

WHO

Christian Michel, copter middleman

Christian James Michel, a British businessman, was extradited to India from the United Arab Emirates on December 4. He is alleged to be the middleman in the ₹3,700 crore AgustaWestland helicopter deal bribery case. He is being probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for bribing public servants so that the contract for supply of 12 helicopters went to the U.K.-based AgustaWestland, a unit of Italy's Finmeccanica (now Leonardo SpA). It is alleged that €42.27 million (about ₹295 crore) was paid by the Finmeccanica group to Mr. Michel's firms for the job.

How is he connected?

In 2006, the UPA government floated tenders to buy 12 VVIP helicopters. Six vendors participated in the process. In 2010, after clearances from the Finance Ministry, the ₹556.262 million contract was bagged by AgustaWestland. The CBI alleges that Mr. Michel entered into a criminal conspiracy with the co-

accused and got the service ceiling of the helicopters reduced from 6,000 m to 4,500 m to ensure that Agusta could bid for the deal. In 2012, an initial probe by Italian authorities indicted Mr. Michel for international bribery. This was the first time reports of bribery in the deal surfaced. In February 2013, the Ministry of Defence asked the CBI to investigate the case after arrests and raids were carried out in Italy. In January 2014, months before the UPA went out of power, India terminated the contract and efforts were made to recover the money from Italy. The company delivered three helicopters, which are lying at the Palam airbase in Delhi.

What went wrong?

The scandal snowballed into a major fight between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of the 2014 general election. The BJP accused the Gandhi

family of receiving the kickbacks. According to the CBI, Mr. Michel had worked with Westland Helicopters (U.K.) since the 1980s. The agency said the middleman was a frequent visitor to

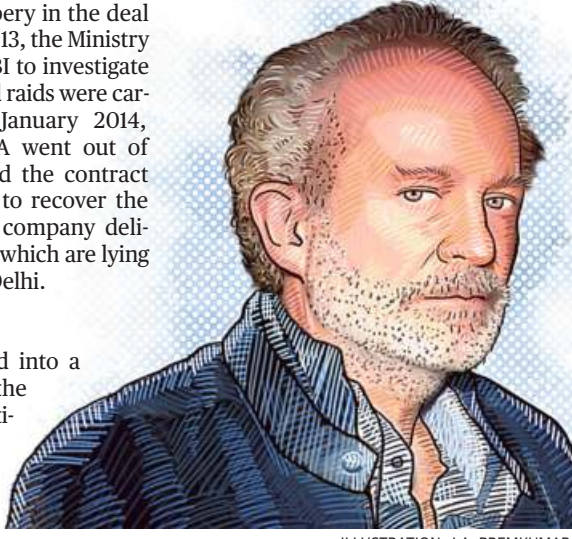


ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

India and had undertaken 300 trips between 1997 and 2013. He flew back to Dubai a few days before the CBI filed an FIR on March 12, 2013.

How was he apprehended?

In September 2015, a CBI court issued an open-ended non-bailable arrest warrant against Mr. Michel. In December 2015 and January 2016, red corner notices were issued against Mr. Michel through the Interpol. In September 2017, the CBI filed a chargesheet against the accused. The agency alleged a loss of about ₹2,666 crore to the exchequer. The extradition request was forwarded to the UAE on March 19, 2017. The Court of Cassation in the UAE held extradition proceedings and on November 19 last year, upheld the lower court's decision on the possibility of extraditing him. He was handed over to Indian authorities on December 4. Several reports said his extradition was linked to India's efforts at repatriating Princess Latifa, daughter of Dubai ruler and UAE Prime Minister

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who had run away from home last year, accusing her father of illegal incarceration and torture. Indian Coast Guard commandos stormed a vessel, Nostromo, off Goa and took into custody Princess Latifa on March 4, 2018.

Where is the case headed?

