of Dharavi, as they are led by Karikalan (Rajinikanth) against a land-grabbing minister, Haridev Abhyankar (Patekar). It expertly plays with ideas of black and white, the ruler and the ruled, the government and the citizen.

The film's director is acutely aware of the space afforded to him and how everything within the frame potentially tells a tale of its own. His story might still be seen as a fable, but Ranjith is responsible enough to keep the fantastical elements to a minimum.

In the 1990s, when Rajinikanth began playing only larger-than-life characters, he spoke for the poor and marginalised. In a scene in *Annamalai* (1992), in which Rajinikanth plays a milkman, he takes on a politician (Vinu Chakravarthy) after which the man undergoes a miraculous change of heart. All through that decade, even when his films were suffused with politics, his offer seemed to be entertainment. In pop consciousness, the superstar's movies of that era may have been escapism, but were gratifying all the same.

On the other hand, *Kaala* lacks a fluent and cohesive plot and is not really a satisfying watch, but

plays with the thalaivar's (leader) image enough to be engaging. The superstar in Rajinikanth is muted as the politics of the movie takes precedence. With his New Cinema influences, Ranjith is concerned about the subaltern of Dharavi and keeps the plot believable, especially in the movie's first half. The film is well-researched and has moments of extraordinary acting from a well-chosen cast.

Many scenes aptly and amply illustrate the strength of the performances. Like, when Kaala first meets Zareena (Huma Qureshi), the romance in the air is palpable even after he asks the woman from his past not to address him as Karikalan anymore (following a particularly intriguing dinner scene).

Rajinikanth offers the best of his theatrics—the style, the walk, the self-deprecating comedy, and, on occasion, that fleeting moment of mature romance. Unlike Billa, Annamalai or Padayappa, Kaala is a complicated man—a leader with a propensity for violence who seems to seethe under the surface. His politics may be simple and clear-headed, but his personal life definitely is not; he is torn between tinges of romantic feelings for a Muslim woman

Tamil Nadu into a graveyard. His comments were perceived to be anti-protest and angered nearly everyone.

When *Kabali* was released, Rajinikanth had not entered politics the way he has now. The anticipation of his political launch had been in the air for an unlikely 15 years. It is widely thought *Baba* (2002), which was more political than *Kaala* (at least to me as a film critic), should have ensured the superstar's new career. But that movie's dramatic flop led to a see-saw of comments from the actor over the years, which seemed neither well thought-out nor focused.

Rajinikanth continues to hold his political cards close to his chest. With his political path still dark, the superstar hits the headlines often, even if what he is saying is not always clear. His phrase 'Aanmiga Arasiyal' (literally, spiritual politics) has got him widespread derision from critics. Apart from his comments on the 126-year-old Cauvery dispute and his 'blind' backing of the project to unite south Indian rivers, Rajinikanth has never made it clear what his political ideology is (*Kaala*, actually, seems to be better at politics than the actor who plays him).

IT IS WIDELY THOUGHT THAT BABA SHOULD HAVE ENSURED THE SUPER

and a more pragmatic relationship with the wife from his hometown of Tirunelveli.

His sons are diametrically opposite—Lenin, the youngest, believes that the system ultimately delivers and wants to make it better, and Selvam, the eldest, is more like Sonny Corleone from *Godfather*, with his violent ways and devil-may-care attitude.

Patekar's Harida is probably the most caricatured of the roles in *Kaala*, but both director and actor manage to bring some refreshing aspects to the portrayal. The pre-interval scene in which Kaala traps Harida inside Dharavi may be the most thrilling for Rajini fans, but is also a testimonial to Patekar's subtler acting skills. A scene with Sayaji Shinde is laugh-out funny in which a smashed Kaala keeps asking the politician who he is.

The movie doesn't exactly write out Rajinikanth, the superstar. His soft and harsh sides, perfected in *Baashha* (1995), return to impress us. The opening scene expertly captures both—a ball faced by Kaala is declared wide after it removes middle wicket during a cricket match, and, in the subsequent sequence, he strongarms and stops the razing of a *dhobi ghat* in the middle of the slum. Rajinikanth has never been averse to playing older roles, but in *Kaala*, his younger self is present only in animation, which must be a first.

Many pages are being written on how the politics in the movie can be linked to the more pertinent one outside the confines of film. Cynics say that it is all puppetry—politicians and actors (the lines between the two have long been blurred in Tamil Nadu) using a volatile situation to achieve their own ends.

Rajinikanth has drawn flak for his comments on the Cauvery issue as well as his widely televised statement on the May 22nd Thoothukudi killings over a protest against a Sterlite copper smelter. To summarise, he said that such protests would turn





STAR'S NEW POLITICAL CAREER



PTI

Rajinikanth in *Baba*; (below) the actor-turned-politician amidst fans in Chennai in March

But 67-year-old Rajinikanth is not unfamiliar with the odds being stacked against him. In 1980, shortly after being written off, he made the trailblazing *Billa*, a remake of the Amitabh Bachchan-starrer *Don*. Even his journey until that point was the road less travelled. His negative roles of the 1970s were an unlikely sign of the superstardom of the 1990s. The Marathi bus conductor raised in Bangalore, Shivaji Rao Gaekwad, who was active in theatre right from his school days, has indeed come a long way.

Compared to the squeaky clean onscreen image of the late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MG Ramachandran, Rajinikanth has played more complex roles. In his debut in K Balachander's *Apoorva Raaganagal* (1975), he played an abusive husband. In *Moondru Mudichu* (1976), his character lusting after his best mate's lover, rows away indifferently even as the friend (played by Kamal Haasan in an extended guest role) falls into a lake. His cigarette manoeuvre, which originated in that movie, has endeared him to movie-goers down the decades. Here was an actor who could woo the audience by merely running his fingers through his receding hairline. The image makeover as a hero of sorts came with the acclaimed *Bhuvana Oru Kelvi Kuri* (1977). The punch lines came with *Murattu Kaalai* (1980). The acting credentials came with *Mullum Malarum* (1978).

By the 1990s, he was the reason why there were no superhero movies in Tamil. With the astonishing success of *Sivaji* (2007) and *Enthiran* (2010), he grew his lead over the other stalwart of Tamil cinema, Kamal Haasan. On the internet, Rajinikanth was the homegrown Chuck Norris with many of the American actor's jokes being reworked to suit the superstar (The gag that Rajini alone could close a revolving door comes to mind immediately).

Then came the brief but well-advertised periods in various hospitals, including one in Singapore, followed by the disastrous failures of *Kochadaiyaan* (2014) and *Lingaa* (2014). Critics queued up to write him off once again.

Meanwhile, Pa Ranjith had joined a gutsy and upcoming group of directors making New Cinema in Tamil. With films like *Sethu* and *Kadhal*, Tamil cinema ruthlessly abandoned the dreamy, fantastical style of the 1990s. With the turn of the millennium, the movies got real, urgent and spoke to life. Ranjith joined this elite group with the success of *Attakathi* (2012) and *Madras* (2014). He then came under the radar of the superstar's daughter Soundarya who brought her father and the director together. The story of a Malaysian don fighting for the rights of Tamils impressed Rajinikanth enough to collaborate with Ranjith. The success of that movie, *Kabali*, brought the two again for another venture, which was announced two years ago.

Now, Rajinikanth has made his chief ministerial ambitions clear. He has said he will launch his own party and announce candidates for all 234 Assembly constituencies in Tamil Nadu. We are still waiting to hear the name of the party. Will *Kaala* put him in office? That's the big question. ■

Nandhu Sundaram is an Ooty-based freelance journalist



MEET THE MANAGERS

The most important
non-players
at the World Cup

By ADITYA IYER



FATE, SOMETIMES TO an even greater extent than tactical acumen, controls the lives of international football managers—the 32 most important non-playing men at a World Cup. From the sideline, these frowning faces in expensive suits will coax, hiss, guide and berate their players towards the opposition's box, towards the crucial end of Russia 2018 and, hopefully, towards the Jules Rimet trophy itself. For Argentina (and hence, Lionel Messi), that man is Jorge Sampaoli—a sun-kissed, attack-minded quinquagenarian, around whose perfectly bald head is said to sit an aura of genius; vouched for not just by Argentines but every football fan in Latin America.

But it was fate (the puppeteer who plays chess with two queens, according to Terry Pratchett) that put Sampaoli in charge of his country's dreams and Messi's legacy, in turn causing a cascading effect on the fates of several other managers around the world, many of whom are present at this World Cup thanks to this incredible chain reaction.

On a fateful day in September 1995, Sampaoli, a small-time coach of a small-time amateur club called Atletico Belgrano de Arequito in the outskirts of his hometown of Rosario, lost his cool with a match official. When the official evicted the screaming manager from the ground for misconduct, he would've expected Sampaoli

to walk back to his car and drive home to Rosario. Only, Sampaoli found a tree just beyond the premise, climbed on to a branch with a view of the ground and began screaming instructions to his players from there—much to the shock of the official and the amusement of a newspaper photographer who happened to be passing by.

