

WHO

Amos Oz
moderate
voice

When Amos Oz, Israeli writer and supporter of a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict, passed away last week, his daughter tweeted, "To those who loved him, thank you." Oz, a respected voice worldwide who died of cancer at 79, was often derided at home by the nationalist right for having "betrayed" his people by suggesting a way out of the crisis that should take in the Palestinian viewpoint as well.

What did he write about?

Over 50 years, Oz accounted for every aspect of a "divided land" through novels, essays, a best-selling memoir, interviews – he wrote about his country's rise following the Holocaust and life after, the struggles, contradictions, the push and pull between Jews and Arabs. In *Dear Zealots* (2017), he presents his case: "I am not sure we can end the fight with Arabs overnight. But we can try." He argues that granting of statehood to Palestine is "a question of life and death for the State of Israel." Last year, on the

70th anniversary of the birth of Israel, Oz told *Deutsche Welle*: "We cannot become one happy family because we are not one, we are not happy, we are not family. We are two unhappy families. We have to divide the house into two smaller next-door apartments." Relations between the two are at its worst and with U.S. President Donald Trump recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital last year, it has put more obstacles on the road to peace.

Why did he join a kibbutz?

Oz was born Amos Klausner in Jerusalem to Eastern European immigrants, his father a right-wing academic, and mother a story-teller who suffered from depression and took her life when he was 12. At 15, he went to live in a kibbutz by himself, changing his surname to the Hebrew for "strength." He worked as a canteen worker and tractor driver and held

various other jobs, but his heart was on writing. His 1966 novel, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, chronicles the kibbutz life, the "strict symmetry" of the buildings, adding a "dimension of weightiness" to

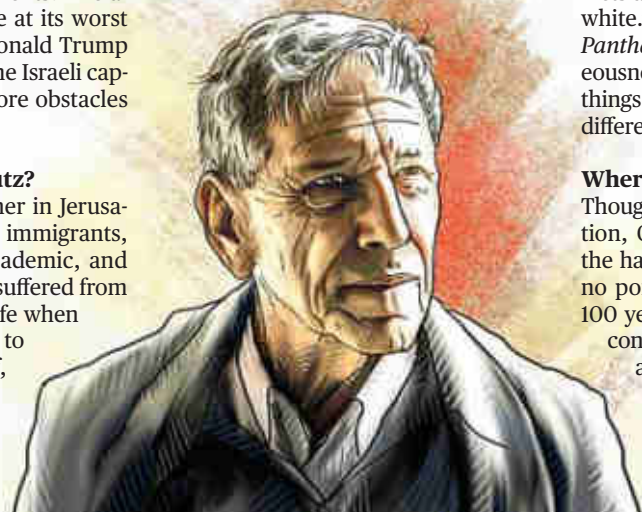


ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

the dwellers' world. As a child he admits to being a "little Zionist-nationalist fanatic – self-righteous, enthusiastic and brain-washed," but after fighting in the 1967 and 1973 wars, he realised that "there are two sides to a story; that conflicts are coloured not only in black and white." The boy-narrator in his book, *Panther in the Basement*, is full of righteousness but soon learns that there are things in the world that can be seen in a different way.

Where does he stand?

Though he pushed for a two-state solution, Oz was wary about dealing with the hard-line Hamas in Gaza. "There is no point in even fantasising that after 100 years of bloodshed and anger and conflict Jews and Arabs will jump into a honeymoon bed and start making love, not war," he said in the interview to *Deutsche Welle*. In *Dear Zealots*, he writes, "Now comes a little confession. I love Israel even when I can-

not stand it." The powerful stories, of loss and longing where the personal and political overlap, that enrich most of his books will be his legacy. Oz's beautiful memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, is the tragic tale of his mother's suicide as also the city of Jerusalem in the 1940s, full of "open hearts and capacious souls." His non-fiction goes straight to the point of his politics. *Think Help us to Divorce: Israel and Palestine – Between Right and Right*, which offers ways to resolve the problem.

Is there hope of a solution?

A deal seems remote since the U.S.-led negotiations stopped in 2014, and violence has escalated on the border along Gaza. Palestinian negotiator Hanan Ashrawi pointed out that Oz's death "deprived Israel and the dwindling peace camp of another rarity," while Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said his passing was a moment of "great darkness."