Mr. Michel, who was interrogated by the CBI, has not been of much help in establishing the money trail. He has remained tight-lipped and given contradictory statements. The ED, which is pursuing the money-laundering angle on the basis of the CBI case, has over the past three years unearthed the transactions made through several conduits including "shell" firms. The ED informed the court that Mr. Michel was not cooperating and was taking a lot of time to write answers to its questions. His lawyers have said he suffers from dyslexia.

VIJAITA SINGH

WHAT

The lowdown on HAL's order book

WHAT IS IT? The Defence Public Sector Undertaking and the country's only manufacturer of aircraft, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), has been caught in the political slugfest over the Rafale deal on the offset issue. But over the last couple of weeks, it has been in the news for its order book and financial situation. HAL makes a range of aircraft – including fighter jets and trainers – and helicopters, both indigenously developed and under licence from foreign original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). For the year ended March 2018, HAL posted a turnover of ₹18,284 crore. But HAL is facing a financial crunch owing to non-payment of dues and lack of new firm contracts. In fact, last week HAL said it had taken an overdraft of ₹962 crore for salaries and running costs. In Parliament last week, Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said HAL had orders worth ₹1 lakh crore, later explaining that it includes deals worth ₹26,570.8 crore signed bet-

ween 2014 and 2018 and contracts worth ₹73,000 crore in the pipeline. Those in the pipeline include 83 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk-1A jets worth ₹50,000 crore, 200 helicopters under a joint venture with Russia worth ₹20,000 crore, and 15 indigenous Light Combat Helicopters (LCH) worth ₹3,000 crore.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

The current situation of HAL is due to a combination of factors – primarily the non-payment of dues by the Indian Air Force (IAF) for orders executed and under way, most of the existing orders coming to an end and a delay in finalisation of new contracts. HAL also has several development programmes which need funding till the services accept them and pitch in with their share. HAL Chairman R. Madhavan recently said the IAF owed HAL money for aircraft, helicopters and services that it had already delivered with

current dues pegged at ₹15,700 crore, which will rise to ₹20,000 crore by March 31. In addition, over the years HAL has paid large amounts to the government as part of equity buy-back and dividends which also depleted its coffers.

On the contrary, the IAF has been paying foreign OEMs for committed liabilities which otherwise attract penalties. For instance, it paid ₹20,000 crore to Dassault Aviation of France for the 36 Rafale jets contracted and to Boeing for Apache and Chinook helicopters, among others.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The weak financial situation can affect future programmes and hamper regular maintenance activities that HAL undertakes for the IAF. The country's indigenous fighter programme LCA is at a critical stage with the final operational clearance nearing and the advanced variant Mk1A making

delayed progress. HAL is setting up another assembly line to ramp up LCA production and is developing the HTT-40 basic trainer and a Light Utility Helicopter (LCU) on its own, based on the demands of the services. The fund crunch affects salaries and running costs. Also as contracts come to an end, the work force will have to be benched. For instance, HAL's biggest contract, the licence manufacture of Su-30 jets from Russia, is nearing completion. Additionally, the delay in finalisation of new orders affects timely planning and supply chain management.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

After the recent developments, the Defence Ministry has made some moves to address the issue. Officials said the Ministry has sought funds from the Finance Ministry to help HAL. Earlier this week, HAL officials met Ms. Sitharaman and the three services chiefs. HAL has also stated that



with anticipated collections up to March, the cash position is expected to improve and in terms of future orders, final contracts for 83 LCA Mk1A and 15 LCH are in advanced stages. Nonetheless, the developments are a matter of serious concern for the country and warrant immediate government attention to set things in order.

DINAKAR PERI

WHY

is there a renewed quota debate?

Who is this reservation for?

