

Shah Faesal. making a political turn

On January 9, Shah Faesal stunned the nation with his announcement that he was quitting as managing director of the Jammu and Kashmir State Power Development Corporation. The 35-year-old had topped the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) examination in 2010.

Why did he take such a step?

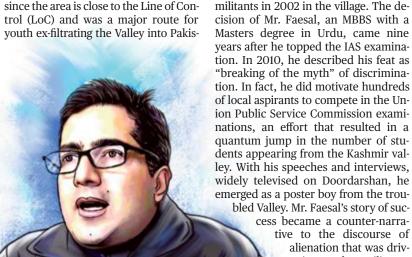
He termed his decision a "small defiance and protest against unabated killings in Kashmir, lack of reach-out and marginalisation of around 200 million Indian Muslims at the hands of Hindutva forces by reducing them to secondclass citizens."

Did he court controversies?

Mr. Faesal's frequent brushes with controversy has constantly pushed him to the centre of discourse. As Deputy Commissioner, Bandipora, he ordered a magisterial inquiry into the killing of a civilian, Farhat Ahmad Dar, in firing by security forces on protesters within his jurisdiction in 2014. He followed up the inquiry by writing to the General Administration Department, seeking an amendment to the rules to bring appraisals of officers of the rank of superintendent of police under a Deputy Commissioner's purview "to reduce human rights violations." His letter attracted a reprimand from the Chief Secretary, who called it "crossing of the red line." Subsequently, his tweets and write-ups on the Kashmir problem landed him in a major row. Many BJP leaders, including Union Minister Jitendra Singh, were critical of his views. In July 2018, the Department of Personnel and Training pointed to a tweet of Mr. Faesal and said its contents were "prima facie in contravention of the provision of the All India Service (Conduct Rules), 1968, and All India Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969." An inquiry is pending against him for his tweets.

Where did he grow up? Mr. Faesal hails from the farflung village of Sogam in

north Kashmir's Kupwara district, where militancy raged in the 1990s since the area is close to the Line of Control (LoC) and was a major route for



cess became a counter-narrative to the discourse of alienation that was driving youth to militancy and street protests.

tan-Occupied Kashmir for arms train-

ing. His father, a teacher, was killed by

What next? Mr. Faesal, who

returned to the State recently from Harvard University after completing a course in public policy, has since announced that he is going to join politics. However, he remained non-committal on joining any ideological platform. He described his stint in politics as "an addition and not an alternative" and made it clear that "he has no aim to divide the J&K electorate further," a hint that he may join some regional party. In the face of an unprecedented feedback, especially from the youth on social media platforms, Mr. Faesal was swayed against joining a current mainstream party immediately. He said his politics would be "a politics of disruption." The mainstream parties, which had failed to represent the sentiments of the people, should reinvent themselves and find a new vocabulary, Mr. Faesal said. He has decided to go back to the grassroots and meet people for the next six months before taking a call.

PEERZADA ASHIQ

WHAT

The **goings-on** in the top probe agency



WHAT IS IT? Alok Verma, an IPS officer of the 1979 batch, was

removed as Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for a second time on January 10, barely 48 hours after the Supreme Court had restored his position. His rival and the number 2, Rakesh Asthana, a 1984-batch officer of the Gujarat cadre, too was transferred a week after Mr. Verma. The government is hoping that it brings the unprecedent-

ed internecine war in the country's premier investigation agency to an end. Both hand-picked officers of the Narendra Modi government, they took personal rivalry to a new low, finally reaching the Supreme Court. On October 23, 2018, when the government divested Mr. Verma of his powers and forced him to go on 'compulsory leave,' he challenged the decision in the Supreme Court. He contended that since he was appointed for a two-year tenure by a high-power selection committee, comprising the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India and the leader of the single largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha, only the committee could remove him. He also challenged the order of the Chief Vigilance Commissioner to remove him for not "co-operating in an inquiry and not submitting required submissions." On January 8, the court restored Mr. Verma to his post but did not go into the merits of corruption allegations against him.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