SUDIPTA DATTA

WHAT

The lowdown
on blood
transfusions

WHAT IS IT? A young pregnant woman in a government hospital at a rural centre in south Tamil Nadu's Madurai district made an explosive revelation mid-December. Expecting her second child, she heard from doctors, after she was admitted following a bout of sickness, that she had tested positive for HIV.

Later, as the story unravelled, in full

media glare, it turns out she had acquired the virus after a blood transfusion in a district hospital following a diagnosis of anaemia. This opened up a Pandora's box, and fear and distrust pervaded the community. Besides flagging the issue of the availability of safe blood in the State, it set in motion a sequence of events, mostly tragic, introspection, and some corrective action.

HOW DID IT
COME ABOUT?

The story did not end, or even begin, there. The blood donor, who had donated as a replacement donor when a pregnant relative required a transfusion, only discovered his HIV positive status after a test for a job interview. He rushed back to the hospital, laden with guilt, to inform authorities. By then, his blood had been transfused to the pregnant woman, and she had tested positive. His blood donation history retrospectively exposed chinks in the blood donation and trans-

fusion cycle in at least two instances. He had already donated blood in 2016, but his blood was discarded after he tested positive for HIV. However, though the HIV law mandates that the patient be informed with counselling about his/her status, in this case the donor remained in the dark. In the second instance, when he donated his blood in November last year, two years after the first, the lab failed to test and/or detect his infection, which was clearly not in the 'window period' where the virus may avoid detection. The donor was distraught, and attempted suicide, and died in hospital later.

A few days later, another pregnant woman claimed she had been transfused with HIV-infected blood at Kilpauk Medical College and Hospital in Chennai. While her claim has been contested stoutly, the two incidents have, nevertheless, rocked the State that once won plaudits for its prevention of transmission programmes.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS
OF DONATION?

There is a chain of approved processes to be followed in blood donation, aimed at quality control and negating the possibility of transmitting infections. Every qualified donor is put through a basic clinical evaluation (blood pressure and pulse). If normal, a sample of the blood donated is tested for HIV, Hepatitis B and C, sexually transmitted diseases and malaria. Meanwhile, the donated blood is stored separately in an 'unscreened refrigerator.' If the sample clears these tests, or if the tests turn negative, the blood will then be moved to the 'screened refrigerator.' If it tests positive for any of the infections, another sample from the same blood bag is tested again. If positive, the bag is discarded. The HIV Act mandates that the blood bank inform the positive donor, besides referring to the appropriate department for further treatment. When a requirement crops up,

the blood bank does a grouping to confirm that the group is the same, does a cross-match with the recipient and releases it to the ward.

WHAT NEXT? The Madras High Court has sought a report from the Health Department. The National and State Human Rights Commissions have taken *suo motu* cognisance of the issue and asked for the State's response. The need, however, is to build confidence in the community that the most exacting standards are followed in collecting, testing and storing blood, and then in transfusing it. Even if this calls for a re-look at the entire process, it must be done. It is as crucial as making sure no one dies because they could not get blood in time.

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on *Sneha's toll-free suicide helpline: 0442464 0050*)

RAMYA KANNAN

WHY

Australian
Open will
be different?

What are the changes?

■ Tennis loves its traditions. But the feeling, at least in the recent past, has been that of a sport trying to slowly chip away at its perceived anachronism. The plethora of changes announced ahead of next week's Australian Open, the first Grand Slam tournament of the year, is to be seen in that context. Two of them stand out – the introduction of a 10-point tiebreak at 6-6 in the deciding set and 'Heat Stress Index' to replace the old Extreme Heat Policy. Other changes include the use of serve clock – to be set at 25 seconds – to help speed up matches, Hawk-Eye review technology on all 16 courts, increase in the number of spots in the women's qualifying draw from 96 to 128, and the inevitable upgrade in the prize money pool.

Why were they needed?

■ The tiebreak rule has followed a similar move by Wimbledon, albeit at 12-12 in the decider, to prevent long-drawn matches from messing up the schedule.



At Melbourne, where a night session is a huge attraction, a marathon encounter extending into the wee hours is undesirable. The change in heat policy is probably the result of the severe criticism the previous set of rules came under. In the last edition, Novak Djokovic and Gael Monfils were vociferous after being forced to play at temperatures that almost touched 40 degrees Celsius. The hospitalisation of Simona Halep, immediately after the women's singles final which was played with the roof open, appears to have forced the organisers' hands. The serve clocks will help enforce the guideline that players have 25 seconds to initiate play after the previous point ends. The additional spots in the women's qualifying draw is to restore parity with the men, while the use of line-calling technology on all 16 match courts will ensure equal condi-

tions for every player in the draw.

tions for every player in the draw.

