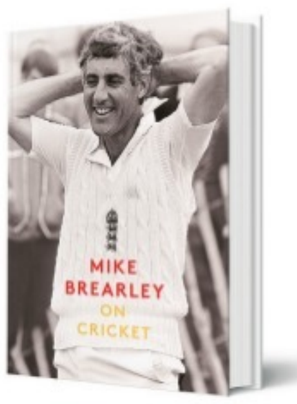
No Fear

Bob Woodward, editor of *The Washington Post* and author of last year's hit, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, has won the 2019 PEN America Literary Service Award. Woodward was also a key figure in reporting Richard Nixon's role during the Watergate scandal.



ON CRICKET
BY MIKE BREARLEY
416 pages, Rs 699
Constable

Between Wickets

The short, sharp cricketing arc of England's Mike Brearley

KAUSHIK DASGUPTA

IN AN international career of five years, Mike Brearley played 39 Tests and 25 One Day Internationals, averaging 23 in the longer format and a little less in the instant variety. These unremarkable figures notwithstanding, Brearley has a permanent place in the game's history. Arguably among the front-rowers in the pantheon of cricket captains, Brearley captained England in all but eight of the Test matches he played, winning 17 and losing only four, and led them to a second place in the World Cup.

Of course, Brearley was helped by having Bob Willis, Ian Botham and Alan Knott at their prime, but it could also be said that he nurtured their skills along with others such as the young David Gower and Graham Gooch. The former Australian quickie Rodney Hogg once commented that Brearley had a "degree in people".

Brearley has a degree in philosophy from Cambridge University and had lectured on the subject at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne before becoming an international cricketer. After retiring from the game, he became a professional psychoanalyst and was president of the British Psychoanalytic Society. Truly one of the game's top minds, his written word is taken seriously. His last book, *On Form,* was the *Times* book of the year in 2017.

His latest book, *On Cricket*, traverses 50 years of the sport with palpable intellectual curiosity. It's the work of a person who delighted in the aesthetics of the sport even when he was competing. Brearley writes that he couldn't help but derive pleasure from Greg Chappel's batting even while he was setting fields to stop the rampaging Australian. At another point, he writes that, "I once stood at extra cover at Cambridge to the great Gary Sobers. Apart from my alarm at the likelihood that he would middle one of his powerful off-drives straight at me, I have a vivid image of that afternoon 50 years ago of the style, power, classicism and the freedom of his arms and hands, and recall it better than I remember most of the pictures I have seen in art galleries".

