

He rocked us



COUNTRY CODE

RAHUL JACOB

Sunday night in Los Angeles will mark that rare occasion when someone of Indian origin is up for an Oscar. This is a declaration many will contest, but a biopic, by definition, is a tribute or a trashing of the person it is about — in this case of a man born Farrokh Bulsara to Parsi parents in the British protectorate of Zanzibar. This is perhaps truer still of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the film about Freddie Mercury, because Rami Malek was practically unknown. Meryl Streep playing Margaret Thatcher (*The Iron Lady*) or Isak Dinesen (*Out of Africa*) was also winning or being nominated because she is Meryl Streep, spectacular accents and all. If Malek wins, he will win because he inhabited Mercury so naturally that it felt like witnessing a televised séance with the singer, who died aged 45 in 1991 of complications from AIDS. From the fake additional incisor teeth that Malek wore to play Mercury that he plans to recast in gold because he thinks it is the sort of thing the flamboyant singer would have approved of to Mercury's strut, Malek got the details and the big picture right.

The film has been celebrated for its riotous rendition of Mercury leading Queen as they take the stage for a little over 20 minutes in July 1985. Contrary to the film's melodramatisation of the events leading to that concert, there appear not to have been a trail of unanswered phone calls to Mercury asking him to perform. Nor was the band, which did struggle with working together on occasion because unusually all four members of Queen wrote hit songs, in different places. They were merely tired after a tour of Australia and New Zealand. Despite being pariahs for having performed in Sun City in South Africa the year before, Bob Geldof, who came up with the idea of the fund-raising concert to raise money for Ethiopia, reached out to them and the band agreed.

Queen had hit a low point and its members were thinking about not touring again for a few years, but the four some took on the training for the concert as if it were, well, the biggest event on earth. Hard to believe in today's era of splintered television audiences except for the pomp and parody of British royal weddings, but Live Aid would be watched by 1.5 billion people worldwide. Queen practiced solidly for three days whereas many of the other performers saw the concert as a series of cameos and just showed up. And, the band's sound engineers had scoped out the venue and the sound systems and cleverly cranked up the volume to levels higher than what the other bands used.

Mercury took the stage like an uncaged Bengal tiger that had not eaten for days. He roared, he strutted. His hypnotic hold on the crowd was unparalleled. He deserved an Oscar; predator on stage one moment, he was camp pussycat the next. Wearing a vest and jeans and seizing that long steel rod that held the microphone, Mercury turned it into an air guitar, then a magician's stick in a circus act, interspersed as the whim carried him with some decidedly phallic symbolism. Most of all, he conducted the crowd as if they were a choir, having them sing along to perfectly pitched triumphalist anthems such as *We are the Champions*. No crowd anywhere has mastered the double clap in *Radio Ga Ga* so resoundingly that it sounded like the medieval drums of an army going to war or shouted "DAAAY-O" quite as lustily. I have watched the YouTube recording so many times that in my more paranoid moments, I worried that if Malek could copy him so perhaps could the roll call of dictators and hyper-nationalistic politicians who dominate the world currently. More likely, though, empty rhetoric is all they have and thankfully none can sing and dance. (Mercury looks eerily like the late Pakistani dictator Zia ul Haq in one of the photos of Live Aid.)

Mostly, I felt an unexplainable and more than slightly illogical nationalistic sense of pride that Mercury had somehow transcended the strictures of Indian diaspora middle-class life to become this utterly unique entertainer. The disruptions of his parents escaping from Zanzibar to Britain during a revolution when he was a teenager, after he had been sent to a boarding school in Panchgani in Maharashtra at the age of eight, would have crushed the spirit of many young people.

Instead, Mercury had the courage to take centre stage time and again before tens of thousands, never so memorably than at Live Aid. "Queen was absolutely the best band of the day. They understood that it was a global jukebox... they just went and smashed one hit after another," Geldof would recall. "It was the perfect stage for Freddie — the whole world." Malek collecting that Oscar statuette this weekend on behalf of Freddie Mercury would be a nice homage, but in Montreux in Switzerland, there already is a 10-foot-high statue of the singer that commands the lake. The symbolism is simple; Mercury was a giant.

So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen...

The valedictories on the last day of the current Lok Sabha were poignant. Some MPs announced retirement; a few surprised their colleagues by praising the PM



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Valedictory speeches — MPs thanking the Speaker at the end of the Lok Sabha's tenure — are always both poignant and incisive: poignant because members are telling each other 'so long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, good night' and incisive because leaders say things that they cannot from any other forum.