According to the myth, the only words of Sampaoli audible from the vantage of his tree were high-pitched pleas of '*contra-ataque*', or counter-attack. The tree-perched Sampaoli wasn't visible to his players either, but it didn't matter. His photograph, snapped by Sergio Toriggino and published in *La Capital de Rosario*, was seen by everyone in Rosario, earning him more than just his 15 minutes of newspaper fame. The newspaper was also read by Eduardo Lopez, president of Rosario's premier club, Newell's Old Boys.

Lopez was impressed enough with the photograph, and the passion the picture exuded, that he instantly pulled Sampaoli out of obscurity by offering him a coaching role with Argentino, a feeder team to Old Boys. This was an offer he couldn't turn down, for Newell's Old Boys was managed by Sampaoli's hero, Marco Bielsa. The story goes that Sampaoli used to tape Bielsa's radio interviews and play it over and over again until he could recite his guru's philosophies verbatim. Now, thanks to fate and a photograph, he had an invitation to share workspace with his idol.



Brazil's coach Tite;
(left) Argentina's
Jorge Sampaoli



PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

“Lopez saw that photograph and called me to manage Argentino. Everything started with that,” Sampaoli is quoted as saying in a recent interview. “Since then I have not stopped managing.” With his hyper-aggressive mantra, Sampaoli earned a reputation for fearless football, which was misconstrued by Argentines for a devil-may-care attitude. So he cut his teeth in the smaller leagues around South America, polishing his full-press skills (3-3-1-3, in formation shorthand) in Peruvian and Chilean club football. After filling club Universidad de Chile’s cabinet with a shelf full of trophies, Sampaoli was given the reins of Chilean football (his first national team) in 2012, saddled with the instruction of taking Chile to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. Sampaoli did better than simply help Chile qualify.

In the pre-quarters of Brazil 2014, Sampaoli’s team was a coat of varnish away from knocking the hosts out of the tournament. Had striker Mauricio Pinilla’s 88th minute shot flown half-an-inch lower, Chile would’ve made the quarters and Sampaoli would’ve been a shoe-in to replace Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella at the

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end of the tournament. Instead, the ball crashed against the base of the crossbar, the prodigal son remained away from home, in Chile, where he would lead the country to its finest footballing hour the following year, against Argentina no less.

In the 2015 Copa America, Sampaoli led Chile to their maiden intercontinental title, beating Messi’s Argentina on penalties. There were widespread rumours at this point of Sampaoli replacing Gerardo Martino, Argentina’s then-head coach. But it was an open secret that Martino was close to Messi’s family, so Sampaoli found a

greener pasture across the Atlantic, for his first stint as a manager of a big club in Europe, Sevilla.

But before he left, Sampaoli recommended the Chilean job to another Argentine, Juan Antonio Pizzi, who knew better than to tinker with the philosophical structure Sampaoli had built from ground up. Riding on well-ingrained strategies, Pizzi led Chile to their second Copa America title in 2016, once again beating Martino’s Argentina. Once again on penalties. Messi, unable to handle



Germany's World Cup winning coach Joachim Löw

three consecutive heartbreaks at the finals, retired. And this time Martino was fired.

While Sampaoli was busy dragging back Sevilla into the Champions League after a four-year hiatus, Pizzi failed to navigate the greatest ever Chile team, riding on the success of back-to-back Copa America titles, through the World Cup qualifiers

and was sacked. But just when Pizzi's dream of managing a team in Russia seemed buried, others, elsewhere around the world, lent him a few helping palms.

Two weeks after Ange Postecoglou secured his native Australia's qualification for Russia, he resigned, claiming his job had taken a 'personal and professional toll' on him. Postecoglou's spot as manager of Socceroos was filled up by the Dutchman Bert van Marwijk, who had helped Saudi Arabia qualify for this World Cup after an absence of 12 years.

Van Marwijk, who once took Holland all the way to the final of the 2010 World Cup, was disappointed with the way Saudi Arabia's football association had treated him and his coaching staff despite what he had achieved, so he quit in January 2018. He was replaced, temporarily, by the man who failed to take the United Arab Emirates to Russia, Edgardo Bauza. Bauza too is an Argentine, whose ebb and flow as an international manager seem eternally entwined with those of Sampaoli and Pizzi.

A quick backstory. The aftermath of Pizzi's Chile defeating Martino's Argentina in the final of the Copa America Centenario in 2016 resulted in Bauza being named as the new Argentina coach. A Messi-less Argentina (remember he had retired?) was always going to be a challenge, and after just eight World Cup qualifier matches, in which the *Albiceleste* ranged from poor to pathetic, Bauza was sacked and Sampaoli was given a long-awaited call-up.

"I've had this dream as a boy," an emotional Sampaoli said, quitting Sevilla half-way through his contract. "I cannot turn this down. Even if this means I may not have the opportunity to coach again at European clubs, I feel I have to do this." Even as Sampaoli turned around Argentina's qualifying fortunes (with Messi choosing to return in the nick of time), Bauza looked to find a team he could call home at the 2018 World Cup. He failed with the UAE and caught a break with a qualified Saudi Arabia, where, as we know, van Marwijk had been expelled and had replaced Postecoglou at Australia. But after being in charge of Saudi Arabia for just five friendlies in 2018, Bauza was shown the door. And in walked Pizzi, the man responsible for the start of Bauza's international managerial career and also its end.

AT THE SURFACE, some bosses present at Russia 18 may seem not to have participated in the football manager's version of musical chairs. But claw deep enough and you begin to see their connection with the cosmic swirl. Take Colombia's Jose Pekerman for example. The country's one-man coaching insti-

tution took Colombia all the way to the quarterfinal of the 2014 World Cup, where they narrowly lost to hosts Brazil. For this, and his outstanding contribution to a football-maniac country, Pekerman was given Colombian citizenship—a day he called the proudest of his life, a day he let go of his Argentinian past.

As an Argentine and the head coach of Argentina at the 2006 World Cup, Pekerman experienced perhaps the worst day of his life. Not only did Argentina lose the quarterfinal to hosts Germany, Pekerman alone was blamed for the loss. Why? Because for a reason yet to be comprehended, Pekerman decided to not feature Messi in the starting eleven; and neither was he brought on as a substitute. Argentina lost on penalties and Pekerman knew he wouldn't be pardoned by the country of his birth.

That day in Berlin, as Pekerman's head drooped in shame, Germany's Joachim Loew—then an assistant to head coach Jurgen Klinsmann—got his first taste of victory at the knockout stages of a World Cup. In his 12-year uninterrupted reign as Germany's top boss (the longest serving international manager in the game today), Loew has caused his fair share of shake-ups; most significantly with the Brazilians. On Germany's road to victory in Brazil 2014, Loew made the five-time winners rethink the fundamentals of their football with a 7-1 massacre in the semi-finals.

Had Sampaoli's Chile or Pekerman's Colombia beaten Brazil in the pre-quarters and quarters of the 2014 edition respectively, as they had threatened to, Luis Felipe Scolari may still have been Brazil's head coach. But Loew's devastation opened a country's eyes to how far the ball had fallen from the field. Scolari went, weeping, and the ultra-defensive Dunga returned from the wilderness, frowning. So keen was Dunga to avoid future 7-1s that he took Brazil down a path he would've otherwise shuddered to go; the faith-keepers of the beautiful game had become 11 Dungas—dull, drab and defensive.

Dunga was sacked as soon as a nation awakened and in came, frolicking, the antithesis to Dunga, Tite. Tite's Brazil breezed through the World Cup qualifiers in record time, as he urged his players to burst across the field in mesmeric triangles. His tactics are altogether unique; it is both a nod to Brazil's romantic past and a handshake with the current times of possession-football.

Long shackled, the soul of Brazilian football is said to have been freed by Tite, a man widely considered to be a reincarnation of Tele Santana, the inimitable coach of Brazil's 1982 campaign. Before Tite, only one man in all of South America came close to being compared with Santana; in Argentina he is known as *El Loco*, or the Mad One. His name is Marco Bielsa, Sampaoli's spiritual guide in life and football. ■

SALON

ART 48 | CINEMA 52 | BOOKS 56 | HOLLYWOOD REPORTER 64 | NOT PEOPLE LIKE US 66

GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

Move over bromance, it's time for female bonding in Hindi cinema 52



(L-R) Shikha Talsania, Sonam Kapoor Ahuja, Kareena Kapoor Khan and Swara Bhaskar in *Veere Di Wedding*

Joining the Dots

Movements and conversations of modern Indian art

By Ritika Kochhar

DEATH AND redemption, meditations and drama, the epic scale of Mahabharata and Ramayana and other poetics are some of the themes at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Noida. Kiran Nadar and KNMA curator, Roobina Karode have never shied away from imagining the infinite canvas. "I used to teach many of these works in college but I'd never seen them," Karode says. "I'm lucky to actually get to see these works—something that Mrs Nadar and KNMA have made possible."