The constitutional amendment passed by Parliament last week seeks to expand the concept of reservation, a form of affirmative action, to favour the "economically weaker sections." Those who are covered by the existing reservation for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the 'socially and educationally backward classes,' a constitutional category known in popular parlance as Other Backward Class or OBC, are not eligible for the proposed new reservation of 10%. The amendment makes it clear that the new reservation in public sector jobs and education in both public and private sectors will be above the existing quotas. The Supreme Court had ruled earlier that the total quantum could not exceed 50%. Politically, the move by the Narendra Modi government aims to placate upper caste Hindus, though those not covered by any quota among the followers of other religions too are potential beneficiaries.



What is the problem?

The amendment raises questions about its compatibility with the basic structure of the Constitution, which the court has held cannot be altered even by Parliament. A petition has already been filed in the Supreme Court, alleging the amendment violates the basic structure doctrine. The idea of giving 10% reservation to the upper castes also raises other ethical and moral questions that may not be justiciable. Reservation is currently covered, primarily under clauses (4) and (5) of Article 15 and clause (4) of Article 16, which allows the State to make special provisions "for the

advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes." The court has examined the concept of 'socially and educationally backward classes' and has ruled that caste can be a basis for inclusion in that category. In the Indra Sawhney vs Union of India, the court examined the decision of the government to implement the Mandal Commission report that stipulated 27% reservation for OBCs and ruled that economic criteria could not be the sole basis for reservation and the 50% ceiling ought not to be crossed. All these questions will be reopened in

the light of the new amendment.

What is the government stand?

The government invoked the Directive Principles of State policy contained in Article 46 to defend its proposal for reservation for the economically weaker sections. This could be questionable. Article 46 says "the State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." The "economically weaker sections of citizens were not eligible for the benefit of reservation. With a view to fulfilling the mandate of Article 46, and to ensure that the economically weaker sections of citizens get a fair chance of receiving higher education and participation in employment in the services of the state, it has been decided to amend the Constitution of India," the amendment Bill stated.

Will it benefit the poor?

In the Indra Sawhney judgment, the court had said: "...the concept of 'weaker sections' under Article 46 is different from that of the 'backward class' of citizens in Article 16(4), but the purpose of the two is also different. One is for the limited purpose of the reservation and hence suffers from limitations, while the other is for all purposes under Article 46... While those entitled to benefits under Article 16(4) may also be entitled to availing themselves of the measures taken under Article 46, the converse is not true. If this is borne in mind, the reasons why mere poverty or economic consideration cannot be a criterion for identifying backward classes of citizens under Article 16(4) would be more clear." Whether the economically weaker sections among the OBCs, the SCs or the STs could be excluded from reservation meant for the economically weaker sections is a contentious question.

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

WHEN

6 January 2019

'We are the champions' At the Golden Globes, last Sunday, there were surprises galore with the Queen musical *Bohemian Rhapsody* taking home the Best Actor for an inspired outing by Rami Malek playing the legendary frontman Freddie Mercury and streaming service Netflix winning five top prizes. Netflix's black and white intimate drama *Roma* bagged both Best Director and Best Foreign Language Film. The Mexican film, directed by Alfonso Cuaron, is seen as an Oscar frontrunner in February. Presumed favourite, Bradley Cooper's *A Star is Born* was largely shut out, barring a Best Original Song trophy. Tears marked the winners podium as Glenn Close for *The Wife* beat Lady Gaga as Best Actress, and segregation-era dramedy *Green Book* triumphed over comedies like *Vice*. Picture shows Malek – he dedicated his win to Mercury, the British singer, who died of AIDS in 1991 – flanked by Brian May and Roger Taylor of Queen, and Cuaron directing Yalitza Aparicio on the sets of *Roma*. •AFP, AP



WHERE

In West Bengal, row over rath yatras

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had announced three rath yatras to cover all 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal, has run into legal and other hurdles. The Trinamool Congress government in the State banned the rallies, citing intelligence reports that warned of communal violence in the areas that the yatras had proposed to cover.

The dispute landed in the Calcutta High Court and later in the Supreme Court, which will hear the matter on January 15.

Why did the BJP plan this?