This round of valedictories was no different. On the last day of the current Lok Sabha, H D Deve Gowda publicly recounted how he

had criticised the Congress Party for elevating as party president a 'foreign person' like Sonia Gandhi (she was present in the house) and conceded that this was no longer an issue as he himself had endorsed a demand that she become prime minister of India (Sonia Gandhi, unusually for her, interrupted him to say she never wanted to be one). He said he had spent 29 years in the House and this would be his last speech in the Lok Sabha. His party might be opposing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) bitterly in Karnataka but he was effusive in his praise for the Prime Minister. Ditto Mulayam Singh Yadav, who said he hoped the Prime Minister would win the elections again and return to government (to this, his relative by marriage, Rabri Devi said rather acridly later that Mulayam Singh had become old and no longer had any control on his power of speech). The Prime Minister responded by singling out Mulayam Singh and thanking him for the affection he had shown. And so, goodbyes were said to this Lok Sabha amid high anticipation for the next.

The House did not get a chance to bid personal goodbye to MPs who have said they will not contest the Lok Sabha election. As parlia-

mentary affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj (MP, Vidisha) used to be the darling of the Opposition. Then Speaker, CPI (M) leader Somnath Chatterjee paid her fulsome compliments, going so far as to call her the best parliamentary affairs minister India has ever had, much to the irritation of his party. After she was made Minister for External Affairs, Mulayam Singh defended her when she was charged with having lobbied with the UK government in favour of disgraced businessman Lalit Modi. It is a fact that in this government she has been sidelined in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) with the Prime Minister's Office dealing directly with the Foreign Secretary on several issues.

Uma Bharti (MP, Jhansi) has said she is not retiring from politics but will not contest the Lok Sabha election for health reasons. The fact that the biggest chunk of her portfolio — Ganga rejuvenation — was taken away from her in the course of Narendra Modi's last reshuffle might have been a factor in her decision. She did not attend the swearing in ceremony of the new ministers and is now dropping out of the elections altogether. Outspoken and blunt, Bharti's comments about her col-

BREAKFAST WITH BS ▶ UMESH PANDEY | THAI POLITICIAN

A bit of Bollywood in Bangkok

The former *Bangkok Post* editor turned opposition candidate talks to Rahul Jacob about his party's controversial nomination of a member of the royal family as a candidate to be PM

The evening before our breakfast on Monday, Umesh Pandey, the Thai Indian journalist turned first-time parliamentary candidate asks to speak to me. The party he is a member of, Thai Raksa Chart, might soon be disqualified; Will *Business Standard* still want an interview? Everyone I have met in Bangkok on the weekend is talking about little else. Indeed, the first election in Thailand since the military coup in 2014 has been turned upside down by Thai Raksa Chart's nomination of the king's elder sister, Ubolratana Rajakanya, as its prime ministerial candidate. Thailand has had a constitutional monarchy since the 1930s, but the royalty is regarded with reverence by the population and has a greater say in the government than in the UK. The shock waves subsided somewhat when the king issued a statement saying the nomination of his sister was "highly inappropriate", which prompted her to withdraw. The king's censure was followed by the election commission recommending to the constitutional court on February 14 that Thai Raksa Chart be dissolved.

For Pandey, this political crisis is also an existential crisis, a recurring theme in our conversation. When we spoke by phone, Pandey mused aloud about whether he should have accepted a recent job offer to be a private banker instead. The next morning, we are at the Sukhothai hotel's buffet at 7 am before the eggs counter has even warmed up its pans. An array of western, Japanese, Thai and Chinese breakfast options stretch out before us as if in an obstacle course, but all Pandey wants is a chilli omelette and orange juice. "I am addicted to chilli," says the youthful 46-year-old, whose late grandfather moved to Thailand several decades ago from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. We skip pleasantries and discuss the prospects

for the party as it awaits the court decision. "There is no precedent for how this (ruling) should be made," he says. The party, allied to the exiled former prime minister and billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, has discontinued campaign rallies. "Some people would view (rallies) as being obnoxious. It's just not the Thai way."

That is an understatement. In the view of many royalists and pro-military wealthy and middle class in Bangkok, the nomination was an affront to king and country. We are handicapped by Thailand's laws about what one can write about the king that are more liberal than Saudi Arabia's, but require a lot be left unsaid. "Officially, we have been saying that the princess approached us because of her intention to reconcile the country. She has said this herself on her Instagram account." The time travel freighted in that response requires a minute to digest: A 67-year-old princess, part of a royal family that dates back to 1782, withdrew her candidacy using Instagram. Speaking to the *Financial Times* last week, Pandey had said a member of the executive committee approached the princess, but the subject is now even more sensitive; he won't be drawn further.