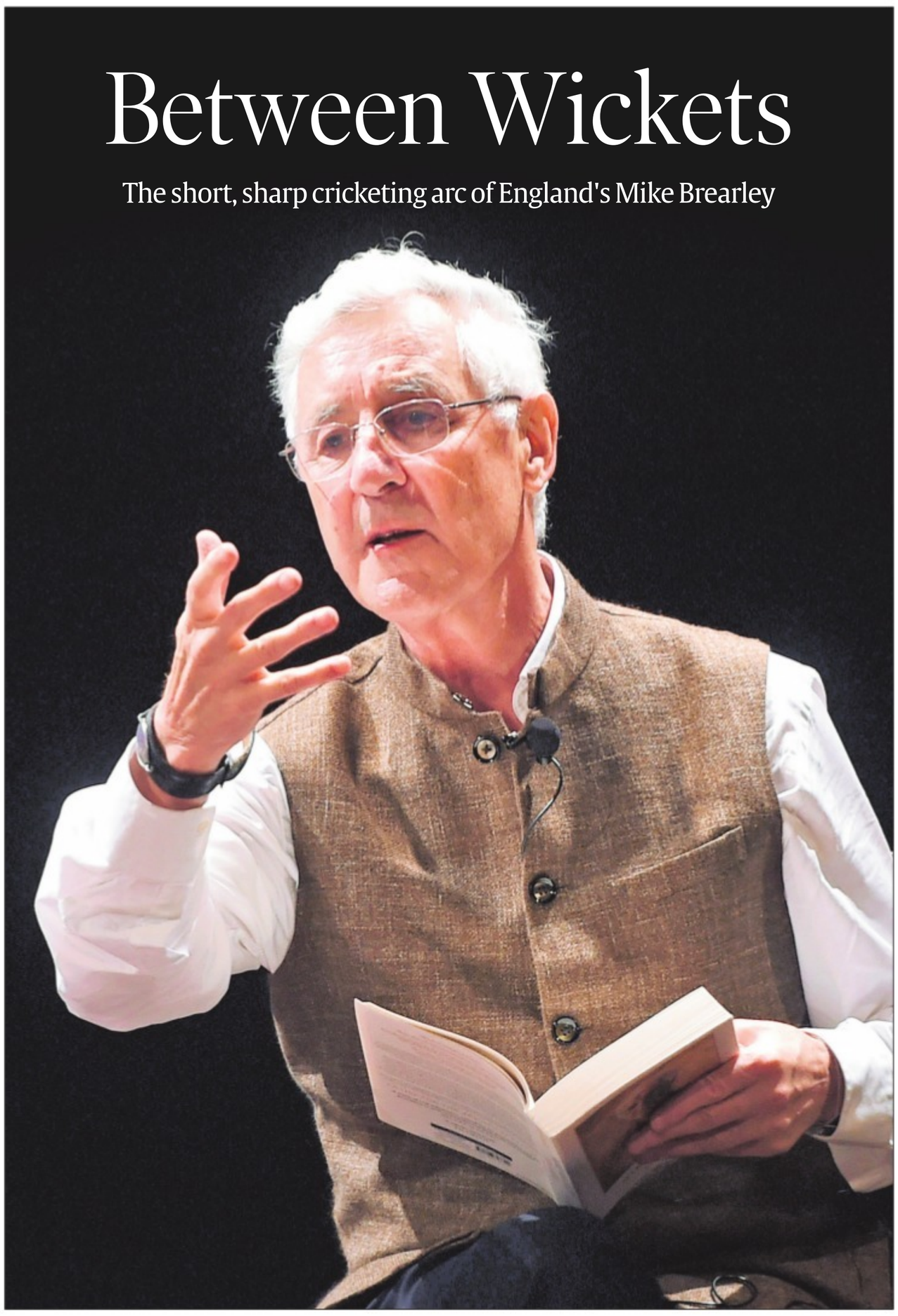
In less than 400 pages, Brearley opens up on some of the issues that the game had to confront during his playing days — the ban on South Africa, Kerry Packer, some of the greats with whom he shared the field — Viv Richards, Bishan Singh Bedi, Michael Holding, the rights and wrongs of modern day cricketers — Virat Kohli, for example, and, the general direction in which the game seems to have headed.

The essays are enriched by Brearley's training as a philosopher and psychoanalyst. His understanding that people are drawn to the game by its aesthetics, or by the mastery of their heroes, is compelling. His words — "We become mini-Federers when we watch Roger play a cross-court forehand, or mini-Warnes when Shane bowls a perfect leg break or mini-Chappels, when we see Greg playing a back-foot stroke of his hips with sumptuous elegance. It's not that we are under illusion. We know that we are not Federer. But we enter the mind-set. We know they are beyond us, but for a moment we have a sense of its possibility" — would strike a chord with anyone who has played sport, even though that might have been at the most modest level.

However, in times when the slam-bang version of cricket rules the roost and commerce is a dominant motif, it's somewhat difficult to appreciate that the urge to replicate a Sunil Gavaskar — or a Virat Kohli for that matter — cover drive, is what draws youngsters to the game. Brearley makes his preference for the longer variety evident. For instance, in an essay that draws from his conversation with Michael Holding — it's aptly titled 'Whispering Death' — Brearley talks about the West Indian great's reluctance to be associated with T-20 cricket. "But when he was told that the aims would be to find Test players as much as short-game players… he had agreed to play a part. Who knows, maybe this will be the beginning of a revival and we'll see a new batch of Holding Roberts and Marshalls gracing Test cricket once again".

Is the instant variety of the game bereft of aesthetics, then? The only semblance of an answer is in the essay on Kohli. Brearley makes his admiration for the Indian captain obvious — "Kohli has a stroke to be seen in his test innings as well in the shorter forms of the game. This is the top spin drive… Instead of letting the ball come to him, he reaches forward in front of his left leg making contact with the ball well ahead of himself and sooner after it has pitched, with his wrists he almost plays what is almost a hockey shot… It requires speed of vision and dexterity of wrists and hands".

Brearley, in fact, concludes *On Cricket* with one of the rare sentences of pessimism in this collection of essays. "I enjoy T20 cricket and the innovations it has given rise, while at the same time being alarmed of its proliferation and the threat it poses to international [sic] — particularly Test — cricket". It's difficult to not empathise with that feeling, more so after reading *On Cricket*.