BJP president Amit Shah was scheduled to flag off the yatras on December 7, 2018, as a pre-election exercise. Unlike several other parts of the country, the eastern State has not seen such yatras in the past, which have more to do with politics than religion.

Even the rath yatra of Lal Krishna Advani in 1992 could not enter the Left Front-ruled West Bengal as it was

stopped by Lalu Prasad Yadav, the then Chief Minister of neighbouring Bihar.

The proposed rath yatras were an attempt to increase the party's support base ahead of the Lok Sabha election. The BJP leadership had plans of three or four rath yatras across the State. These were strategically timed. After the 2016 Assembly election, which brought Mamata Banerjee to power for a second consecutive term, the support base of the Left parties and the Congress have slipped further, and the BJP has emerged as a contender.

What is Trinamool's stand?

The Mamata Banerjee government's decision not to grant permission to the yatras did not come as a surprise. Ms. Banerjee's public statements calling them a means to whip up communal tensions made it clear that the State government would not give the go-ahead. Instead, the Trinamool Congress countered the BJP's move with a plan to hold a purification (*shuddhikaran*) yatra. On the



ground, battlelines are drawn with supporters of both parties often engaging in violence.

On several occasions, the Opposition parties, including the BJP, have claimed that the Trinamool Congress government has denied them permission to hold political programmes under different pretexts. When the BJP ap-

proached the Calcutta High Court, the State government cited intelligence inputs on a possible communal flare-up.

Weeks of arguments and counter-arguments over the reasonable restrictions that a State can impose and the right of a political party to hold rallies and political events failed to resolve the dispute at the High Court.

Is there a shift in the narrative?

Whatever be the fate of the yatras, they are indicative of what political observers call a state of "competitive communalism" in West Bengal. While a decade ago, politics in the State hinged on long-drawn agitations against forcible land acquisition that sometimes led to violence that was witnessed, for instance, at Singur and Nandigram, the yatras are indicative of a changing narrative in the State.

A few months ago, the High Court was debating whether giving money to 28,000 Durga Puja committees was within the rights of the State. Those

against the move argued that handing out money for Durga Puja amounted to promoting one particular religion.

Prior to this, the issue of giving honorarium to imams and muezzins by the West Bengal government was challenged in court, as was the decision of not allowing immersion of idols on one particular day as it clashed with Muharram.

West Bengal, which has a Muslim population of 27.01% according to the 2011 Census and which shares over a 2,000-km border with Bangladesh, is witnessing a polarised political discourse.

Over the past few years, the State has seen tensions and even riots during Ram Navami, Muharram and other festivals. According to the information tabled in Parliament by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the number of communal incidents in the State rose from 27 in 2015 to 58 in 2017.

SHIV SAHAY SINGH
A NO-NDE

Always cool, always Hardik, always a dire embarrassment

As it looks to penalise Hardik Pandya and K.L. Rahul, the BCCI should consider initiating workshops for young cricketers to sensitise them to gender and race issues



PASSING BITE

RUCHIR JOSHI
is a writer, filmmaker and columnist

Watching the 'Koffee with Karan' episode with K.L. Rahul and Hardik Pandya is excruciating in many ways. The two young men prance in, trying to match Karan Johar's famously OTT couture, thread for shiny thread. It's as though they are entering a temple of bad taste to worship at the altar of wealth and glamour, with Johar as the head priest. Even in this fierce competition of loud and bad taste, Pandya stands out, garlanding and festooning himself in cliché and derivation.

The Preening Flamingo Triangular
Young Pandya wastes no time in establishing himself as a guy with the brain and awareness of a *banoad-thhaoed* ostrich. He is clearly overawed by rap and gangsta culture and in perpetual envy of contemporary black male thea-

trics. All young Indian men are not sexist. Similarly, it's far from the truth that all young guys from small towns are idiots and all uneducated males are louts, but Pandya is the emperor of that section of the Venn diagram where the categories 'ant-visioned provincial', 'un-schooled know-nothing' and 'gross male pig' overlap. Like a clever medium-pacer, or a hungry shark, Johar quickly decides which batsman he wants for breakfast; it is – no surprises – the man who actually thinks it's clever to introduce himself to women as "Hardik – always". K.L. is quickly relegated to the role of *bhonda*, the sidekick supporting the actor; most of the show is about getting Mr. Always Peacock to take off his own shiny pants.