That's precisely the feeling you get when you walk into this exquisite exhibition from KNMA's 4,300 (approximately 6,000 if you count each artwork in a series separately) strong collection of modern and contemporary



PHOTOS COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART



Indian art that ranges from the late 19th-century miniatures to rare works by Raja Ravi Varma to international names such as Anish Kapoor and Raqib Shaw. Karode, a leading curator in India, is using recent acquisitions in Kiran Nadar's collection as an opportunity to relook at the existing collection and find new germinations and thoughts in Indian art through the configurations. You understand the weight of the task in front of her when you see the way she has built this exhibition so that it maps movements, times and conversations. You also understand the weight of her choices when you realise that over 200 South Asian artists are represented in KNMA's permanent collection, encompassing a diversity of time-periods, art historical contexts and relationships.

The conversation with KNMA starts even before you enter the exhibition. KNMA Noida is situated within the vast HCL campus building, where it shares space with the large cafeteria. Guards at the gates have grudgingly learnt to allow in guests, but it's still sobering to realise that works by seminal artists, which should have been preserved by government museums, are finding a home in a private building and often overlooked by techies as they rush to have their lunch.

The second conversation is regarding the direction KNMA. Kiran Nadar has been inspired by the Guggenheim, MoMA, and the Whitney, which

started out as private collections and this exhibition is supposed to connect the dots between the past of India's art history and the future. It is important that art is brought closer to the larger public. KNMA has a huge responsibility in filling that gap. And how we shape our mandate for the future," says Karode.

In the near future, KNMA has an ambitious programme planned where a gallery at the Saket branch will host week-long programmes with young art practitioners. But at the present exhibition, the artworks are astounding. As Karode says, "These are landmark works in the careers of these artists."

Krishen Khanna's incredible *Pieta* (1988) is juxtaposed against A Ramachandran's *Anatomy Lesson*. Made in 1971, the year of the Indo-Pakistan war and Bangladesh's Liberation and when Ramachandran's reputation as a social commentator was at its peak, the painting distorts Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* so that the Good Doctor in the original is turned into Hitler and the doctors watching become morally dead spectators of an orgy of blood and gristle.

Another legendary 1970 work by Krishen Khanna—*Che Dead: The Photograph* can also be found here. Despite the 18 years between *Pieta* and *Che Dead*, the colours, workmanship and the themes create a juxtaposition that focuses attention on the value of a dead hero, destruction, redemption and sacrifice.

But Karode doesn't let you wallow. The theme shifts from the unearthly and metaphysical to the earthy and material as you're faced with a fantastic early Souza called *The Family*. This is one of the few works at the show that KNMA has displayed at earlier exhibitions, but it's still stunning, overshadowing even the Himmat Shah sculptures and Avinash Chandra paintings next to it. The Himmat Shah sculptures have never been displayed in Delhi before. They were cast in London and came to the artist after the KNMA retrospective in 2015. Early works by Ram Kumar (the

"In India, we're lagging so far behind. There are no rigorous contemporary museums. One museum isn't enough"

Roobina Karode curator,
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

show is dedicated to him) Padamsee and KK Hebbar's *The Tile Factory* show both the change in styles as well as the early brilliance of the Progressive artists. Karode mixes in sculpture as well, with Somnath Hore's tiny *Boy with Cloak*.

And then you come to a room that, even in this exhibition of classics, burns itself onto your retinas. Karode, who belongs to a family of architects, has created a special space for Imran Qureshi's red-and-white *You who are my love and my life's enemy too*. "It's so powerful that it kills other works, so I decided to shorten the room and make the room of the same colour as the painting, so that we distil the essence of the painting. We also added a painted white frame to make it quieter and more meditative, but the painting still erupts with the spatter of blood. It talks about the scale of human violence. Though the work is disturbing, there is hope for salvation too in the petal of flowers appearing," she says.

A room full of Meera Mukherjee sculptures, as well as artworks by Jamini Roy, Arpana Caur and Biren De reveal repetition and resurrection, as they lead you to a beautiful Aisha Khalid twin carpet tapestry that was made by the artist after the 2014 terrorist attack on a school in Peshawar. Steel and gold-plated pins create identical designs on two carpets to create *In two forms and with two faces—with one soul, Thou and I*. One carpet is made of red velvet while the other is a washed-out military fatigue cloth. Between the two carpets is an almost iron maiden-like torture chamber made of thousands of pinpoints.

(Clockwise from left);
Mohan Samant's
untitled work (1953);
Pushpamala's
Abduction/ The Pond;
Nalini Malani's
Ecstasy of Radha 2





Imran Qureshi's *You who are my love and my life's enemy too*; (below) Mrinalini Mukherjee's *Van Raja II (King of the Forest)*



the real and the fantastical with text and symbols. An entire room is devoted to 15 colourful panels from Naidu's seminal 18-panel Mahabharata series—one for each Parva or canto of the epic, executed between 1972 and 1974 and shown in Delhi in 2006. Children love the Naidu room, it seems, but on a more abstract level, both artists return to folk art and text as an important part of their work.

This return to folk art symbolism is reflected in K Laxma Gaud's *Toran*—a huge sculpture that was last seen at the India Art Fair in 2018, and Mrinalini Mukherjee's macramé *Van Raja II*, which was a part of her retrospective in 2015 at NGMA. Pushpamala's 2012 photo-series on Sita's abduction in the Ramayana bring us full circle to Khanna's *Pieta*. This sets up another interesting juxtaposition of themes, including the epics and the gaze of gender.

Nadar and Karode are responsible for helping India embrace a number of artists like Zarina, Nasreen Mohamedi, Nalini Malini, Himmat Shah, Rameshwar Broota, often through retrospectives. It's a responsibility that involves loans, insurance policies, no-objection certificates, and sometimes even restoration and refurbishments. But it's an essential part of maintaining the art history of a country, especially since they've taken on the additional role of educating school children. "Unfortunately, in India, we're lagging so far behind. There are no rigorous contemporary museums. One museum isn't enough. We're doing an injustice to ourselves, to the immense talent in India," laments Karode. In the meantime, this exhibition is a reason to celebrate the best of Indian art and an intelligent collector. ■

New Configurations runs at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Noida, till July 31

And with this begins the wonderful women's section of the exhibition. The golden beauty of Lal Ded's verses on Nilima Shiekh's canvas is juxtaposed by an unexpected early Arpita Singh untitled work from 1971 that is awash with colour and Nalini Malani's *Ecstasy of Radha II* (2004). The opposite wall has a huge meditative abstraction by Zarina. It counterpoises an Aisha Khalid and a textile series by the recently

deceased Priya Ravish Mehra and immediately establishes the continuity of the abstract tradition despite the different materials and countries.

The exhibition also moves beyond the usual Delhi, Baroda, Bombay, Lahore and Dhaka-based artists. Karode has included a series of works by J Sultan Ali and Reddeppa M Naidu who were active in the south. Ali's work uses folk art for inspiration and blends

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CINEMA



Girls

Just Want to Have Fun

Move over bromance, it's time for female bonding



Veere Di Wedding;
(below) *Queen*



By Shaikh Ayaz

VEERE DI WEDDING, a recent all-women Hindi comedy, includes a masturbation scene, complete with a vibrator and the bliss of orgasmic release on actor Swara Bhaskar's face. Even male actors think twice before performing that most 'taboo of acts' on screen. Featuring Sonam Kapoor, Kareena Kapoor and Shikha Talsania alongside Bhaskar, not just this scene, but nearly everything about this buddy comedy—with its drinking and smoking, swearing and general fuck-you attitude—has come under flak. Not surprisingly, certain guardians of 'Hindu' culture (and their grandmothers) seemed the most incensed. Daring or disgusting, empowering or embarrassing, or simply boring, no matter where you stand on the *Veere Di Wedding* debate, the film—call it a 'chick flick' at your own risk—is a rare event in the testosterone-fuelled, all-male gated enclave of Bollywood. Rarer still, for its rejection of that much-tossed about and maligned term, 'feminist'. There's a reason why its female cast has repeatedly emphasised that this is a light-hearted peek into the inner life of a girl gang and attempts to read feminism into it would be to miss the point—and all the fun, too.