In reality, Thai Raksa Chart party is closely allied with Thaksin, who has finished first in every election since 2001. With Thaksin and his sister Yingluck forced into exile by the military government, the nomination of Princess Ubolratana was a high-stakes gamble. Since 2006, rural supporters of Thaksin and his urban opponents have sometimes turned violent and brought Bangkok to a standstill every couple of years since 2006 until the coup in 2014. Whether Thaksin intended the nomination as an olive branch to the king, and whether the princess informed the king in advance is the subject of much speculation. Now even more than ever, Thailand is a

riddle wrapped in an enigma, cocooned in a hundred conspiracy theories.

What is clear is that the telecom billionaire's bet has backfired spectacularly. The current military dictator, Prayut Chan-o-cha, head of the National Council of Peace and Order, who is prime ministerial candidate for a party aligned with the army, is the beneficiary. The king, too, seems more magisterial than before. Pandey's party is almost certain to be disqualified. For Pandey, who says he met with the leaders of four parties before settling on what now seems a terrible choice, the election may be over. Pandey, who has a resemblance to the actor Jeetendra, laughs at this irony: "That's life then. I never expected to be in this situation." I assume he means he never intended to be in politics. He corrects me; politics has been "my dream... in seventh grade in Bishop Cotton, Shimla, I told my best friend, 'I want to be in politics in my country.' He said, 'You will never make it.'" Within days of being fired at the *Bangkok Post* last May after 22 months as editor, Pandey was approached by the leader of a major party and discussed joining them for three hours in the bakery of the hotel.

A large table nearby has been taken over by men in uniform, but they merely make repeated trips to the buffet.

Not much intimidates Pandey, whose hard-hitting coverage when he was editor-in-chief of the *Bangkok Post* prompted repeated calls from the military spokesman: "I was even told 'Your head will be chopped off if you run this story.'" He replied that every call to his Samsung was recorded and such conversations were passed on to two of his friends. Matters came to a head when the *Post* covered the Malaysian election last May that led to the surprise rout of Malaysian



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

strongman Najib Razak, drawing repeated parallels to the army's control of Thailand and promise of elections. Pandey says the owner said, "How many times have I asked you to control yourself? I will have to use my position to control you." The *Post*, which says he was fired for "mismanagement", on some days seems noticeably tamer, but is still critical of the government. Was he ever scared, I ask. Pandey laughs. "I don't have a family, but yes, I have

leagues during a meeting of the BJP's national executive in 2006 saw many red faces in the party. Some of them have not forgiven her for her outburst to this day.

Major General B C Khanduri (MP, Garhwal), the roads man in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet, will not return to the Lok Sabha either. He was removed without ceremony from his position as chairman of the Standing Committee on Defence three months before his term was to end. Maybe it is that humiliation or just a feeling that it is now time to hang up his boots. Bhagat Singh Koshyari, (Nainital-Udhamsingh Nagar) will not contest the elections. Nor will Hukumdev Narayan Yadav (Madhubani), who has said he would prefer to do party work. He has turned 80.

But there are some who are not Lok Sabha MPs but have said they will fight the election if forced to do so by their party. There is the rather confusing matter of Sharad Pawar, currently a Rajya Sabha MP who represented Madhya Pradesh in the previous Lok Sabha. His nephew and MLA, Ajit Pawar, had recently chided party workers in Pune for demanding that Sharadrao contest the Lok Sabha election. "He (Sharad Pawar) has said himself that he does not want to contest so please don't raise slogans," Ajit Pawar tersely told party workers. But the latest from Sharad Pawar himself is that if his party wants, he is ready to contest the Madhya seat. He is also reported to have said that his nephew will not contest.

Either way, a new House will be in place in May — so goodbye, and welcome.

mom and dad."

Pandey was sent to Bishop Cotton for four years because his father, a textile engineer, was keen he learn Hindi. Now, this natural story-teller reaches for a Bollywood line Jeetendra might have winced at: "*Abhi tak nahi marein, abh kya marenge?*" Then he turns emotional and gets slightly choked up while making the point that many Thai Indians, a diaspora of about 350,000, have had family in Thailand dating back 200 years yet "keep their head under the table". His run for parliament was intended to change that. If his party is disqualified, he intends to run in the next election in four years. Still, with Thaksin — who Pandey calls "a visionary" — weakened by the decision to nominate the princess and the careful stitching up of the electoral process by the military which controls the entire upper house, Pandey's dream of being the first Thai Indian in parliament may never happen.