Across the programme there are several distressing things about both Pandya and K.L. Cricket-wise, no captain or manager would be happy about Pandya blithely admitting that he's been told off several times for not listening to instructions on the field and that this is likely to continue. No one who understands cricket would so easily pick Kohli over Tendulkar as the greater batsman, not yet and not with such alacrity, but both these clowns do just that. In terms of



awareness of the history they are part of, both these 'boys' score zero; there's even one moment, when asked to name India's ODI captains, K.L. juggles all sorts of names but misses out on the biggest of them, Kapil Dev. Then there are the constant references to scoring (with women), dating, affairs, "doing it", and fancying Bollywood women actors; there is the admission, mild compared to some of the other stuff, that both K.L. and Pandya have had sex in their hotel rooms while accommodating

colleague roomies have kept away; there is the barb from K.L. that Pandya has "done" all the IPL cheerleaders and thus does not get excited by them while playing; there is the business of friends coming on screen and revealing embarrassing details, including the "fact" that Pandya often forgets to flush his toilet (sharply denied by Mr. Always).

At times the programme felt like a slightly tarted up fly-on-the-wall shoot of a boys' locker room. Throughout its 47 minutes, the episode was deep fried

in the competing smugness of all three men, with K.L. occasionally showing some trace of class and coming out a bad third in the Preening Flamingo Triangular. But the worst bit came early, and out of the mouth of Pandya, when he said that while trying to pick up women, he likes to first watch them move, because it's an indicator of "how they will be later" and "because I'm a bit from the black side".

There's a Gujarati epithet that fits Pandya perfectly – *dafol*. It means duffer, except by itself the description is altogether too kind. Other words that would go appropriately with *dafol* cannot, alas, be printed here. Pandya is a perfect disaster: he seems proud of the fact that he didn't study beyond Class 9 and that too because of the largesse of his teachers who didn't want to fail him; he is amused by the fact that he can't even read (forget write) his own name in Gujarati or Hindi and barely manages English; he is obnoxiously cocky about how many women he has managed to "do"; he is proud of the fact that he behaves as he likes on the cricket field. All this is predicated on the undeniable fact that Pandya has achieved some initial success as a cricketer playing for India

in limited overs formats. None of this can excuse the fact that this tower of bling-laden self-regard is also casually racist and misogynist – without understanding a thing about Afro-Caribbean or Afro-American culture, he takes the worst stereotype of sexist black male behaviour and drapes it across his shoulders like a cape: black men are like this only, and it's great, so I'm also like this, so cool I am, so Hardik.

Cultural boot camps?
What might be the solution? With the democratisation of team selection over the last three decades, all sorts of youngsters with incredible cricketing talent (like Pandya) are coming into the Indian team from different backgrounds. With the smallest of success comes the harsh exposure to the glitter of IPL, the TV shows, the parties, the international tours. Even as the BCCI looks to penalise Pandya and the far less culpable K.L., it should consider initiating workshops for young cricketers to sensitise them to gender issues, race politics, media traps, and give them a general boot-camp about the world they will enter, a world far from being just about cricket.

The perception challenge

The challenge for the BJP is to change some perceptions and reinforce others



ON THE OTHER HAND

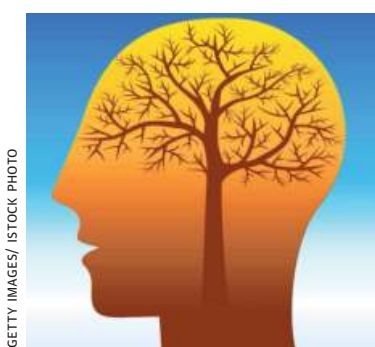
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Perceptions are problematic. For starters, they seldom match reality. But that hardly matters for most of us because what we perceive is the reality, as far as we are concerned. If we are having a good day, we think the world's a great place. If not, we think everything is going down the tubes.