How will it impact players?

■ A final set super tiebreak means encounters like the one in 2017, where Ivo Karlovic defeated Horacio Zeballos 22-20 in the fifth set, will be a thing of the past. So will be Halep's memorable 4-6, 6-4, 15-13 win over Lauren Davis and the 6-3, 4-6, 9-7 semifinal triumph over Angelique Kerber, both last year. While it is sure to help players physically, the move has generated criticism, with many arguing that the women's game could have been spared. If anything, it was the men's game which needed trimming and there too it was felt that curtailing the end would deprive fans of drama. In the 2008 Wimbledon men's singles final between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, it is the 9-7 final set scoreline that everyone remembers and not the initial phase of the match, went the theory. As to how the new heat policy – which takes into account air temperature, radiant heat, humidity and wind

speed – plays out is yet to be seen. But tournament director Craig Tiley's confirmation that none of 2018's contentious decisions to continue play would have been overturned under the new system has dampened hopes.

How will the tournament pan out?

■ A rejuvenated Djokovic, a six-time champion here, is a welcome change from last year. So is the return of Serena Williams, who skipped the 2018 competition because of pregnancy. Andy Murray's recovery after his hip surgery has been slower than expected and the searing Australian summer is the least ideal of conditions to put his body to test. The same may apply for Rafael Nadal, who is coming back from an ankle surgery. However, defending men's singles champion Roger Federer is as resplendent as ever. Caroline Wozniacki, the women's champion, who has stuttered of late, will hope for some of it to rub off on her.

N. SUDARSHAN

WHEN

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January 2019

Wall for equality: On Tuesday, thousands of women in Kerala formed a 620-km human chain from north to south, termed the women's wall, in support of gender equality and access to the Sabarimala temple. Backed by the State government, they were protesting against the ban on women in the age group of 10-50 from visiting the temple. Last September, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court threw the temple open to women of all ages, which led to an outpouring of protests. On Wednesday, two women in their 40s entered the temple for the first time since the verdict, sparking fresh clashes. "I had earlier made it clear that the government will provide protection if any woman comes forward to enter the temple," said Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. Pictures show women on Kannur Road in Kozhikode, and artistes painting on a 30-metre canvas set up by the Kerala Lalithakala Academy to drum up support for gender parity. ■ K. RAGESH, S. GOPAKUMAR



WHERE

In Karnataka,
row over
midday meal

The Karnataka government's midday meal programme in schools has run into controversy with one of its NGO partners in the mammoth welfare exercise, International Society for Krishna Consciousness's subsidiary Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF), refusing to include onion and garlic in cooking.

Following this, the State government

has not yet signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to continue the programme with APF that supplies food to 4.49 lakh students in government and government-aided schools through its centralised kitchens in several cities.

In Bengaluru alone, it provides meals to 1.83 lakh students across 1,212 schools.

In November, the Department of Primary and Secondary Education directed the foundation to include onion and garlic in the noon meal and start supplying hot milk instead of cold milk to the students. While the foundation has started supplying hot milk to some schools on a pilot basis, it has categorically said it will not add onion and garlic.

Why does it matter?

An official of the State Food Commission said it had received complaints about students skipping the midday meals as they did not like the taste of the food without onion and garlic, which

are an integral part of the food culture among most communities.

Children skipping meals is worrying because malnutrition is a serious issue. According to the National Family Health Survey 4 (NFHS) data for Karnataka (2015-2016), 36.2% of the children below the age of five are stunted, while 26.1% are wasted. The survey also reveals that 10.5% of the children were severely wasted, while 35.2% are underweight.

The Central Food Technological Research Institute has sent a report to the Department based on its earlier research findings that both onion and garlic were found to enhance the bioaccessibility of iron and zinc from grain.

But the institute has stated that during its survey across 270 schools in Mysuru district between January and May 2017, it found the average calorific value of the meals supplied by the APF was more than a school-cooked meal. The APF has said in a statement that its cooked meals are in compliance with

the nutritional norms prescribed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

What is the government's stand?

Principal Secretary S.R. Umashankar said a final call would be taken after considering the feedback from students and teachers. The APF has had a series of meetings with several stakeholders, including officials of the State Food Commission and the Education Department. The government will have to either accept the dietary norms of APF or make alternative arrangements for supplying food.