It all started in the middle of 2017 when

the government refused to appoint IPS officers recommended by Mr. Verma to the CBI. In October 2017, when the government was about to consider a promotion for Mr. Asthana to the rank of Special Director, Mr. Verma submitted a note to the CVC, alleging that the blue-eyed officer of the Modi regime had taken a bribe in the Sterling Biotech case that the agency was investigating for default of over ₹5,000 crore in loans. He alleged that a diary found on the premises of Sterling had mentioned that Mr. Asthana had received a bribe of ₹3.8 crore. Yet, the government promoted Mr. Asthana. This worsened relations between the two. In June 2018, the former CBI chief wrote to the CVC again that Mr. Asthana could not represent the Director at official meetings. In a tit-for-tat allegation, Mr. Asthana wrote to the Cabinet Secretary in August 2018, accusing Mr. Verma of meddling in a probe and preventing a raid against former Railway Minister Lalu Prasad in the IRCTC scam. Mr. Verma hit back, and on October 15, the CBI registered a case of bribery against Mr. Asthana, alleging that the agency's number two officer had received a bribe of ₹2 crore in the Moin Qureshi money laundering case. Mr. Asthana moved the Delhi High Court to quash the FIR. On October 23, the CBI's internal tussle peaked. Mr. Verma ordered Mr. Asthana to be stripped of all his powers since he was "under investigation for extortion and bribery." The CVC, who performs a supervisory role of monitoring the CBI under the Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, stepped in by divesting Mr. Verma of all powers. The government, which had been a silent spectator until then, too intervened. The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), under which the CBI functions, divested Mr. Verma of all functions and responsibilities. On learning about his midnight

removal, Mr. Verma moved the Supreme Court.

The entire episode not only dented the IT MATTER? CBI's image but the rival-

ry between two top officers split the agency into camps where subordinate officers went by personal loyalties rather than upholding the rule of law. Experts said the CBI, which has often been described as being a "caged parrot," was now witnessing a "gang war."

AHEAD?

tee is meeting this Thursday to decide on a new full-time Director as Mr. Verma's original two-year tenure would have ended on January 31. The biggest task before the government is to restore the credibility of the agency by appointing an officer of impeccable record.

The selection commit-

SANDEEP PHUKAN

WHY

Team India needs to consolidate

How important is the Test win?

■ Cricketing jousts against Australia in its own backyard have always been a difficult proposition. India first sailed the seas, then gradually acquired air-miles but the results were eerily similar. Most games were lost, the odd triumph or draw was wrested and a Test series was never won Down Under until Virat Kohli's men altered the script. Right from the days when Lala Amarnath led his outfit on its maiden sojourn to Australia in 1947-48, India seemed fated to wilt. Seen through that historical prism, what Kohli's men have achieved during the course of the four-match Test series, is hugely significant. India won the series at 2-1. But for the rains during the final clash at Sydney, the visitors may have walked away with a 3-1 verdict.

What helped India achieve this?

■ India sauntered in with its number one Test ranking. But the surroundsound grated on the ears. It ranged from cal counterparts, masked a few inade-

home, lambs abroad' to the gigantic bag of expectations centred around Kohli's men inevitably winning against an anaemic Australia, which missed Steve Smith and David Warner. The duo was banned for a year, following the balltampering crisis in South Africa. Yet, there is many a slip between 'strengths on paper' and what transpires on the field. India needed a clutch of enforcers to register its supremacy and it found those men. But none were bigger than Cheteshwar Pujara (521 runs) and speedster Jasprit Bumrah (21 wickets). The duo's astounding performance and the vital contributions of Kohli, Rishabh Pant and Mohammed Shami, to name a few, ensured that despite suffering a blip at Perth, India stayed on top.

Which are the areas for improvement? ■ The middle-order's relatively superior health and the incisive nature of the fast bowlers, who fared better than their lothose stray whispers of being 'tigers at quacies. These weak spots could hurt.



The opening pair remains a work in progress. Regulars Murali Vijay and K.L. Rahul seem to have lost their touch, the last-named was a walking-wicket. Newcomer Mayank Agarwal (195 runs) did well and perhaps in future Tests he could pad up with Prithvi Shaw. Ajinkya Rahane's inability to convert starts into the odd century remains a worry but he has been an able deputy to Kohli.

Are there issues about discipline? ■ Morale is high but the squad's self-es-

teem could border on the delusional. The constant posturing by coach Ravi Shastri that this unit is India's finest ever and even alluding that the latest milestone is bigger than the 1983 World Cup win seems to be stretching the limits of hyperbole. Kohli and some players have caught on to this 'we-are-the-best' anthem. The bubble they have built has its perils. The sense of immunity that seeped in has come back to haunt, espe cially after Hardik Pandya and Rahul's misogynist remarks on 'Koffee with Karan.' It would help if the players remember that they have stepped into the massive shoes of men like Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar, Anil Kumble and Rahul Dravid.