Taking advantage of perceptions

Marketers and advertisers know this well, but politicians understand this better than anyone else. They are masters at sensing public perception. When they sense the slightest change in the direction the wind is blowing, they change tack. That's why Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' resonated with so many voters and got him into the White House. The reality is that the U.S. is the world's only superpower, capable of destroying any nation which opposes it. The reality is that the U.S. is the world's biggest economy, and is likely to remain so for decades to come. The reality is that the U.S. continues to be the innovations leader in the world and is home to most of the world's biggest and most powerful corporates. The reality is that immigrants actually add value to the American economy. But most Americans believe otherwise on all these counts.

The same holds good for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He propelled the BJP to a historic win in 2014 with his promise of *achhe din* (good days) and *sabka saath, sabka vikaas* (progress for everyone). He took advantage of certain popular perceptions of the time – that the government of the day was weak, that progress was prisoner



to corruption, and that crony capitalism was helping the rich get richer while the poor got left behind. His promise of a better future for everyone also resonated because he backed it up with a proven track record of growth and development in Gujarat as Chief Minister. It was irrelevant whether these perceptions actually matched reality or not. For people who believed these claims, the perceptions became the reality.

Far from reality

There may have been another factor helping Mr. Modi. In the global research agency Ipsos MORI's Global Misperceptions Index in 2018, India ranked 12th. The index is based on the findings of a study, called The Perils of Perception, which Ipsos MORI has been conducting for years. Now covering 37 countries, the study polls 1,000 respondents, aged 18-64, in each country on a number of issues and then stacks them up against data culled from official sources to arrive at the 'misperceptions' index.

Admittedly, the survey is not representative. As the footnotes explain: "Brazil, Colombia, China, Chile, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, South Africa, Thailand and Turkey produce a national sample that is more urban and educated, and with higher incomes than their fellow citizens. We refer to these respondents as 'Upper Deck Consumer Citizens'. They are not nationally representative of their

country." Upper deck and non-representative they may be, but if this is what the educated, aware, online Indian thinks and feels about critical issues, it's little wonder that India is the fake news capital of the world or that politicians are having a field day. The findings also hint at why certain political tropes resonate with the voters and what may work and what may not when the general election takes place in six months.

Take the estimate of Muslims in India, for instance. Indians tend to highly overestimate the percentage of the Muslim population in India, according to the survey. The average guess is around 32%, but in reality, Muslims constitute only 14% of the population. So, a plank of reverse majority discrimination, where the minority is presented as a threat to the actual majority, can work when the majority overestimates the size of the problem to start with.

A headache for the government

On the jobs front, though, there is a problem for the BJP. There is a widespread perception that there are not enough jobs in the country. Most Indians overestimate the number of those unemployed – out of every 100 people of working age in India, Indians think 44% are unemployed and looking for work. The reality is that the number stands at just 4%.

This creates a different kind of headache for Mr. Modi and the BJP's poll managers. One of Mr. Modi's key poll promises was to create two crore jobs. In reality, the number of jobs created may be even higher, but the perception is the reverse. This is reinforced by the perception Indians have about the economy – asked to guess India's economic ranking in the world, most guessed that it would rank around 50. The reality is that India is already the seventh largest economy in the world.

The key challenge that Team Modi faces in 2019 is to figure out how to reinforce certain perceptions and change others.

Must we finish books?