Are health activists worried?

Around 145 health activists, experts and citizens, who are part of the Right to Food Campaign and the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, have written to the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Chief Minister, stating that children are eating less as they find the food bland.

Sylvia Karpagam, a public health doc-

tor and researcher who is one of the signatories, argued for cooking culturally appropriate food in de-centralised kitchens.

Activists have also demanded that eggs be served as part of the midday meals as it is a good source of protein. They want the contract with the APF terminated, and meals prepared by self-help groups and other community-based organisations in accordance with nutritional norms and cultural practices, using fresh local produce.

Veena Shatrugna, a clinical nutritionist and former Deputy Director of the National Institute of Nutrition, said, "Normally, phytates and oxalates found in vegetarian diets precipitate iron and zinc and prevent their absorption from the gut. Onion and garlic appear to enhance absorption of these minerals." This is significant, she pointed out, because around 50% to 70% of children in India are anaemic.

TANU KULKARNI

Nations of noise and silence

If too much noise prevents thinking in India, too great a silence indicates a refusal to think in Denmark



THE CONTROVERSIAL INDIAN

TABISH KHAIR
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It is strange that I should be writing this piece. I have highlighted how the language of literature goes beyond the expectation of 'communication' in other language usages, such as medical literature or business writing. Literature explores, along with 'communication', those aspects of language that might be considered 'non-communicative' in other fields: paradox, contradiction, aporia, silence, gap, noise. In other words, I have stressed the role of 'noise' in the language of literature, just as I have underlined the role of 'silence' in it. But this piece, written on a train from Copenhagen to Aarhus, is about the dangers of noise. And, inevitably, silence.

No two countries offer a greater con-

trast in this regard. India is the subcontinent of noise; Denmark is a land of silence. Partly, this is because Denmark is sparsely populated: my train is half-empty. Can we even imagine a half-empty train between, say, Delhi and Kolkata? Or, Patna and Gaya?

A matter of national character

But part of the difference is also a matter of national character. People talk softly here and seldom interrupt each other, cars do not honk, even political processions almost never indulge in shouting and loud sloganeering. This might well be because, politically, Denmark has been built on compromise: on the negative side, it compromised with Nazi Germany; on the positive side, it has been run with a general degree of success by various political coalitions for close to a century now. It is impossible to imagine any single party coming to power in Denmark, and even though the party coalitions change, the nation seems to steer a steady course with regard to citizen's rights, internal well-being, and the national economy.

India is a nation of noise. It strikes me every time I go to India, and even more



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

forcibly when I return to Denmark. I recall the first question about Denmark that my mother asked when she visited me: "Is there a holiday today? Why is it so quiet?" And in those days I was living in Copenhagen, arguably a metropolis, while my mother had only known the taluk towns of Bihar!

Noise, within limits, is not necessarily bad. Amartya Sen says as much in his book, *The Argumentative Indian*. While I put greater stress on conversation than argument, perhaps because I have lived for many years in Denmark now, Profes-

sor Sen sees arguments as an essential part of ongoing conversations.

Noise curtails thinking

Yet, a point comes when noise reduces and even prevents thinking – and hence, the exploration of meanings and the exchange of understanding. I find this point being exceeded more often than not in contemporary India. This happens not just on the roads, with their deafening cacophony, and in many ordinary conversations, with their loud interruptions and tendency to-

wards overlapping monologues, but also in the media, especially TV, and political debates of all kinds.

The medium of thinking, as the German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han constantly reminds us, is quiet. That is why our sages are depicted as meditating in forests and on remote peaks. That is why Moses returned from a lonely trek up a mountain with his commandments; Buddha attained enlightenment under a tree; Mohammad had his first revelation alone in a cave.

It is sadly in the nature of once-colonised and now desperately 'developing' nations to suffer from the worst effects of environmental degradation. We can see this happening to our rivers and mountains. We can see this happening to our towns and cities: the pollution level in Delhi is 'severe' this winter. But perhaps the worst kind of pollution that we suffer from is noise pollution, for it curtails thinking, understanding and working out the best solutions. Even arguments only work as long as they do not end a conversation.