What's in store?

■ Sporting history is replete with tales of triumphs against a pedigreed team, eventually causing upheavals in the hierarchy. India defeated the West Indies in an ODI at Berbice during the 1983 tour and perhaps it sowed the seeds of the subsequent World Cup high at Lord's. + India has already slipped into the ODI mode and just won the latest series against Australia 2-1 on Friday. Next, New Zealand awaits. After that, Australia will arrive in India for a set of ODIs. All this is a prelude to the World Cup in England from May 30 to July 14. Confidence is a mighty ally to have. Meanwhile, it would help if the players mind their language on television.

WHEN

15 January, 2019

Wall of people: As a partial U.S. government shutdown reached its 25th day, President Donald Trump on Tuesday invoked a new caravan of migrants, heading to the border, on Twitter to pressure lawmakers. Mr. Trump wants Congress to provide \$5.7 billion for building a wall on the Mexico border but Democrats have resisted. "A big new Caravan is heading up to our Southern Border from Honduras," he tweeted. "Only a Wall, or Steel Barrier, will keep our Country safe! Stop playing political games and end the Shutdown!' Hundreds of mostly Honduran migrants have entered southern Mexico, joining thousands of other people from Central America who are already there. Mexican authorities told Reuters the migrants would be put up in shelters. Pictures show migrants from Honduras walking along a road as others hitch a ride in Guatemala, and a migrant trying to reach the U.S. jumping a fence to cross illegally into San Diego from the border in Tijuana, Mexico. ■REUTERS





WHERE

Confusion over construction **plan** in Bandipur



The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has opposed a proposal to construct elevated roads over the Bandipur Tiger Reserve. The proposal had triggered outrage and protests from NGOs. The tiger reserve, spread over nearly 912 sq km, is located in Chamarajanagar district of Karnataka, constitutes an important component of a forest landscape comprising

Nagarahole (Karnataka), Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam (Tamil Nadu) and Wavanad (Kerala). The tiger reserve is home to nearly 120 to 150 tigers as per the 2014 estimates made by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). Bandipur also supports nearly 1,600 elephants, according to a 2012 count by the Karnataka Forest Department. Conservationists feel any infrastructure project through the forests is bound to impact the wildlife habitat and should be dropped. But there are supporters of the project who want the night traffic ban lifted. The matter is pending before the Supreme Court.

What does the view signify?

In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Environment Mahesh Sharma said the Ministry had not concurred with the proposal for elevated roads, but supported strengthening of the alternative route. While wildlife activists have welcomed the statement, they have underlined the contradictory stance of the government. Conservation biologist Sanjay Gubbi argued that different Ministries were holding divergent views. While the MoEF& CC was against the project in principle, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways was for it. "In case the Centre was against the elevated road, the MoRTH, which has filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court on September 19, 2018, in support of the project, should be made to withdraw the affidavit and respect the views of the Ministry of Environment on forest issues," he

Why was the project proposed? The ban on traffic through Bandipur, lo-

cated 80 km from Mysuru in Karnataka, from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. was introduced on the directives of the High Court of Karnataka to reduce disturbance to wildlife and curb road kills. It has been in place since 2009. But the ban evoked opposition from a section of stakeholders, including the Kerala government which challenged the High Court order in the Supreme Court on the grounds that it was impeding economic growth of the region. The Supreme Court constituted a committee to examine the disputes between Karnataka and Kerala. In an affidavit, the MoRTH, which was part of the committee, proposed construction of elevated highways: five sections of 1 km each (four in Bandipur and one in the Wayanad sanctuary).

Why is it being opposed? Activists have argued that such projects are prohibited under the final notification of the Eco-Sensitize Zone for Bandipur issued in September 2011 based on the Environment Protection Rules, 1986. The guidelines make it clear that in the areas of threatened taxa, there should not be infrastructure development, and since Bandipur is a source habitat for tigers, flyovers cannot be constructed, said Mr. Gubbi. Wildlife activist Santosh Pavagada pointed out that the Centre had also ignored the Tiger Conservation Plan (TCP) for Bandipur, which was prepared under Section 38V (3) of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and it had recommended night closure of highways passing through the tiger reserve.