Former England captain Mike Brearley during the launch of his earlier book, *On Form*, Mumbai *PTI Photo by Shashank Parade*

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Tracing an Epoch

An evocative novel that reconstructs the time from 1857 till Gandhi's assassination

NS GUNDUR

SHRINIVAS VAIDYA'S *Halla Bantu Halla* (2004), which won him both the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award and the national Sahitya Akademi award, has been hailed by several critics as one of the best Kannada novels. Although it cannot be ranked as a modern classic in the Kannada literary culture, it draws our attention for various reasons.

As an exercise in documentary realism, the novel reconstructs the biography of an epoch, from 1857 to the times around Gandhi's assassination, without any indulgence. In the looming presence of the political events that unfold, the episodes in the Panth family in Navalgund give a slice of the middle-class experience in north Karnataka, a part of the then Bombay province. Thus, the story of an epoch and the lives of three generations of the Panths form the plot in such a way that we feel here the presence of an artist who paints plain portraitures, none of which is manipulated to haunt the beholder — it is simply a projection.

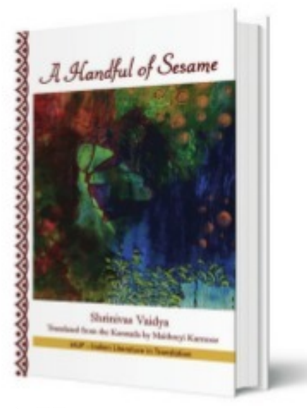
Two men from the Kashi and Kanpur region arrive at Navalgund at the time of the 1857 mutiny. One of them — Padmanabh — is put to death by the authorities of the East India Company and the other — Kamalnabh— settles down in Navalgund after being manipulated by a local Brahmin into marrying his daughter. The rest of the story is about what happens to the sons and grandsons of Kamalnabh Panth. Marriages, births, development of different kinds of relationships, deaths — things that form the cycle of life — take place. But none of these is either idealised or trivialised in the story. As history comes alive, human life is historicised.

The supreme achievement of this novel is that it gives a detached account of people who experience the coming of colonial modernity without the sound and fury. The novel, again, does not set the theme of tradition and modernity into conflict with each other as most novels in India do. It just narrates how western institutions and practices — such as schools, government, press, new professions, means of transport, English medicine and, lastly, the construction of a bridge — become part of provincial life and create a new consciousness. People experience the fruits and pains of modernity, but they adjust themselves to this form of life without making any fuss about it.

The use of the north Karnataka dialect of Kannada is a striking feature of this novel. While creating the ethos of the Madhva Brahmin way of life through the dialect, the novelist rarely allows the standardised Kannada peep into the narrative. Perhaps due to such deep-rooted cultural specificities and the use of a highly specialised sociolect, some earlier attempts to translate this novel into English have been abandoned. But Maithreyi Karnoor's translation of it into English as *A Handful of Sesame* (2018) promises an immense future for the republic of translating Indian texts into English. It breaks the myths associated with translating Indian literature into English such as the problem of translating regional nuances, both linguistic and cultural, among others. This translation, thus, makes Manipal University Press' Indian Literature in Translation series useful and worthwhile.

Maithreyi's translation itself has come out as a good piece of work almost adding grace to the original. It reads like an English novel. She has overcome the obstacles of the translator, such as the problem of being completely faithful to the original, by breaking the Kannada syntactic structures and by recreating the regional world in an idiom of English that does not deny aesthetic pleasure and a deep understanding of the culture to the reader. This is, for example, quite visible in the way she has recreated the title of the novel and the titles of the chapters, without tampering with the intentions of the original. It is a superb work of translation, and hence, one may suggest it as a model for translation aspirants.

The writer is professor, department of studies and research in English, Tumkur University



A HANDFUL OF SESAME
BY SHRINIVAS VAIDYA (AUTHOR), MAITHREYI KARNOOR (TRANSLATOR)
Manipal Universal Press
252 pages, Rs 310

General Havelock's attack on Nana Sahib at Futtypore, 1857 *Express Archives*

From the farms and fields

An important treatise on the predicament of Indian farmers and how to contextualise their distress

HARISH DAMODARAN

ONE OF the demands of farmer organisations holding protest marches, including the one held recently in the national capital, has been for a special session of Parliament to discuss agrarian issues. Feroze Varun Gandhi is a rare Member of Parliament, that too from the ruling BJP, who has found it more worthwhile to engage in a "national conversation" on rural distress than on building a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya or criminalising instant triple talaq.