By not doing so, we often do ourselves and the writer a favour



WORD COUNTS

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We are so awash in advice on how to fit in more reading into our lives, on how to stop moaning about "so much to read and so little time" and get on with reading hacks that a colleague's dilemma took me by surprise. A voracious reader of fiction, of late she has started keeping aside some books half-read. These include the Man Booker Prize winner of 2018, *Milkman*, by Anna Burns. She says she is so engrossed in these books that she is assailed by the fear that she won't find another book that she likes as much. And so, she stops reading.

The ways in which we read

My reading pace is qualitatively different. When I am enthralled, disturbed, intrigued, awed, riveted (as the case may be) while reading a book, I tend to hurry through it. I like to get to the end as soon as possible, so that I can quickly go back and reread long stretches. But her predicament – or lucky space, depending on how you see it – made me wonder if she would ever get around to finishing *Milkman*, whether she has absorbed enough of the story so far to make it a whole in her mind, whether a half-read novel is the best of all worlds for some readers. In other words, it begs the age-old question: Why finish books?

That is the name of an essay by Tim Parks, Italy-based novelist, translator, critic and football fan, in *Where I Am Reading From: The Changing World of Books*. The query is easily settled for some books, he points out, quoting Schopenhauer about life being too short for a bad book. But what about good books? He writes: "Is a good book by definition one that we did fin-



ish? Or are there occasions when we might choose to leave off a book before the end, or even halfway through, and nevertheless feel that it was good, even excellent, that we were glad we read what we read, but don't feel the need to finish it?" Moreover, he asks us to consider whether this act of part-reading a book ethically allows us to recommend it to others.

Parks is liberal in answering these questions on behalf of the reader, but speaking as a writer is more complicated. He recalls being disappointed when a reader told him he had liked one of his books, though he hadn't read right to the end. Picking apart his hurt, however, Park reconsiders the issue: "Might it be that, in showing a willingness not to pursue even an excellent book to the death, you are actually doing the writer a favour, exonerating him or her from the near-impossible task of getting out of the plot gracefully?"

Compulsive re-reader

For me, as a compulsive re-reader of literary fiction, the process is somewhat different, and perhaps it would startle writers like Parks yet more. I do tend to read through to the end of a book I value (enjoy would not be the right word, as the books we treasure often tend to be disorienting, calling us to reconsider what we had taken to be certitudes, and some, like Haruki

Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, even throw us half a frame out of our normal existence for a few weeks). There is, of course, always the tension in the reading process when going through a thoroughly engrossing book, wondering how on earth the writer will pull all the threads together. Sometimes, the writer does it well enough, sometimes not – and being a re-reader, when the latter eventuality obtains, I will keep going back to the book but not finishing it, so that over time the novel comes to be transformed in my mind to something it was not upon the first read. Even if the writer closes the book most satisfactorily, I will sometimes re-make it in my mind variously – as I do with Carol Shields's *Unless*.

At other times, in a book I have inhabited so long that its landscape feels personally felt to me, I work out different narrative sequences, almost converting into a hypertext. I have done it often with Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*, going back and forth in different ways, so the story pivots at a new point. (It helps also that there are various translations, to aid this constant reassessment, not so much of the book, but my own understanding of the world around.)

Filling the spaces

Then, there is a book like Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, epic in its narrative arc, but weighing in at only a little over 300 pages. This is the story of Laila, from her adolescent days in the 1930s in a conservative taluqqar household in Lucknow, through her awakening intellectually, politically and socially in pre-Independence India, and finally to her coming to some sort of terms with a country and family divided by Partition. Over the years, I have filled in spaces in this saga that at times I need to read just one passage to be lost in a story, dilemma, takeaway, consolation that were never there during previous readings of this classic.

So, here's my question: Why finish books when re-reading?

Enlightenment and its discontents

In the Sabarimala agitations, the state is acting as an agent of Enlightenment and the protesters are enacting the Counter-Enlightenment critique



SERENDIPITIES

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The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek makes a striking observation about the difference between fascism and communism. In fascism – think of Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini – when the supreme leader finishes his speech, his body seeks to embody a theatrical gravitas. The leader stares into the crowds and his hands barely move as he soaks in the wave of applause. He never betrays the mask of virility that he carefully adorns.