This is a man who laughs often yet chokes up with emotion a couple of times in our two-and-a-half hour conversation. Pandey appears to have multiple personalities: Idealist, huckster, management theorist, sentimental son. At one point, he comes over to my side of the table to show me screenshots from a few years ago of negotiations with the Post's then editor, asking for a timeline to be promoted to be his successor. The story segues to how he would get up early to take a public bus from his home near a slum to his posh international school in Bangkok. His eyes go moist when he says first-generation immigrants deserve a chance to be prime minister. He wants to work towards passing that law. Thinking of Jakarta where the ethnically Chinese governor not only lost the election a couple of years ago but was jailed for blasphemy, I say this is impossible. Southeast Asia, for all its surface hospitality towards tourists, is not a welcoming place for immigrants. "It's a dream, but will I give it up? No bloody way," Pandey says, "*Agar aaj nahi hoga...*"

His party may look doomed, but Pandey will eventually get back on that campaign bus.

God is coming



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

KEYA SARKAR

When our British and European friends wish to get away from the winter chill, they know they can always rely on us to go gallivanting with them in India. This time the venue was Goa. We planned for a long time and managed to get a beautiful house on rent on an island in the Mandovi river. Although this meant crossing the ferry every time one wished to go to the beach, it also meant at the end of the day we were in a rather unmolested environment.

With the Salim Ali bird sanctuary nearby, one woke up to the chirping of birds. A little dip in the pool and we would head for a shack for our day's quota of prawns and crabs. After devouring all the seafood

that their stomachs would allow them to order, the foreigners were left totally satiated.

My husband and I decided to stay back and drive to a little known town on the Maharashtra coast called Vengurla. It was only a two-hour drive from where we were in Goa, but it is strange how contiguous states can be so visually different. The houses, the little places to eat on the road were similar yet different. We reached our destination where we had booked a modest home stay. After the poshness of our stay in Goa, this little room seemed from another era. It was almost lunch time and our host led us to our dining space in their garden. As we sat surrounded by coconut trees and farming tools, it was easy to appreciate that the food would be low on style but high on food value. Sure enough the vegetarian *thali* when it appeared looked hugely appetising. Everything served was from their farm and cooked just before serving.

As we sat chatting with our host long after the last morsel had been polished off, we learnt that quite unknowingly we had arrived on a rather auspicious occasion. Apparently the next day, lakhs of visitors would come from all over Maharashtra to visit the Sagarshwar temple and take a dip in the sea. The Sagarshwar temple

happened to be in the same lane that our home stay was on and we looked forward to some action the next day.

An evening stroll to the beach was wonderful because unlike Goa, beaches in Maharashtra are free of shacks and it was gorgeous to be on a beach with not a soul but us. The emptiness of the sand and the sea left us quite unprepared for the next day.

The next morning as we took our car out to explore Vengurla, we realised many devotees were making a beeline for the temple. But it is only when we tried to get back at lunch time that we realised the jam we were in. Literally. We had planned to leave Vengurla early evening that day but now the traffic and the police made it impossible to enter the little lane which housed our home stay and the temple. We hung around at a little café for a while and when the crowds had thinned a bit pleaded with the police to let us into the lane. They finally relented and we pushed through the crowds at a snail's pace.

Just as we were approaching our destination a group of devotees, like many before them, came towards us carrying a palanquin and other ritualistic yokes and banners. A big guy thumped on the car to stop us and said in a rather chastising manner in Marathi, "please don't go further. God is coming".

Looking for succour



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

When things overwhelm her, my wife seeks refuge in (a) rearranging her cupboard (this can take a week, by which time she needs some other form of escape from our nagging to "please just put everything back"); (b) goes on a laundry binge, washing already washed clothes; (c) ignores the chaos around her to pick up the phone and gossip with friends (she can talk as long as the phone battery lasts); and/or (d) get into a car and arrive unannounced at some friend's house, re-surfacing only when she is forced to come back. When things overwhelm her, my daughter likes to head for the nearest mall, find-

ing succour amidst the crowds, or in shopping — or both. When things overwhelm my son, his refuge is his bike, hitting the highway with his buddies. I didn't know where his wife seeks shelter, but it's a matter of time before we find out.

My own escape is a cottage 15 minutes from home that is surrounded by fields and silence for most part. I like to potter around here, even though I'm no help to the *maali*, and have to ask his wife to rustle up a meal when I'm peckish even though the kitchen is equipped with ingredients as well as labour saving devices. I'd like to say I read here, watch TV, or listen to music, but mostly I just stare vacuously and do nothing. Which, let me hasten to assure you, is an art, so addicted have we become to "doing something".