To bond over food, travel, shopping, men, sex and other existential forest essentials is normal and *Veere Di Wedding* is designed precisely to normalise the normal. As Swara Bhaskar, who's fast filling the firebrand activist-feminist spot long vacated by Shabana Azmi, says, "It's taken 105 years for mainstream Bollywood to make a film about four girls who are friends and not falling in love with the same guy. I've said this again and again, but I think it bears repetition. People saw four girls who are in a certain urban setting being realistic to what young, urban working women and their lifestyle is—we do curse, some of us more than others, we do drink. We're empowered by our choices."

Female agency, in recent years, has emerged as an interesting cinematic tool—and a highly profitable one. The female-centric film is no more a box-office risk. Recent examples like *Queen*, *Pink*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and now, *Veere Di Wedding*, have set the box office on fire, ushering in a new era of fromances and creating a genre that lets women see their real selves reflected on the big screen. Men have enjoyed that privilege for decades, after all—cussing, lusting, objectifying, generalising and bro-yoying their way into a *Hangover*-style carefree haven. If *Hangover* is made with an all-women cast, it would be an entirely different film. The reason is simple: women tend to bond in a different way from men. Female bonding is face-to-face, as one online piece notes. Male bonding, in contrast, is relatively shoulder-to-shoulder.

Male humour, according to Christopher Hitchens, 'prefers the laugh to be at someone's expense, and understand that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste.' That ought to be music

to the ears of Bollywood's bromance merchants. Author Fran Lebowitz puts it even more bluntly (as told to Hitchens), "The cultural values are male; for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty. Also, humour is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what's more male than that?"

Applied to Hindi cinema, that's true. Traditionally, the industry has devoted a great deal of time and effort to bromances and male bonding, sidelining the female territory completely. The rise of fromances has been recent but nothing short of remarkable. With Kangana Ranaut's *Queen*, Hindi cinema seemed to have had its very own *Thelma and Louise* moment. While Ranaut, along with Deepika Padukone, Alia Bhatt and Swara Bhaskar *et al* have been anointed Bollywood feminism's poster girls, Sonam Kapoor has been quietly adding her own high-fashion flagship charm to the 'chick flick' genre, beginning with *Aisha*—the champagne-soaked soul sister to *Veere Di Wedding*. What *Veere Di Wedding* seems to be suggesting, among other things, is that if *Pyaar Ka PUNCHAMA* is no guilty pleasure for men, why should *Veere Di Wedding* be seen as embarrassing? If men can objectify women, why shouldn't women serve the opposite sex a taste of some of their own bitter medicine?

The #MeToo movement coinciding with a wave of neo-feminism has brought the issue centre stage. Think about it. Just a short while earlier, would Philip Roth's death have triggered such a backlash from mainly female critics who find the ultimate male Jewish-American's fiction derogatory and an impediment to the female wave? One Roth reader compared her relief at his death to the comfort of taking 'my bra off after a long day'. Without undermining the 'chick flick' territory, *Sex and the City*, which incidentally celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, has contributed in a fundamental way to how we see the fun side of women.

THINK BACK TO Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Pink* (2016). It's a fine example of igniting a women's revolution of sorts. The subject of female choice and her right to say 'no' to male provocation lay at the heart of *Pink*. Yet, the female bonding of *Pink* is distinct from what's seen in *Veere Di Wedding*. Though both films are set in Delhi, the world of *Pink* would be likely more relatable to the numerous young small-town middle-class girls who share not just an apartment but also life in the big city. (Set in Bombay, Madhur Bhandarkar's *Page 3* evoked a similar feel. The working girls share an intimate bond as roomies. The Lata Mangeshkar number *Kitne Ajeeb Rishtey* encapsulates that bonding.) *Veere Di Wedding*'s posh South Delhi girls inhabit a make-believe world of luxury products, while *Pink*'s Taapsee Pannu, Kirti Kulhari and Andrea Tariang, as working women, might merely aspire to these trappings of the high life. The degrees of separation is more than sevenfold. The bonding among *Pink*'s protagonists is based less on the idea of mutual fun and excess than mutual survival and closing

(L-R) Scenes from *Sonata*; *Lipstick Under My Burkha*; and *Pink*



ranks in the face of an ominous threat. Before the film gets down to its investigative thriller mode, there's a moment when Minal Arora (Taapsee Pannu) tries to lighten the mood after an alarming few days. She reminds her roommates that they haven't even smiled in days. "*Toh hanso* (then laugh)," advises Falak Ali (Kirti Kulhari), and the three break into unguarded mirth. Evidently, the laughter would be short-lived. But this scene ties in perfectly with Aparna Sen's *Sonata* (2017); only the characters are older. Still, they are happily single and probably more footloose and fancy-free than *Pink*'s far younger girls. Azmi's Dolon Sen spends much of the film blotting, dangling a glass of wine even as the 'prude' Aruna Chaturvedi (Aparna Sen) exudes a more guarded presence. (Call it an astute case of counter thinking, role reversal or an inside joke at the swapping of regional identities, Mijwan's Azmi gets to play a Bengali to the Calcutta-born Sen's UP Brahmin.) But close friend Subhadra's (Lillete Dubey) arrival helps loosen their inner demons, supplying the womenfolk unending moments of laughter.

"Who the hell was looking at his profile? With those thighs, thunder thighs!" Subhadra says, invoking the memory of a college professor she's probably had a crush on. This is exactly the sort of no-holds-barred dirty conversation you'd find in a male-only bar. With wine-soaked laughter, they gather in a football team huddle, hurling digs, teasing, sharing, abusing and bullying. Why hasn't this film made the moral police squeamish? Could it be because the women are older and well beyond the purview of moral appraisal? More likely, nobody saw it.

Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* appeared the same year as *Sonata*, but didn't have the privilege of being quite as niche. It got conservative India's panties in a knot, quickly turning into a cause célèbre. Pahlaj Nihalani, the then

Recent examples like *Queen* and now *Veere Di Wedding* have set the box office on fire and created a genre that lets women see their real selves reflected on the big screen



Censor hawk, found the film “too lady-oriented” and refused to let it pass. This ‘too taboo to be true’ story of four small-town women, led by the widow Buaji (Ratna Pathak), flashed the ultimate middle-finger salute to Indian patriarchy. Buaji is a much-needed rarity on Bollywood screens and the way Ratna Pathak plays her—with her libido upright and lusty designs on a man half her age—you wonder why this powerhouse doesn’t do more films. Buaji is joined by women from other socio-economic backgrounds in a film whose central bonding happens to be for the cause of female liberation—be it social, symbolic or sexual, as in the case of Buaji.

Far removed from Buaji’s circumstances, but one who could just as easily pass off as her fellow traveller is Chandra Akka (Chhaya Kadam) of Ravi Jadhav’s *Nude*. Much like *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, efforts to get *Nude* banned had failed, and thankfully, it made its way tentatively to theatres in April this year. Chandra works at the JJ School of Art as a sweeper, but her secret job is to pose as a nude model for art students. She initiates her niece Yamuna (Kalyanee Mulay) into a profession that explores the female body—an investigation which is just as vital to the world, we are told, as a doctor’s study of human anatomy. In one key scene, she drops her sari at the grand altar of art and with it, all her fears. Through nudity—where all outer boundaries and deeply-held inhibitions collapse—Jadhav sketches some of the most sublime and intimate moments between Chandra and her niece. When Chandra’s husband demands a similar job at the art school for himself, the couple cannot contain their laughter. What will they tell him, the kind of a job it is? And, does he have a body that would inspire art? It seems fitting, then, that Jadhav (a former art student himself) opens the film with Yamuna’s

river-drenched body, the camera caressing her curves. Later on, as she begins to think of nude modelling as a social duty, she looks admiringly at her own oil portrait. Captured on canvas, Yamuna has achieved immortality.

NOTICE HOW MUCH of Indian cinema’s most touching sisterhood moments take place not between friends, but between relatives. When we talk about female bonding, how is it that we forget that in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996)—a distant memory to most cinema-goers now—the homoerotic attraction depicted occurs between Radha (Shabana Azmi) and her sister-in-law Sita (Nandita Das as the young bride)? Or that, years later, Aamir Khan’s *Secret Superstar* depended on mother-daughter bonding in a conservative Muslim family as its fodder for the young *burkha*-clad upstart’s musical ambitions? Or *Nil Battey Sannata*’s mother (Swara Bhaskar) and her efforts to ensure her daughter leads the life she never did? Add to the above list Leena Yadav’s *Parched*, an ode to the unsung pluck of rural folks and to womanhood in the face of oppression.

Talking of *Parched* inevitably leads us to the unlikely bond between Ayesha Takia and Gul Panag in Nagesh Kukunoor’s *Dor*, and finally, wasn’t Ketan Mehta’s *Mirch Masala* the original trailblazer, a worthy homage to the rural woman’s hard-fisted knock at the glass (and class) ceiling? While Hindi cinema is giving Indian women plenty of reasons to celebrate, the good news is not that the young among them are finally being heard. It’s actually the older women, from *Sonata*’s three doyens to *Lipstick*’s Buaji, who are unleashing their golden moment on Indian screens.