What is the State's view?

The Chief Conservator of Forests and Director of Bandipur, Ambadi Madhav, said the State government was consistent in opposing the project and developed an alternative road that bypassed the core forest area. The State has spent over ₹75 crore to develop an alternative road (SH-90) through Hunsur, Gonikoppa, Kutta and Kartikulam and another stretch between Konanur and Makutta and Madikeri and Kutta that links northern Kerala. The detour is 30 km longer. The Board for Wildlife has exempted ambulance and fire-service vehicles from the ban and 16 State transport buses are allowed to pass through at night.

A ND-NDE

KRISHNA KUMAR

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The root cause of corruption

If we want to cut down on corruption, we will have to start working more seriously on reducing the huge chasm between the rich and the poor



HE CONTROVERSIAL INDIAN

TABISH KHAIR

is an Indian novelist and academic who works in Denmark

Transparency International, a global anti-corruption coalition, ranked India 81 out of 180 countries in its corruption index of 2017. The least corrupt nations were New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Singapore, Sweden, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the U.K. Just above India in the list were China, Serbia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Ghana (less corrupt). And below India were Morocco, Turkey, Argentina, Benin, and Kosovo (as corrupt or more corrupt).

Now, 81 out of 180 might not seem too bad, especially to sceptical Indians, but it is misleading: often the same rank is occupied by as many as three countries (for instance, rank 71). As such, in terms of numbers, India is placed in the bottom third of the list, if not the last quarter. This should not surprise sceptical

However, ranking the corruption level of a country is less of a science and more of an art. And it is an art that naturally occludes the advantages – which others might see in terms of invisible corruption – of rich First World nations, where polity and economy, Parliament and corporation often have long-established and uncontroverted relationships. This does not mean that nations like Ghana, India, Morocco and Turkey do not have considerably more corruption than nations like New Zealand and Denmark. What it means is that the ranking game is not sufficient to understand corruption at the global, national and local levels.

Cultural and historical factors

How, then, can we understand the corruption that we find in nations like India? One common option is to employ a cultural perspective. It is attributed to something like national character. For instance, it seems suggestive that all the least corrupt nations listed above, with the exception of Singapore, are Euro-



structure, in all regards except that of some citizen rights. Another common explanation is basically historical: for instance, by referring to the top-down power structures of feudal or colonial regimes in places like Morocco, China and India until just a few decades ago.

I will not deny that cultural ethos and historical precedence play a role. After all, both abiding by the law and lawlessness have a domino effect: if you follow the law, other people around you are more likely to do so; if you break the law, other people around you are also more likely to do so. A history of unresponsive authoritarianism might increase the tendency to break laws, if one can get away with it, because the citizen has nothing invested in the status quo. Only fear upholds the law, and the moment the citizen can get away with it, he or she breaks the law. This can also

lead to a greater tendency towards corruption.

The most important factor

But culture and history are misleading as primary explanations. Far more important is another factor that few people talk about. If you look at India and the countries around it on the index, and at the top 10 (least corrupt) countries, you realise that the former group contains nations with huge socio-economic inequalities, and the latter contains nations with a high degree of social and economic justice. In that sense, Singapore belongs with the European and European-settler countries ranked as the 10 least corrupt nations. In short, corruption is directly proportionate to the socio-economic gap in a nation. Cultural and historical factors add to this or subtract from this, but the greater the socio-economic disparities, the greater the incentive towards corruption.

This happens in many ways, both among the rich and the poor. For instance, in a country where, say, ${\cline 10,000}$ is nothing for the rich, it is easy for the rich to offer a bribe of that sum. But if, in the same country, ₹10,000 is what a

poor man may earn in an entire month. it is difficult for him to refuse a bribe of that sum. This leads to the gradual erosion of morality and ethics on both sides: some find it easy to spend money to get things done, others find it difficult to refuse to accept that money. On both sides, there builds up a disrespect for the system and for each other. The system itself is seen as thoroughly corrupt because of such individual acts of corruption. This further 'justifies' the corruption on both sides. Moreover, the poor look at the affluence of the rich as basically a consequence of corruption, which is by no means the case all the time. And the rich look at the vulnerability of the poor as the consequence of a corrupt morality, which is again by no means the case all the time. Such a nexus saps the entire social fabric of a country, also creating apathy towards demands for greater transparency in the corridors of power. This further leads to the spread of corruption.