Two days after my son's marriage, I decided to spend the day at the cottage. In a house where wedding guests were still in residence, this was not an easy proposition. My mother insisted on coming. It seemed churlish not to extend an invitation to my sister and her husband, who were staying with us. This was a manageable flock, so we took off. My mother settled down to sunbathe. My sister did this and that. My brother-in-law was content chug-

ging bottles of beer that he discovered in the fridge. All was content.

But word of our escape seemed to have reached others. An SUV announced the arrival of a cousin sister and two aunts. They quickly set to chatting and knitting and criticising in the way that aunts are inclined to do — it's built into their DNA. Another aunt and her son followed soon after. This was becoming a party. I was reduced to fetching chairs and serving cocktails instead of slumbering quietly on a deck chair. It was soon evident they expected to be served lunch. Fortunately, my wife arrived then and took over the kitchen. At some point a meal was served, followed by tea. No one seemed in a hurry to leave.

The last to arrive were my son and his bride. Perhaps, like me, they came in search of tranquillity and isolation. At any rate, they too found themselves surrounded by chattering relatives. None of it was idyllic. So we did what we do in such situations. My daughter-in-law (like my daughter) took off to a mall. My son decided to go riding. My wife took on the settling of cupboards and laundering simultaneously, so our bedroom resembles a war zone. And I'm back at work, where it's quieter than home is likely to be for a while.

A great unravelling

First there was Prompt Corrective Action for banks. Now we have it for businessmen. Anil Ambani's group finds itself in virtual meltdown. Naresh Goyal is about to lose control of Jet Airways. Subhash Chandra of Zee is looking for a white knight. The Ruias have lost one flagship enterprise, and seem set to lose the other. In Kolkata, the B M Khaitan group is selling tea gardens and has put a company on the block. In Delhi, the Singh brothers, after destroying their Ranbaxy inheritance, are destroying each other. And in London, Vijay Mallya is trying desperately to keep a safe distance from the Arthur Road jail, which has been spruced up in his honour.

Meanwhile, the great debt sell-off continues. Whether it is the airport titans GMR and GVK or financial sector giants like IL&FS and DHFL, or real estate stalwarts like DLF, they are all coping with the problems of past excess. Other over-ambitious creations of the go-go years, like the Bhushan companies and Lanco, have pretty much disappeared off the map. Rumours whirl in business circles about still hidden toxicities in the financial sector. This is a great unravelling.

The simple narrative had been public sector bad, and private sector good. The public sector still looks bad; consider Air-India, the ₹48,000 crore to be pumped into government banks (on top of ₹1.57 trillion already pumped in during just the last two years), and the bail-out that is round the corner for the government's terminally ill telecom twins, BSNL and MTNL. But who will fly the flag now for India's vaunted private sector, who are the primary authors of the balance sheet problems that have plagued banks, squeezed credit and slowed the economy?

Many of the businessmen biting the dust are first-generation entrepreneurs, who could possibly earn some sympathy for having dreamed big. Still, the Ruias learned no lessons from having gone bankrupt once earlier in the 1990s. They and others gorged too much on debt, or under-estimated risk on commodity price swings and long-gestation projects. Also, there are those who generated their initial capital by means that will not bear close scrutiny — the old story of businessmen flourishing while their companies went under. Now the fates of companies and promoters seem more closely intertwined, thanks to new rules. As for the high-flying second- or third-generation inheritors who mismanaged what they started with, the reaction they provoke in at least some circles must be *schadenfreude*.

Who is to take their place? Will a new generation of entrepreneurs start up with better business sense, or at least better luck? But the so-called unicorns are mostly copycat entrepreneurs whose cash flow is funded by overseas (including Chinese) money. Many of the billionaires thrown up by the tech services boom of an earlier era have turned to philanthropy. Some recent stars like Radhakishan Damani of DMart continue to flourish, while Dilip Shanghvi of Sun Pharmaceuticals has faded along with the pharma story, and Sunil Mittal has been sucked into the telecom tariff whirlpool. Indeed, a feature of the current scenario is that even rapidly growing sectors like telecom and aviation don't generate surpluses. No wonder the stock market has been sluggish these past five years. One must hope there are hidden gems as yet unlisted.

Among the safe bets so far have been consumer-facing businesses in which Emami, Marico and others have done surprisingly well against the giants in the field. Emami strayed, though, and is now trying to reduce its debt load. Some established groups continue to do well — Bajaj, Mahindra, Piramal, Godrej and, of course, relentless Reliance. But Tata looks increasingly like a one-and-a-half company group, as old Bombay House stalwarts soak up capital.