Dolon Sen can pop the bubbly now. ■

Bill Returns to the Oval Office

Being inside the head of the world's most powerful man is enough to make you clutch pen and paper tight

By Shylashri Shankar

THE GOOD NEWS for Bill Clinton is that he doesn't have to exert himself to outdo his presidential predecessors. Way before he became US president, Abe Lincoln wrote a murder mystery, *The Trailor Murder Mystery*, and got it published in his local paper, *The Quincy Whig*, in 1846. Abe's dream was to become an Edgar Allan Poe, but alas, his writing style did not rise to those levels, preferring to hew close to his profession. The style is reminiscent of a judge summing up a case for the jury.

Then we come to poor Jimmy Carter, who wrote *The Hornet's Nest* (2001), a saga set in the American South. A reviewer panned it in the *Guardian* as 'an unreadable book, one which leaves other unreadables (like *The Da Vinci Code*) floundering in his lumpen wake.'

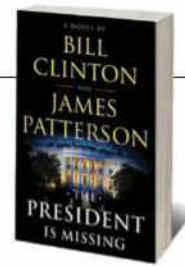
Bill Clinton has done two smart things while creating *The President Is Missing*. First, he has found James Patterson, the author of some 160 novels, as his co-author. Second, the main character of the book is the President of the United States of America, something Bill knows a little about.

So how does the book touted as 'the publishing event of 2018' rate as a thriller? Well, it begins with a bang, and will thrill politicos. It is a Senate hearing where the main character, the President, obviously, is being grilled by his political rivals, with an impeachment looming ahead. Or so we think until we realise that (especially) the most powerful person in the world has to rehearse *ad nauseam* in this age of visual media. Up front, we know that President Jon Duncan is worried about a threat to his country, a McGuffin of humungous dimensions. A cyberterrorist, Suliman Cindoruk, may

be involved, but we don't know on whose side he is. Impeachment is on the cards because leaks suggest that the President had spoken to Suliman, who is Turkish but not Muslim (no Islamophobia will be tolerated by Bill er... Duncan). A Carlos the Jackal type assassin, Bach (who, of course, listens to Bach) has been hired but we don't know who the target is. We are given some clues: the President and his key aides are worried about something they have codenamed 'Dark Ages', and the lights keep flickering periodically in the White House. We also know that President Duncan will do the right thing regardless of how much it costs him. His past—a Prisoner of War in Desert Storm who was tortured but never gave up any secrets, a loyal friend, a loving father, a grieving and recent widower with one daughter, a medical condition (immune thrombocytopenia, by which blood won't clot)—is the stuff that makes for an All American Hero.

Duncan has a simple view of the world—friend or enemy, good or bad, just or unjust—but is set adrift in a universe of brilliant tacticians who blur these distinctions. Foremost among them are the Beltway snakes—political rivals who want to destroy him 'personally and politically' and who include the Speaker

IT IS FAST-PACED AND RIVETING IN MOST PARTS. WE GET A CLEAR GLIMPSE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES A PRESIDENT OF THE US FACES ON A DAILY IF NOT AN HOURLY BASIS



THE PRESIDENT IS MISSING
Bill Clinton and James Patterson

Century Publishing
528 Pages | £3.99

of the House and his own Vice President, who was his rival. The icing on the cake is that there is a traitor in the inner circle of his administration. How do we know this? Because a strange woman contacts him, says she has a partner, and both want to make a deal, and for good measure uses the codeword 'Dark Ages', known only to six people in his administration. One of them is the traitor who has revealed it to this computer coder-woman. President Duncan slips into a disguise—well, grows a beard and thickens his eyebrows (no Jason Bourne this)—and hurries off to meet the woman's partner at a ballgame. No secret service detail, just him as an ordinary Jon meeting a cyberterrorist-hacker. Hence, the title.

I think the title is misleading because we are parked, for most part, in the President's head. The story is mainly narrated in first person and in the present: 'I turn to my left as the top of the squad car takes two bullets, thunk-thunk, and drape my body over Augie's.' Thunk thunk indeed. We see the actions he is taking and (not so slowly) understand the reasons for them. With assassins on the loose, bullets are bound to fly about. We also learn that the coder has created a virus capable of catapulting the US into the dark ages. From then on, it is a race against time to find the solution before the virus finds all the files that make life tick in the US. Much of the conversation mid-way onwards reminded me of *Die Hard 4*, where Bruce Willis teams up with a hacker to stop a cyberterrorist.

Patterson's skill as a storyteller (but not as a writer) is evident. His tips on how to write an unputdownable story (which he has elaborated in an interview



Bill Clinton and James Patterson

AP

elsewhere) are all followed in this book. Don't bother with descriptions, just give the reader enough to follow on that page and keep her interested enough to turn the page. Make it an experience. Keep chapters short. It doesn't have to be realistic. Outline as if your book depends on it. Know who you are writing for and what they want.

"I think I'm an okay writer, but a very good storyteller," Patterson had told the interviewer, and that is spot on. The book periodically inserts a third-person point of view (that of the pregnant assassin), but its beat is staccato, with very little heart driving it. In the President's point of view, however, the telling of the tale is all heart. But that too often tips into melodrama.

It is fast-paced and riveting in most parts. We get a clear glimpse of the impossible choices a president of the US faces on a daily if not an hourly basis. Do you capture a terrorist and avert future deaths if in doing so you will have to kill seven children? Do you do the right thing even if it is going to maim you politically? What can you do in a situation where even your experts can't come up with an answer? I am not giving away anything here because these are the questions that drive the book—that make you, the reader, turn the page. Though the

answers are quite pedestrian and make the reading experience quite shallow, the fact that Bill Clinton is the co-author lends the central character's internal monologues credibility.

The dialogue, however, is another matter.

'Why do I feel like we are chasing our own goddam tails here, people,' says the President.

'Because it always feels that way sir,' is the response. 'It is what we do. We play defense against invisible opponents. We try to smoke them out.'

Surely people in such powerful positions don't speak like this.

Or do they?

Now to the question at the top of everyone's list. How have the co-authors shared the writing of this book? As anybody knows, writing is a solitary business. Co-writing is a hellish one, unless your co-writer is a dab hand at it. What part did Clinton write? Did he give Patterson the first-hand account of what it feels to be a president, or did he also write sections of the book? For an answer, one could check to what extent *The President Is Missing* resonates with the theme of Patterson's other books. Where has he made allowances for Clinton?

The only slight problem was that I

had not read a single book by Patterson. I decided to read *The Black Book* (2017), which Patterson considers to be his best novel in 20 years, but had to stop after the first two pages. Too much melodrama and angst. Happily for us, the melodrama quotient is dialled down in *The President Is Missing*. Clinton's contribution perhaps?

When a former president co-writes a thriller, the reader is tempted to attribute more meaning and magnify the significance of some parts of the story, such as about the nature of his country's friendships. Take the US-Israel one, for instance. In this book, the Israeli Prime Minister (a Golda Meir-ish woman) calls the President 'Jonny', which says it all. Clinton also gets to offer a political oration about the kind of world he dreams of in chapter 128.

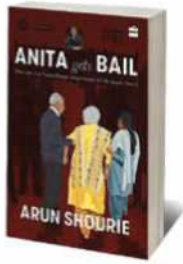
After finishing this book, you will want to hang on to your old (non-computerised) car, pens, paper, and of course, withdraw your money from the bank, change it into gold, and store it under your bed. It is terrifying to realise that the easier our life becomes because of technology, the more vulnerable we become.