The noteworthy part about his present book is its sensitivity to the subject: "Farmers now need more courage to live than to kill themselves… Categorising their suicide as 'killing themselves' is a misnomer. They are simply defeated by the long, hard struggle to stay alive." And this feeling is seemingly derived from personal engagement as an elected representative: "Travelling through the sullen bylanes of suicide-stricken villages in Bijnor, Bahraich, Kheri, Pratapgarh, Aligarh and Sitapur is a humbling and disconcerting experience."

The timing of *A Rural Manifesto*, too, is impeccable — hardly 3-4 months before national elections, where the main campaign issue, whether or not Gandhi's own party's top leadership likes it, is going to be the crisis in farming and the wider rural economy.

Gandhi's basic diagnosis of the problem is right. India's agricultural strategy in the post-Green Revolution era has largely been to raise per-acre crop productivity through planting of high-yielding varieties, while keeping the cost of inputs (fertilisers, seed, diesel, power and credit) low via state subsidies and guaranteeing returns by undertaking minimum support price (MSP)-based procurement. This strategy has, however, proved unsustainable in the last two decades, with a marked shift in government policies towards containment of fiscal deficits and liberalisation of imports. Indian agriculture is, therefore, "increasingly exposed to market signals that it hasn't been prepared for."

The brunt of this policy and market-driven uncertainty has, of course, been borne by small and marginal farmers. They have limited access to formal institutional credit for procuring inputs (leading to overdependence on the moneylender, who also supplies them seed, fertiliser and pesticide), markets (most farmers lack the wherewithal to wait for better prices or even take their produce to mandis, and are forced to sell to village-level aggregators who are often the same financiers-cum-input dealers) and agricultural extension services. It is even worse for tenant farmers, who till land taken on informal lease. Bereft of any legal status, they cannot avail of subsidised credit, crop insurance, MSP, loan waivers and other state benefits extended to "regular" farmers.

The solutions Gandhi proposes are sensible and straightforward. First, we need to promote Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). These can help farmers gain better bargaining power, both when it comes to sale of produce and purchase of inputs.

Second, farmers should have the choice to sell directly to buyers, including large retailers, exporters and processors. Currently, most states allow sale and purchase transactions to happen only through traders in regulated APMC (agricultural produce market committee) *mandis*. Once farmers are organised into FPOs, they would have a mechanism for negotiating terms of contract with buyers willing to pay more in return for stable supplies and cost savings from not dealing with mandi intermediaries. Dismantling the monopoly of APMCs would also force these traditional channels to respond to competition and invest in proper weighing, grading, auctioning, storage and other associated infrastructure.

The third recommendation relates to tenancy reforms, which would enable farmers to lease out their small holdings to those wanting to achieve economies of scale. Tenancy laws that guarantee security of ownership would encourage such small holders to actively pursue non-farm employment opportunities, while unlocking their land for more productive use.

Fourth, implement a "regular unconditional basic income" programme, which "can be scaled up through pilots, and rolled out slowly and carefully." Guaranteed minimum monthly income would basically offer financial predictability, which matters especially for farmers whose occupation entails both production (harvest failure) and market (price volatility) risks.

These, and many other such recommendations, aren't really new. But they carry weight when coming from a parliamentarian. There are quite a few of them even today, who know about the *rozi-roti* struggle of rural households and how it plays out in their own constituencies. It goes to Gandhi's credit, however, to make an effort to write a book like this that goes beyond farming to also cover areas such as rural healthcare, education and handicrafts.

My only complaint about the book is its length: at 825 pages, it is thicker and heavier than even Thomas Piketty's *Capital*, which is 685 pages long. A manifesto should ideally be concise, focussed and with an action-oriented agenda, whereas Gandhi's tends to be rambling and disjointed. Yet, one would wish there are more like him who would push at least the next Lok Sabha, to convene a special session focussing exclusively on agriculture.

Varun Gandhi, in Delhi *Express photo by Prem Nath Pandey*

A RURAL MANIFESTO
BY FEROZE VARUN GANDHI
Rupa Publications
848 pages, Rs 995