In contrast, under communism – think of Joseph Stalin, Xi Jinping, or Kim Jong Un – the supreme leader joins in the bonhomie. His hands applaud freely and his body seeks to project conviviality to further the claim that he too is merely a fellow party worker, never hinting at the vast authoritarian powers he oversees. This comparison of politi-

cal theatre has an element of the farcical. There is, however, one great miserable truth to be extracted.

Universalism and the public good

It is that for fascism, there is little use for the pretence of camaraderie. Any social reality that may allow one to discover reasons for solidarity with the 'enemy' is irrelevant. In fascism, all political consciousness progressively substitutes its own critical faculties with a sublimation – an emotional surrender – unto the leader. The idiosyncrasies and prejudices of the leader is fascism's supreme political fact. In this sense, fascism's end is an emptying of all ideological consciousness itself. Auschwitz is fascism's apogee where no humanity remains. In contrast, under (totalitarian) communism, a great emphasis is laid on the explanatory powers of socio-economic realities to justify why the state must oppress many and liquidate some. To this end, an entire bureaucracy is dedicated to the pedagogy of the people (Lenin's famous exhortation: study, study, study) to ensure that they abandon an old, and purportedly false, consciousness to emerge as new men under the guidance of the party. Those who



fail to be appropriately re-educated are deemed the 'enemy of the people', 'class traitors' and so on. Even the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s, which often ended in frostbitten deaths in Siberian gulags, were used for the aggrandisement of ideology.

The liberal political order, which often prides itself as a system of pragmatic choices, drained of ideological excesses – except, perhaps, for the cult of individualism – nevertheless shares one crucial similarity with communism and fas-

cism. All make universalist claims, often in the name of public good. All three ideological structures have little use for heterogeneous socio-cultural realities such as India's where mutually contradictory belief systems are held by different communities and where the same beliefs elicit a diversity of ritualist expressions. When A.K. Ramanujan asked, "Is there an Indian way of thinking?" it was the fragmentary nature of Indian social reality that midwived his answer.

Such universalist tendencies have, however, also found oppositions in the form of what is sometimes called the 'Counter-Enlightenment'. The Enlightenment, to summarise, was a vast constellation of diverse efforts that sought to disenchant the world of its belief in a world of unreason that took many forms – witchcraft, soothsaying, divinity of royals, and ultimately religion. But this zeal towards Enlightenment doesn't come without exacting its own revenge. In the 1940s, two great German Marxist thinkers, Theodor Adorno and his teacher Max Horkheimer, described how the Enlightenment project, through its relentless stress on utilitarian ideas and zeal to strip away human imperfections, is pregnant with a form of political myth-making through a process they called 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment'. These newfangled political myths are variations of totalitarianism.

As if intuiting this inevitability, the Counter-Enlightenment voices sought to deflate any claims of Cartesian omniscience made by Enlightenment figures. They argued, most persuasively in the voice of the early modern Italian thinker Giambattista Vico, that historical con-

sciousness and context-specific reading is key to distinguish between self-understanding of a people and the mere administrative logic employed by the 'enlightened despotism' of the state.

The debate today

In his last book called *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra elegantly traced the modern origins of this schism – the universalist versus the particularist – to an old debate between two French philosophers, Rousseau and Voltaire, who disagreed on the fate of Poland. Voltaire argued that the Poles were a backward people ("One Pole is a charmer; two Poles – a brawl; three Poles – well, this is the Polish Question.") who needed to be dragged by force into the modern age. Rousseau, in contrast, stressed that Poland should maintain its own traditions, even if it runs counter to reigning fashionable philosophies of secular modernity prevalent in the salons of 18th century Paris. We see this debate prosecuted to this day in India – most stridently in the recent Sabarimala agitations – where the state acts as an agent of Enlightenment and the protesters enact the Counter-Enlightenment critique.