Meanwhile, Suzuki has half the car market, the Chinese have the mobile phone business, and the Koreans key consumer durables segments. Deep-pocket investors like Blackstone and KKR have moved in, seeing opportunity. IBM is among the country's largest employers, Honda has overtaken Hero, Diageo has bought out Mallya, the two largest private banks are basically foreign-owned, and Etihad may run Jet. Where would we be without the foreign players?!

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Revenge is for morons

The wise think deterrence instead. Surgical strikes after Uri didn't prevent Pulwama. Another may be heady but won't deter Pakistan. Here's what will

Revenge is the immediate call after a terror attack with Pakistani fingerprints. In a couple of days, sanity tip-toes back into public debate. Inevitably then appears that phrase: Revenge is a dish best served cold. And Afghans are credited with having invented it.

Never mind that Phrase-Finder tells me that the French said this first, at the turn of the 18th century. But it's just that it fits the Afghans more. Because vengeance is essential to their lifestyle, usually lasting generations. How good are they at it? Don't bother reading tribal history or Rudyard Kipling. Ask the Soviets, the Americans and the Pakistanis. You mess with the Afghans, you will get the payback.

Yet, look at the state of Afghanistan. For all its old conquests and loot of India's riches and defeat of two superpowers, it is a hopelessly broken, poor, near-medieval and ungovernable disaster. It is probably human history's most perennial loser. Lesson: Revenge, served hot or cold, may be a delightful dish to eat. But it does nothing for you, besides momentarily satisfying your blood-lust.

A nation driven by revenge is more likely to self-destruct than win. Bush Jr. invaded Iraq to avenge Saddam Hussein's insults to his father and unravelled West Asia. Obama killed Osama bin Laden, by that time an inconsequential ailing old exile, and it did nothing to discourage new Islamic terrorists.

Pakistan has worked on a multi-generation project to avenge 1971 and destroyed its economy, society and polity in the process. The side that wins, on the other hand, is one that prefers "deterrence" to revenge. The travesty of recent Indian strategic thought is it emerges not from our brains but from whatever part of the anatomy that secretes the prickliest hormones. Revenge is a mere emotion, and for idiots. Deterrence grows over time from grey matter in the heads of wise people.

Take, for example, the surgical strikes after the Uri "fidayeen" attack. It became an end in itself. They killed 19 of ours, we killed many more of theirs. *Khoon ka badla khoon*.

Sure enough, they were at our throats again in Pulwama. There is clamour for revenge again. TV stud-

ios have become war rooms and indicate "strike" targets and weapons options. Prime Minister Narendra Modi promises retribution for "each one of your tears". The commentariat agrees that something definitely needs to be done soon. The less nutty ones also say revenge is good. But not just now. Take your time. As the Afghans say...

Here is a question: What comes after revenge? Will it buy you durable peace and security, or just be a great headline, an event and maybe a movie later? It may even win you an election. But will it deter your enemy?

Kautilya is much in fashion these days, so let's take this argument forward using his wisdom.

We don't have to read the Arthashastra. Just the most familiar folklore about Kautilya will do. When his dhоти got caught in a thorny bush and was torn, he did not go looking for a chopper to cut it down.

He took his time, returned with a pitcher of sweetened milk and poured it into the roots of the offending plant. When a curious Chandragupta asked him why, he said, if I cut it, it will grow from its roots again. But sweetened milk will attract millions of ants. They will eat up the roots and finish this problem for ever. The scythe option would have been revenge. The sweetened milk is deterrence. It isn't sexy. It's brutal. It's Kautilyan.

We can similarly examine our own strategic history. China's 1962 invasion was not to punish India, take revenge or grab territory. It was to create deterrence. It ended India's "Forward Policy", placed red lines on our Tibetan dalliance and pushed generations of Indian strategists into a defensive mindset, mentally fighting the same old war of 1962 to protect our territory. That message delivered, the Chinese built Pakistan into a worthy client. For five decades now they have brilliantly used a smaller neighbour (Pakistan) to balance a much larger India. This is classical, low-cost deterrence.

In 1971 Indira Gandhi employed her version of the Arthashastra. She waited for nine months to build sufficient military and diplomatic edge, instead of playing to public opinion and jumping in when West Pakistanis cracked down in March. She built up the military, signed a treaty with the Soviets to balance America and China,



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Don't abolish billionaires



WILL WILKINSON

for radical levelling is whistling out of the hard-left fringe and blossoming into a mainstream mood.