But, as an Indian, I do not just relish the quietness that this Scandinavian country affords me. I also sometimes

question the extent of its silence. Because quietness, like noise, has its uses and its excesses. Maybe one can even distinguish between quietness and silence, and it is a pity that we do not have a similar qualification of signifiers when it comes to 'noise'. (Maybe I should switch to Hindustani here in order to distinguish between necessary noise and destructive noise: *awaaz* and *bak-waas* might work!)

Quietness and silence

Anyway, a distinction can be made between quietness and silence in the social context. Quietness is necessary for thinking and communicating, and literature, when it uses silence, does exactly this: it halts the easy flow of words to suggest what the words cannot encapsulate. But quietness, when it insists on gagging all social and political noise, turns into a dangerous and absolute silence. All countries have versions of it. In Denmark, it largely consists of a refusal to discuss First World privileges in the context of the global neoliberal economy. If too much noise prevents thinking, too great a silence indicates a refusal to think.

The scam in the ROFL deal

The question that even Rahul Gandhi does not dare to ask



ALLEGEDLY

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Some of you may not agree but I strongly believe that India's greatest achievement since Independence is the inking of the ROFL deal with the French and the handover of the offset component to Double A, a man whose patriotism and commitment to excellence is blindingly clear to all but a handful of pliable journalists. Thankfully, most of the media, and I include myself in this larger subset of The Non-pliables, know an honest deal when they see one, and the ROFL deal is the world's most honest deal since Bofors.

So I was shocked when a foreign jholawala-type NGO worker started arguing with me about the ROFL deal. I couldn't make head or tail of what Jon Snow (name changed to protect his identity) was talking about. So I'm sharing the transcript of our conversation. If any of you can make sense of what seems like poppycock to me, do enlighten me over email. Here goes:

JS: Can India really afford this deal?

Me: I'm sorry, what?

JS: You are paying ₹1,600 crore for one plane. Is that the right priority for a country where malnutrition is rampant and millions are still illiterate?

Me: Excuse me, what's that got to do with anything?

JS: Isn't this money better spent on public healthcare and a good schooling system with well-paid teachers?

Me: Are you crazy? You know how much this deal is worth? ₹7.8 billion! We can't spend that kind of money on health and education. Besides, India's defence is already underfunded.

JS: But India has been the world's largest importer of arms for several



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

years! And in the ROFL deal, you're now paying ₹1,000 crore more per jet than in the original deal, aren't you?

Me: You know nothing, Jon Snow. Stop talking.

JS: Fine, why don't you enlighten me?

Me: Look, we may be paying ₹1,000 crore extra and getting 90 jets less than what we need. So what? This is a matter of national security. When it comes to national security, everything else is irrelevant. When I say everything, I mean everything – cost, transparency, legality, privacy, fundamental rights (including the right to life), and, of course, democracy. No price is too high for national security. You can't put a price on the life and liberty of Indian citizens.

JS: Are farmers Indian citizens?

Me: Hmm... that's a tough one. What if they are?

JS: They are killing themselves because you can't ensure a decent price for their produce. How will your ROFL jets save their lives?

Me: You are mixing apples and oranges. Chalk and cheese. Cholesterol and cow urine. Pakodas and—

JS: Okay, I get it! Tell me this: why don't you drive a Porsche 911 Turbo S Cabriolet?

Me: I can't afford one. Simple!

JS: What if you signed away your entire salary for the rest of your life, along with your father's pension, as EMI towards the price of the Porsche?

Me: If I did that, how would I pay my bills? What would I eat?

JS: A poor country that can't afford to feed its people, can't afford to pay

its teachers, can't afford to keep its cities clean is a country that can't afford to buy 36 planes at ₹1,600 crore apiece. Is this so hard to understand?

Me: I'm sorry, but you've no understanding of India's threat perceptions or the need to modernise our military capabilities.

JS: This is the real scam in the whole ROFL deal.

Me: What do you mean?

JS: It's a question that not even Rahul Gandhi dares to ask. The biggest scam is that there is no debate at all on whether India should be splurging on these super-expensive jets in the first place, on whether there isn't another way to secure your interests.

Me: Another way?

JS: You already have nuclear deterrence. On top of that, you have enough conventional weapons to pummel Pakistan ten times over. Even if you sold all your PSUs, rivers, mineral resources, and borrowed all you could, and put all of that money exclusively in your defence budget, you still won't achieve parity with China. So what will you achieve by acquiring 36 ROFL jets?

Me: You're nuts. And you're not even an Indian.

JS: Speaking of 'Indianness', why can't India make its own ROFL jets?