If we in India want to cut down on corruption, we will have to start working far more seriously on reducing the huge (and some say, widening) chasm between the rich and the poor.

You'll be fine without privacy

As a true patriot, you should donate it to the cause of national security



ALLEGEDLY

G. SAMPATH is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu

The problem with people like Rahul Gandhi is that they keep making completely false allegations against our Prime Minister. For instance, take his pet grouse that the Prime Minister doesn't listen to the heartbeat of the people. This is the most ridiculous thing I've heard in my whole life. Is he the Prime Minister of India or a cardiologist at Apollo, that he should listen to heartbeats all the time?

But every Indian knows that the Prime Minister does listen. If you really believe he is an arrogant man who never listens to anyone, I dare you to say so in a Facebook post, along with your address and phone number. I promise you that in 24 hours we will come to know who is a bad listener and who isn't. As they say in Hindi, milk will become milk and water will

The Prime Minister is all ears

The biggest proof that listening to people is top priority for our Prime Minister is the recent order by his government authorising 10 central agencies to intercept, monitor, and decrypt "any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer". I can't think of a bigger step taken by any Prime Minister anywhere in the world to listen round the clock, everywhere, to every citizen irrespective of caste, class, religion, gender, mother tongue, and whether or not the urea

they use comes with neem-coating. Sadly, pliable journalists and their patrons in the shameless Opposition are opposing this move because they have nothing better to do. They are alleging that it will result in invasion of

people's privacy. What makes their protestations totally unconvincing is that they defended Aadhaar when people said Aadhaar invaded privacy. They said if you have nothing to hide, what's your problem?

Today I want to tell them the same thing: if you have nothing to hide, what's your problem? Thanks to Snowden, the whole world knows America snoops on the whole world. You never protested that. But now you accuse your own government of 'snooping' when all it wants is to know you better. Tell me: what better way to know someone than to spy on everything that passes through their computers? Why should there be any secrets between you and your dear leader who you so lovingly voted to power almost five years ago? What will you do with all your privacy anyway? Build Taj Mahal? Why not donate it to the cause of national security?

Don't you know that terrorists save all their evil plans on their personal computers? You must have read in the papers about our brilliant sleuths busting the sleeper cells of the dreaded terrorist group, Harkat-ul-Meerkat-e-Furcoat-ul-Zameen-e-Asmaan-e- Mujahide en-e-Anti-India-e-Lashkar-e-Hizbul-elol Qaida. How do you think they did it? It's not as if the sleeper cells were sleeping after a heavy breakfast of appam and coconut milk, waiting for the police to come and wish them 'Happy Bombing!' We caught them because we had been diligently monitoring the laptops and smart phones of every single citizen of India, including those too poor to own a laptop or smart phone.

In other words, the compulsive contrarians who keep harping on privacy are actually doing two things: first, they are refusing to trust their own democratically elected government, which, if you ask me, makes them hardcore anti-nationals fully deserving of every bit of surveillance; second, they are taking the side of the terrorists and bad guys, for those are the only ones who stand to gain by not having their computers spied upon.

The solution to India's problems

Looked at objectively, it is clear that mass surveillance is a revolutionary step that can change the very character of Indian democracy. I can't tell you how excited I am by this move. Like every patriotic Indian, I also have great solutions for India's problems. Now all I need to do to communicate them to the government is to open a word file in my laptop and write them down. And I'm happy to tell you that this was the first thing I did in 2019: I wrote down the solution to India's problems. Since you can't do surveillance on me, let me voluntarily share my so-

lution with you: dictatorship. That's what Indian democracy needs. All our problems have the same root cause: population. Too many Indians. And too many poor Indians. If India can reduce its population by 50%, then we will have plenty for every one. Plenty of jobs, plenty of food, and, most important, corruption and poverty will both come down by 50%.

And the only way to reduce our population is to let the army run the government and leave policymaking to experts, preferably from World Bank and McKinsey. Anyway, this is what I wrote down in my laptop and I'm confident our government has taken note of it. As for those who insist on asking what about right to privacy, well, if data is the new oil, then as they say in Hindi, privacy has gone to buy oil.