Overall, the book ticks the boxes. It is a quick and easy read, and entertaining for the most part. But the 'most gripping and surprising thriller in years', it is not. ■

Travails of Justice

A portrait of the Indian judiciary as a symbol for everything that has gone wrong

By Madhav Khosla

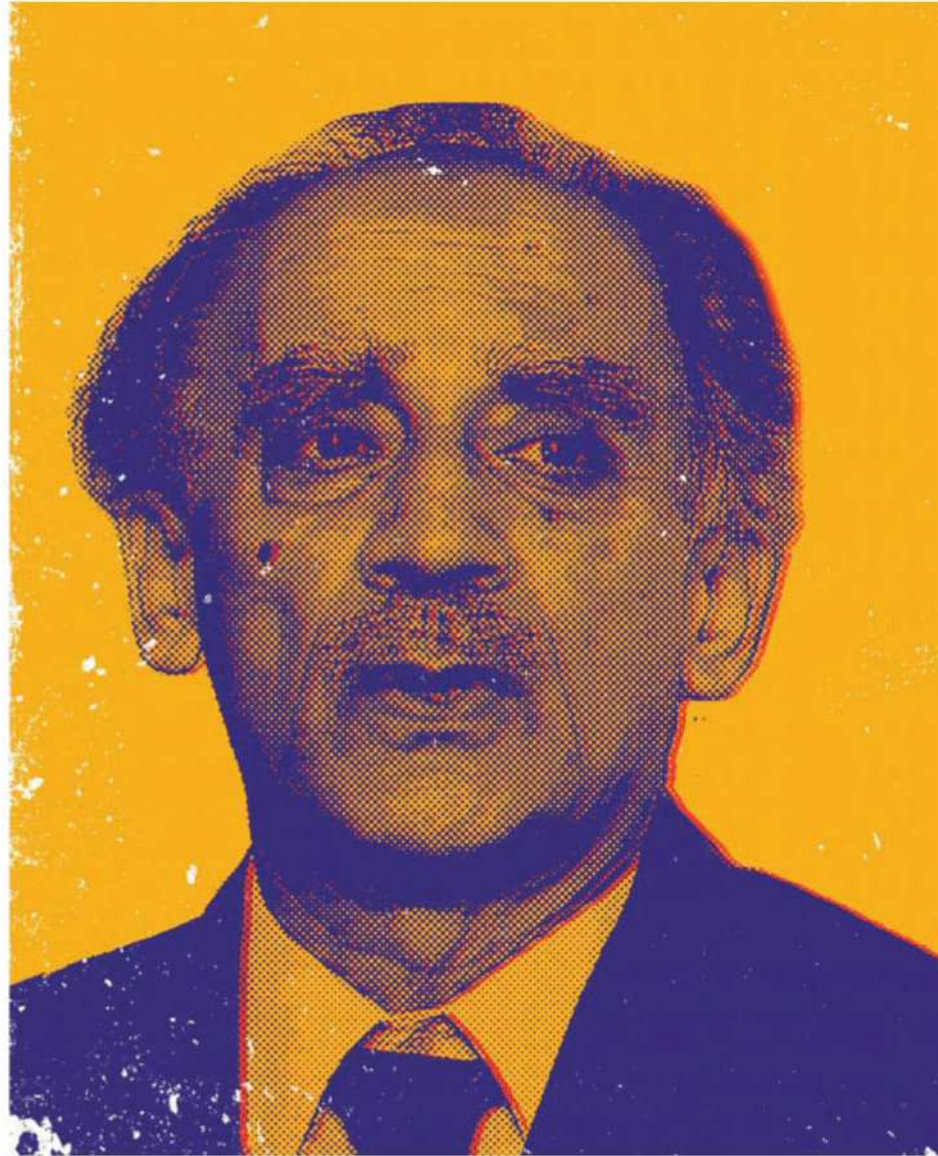


ANITA GETS BAIL
Arun Shourie

HarperCollins
277 Pages | Rs 699

ARUN SHOURIE HAS not always offered the most balanced judgments. His writings can be undermined by their polemical form and exaggerated character. His good and valuable insights are often lost in narratives that seem unruly. Yet, Shourie occupies an important, even unique, place in Indian intellectual life. This fact is not explained merely by his remarkable productivity—Shourie has authored more than 25 books. Rather, it rests on his capacity to consider questions and problems in direct terms, and venture suppositions that would be uncomfortable to many. Even when he is wrong—as he often is—Shourie tackles serious and profound matters, offers critiques that are unafraid, and goes where not all would be ready to tread.

Shourie's new book, *Anita gets Bail*,



SAURABH SINGH

is a fine example of this capacity. It begins in a dramatic fashion: a policeman shows up at Shourie's home with an arrest warrant for his wife, Anita. Shourie proceeds to paint a Kafkaesque narrative. His wife, who suffers from Parkinson's, is charged with illegal construction on land that she had once owned but long sold. Hearings are fixed for particular dates, but the case somehow comes up on other dates. Witnesses fail to appear, evidence is not presented, one adjournment leads to another. For a decade, Shourie's wife had received

notices from the Haryana State Pollution Control Board seeking an explanation for construction that never occurred. The replies were consistent and categorical, but the questions seemed unmoved. Matters had now reached the judiciary. The case in court proceeds lethargically, but the facts are too straightforward to provide a surprise ending. An acquittal occurs after six years.

Anita gets Bail then turns to a somewhat different legal episode: the famous Jayalalithaa case involving disproportionate assets. Shourie writes of

the trial judgment that found her guilty, the Karnataka High Court decision that reversed the finding, and the final Supreme Court verdict that reinstated the guilty outcome. For Shourie, the trial and apex court verdicts were both a 'model of meticulous examination' of the matter at hand. The High Court decision was, on the other hand, 'as much a model of misrepresentation and distortion'. The High Court, Shourie notes, did not simply make a simple mathematical error, as several media reports suggested at the time. More seriously, it 'inflated the income' of Jayalithaa and others involved; it 'deflated the expenses they had incurred'; and, finally, it 'drastically reduced the value of the assets they had acquired'. This claim is mapped out through a careful unveiling of facts. We are shown how loans were tabulated and added, forms of 'double-counting', the inclusion of amounts that were not disbursed, etcetera. The particular details are irrelevant here; the basic point is to demonstrate how they seemed irrelevant even to the High Court.

Analyses of legal matters often present a close reading of judgments. To Shourie's credit, he does more. The final Supreme Court judgment, he observes, is delivered two decades after the charge-sheet is filed. In the interim, every fact external to the law appears to change. Jayalithaa returns as Chief Minister, the prosecutorial team changes, witnesses alter their stance, and so forth. The Supreme Court transfers the case to Karnataka but, alas, matters scarcely improve. Defence tactics find new ways to delay the trial. The prosecutor in Karnataka, whom Shourie views favourably, eventually chooses to leave the case and a new prosecutor with an unestablished record is appointed. The prosecutor's actions leave much to be desired but attempts to remove him are challenged, remarkably enough, by the defence. One series of events follows another, the case barely advances and is hostage to a host of different institutional failures and legal tactics.

The remaining chapters in *Anita*

gets Bail touch upon various other legal affairs. These include matters that have been the subject of much recent public attention, such as the contempt-of-court saga involving Justice CS Karnan and the controversy surrounding the death of Justice Brijgopal H Loya. The episodes reveal facts that are familiar to anyone who has engaged even mildly with the judiciary, though are important enough to merit rehearsing: the utter collapse of the police and the criminal justice system; the tragic situation of the subordinate judiciary; the extent to which lawyers bear responsibility for what occurs; and the fact that the apex court itself can hardly claim any high ground. It is hard to find anyone (or any institution) that comes across well in these narratives, though now and again Shourie does mention the lone rare efficient and honest individual (sometimes a judge;

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sometimes a civil servant; sometimes a lawyer) who does what he can.

There are other features of the Indian judiciary that Shourie identifies, ones that are well-known but less frequently discussed. The most important example is the writing of judgments and decline in judicial reasoning. The lack of discipline that characterises judicial opinions is brought into sharp focus by lengthy quotations: judges refer to sources that have little significance; narrow legal questions are seen as invitations to offer theories on matters large and small;

there is the stunning practice of 'quoting oneself quoting others'; and all of this occurs even in concurring opinions. Often, the reader sadly comes to realise, there is very little law and very little judgment.

Shourie has turned to the pathologies and problems of the Indian judiciary before in two earlier books, *Courts and their Judgments* and *Falling over Backwards* (the first, like *Anita gets Bail*, was broad-ranging; the second was more narrowly focused on the question of reservations). Like those works, *Anita gets Bail* too leaves us with very little to feel pleased about. Shourie recognises that, in the final analysis, all he can do is present an account of the situation. The solutions that he offers—from increased attention to case durations to changes in specific procedural rules to the better monitoring of the implementation of verdicts—will surprise no one. The reality, he knows, is that there is little ideological support or any incentive to reform the Indian judiciary.

If the judiciary has acquired attention because of a breakdown in legitimacy and performance suffered by representative institutions, Shourie makes it clear it is as broken as any other branch of the Indian state. He is aware that the judiciary can bear only limited responsibility for the present state of affairs. The real blame lies in the broader patterns of politics. The story of the Indian judiciary is not necessarily more interesting or any worse than the drawing one may sketch of any of our public institutions. But, on reading *Anita gets Bail*, it does seem that all of India's struggles and deviances, its absurdities and ironies, and its egregious realities somehow play out in one form or another in the courtroom; the space is a symbol for everything that has gone wrong. The place that was meant to be—in Ronald Dworkin's memorable phrase—the forum of principle would appear to have descended into being a forum of perversity. ■

Madhav Khosla is a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows, and co-editor of The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution



MISSING
Sumana Roy

Aleph
267 Pages | Rs 470

The Unknown

Being abstract and absent with Sumana Roy

By Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan

THE ONLY OTHER time I have come across a blind Indian man who is the protagonist of his pages, the only other time *before* I read *Missing* by Sumana Roy, that is, was when I devoured Ved Mehta's autobiography *Face To Face*. It was a funny book for a 19-year-old to read so avidly, also it was odd that I happened upon it at a second-hand bookstore in Paris. Perhaps reading about a blind man navigating his way through India and America reflected my own feelings, being in a strange new country and trying to be a tourist alone, while my father worked. I walked across Paris, getting lost in side alleys and trying to interpret the Metro, while I read Mehta's descriptions of going to the US for the first time, to attend a school for the blind, and how, back in India, his father encouraged him to be as independent as he could possibly be. I think it gave me courage, that book, how laughably easy Paris seemed, even if they were speaking a different language, at least I could see what they were pointing at.