Me: You mean, like Make in India and all that?

JS: Yeah, why can't your scientists design it and HAL manufacture it?

Me: Well, if Indians start making their own ROFL jets, how will we maintain our status as the world's top importer of arms?

JS: Ah, now you are making sense. For a long time, I didn't quite understand the meaning of 'national security'. Now it's clear. It's all about keeping Western arms manufacturers in business, isn't it? No developing country can afford to ignore its obligations in this regard.

Me: Huh? So we finally agree on something?

JS: ROFL.

A testimony to broken dreams

A journey through the ruins of Phuti Masjid, built by Sarfaraz Khan, in Murshidabad



WHERE STONES SPEAK

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It is difficult to imagine that Murshidabad, now a small, sleepy town in West Bengal, was among the richest courts of the 18th and 19th century. It hides many conspiracies, power brokers, pawns and fallen emperors in its heart.

One such fallen emperor was Sarfaraz Khan, the maternal grandson of Murshid Quli Khan, the founder of the city and the Nasiri dynasty. Nawab Murshid Quli Khan appointed Sarfaraz Khan as his successor before his death in 1727 as there was no direct heir to the throne. However, his son-in-law (Sarfaraz's father) Shuja Khan frustrated Sarfaraz's dreams. He felt that he had a bigger claim to the *musnad*, or the throne, of Murshidabad. Sarfaraz could only ascend the throne in 1739 with the title Alauddin Haider Jung.

A short-lived reign

But his problems did not stop there. The newly crowned Nawab fell out with his Wazir, Haji Ahmed. The Wazir won over the rich banker Jagat Seth Fateh Chand and Rai Rayan Chand and started plotting against the Nawab. Haji Ahmed invited Ali Vardi Khan, the Nawab Nazim of Bihar, to seek someone from the Mughal empire to replace Sarfaraz Khan. In the battle of Garia, Ali Vardi Khan defeated Sarfaraz Khan. The *Musnad of Murshidabad*, compiled by Purna Chandra Majumdar, mentions that the Jagat Seths suborned the Nawab's men to place bricks and clods instead of cannon balls and fodder in Sarfaraz Khan's magazine. Though the Nawab found out and gave charge of his artillery to a Portuguese,



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he was killed by a bullet as he rode out to battle on his elephant. Nawab Sarfaraz Khan ruled only for a year.

Inside Phuti Masjid

When I went to Murshidabad, I visited the grand mosques, palaces and imambaras constructed by the Nawabs who ruled for a longer time and in happier circumstances. But it was the Phuti Masjid that I found fascinating.

The mosque is quite large: 135 ft. long and 38 ft. wide with four cupolas at the corners. Only two of its five planned domes were completed. Dangerous looking spiral staircases lead up to the cupolas. As the builder died soon after construction began, the mosque was never completed. And so the name Phuti Masjid, or broken mosque. It is also known rather morbidly as Fouti Masjid. 'Fout' means death, and the name was apparently given after the builder's death.

As I approached the mosque, I first saw brick walls surrounded by small cottages and fields on a dusty road. The walls were covered with moss. I went eastward, which is the direction in which people generally enter mosques. But I found to my dismay that the entrance was at a height and there were no steps leading up to it. My guide was young and he quickly climbed up. With his help, I somehow

managed to scramble up the mud incline. I am glad that I did, for I immediately saw a huge hall and soaring arches. There was a sense of desolation, mystery and a strange undercurrent of spirituality in the mosque. An extremely religious and devout Nawab with money, power and resources had wanted to build a house of worship, yet no one ever prayed there. It was more like a scene from a horror movie: there was a semi-open roof, wild undergrowth, and trees and the sun rays peeped in through apertures. Just then I heard shrill voices. Two children from a nearby cottage, aged four and five, had clambered up to ask if they could be my guides!

One legend goes that this mosque was built in one night by Sarfaraz Khan. Another says that a number of workers toiled for several months to construct it. During roll call one day, it was found that one worker was not present. This happened a number of times and as the story became famous, the mysterious workman disappeared leaving his work incomplete and no one could match his skill. Both stories point to the hand of Djinn. Whatever be the truth, this broken structure is still standing despite all the odds, surrounded by houses, fields and hostile elements, a mute testimony to broken dreams.