In one of India's oldest port cities

A walk through Lothal takes you back 4,500 years to the Harappan Civilisation



RANA SAFVI

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No child growing up in India fails to study the Indus Valley Civilisation, which is now more popularly referred to as the Harappan Civilisation after Harappa, the first of its sites to be excavated in the 1920s by British archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Growing up, I was fascinated by Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, which now top my bucket list. I remember being awestruck, like many, when I saw in Delhi's National Museum the famous bronze beauty, the 'Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro', cast some 4,500 years ago.

The Harappan Civilisation was widespread: it covered parts of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even though, post-Partition, Harappa and Mohenjodaro fell in Pakistani territory, there are many sites of the Harappan Civilisation in India too. I intend to learn as much about them as possible before my dream of visiting Mohenjo-daro and Harappa comes true

The importance of trade

Indian archaeologists started the search for cities of the Harappan Civilisation post-1947 in Saurashtra, Gujarat, and were amply rewarded. Archaeologist S.R. Rao led teams who discovered a number of Harappan sites, including the port city of Lothal in 1954-63. Two sub-periods of Harappan culture are marked out: period A dating to 2,400-1,900 BCE, and period B dating to 1,900-1,600 BCE. The word Lothal, like Mohenjo-daro, means the mound of the dead. Lothal is located between the Bhogavo and Sabarmati rivers near the Gulf of Khambat.

When I got a chance to visit Lothal



recently, I jumped at it. It was a long and dusty ride from Ahmedabad to the village of Saragwala where the archaeological site of Lothal is located, but it was well worth it. I really couldn't believe my eyes when I first saw the remains. The bricks truly look as though they are from the recent past and not from 2,400 BCE!

My first stop was the rectangular basin that was said to be the dockyard. It is 218 m long and 37 m wide and is bound on all sides by baked bricks. It had gaps for a sluice gate and inlet. As we haven't yet deciphered the Indus script, we don't know if this was really India's first port as is claimed by some and questioned by some historians. But it is true that the discovery of Lothal seals in other ancient cities points to its importance in trade that was conducted with other ancient civilisations. The dockyard proves the maritime activity of the Harappans.

The 4,500-year-old city was mathematically planned. It had a grid pattern with proper streets crossing at right angles, drainage systems, and a great bath. The emphasis on cleanliness can be judged from the discovery of toilets and lota-like jars described by Tony Joseph in his fascinating book, The Early Indians: The Story of Our

Ancestors and Where We Came From. He writes that "the way South Asians wash themselves hasn't changed all that much". Imagine, our fixation with washing up goes back all the way to the Harappan Civilisation!

As this thought was crossing my mind, I made my way past an ancient well, the remains of a storehouse, and found myself in the upper town or citadel. The city was divided into two parts: the upper town and the lower town. The remains of the brick walls there suggest wide streets, drains and bathing platforms.

Off to a bead-making factory

After spending some time in the citadel I followed the signs to a bead-making factory. I wish the signs were more accurate. Amidst ruins, my search turned into a guessing game with all the signboards being so vague.

Lothal was in the thick of Harappan maritime trade, and beads made from +semi-precious stones, terracotta, gold, etc. were popular in areas as far as Sumer (modern-day Iraq), Bahrain and Iran. The Lothal bead-makers were highly skilled. According to the signboard in the Archaeological Survey of India museum there, which displays these beads, a bead-maker's house was excavated in the lower town. It had several rooms and a kiln. Eight hundred cornelian beads in various stages of production and tools and raw materials were also recovered from there. In the cool confines of the museum, I was also bewitched by the unicorn seal. There must be few students in India who have not seen that seal in their history textbooks.

I also learnt from The Early Indians about a vase discovered at Lothal. It has the painting of a crow standing next to a pitcher with a deer looking back at it. It reminds one of the tale of the thirsty crow in the Panchatantra. As Joseph writes, "So some of the tales we tell our children may have been the same ones told by the Harappans to their children."

Chance encounter with South Asian folk wisdom

Taxi rides can provide a few minutes of social intimacy among strangers. Occasionally, they can also be reminders of disappearing folk wisdom



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Taxis are mobile spaces that enable strangers to be physically proximate for a short duration. In an enclosed metallic 6x6 ft box on wheels, two individuals or a small group are accidentally thrown together. But if the passenger and the driver are so inclined, taxis provide an opportunity for ephemeral, social intimacy too. The journey cries out for conversation particularly if you seat yourself next to the driver. And when that happens, the episode can turn into an amateur ethnographer's delight, for it provides fleeting, meaningful data about a person, his society, and culture, which can be stored in memory for future use.