Nayan, the blind man in *Missing*, is nothing like young Ved. All of the book—a week in his life—has him sitting on his chair, having the newspaper read out to him by a young girl, who is equal parts pitying and scornful, and wondering about his wife, who went in search of a girl who was molested and hasn't been heard from since. All of Nayan's news is brought to him by people he employs—a garrulous racist carpenter, his assistant, and his granddaughter, the newspaper reader. Occasionally the house help chimes in. You get the sense that Nayan is (pardon the pun) in the eye of the storm, as it were, inward looking while the world crashes around him,

completely absorbed in thinking about his wife Kobita.

Kobita is a complete cipher, no matter how much time the characters devote to talking about her. If it is possible to make someone vanish by just talking *around* them, that is what has been done to this character. The more the reader learns, the less, paradoxically, do we know. It is as if Kobita is being bricked up behind a wall of description. Who is this woman, why did she leave, will she ever return? We are as helpless as Nayan, waiting for news to be spoonfed to us.

While this is a book about a missing woman, it is populated almost entirely by men. There's one female character, a teenager, the aforementioned granddaughter, but her reactions are almost chalk outlines; it's hard to tell what this character *wants*, let alone thinks and feels. We know she has a boyfriend, but we never meet him; we

know she feels the need to invent stories occasionally, but the whys and wherefores of it all are somewhat abstract. 'Abstract' is actually a good word for the themes lurking in Roy's book—which is a highly polished, almost lyrical read. The images are powerful, each word chosen so carefully, that sometimes I stopped and closed the book—a satisfying hardback—and just smiled to myself at the sentence I had just read. I began by marking the sentences I particularly liked, but then there was a flood of pencil underlines and dog eared pages.

Roy writes, 'What would you do if you were the last person left on this planet, Tushi?'

'I'd leave the toilet door open. There would be no one to peep in.'

Missing is a roundabout metaphor for the Ramayana, as the cover blurb mentions. It makes sense: the missing wife, Kobita, is almost a perfect human being.

But then the metaphor sort of falls apart—Ram was many things, but perhaps not a blind husband, or at least, if he was, by this author's interpretation, it's hard for me to see it that way. His son, yearning in his foreign university, is that Bharata? Is the carpenter who keeps Nayan company every day supposed to be Hanuman?

The reader is led by the hand in an unknown direction, almost like *Alice in Wonderland*; it's half surreal. Roy's first book *How I Became a Tree* has the same effect on readers, it seems almost like a fever dream, you're coaxed to see the world in a new way, and this makes it not a light read, or a quick read, or any of those damning-by-faint-praise descriptors, but a book that lingers and urges you to take your time. ■

SAURABH SINGH

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Jungle Book

The wonderment of being in the wild

By Prerna Singh Bindra

HAVE A FEELING I am doing this all wrong, the review of *Running Away from Elephants* needs to flow, aided by a drink or two amidst the cheery banter of a pub; not primly written during working hours at the desk.

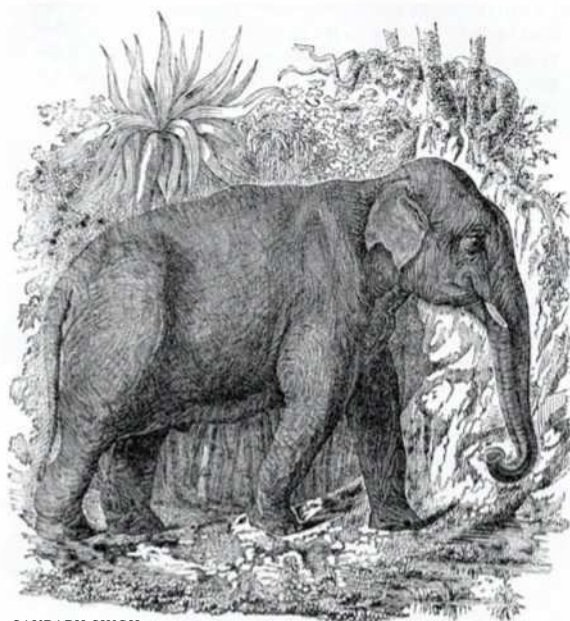
After all, it was 'out of a drunken conversation' that wildlife biologist Rauf Ali—who died at a young 62 in 2016—took the decision to write his story, even though he thought this was best left to famous—if boring—men. Thank the good lord for such spirited discussions, for who else but the most loved (but not always) maverick of the conservation world would have given us this hugely entertaining, no-holds-barred memoir?

As an aside, if you are to read the book, as you must, it will convince you that all good things—teaching, research projects, plans to save the forest and the planet—owe their origin to the bottle. Don't let that deceive you. The author's touch is light, but his treatment of the subject is not, as he discusses a range of conservation issues from the damages caused by the introduction of exotic species to the local ecology of Andaman's & Nicobar Islands, to the lack of good governance and corruption. He writes about how the fortunes of a Protected Area change with individual officers: 'One would be passionate about animals, the next would have four daughters he needed to marry off.' There are no holy cows for Ali—none are spared the acidic pen: fellow researchers, conservationists, politicians, institutions, army men—and above all, the bureaucracy. What makes it palatable is his

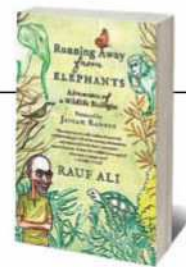
equal generosity with praise.

I find this most refreshing. Books by those of us in the grim business of conserving the environment in the times of Climate Change and the Sixth Extinction are either understandably bleak, or inflicted with an overdose of pompous flatulence as befitting a superior primate on top of the academic chain. Not so Dr Ali, who took his work but never himself seriously. He writes with considerable wit and self-deprecating humour, swinging between episodes of his life's adventures: as a keen young birder, ragging during graduation, researching the behavioural ecology of the bonnet macaque ('nasty little animals') in Mundanthurai, Tamil Nadu, through to his years at Auroville and the Andamans.

Rauf belonged to India's first family of conservation—the Alis of Bombay, who have given the world many wildlifers, none more famous than his ornithologist uncle Salim Ali, who had a 'fierce temper



SAURABH SINGH



**RUNNING AWAY FROM ELEPHANTS:
THE ADVENTURES OF A
WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST**

Rauf Ali

Speaking Tiger
224 Pages | Rs 499

and many eccentricities'. The story I find most delightful is of his insistence to drive his car well into his 70s. '[Salim Ali] was a menace on the roads. While out with him one evening, we were stopped after we drove through red light. By the time he was through the cop was apologising for the location of the traffic light!'

As Rauf followed the family line, he obviously had big boots to fill, a job he did well. He was a pioneer in wildlife science in India and established a Master's programme in ecology. He helped conserve a small patch of evergreen forest connecting critical habitats of the lion-tailed macaque—long before anyone spoke of wildlife corridors. Rauf was instrumental in establishing Protected Areas in the Palani Hills of the Western Ghats, and understood the importance of involving local communities in conservation. He was a teacher, mentor, friend and guide. A host

of India's best known biologists today were his students and have collectively—along with forest officials, colleagues—authored the introduction. I find the greatest measure of his success in Narayana, the inquisitive son of a forest guard he met at his first field station (Mundanthurai) who went on to acquire 'two masters degrees, a doctorate and has been a teaching fellow at Harvard.'

Quirky, candid, witty, edifying, this memoir brims with *joie de vivre*, a perfect reflection of Rauf's all too short life. ■

Prerna Singh Bindra's latest book is *The Vanishing: India's Wildlife Crisis*



THE SNAKE AND THE LOTUS
Appupen

Context
276 Pages | Rs 799

Dark Metal

Getting lost in fractured landscapes

By Jaideep Unudurti

THE ITALIAN ARTIST Piranesi hit the big time in the 18th century with his etchings of Rome. His engravings of the Colosseum and other tourist traps were lapped up by the paying public. Just as his career was peaking, he started a new product line. And spent five years drawing prisons. Imaginary prisons. Impossible prisons. Labyrinthine, immense, utterly imaginary prisons.

Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* belonged to a category called 'Capricci', paintings or 'whimsical aggregates of monumental architecture and ruin'.

These 'whimsical aggregates' also find expression in *The Snake and the Lotus*, a new graphic novel by Appupen (the *nom de plume* of George Mathen).

However, Appupen's world is driven by something far darker than architectural whim-wham. For more than a decade, he has been patiently building brick by brick, panel by panel, his own world of Halahala (named after the poison that Lord Shiva consumes, an unfortunate pharmaceutical byproduct of the Deva-Asura struggles).

There are some novelties in this latest instalment—his silent, no-speech-bubble approach has been replaced by brief text for each page, and more importantly, Appupen eschews the normal multiple panel set up for one image per page.

These huge panels lead to a certain loss of fluidity, making the comic more static, but also more monumental. The eye wanders in page-wide mazes of details and masses of sumptuous black.

The story or the narrative is not particularly substantive. 'In

the Grey of the wastelands, giant towers house machines that keep a diminished, diminutive human race alive on lotus milk. If humans and machines continue unchecked in their ways, nature—existence itself—will be under siege.'

In short, Humanity has retreated into a final redoubt—the 'White City'. There, subsisting on the milk of a mutated lotus plant, and divided into the ruling 'Godling' and underclass of 'Greys', they eke out their final hours as the planet spins itself into oblivion.

Appupen had shown me some of the pages when I interviewed him about his previous work, nearly half a decade ago. I distinctly remember the White City looking like an unholy marriage between the Lotus Temple in Delhi and the Sydney Opera House. Hand-drawn

over years, the form itself is a protest in this age of digital shortcuts.

'White City' is the ultimate 'gated community' in this ruin-strewn wasteland. This idea of a last redoubt has fascinated the science-fiction imagination since the genre began; so have speculations on how class warfare would play out in the future. For instance, the vertical hierarchies in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or HG Wells' *The Time Machine* with its Morlocks and Eloi.

This lode has been mined (too thoroughly), one might say, but more than the narrative, it is the pervasive atmosphere that Appupen sets up. From the opening in these batrachian wastelands, Appupen traffics in every shade of darkness there is, his characters adrift amidst a vista of fractured landscapes, fractured ideologies.

This volume bears testament to his private obsessions, including loss of contact with nature and the atomisation of the individual. Underlying this is a fascinated horror with biomechanoid speculation—living beings turning into machines.

These meldings of flesh and metal have been explored by artists like David Cronenberg in film and HR Giger in art. This thread in the artistic imagination spans the centuries, all the way from Piranesi's prisons with their impossible, confining geometries.

In the end, the only ideology left is to consume. In Appupen's Halahala, even the moon is shattered, half-eaten.

Everything consumes and, in turn, is consumed. ■





JOHN TRAVOLTA

'I love playing specific guys, not just John Travolta kind of doing it'

OVER THE DECADES, we have seen John Travolta in various avatars. For many, he will always be the slick-haired Danny, totting a cigarette and burning up the dance floor in *Grease* (1978). For others, he will be the terrorist/agent in *Face/Off* (1997), and of course, who will ever forget the cold-blooded assassin Vincent Vega of *Pulp Fiction* (1994)? We can now see Travolta as the crime boss John Gotti in Kevin Connolly's *Gotti*. Travolta's wife Kelly Preston plays his wife in the movie as well. It is a role that Travolta has been pursuing for the last seven years, and it's one that shows that the man retains his acting chops.

Why have you been wanting to play Gotti?

He just fascinated me as a very complicated character. He behaved in such an interesting way with his family and his crime life, and he was a colourful character. He was someone who was kind of fun to grasp, he had integrity to what he did, and he believed in his decisions on life. And I think that is kind of interesting. I asked many people in my research, 'He took from your business and why did you love him?' And they said, 'Because he protected us if we went into the red.' So, he would take a percentage of your business, but if you were going to close, he would never let your business close. So, the people were rooting for him and I had never heard of a gangster [who had] people rooting for him. But I guess that was part of his cachet; he bailed people out. So, he had a global kind of concept in a very specific way. He aided people's survival, otherwise he would not have been loved and admired to the degree and level that he was.

Why did you choose Kevin Connolly to direct the film?

Because Kevin grew up in this neighbourhood in New York and he loved and understood the whole Gotti era, and he knew it to a point where I said, 'Kevin, you and I know it, but the audience may not understand the dates, times and events, and we have to clarify that.' But he loved it so much that he just assumed that everyone understood the playing field. So I loved that he understood it, and he's [a director] who I think has a vision and he is an artist and I think he knew what kind of a movie he wanted to make. And that is why I chose Kevin. He had several incarnations and none of them quite got it. One of them was too violent [for] a classic gangster shoot-up film. The other guy was maybe too much on family and could not balance it. Finally, he got it right. It's a combination of both.

What was it that attracted you to Gotti's character?

As an actor, I've been around for so long and have played so many different characters that I am always challenged by a dynamic character to play. You love the way he walks and talks and his style and verbiage. He was someone that I

could really hold on to and play. I love playing specific guys, not just perhaps John Travolta kind of doing it. But to really be the character, to become Gotti, I [would have to] give a performance.

Gotti did have style. Where does your own fashion sense come from?

I think that initially it came from my mother. I think she always thought that people were each other's scenery and that we have to look at each other. And the sad thing that happened for a moment in the late 60s was that people thought it was egocentric to look good. Then finally you learn that maybe it's not egocentric but maybe it's a polite and well-mannered thing to look nice for each other... 'cause we are not looking at ourselves, and maybe it's a generous gesture to be of good appearance. And my brother-in-law was a photographer for *Vogue* when I was a teenager and he dressed us all. He dressed the women and he dressed the men. My first pair of bell bottoms, my first suit, were all from my brother-in-law; so it was kind of in the family to try and look your best at events or for school or what have you. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

A Refreshingly Candid Relationship

Ranbir Kapoor and **Alia Bhatt** appear to have decided they will not let fear of the paparazzi or gossip mongers come in the way of their relationship. The young pair, who are currently dating by all accounts, have been refreshingly candid and unguarded about showing the world how they feel about each other. From Ranbir being spotted attending a preview show of Alia's *Raazi* to an interview he gave *GQ* magazine in which he admitted the relationship "is really new right now", you have to hand it to the famously low-profile-in-love leading man for putting himself out there.

The couple made their first public appearance at Sonam Kapoor's wedding reception. Since then, they've been seen coming and leaving the set of *Brahmastra* together, and last week pictures emerged of Alia on a dinner date with Ranbir, his mum Neetu Singh, his sister Riddhima Sahni, and his niece Samara. Tabloids have noted that the 7-year-old is clearly a fan of her uncle's girlfriend, as apparent in photographs that show her holding Alia's hand as they left the restaurant.

Even **Pooja Bhatt**, Alia's half-sister, has begged the media to back off. Asked recently by journalists to comment on Alia's 'friendship' with Ranbir, Pooja reportedly said her sister was doing a great job entertaining fans with her performances and deserved to be "left alone" to conduct her private life the way she wants.

Together or Not?

Speaking of new couples, **Priyanka Chopra** and **Nick Jonas** have the international tabloids working overtime as they continue to travel across the US, sparking rumours of a whirlwind romance.

The couple famously spent Memorial Day weekend together taking in *Beauty and the Beast* at the Hollywood Bowl, then attending a

Dodgers game in Los Angeles. The same weekend, they were papped letting their hair down with the singer's friends on a yacht. But talk has really gotten serious since Priyanka was seen accompanying Jonas to his cousin's wedding in New Jersey this past weekend.

But don't expect any grand revelations from PC, who's had enough drama last week after she had to apologise to fans after an episode of *Quantico* drew fire for a controversial storyline in which Indian extremists falsely pinned a terror conspiracy on Pakistan. When protestors demanded that the actress be dropped by the brands she was associated with, the social-media intelligentsia arose in defence of Priyanka, insisting that she was not to blame for a fictional television plot. Still, the actress, likely under pressure from her brands, put out a tweet apologising for having hurt the sentiments of people who were upset with the episode.

In Need of a Bail-Out

This '*bade dilwala*' star has once again come to the rescue of this up-and-coming young actor whom he launched in a remake of a popular 80s hit. The failure of that film, and a serious legal case that the actor is involved in, pretty much put the brakes on his career, but his mentor has now bankrolled a new movie for the fella.

When his advisors recommended that he keep a safe distance from the kid who could be in serious trouble on account of the court case, the star instead pledged to stand by him. Insiders are saying he's offered the services of his own battery of lawyers to the actor and his parents, and he's making calls to pull strings wherever he can.

The mentor hasn't been able to coax a reluctant film fraternity to cast the boy in new projects, but he's offered to star in a film with him if that's the only way he'll get any outside work. ■



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

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