An old wish list for a new government

Regardless of the party or coalition in power, a list of what the country urgently needs in the immediate future



THE PUBLIC EYE

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This is the year of the general election. Political analysts and psephologists have already begun to forecast which party will get the largest number of parliamentary seats, and if it fails to secure a majority, the alliance partners it would seek to form a government. Men, women and even children will play this guessing game. Passionate discussion, intense arguments and mudslinging will soon become a national pastime. I confess that I too will be irresistibly sucked into it.

But for now, I will desist. Instead, I share with the reader my personal wish list of expectations from the new government, regardless of the party or coalition that forms it. Suspending personal preference, and keeping in view our collective interest, I ask what the country urgently needs in the immediate future.

I have deliberately pruned this list

down to just five needs, not necessarily in order of importance.

Respect law, be humane

First, the new government must enforce the rule of law. This means expelling arbitrariness from the exercise of power; political decisions must not be grounded in the caprice of a single individual or group. No matter how powerful or wealthy, no one must be above the law that must be applied even-handedly. There must not be one set of criminal laws for one group, and quite another for other groups. The rule of law must not be fractured by the diktat of a mob, as in recent cases of lynching. No criminal should be allowed to roam freely with impunity. Can the newly elected government for once side unambiguously with victims of collective violence rather than with perpetrators?

A related point: it is shameful enough that a civilised society discriminates on grounds of religion, language, race, gender or caste. But to target a group because of any one of these and kill, maim, oppress, or humiliate it is downright obnoxious. Will the elected government stop this abomination, do all it can to prevent any expression of hate or occurrence of violence, and build a more inclusive society?

Second, a government is expected to



VIBHAV BIRWATKAR

provide relief to citizens in dire need of material help, say, to victims of cyclones and floods, or farmers in calamitous distress. Every government is also meant to undertake major structural reforms to alleviate chronic poverty. Underlying such efforts is the assumption of the impoverished as mere biological organisms who require food, nutrition, clean water and air. But a caring government must also view its beneficiaries as people who need and value friendship, family and community, who have the capacity to reflect and self-reflect, who need to tell stories about themselves and imagine new worlds. Will the new government design policies that look at human life in all its richness and com-

plexity and support organisations that attend to the social and psychological consequences of material deprivations?

Respect institutions

Third, our government must respect the independence of institutions. A society is sustained and nourished by collective effort. Nothing of significance is achieved by one group alone, but by apportioning tasks to different groups. As work is divided among groups with appropriate but different skill sets, each generates its own specific rules, norms and values. Institutions are practices governed by domain-specific rules and norms. If a nation is to realise its goals, it is crucial that public institutions such as

the university, the press, the judiciary, the Reserve Bank of India, the Election Commission, the police and investigative agencies remain in the hands of able, qualified personnel who possess a deep understanding of not only the point of these institutions but also how specifically each contributes to the overall functioning of society. Elected leaders must ensure that these institutions work in tandem to realise collective purpose; they must not capture and run them according to their whims. They must facilitate their respective functions rather than arbitrarily interfere, misuse or abuse institutions. How can a government appoint someone to head an academic institution without a clue about norms of intellectual production and scholarship? How can the Sahitya Kala Parishad, Lalit Kala Akademi or the Film Institute be administered by one with little understanding of art, literature or cinema?

Listen to criticism

Fourth, an elected government must listen to what ordinary people say about it – good or bad. It is even more duty-bound to pay heed to public-spirited intellectuals – all those whose entire social role is to assess, evaluate and criticise those who wield power or have the potential to cause systematic harm to

ordinary people. Those who can't stomach dissent or protest are unfit to rule.

Protect cultural heritage

Finally, every society selectively remembers a part of its past to pass it on to future generations. For, if we don't remember the past for the sake of the future, even our present is irrevocably destroyed. Indeed, no human society can grow unless future generations inherit the archives of the past. Our collective heritage is a usable past chosen to construct a collective future. Such cultural heritage can be found in tangible objects such as monuments and intangible objects such as ideas, values and symbols. Rather than exploit this heritage for narrow political gains, we need a government committed to rescuing it from destruction, to connect traces of the past with a living present. I am told there are hundreds of thousands of old Pali and Sanskrit manuscripts decaying in different parts of the country, pedagogies of traditional learning on the verge of disappearance, oral traditions becoming extinct, hundreds of languages fading away. These are irrevocable losses. Will the new government focus on protecting this fast decaying heritage rather than spend its time in cursorily renaming streets and cities to suit its political agenda?