We all die empty-handed

In metropolitan cities such as New York or Sydney, Indian visitors can't escape a chance encounter with Pakistani taxi

drivers. Conversations begin with "where are you originally from?" and soon enough, the P-word is fluttering in the newly found common space. A lament curdles: how sad that India was partitioned - so unnecessary, so painful! And then the blame game begins: 'It is all the doing of politicians – not only of yesteryears but also today - whose avarice ordinary people fall prey to. If only people took matters in their own hands, but no politician allows that. We must live with our fate: as separated brothers for whom reunion is forever denied.' The journey ends with a slightly mournful, feel-good bye. The driver refuses to take any money. The passenger insists that he can't take a free ride. Money is finally exchanged and reciprocal pleasantries bring the encounter to a close. I must have gone through this ritual hundreds of times in the last two decades. Away from their respective homelands, diasporic South Asians feel a special, fleeting bond that they fail to replicate when they return.

When I hailed a taxi on my recent visit to Sydney, one Abdul Mallick from Karachi stopped by the curb and asked me to get in. He had the look of a proper, god-fearing Muslim – a beard that would be perfectly V-shaped if it was not inordinately long, facial hair shaven



away from squeaky clean, shining, cheekbones. He had no moustache. This is the kind of religious appearance that ordinary Hindus associate with a kattar mussalman, or dangerous Muslim. The conversation had a predictable beginning but then took an unexpected turn. "Sir, I don't understand our politicians," he said. "They all claim to be true Muslims. But a Muslim's foremost concern is with what happens in the afterlife. He gets Jannat only if he does good in the here and now, right? But he openly plunders his homeland and does no good to his holy land; all he is interested in is amassing power and wealth for himself and his family. Why

can't he realise that this does no good for his afterlife? He is simply not being a good Muslim."

I was stumped, but listened intently. "And you know, sir, they believe they are leaving behind a fortune for their family, but what do they get in return? When Benazir's family came to power after her assassination, did they go after her killers? No, sir, they only amassed more power and wealth for themselves. These people are rotten. They are so caught up in this terrible game that they have no qualms about betraying their mother or wife. Or perhaps what Benazir passed on to her family was just this: greed for power and wealth. That is her legacy, that is their inheritance," he said despondently.

Perhaps simplistic and too harsh on the family, I thought, but he had a point. The stakes in big time moneymaking and power wielding are so high that ordinary values of love, affection, and respect are easily set aside. This philosophical lesson was rounded off with a soulful rendering of four lines from Shailendra/Mukesh's immortal song from Teesri Kasam: "Sajan re jhoonth mat bolo, Khuda ke paas jana jai, na haathi hai, no ghoda hai, wahan paidal hi jana hai." He said: "Sab yaheen dhare ka dhara reh jayega Janaab! Phir kyoon veh mara maari (You're not going to take anything with you after you die, so

Forgetting life's purpose

"Yes, sir," I nodded in agreement.

But are the really wealthy and the powerful listening, I wondered. Ruthless accumulation of wealth and power is at the expense of the nation, not for its sake as is sometimes claimed. Nor is it in the true interest of the family, which has no special claim anyway. Largely induced by wilful self-assertion, it is aimed at momentary pleasure, for pride and glory in the immediate here and

why hanker after power and wealth)?"

As I got off and walked towards my hotel, I chewed over Mallick's sagacious reflections. Today's politicians seem to have forgotten the very point of human life, he was saying: why we are here, what makes our life worth living, what gives it meaning. They give politics a bad name by overlooking its real point, he might have added: to use collective power to realise the common good. But why only blame politicians? Are we not all complicit? Have we all not forgotten the point of our vocations - law, medicine, education - and lost a sense of the overall purpose of human life?

It is hard for me to judge whether he interpreted Islam correctly. But indisputably, that was his interpretation of what true Islam required, what a true Muslim ought to do: abjure limitless pursuit of power and wealth for the sake of a better afterlife. But then, would a Hindu with an otherworldly inclination say anything different to contemporary politicians and builders of business empires who happen to be Hindus? It is hard not to conclude that despite all the manifest difference, the lived religion of ordinary South Asians, in taxis or outside them, contains ancient, common folk wisdom. Alas, the excessively wealthy and the extremely powerful are impervious to it.