Ms. Ocasio-Cortez's policy adviser, Dan Riffe, contends that "every billionaire is a policy failure" (that's the tagline on his Twitter handle) because "the acquisition of that much wealth has bad consequences" and "a moral society needs guardrails against it." He'd like to see the 2020 Democratic primary contenders answer a question: Can it be morally appropriate for anyone to be a billionaire?

It's a compelling litmus test. I'd also like to watch would-be Democratic nominees take it. However, I hope that they would stick up for the idea that it can be morally kosher to bank a billion and that the existence of virtuous three-comma fortunes is a sign not of failure but of supreme policy success.

The empirical record is quite clear about the general form of national political economy that produces the happiest, healthiest, wealthiest, freest and longest lives. There's no pithy name for it, so we'll have to settle for "liberal-democratic welfare-state capitalism." There's a "social democratic" version, which is what you get in countries like

Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. And there's a "neoliberal" (usually English-speaking) version, which is what you get in countries like Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

You may prefer one version over the other, but they're not all that different. And in comparative terms, they're all insanely great. The typical citizen of these countries is as well-off as human beings have ever been. These places are the historical pinnacle of policy success.

But guess what? There are billionaires in all of them. Egalitarian Sweden, an object of ardent progressive adoration, has more billionaires per capita than the United States.

So what's the problem? Preventing billion-dollar hoards guards against the bad consequences of... having the best sort of polity that has ever existed? The progressive idea here is usually that people with vastly more wealth than the common run of citizens wield vastly disproportionate political power and therefore imperil democracy and the equal worth of our basic rights. It's a worry we've got to take seriously, but it's based more in abstract theorising than empirical analysis. Inspect any credible inter-

national ranking of countries by democratic quality, equal treatment under the law or level of personal freedom. You'll find the same passel of billionaire-tolerant states again and again. If there are billionaires in all the places where people flourish best, why think getting rid of them will make things go better?

It can be tempting to think that there's no morally decent way to accumulate that much wealth. And it's true that scads of the filthy rich got that way through theft, exploitation and the subtler corruption of anti-competitive rules in politically rigged markets. (You may have heard of Donald Trump.)

But there's a big moral difference between positive-sum wealth production and zero-sum wealth extraction — a difference that corresponds to a rough-and-ready distinction between the deserving and undeserving rich. The distinction is sound because there's a proven a way to make a moral killing: improve a huge number of other people's lives while capturing a tiny slice of the surplus value.

Consider Dr Gary Michelson, a spinal surgeon and inventor worth an estimated \$1.8 billion. He lives in Los Angeles. Dr Michelson holds hundreds of patents on medical devices and procedures that have made spinal surgery more effective.

He got rich by making it so that people with spinal injuries could walk again or suffer less debilitating pain.

According to William Nordhaus, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, innovators capture about 2 per cent of the economic value they create. The rest of it accrues to consumers. Whatever that is, it's not a raw deal. The accumulation of these innovations over time is the mechanism that drives compounding economic growth, which accounts for a vast improvement over the past 100 years in the typical American standard of living. Some people may have made an ungodly sum in the course of helping make this humanitarian miracle happen, but that's O.K.

This isn't to say that the deserving rich deserve every penny they get. In a better world, billionaires like Dr Michelson would probably have less. Policy failure is rife, and it's bound to account for a portion of even the best-deserved fortunes. Patents, for example, are government-granted monopolies meant to incentivise innovation. But the evidence suggests we've overshot the mark, and the pace of innovation would quicken, and many of America's biggest fortunes would shrink, if patent protections were weakened.

©2019 The New York Times News Service

Oscars so divisive

EYE CULTURE

J JAGANNATH

It's only befitting that the run-up to this year's Oscars ceremony is a grim reminder of where America stands in the Trump era: Utterly polarised. It's bogging everyone's mind on Twitter, the pre-eminent platform to vent one's rage these days, that two astonishingly bad movies are up for the most popular awards. *Green Book*, a movie about a black piano virtuoso (Mahershala Ali) who was able to traverse the Deep South in the 1960s due to his Italian-American chauffeur-slash-bodyguard (Viggo Mortensen) is a schmaltz-fest. Despite it being a true story, director Peter Farrelly took extreme liberties to buttress the movie's dramatic quotient. The two men apparently were never close friends and the cultured Black man never helped the brutish Caucasian write letters to his wife. Historical inaccuracies apart, the movie is just a giant slab of clichés piled together. That's why nominating Ali for Best Supporting Actor and Mortensen for Best Actor almost feels like the Academy is rewarding one-dimensional acting. That said, Ali is almost a dead certainty for winning his second Oscar because the Academy is prone to loving such saccharine pap.

Bohemian Rhapsody is another movie that left me cold despite it being the biopic of Freddie Mercury, the vastly charismatic frontman of Queen, one of the greatest rock bands in the history of music. Rami Malek is a misfit in the role of Mercury and he hams his way through but somehow he got a Best Actor nomination and he'll need to either murder or rob a bank to avoid winning the award. However, the Academy is being accused of setting a bad precedent by lauding a movie whose director (Bryan Singer) is accused of preying on teen boys.

The Academy also dodged a bullet by reversing its decision to award Cinematography, Editing, Live Action Short, and Makeup and Hairstyling winners during commercial breaks. In its quest to shorten the ceremony's duration to under three hours, the Academy almost did away with crucial awards such as Cinematography and Editing, which are the flesh and blood of any movie worth its salt.

For anyone in India who's looking forward to waking up early

Monday morning to catch the show, not all is gloom and doom though. *The Favourite*, a true story set in the 18th century about two cousins vying for the undivided attention of Queen Anne, is the dark comedy that will leave you simultaneously appalled and chuckling hard and, rightfully so, thus snaffled ten nominations. Director Yorgos Lanthimos' ravishing tapestry earned Robbie Ryan, right now the best cinematographer in the indie cinema world, his first ever nomination. The punters are not betting big on the movie though. Olivia Colman's Queen Anne might lose out on the Best Actress award to Glenn Close's touching portrait of a woman disregarded by her pompous Nobel-winning husband in *The Wife*. Same might just be the case with Emma Stone and Rachel Weisz in the Best Supporting Actress category where Regina King is supposedly destined to get the shiny gong for her role in Barry Jenkins' *If Beale Street Could Talk*. If there's any justice left in the world, Lanthimos has to win the Best Director award.

But, he's up against Alfonso Cuarón for Roma, a semi-autobiographical movie about a nanny taking care of three American kids in the 1970s' Mexico, which is the toast of the Tinseltown. Cuarón's movie is a minor masterpiece in *mise en scène* and the incandescent acting by Yalitza Aparicio, nominated for Best Actress, is to be believed. The movie earned ten nominations because Cuarón ensured it looked blazingly plain, sternly unsentimental and oozed with subtle detailing. A win for Roma will be a terrific acknowledgement for Netflix's stature as a peer of the traditional movie studios of Hollywood. Roma's victory would also be a rap on the knuckles of Donald Trump for his needless urge to build a wall along the southern border to thwart illegal immigrants from Mexico.

Among other heartening aspects of the nominations is that it took 31 years for Spike Lee, American cinema's *Malcolm X*, to get a Best Director nomination for *BlacKkKlansman*, a scabrous take on the far-right groups mushrooming in America in the 1970s. All in all, it's going to be a cracking show.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport

Kashmiris are not the enemy



INTER ALIA

MITALI SARAN

allocation of resources, the best technology, and the best intelligence. Ask the United States. Ask the United Kingdom. Ask Spain.

The best that these "bests" can do is minimise terrorism — and they do.

But when one part of the country suffers disproportionately from terrorist attacks, causing a disproportionate loss of armed forces personnel, it is fair to say that we are not giving it our best. The hard-earned, fragile calm in Kashmir has unravelled again over the last few years; according to the IndiaSpend data, there have been 1,708 attacks in Jammu and Kashmir since 2014, accompanied with a 94 per cent increase in armed forces fatalities. And because "the Kashmir problem" is difficult to fix, because we keep failing, it seems easier to blame and demonise the people.

You cannot say the following three things simultaneously: That Kashmir is an integral part of India; that India is a democratic country based on the rule of law; and that Kashmiris are treacherous anti-nationals who should be

persecuted.

Pakistan's destructive influence in Kashmir rides on unresolved Kashmiri grievances. While we certainly need to effectively push back against Pakistan, that diplomatic and/or military effort will be incomplete at best unless we also engage with the disaffection among Kashmiri Indians. We cannot win peace among our people by treating them like the enemy.

Every loss of armed forces personnel is terrible, but we cannot lose sight of why those lives are on the line in the first place: To protect not just the territorial integrity of India, but also the Constitution of India — it's right there in the CRPF oath of service. There is only one way to make those soldiers' deaths worse, and that is to rob them of meaning by allowing a hysterical nationalism to hijack the narrative and, under cover of grief for fallen soldiers, turn India against ordinary Kashmiris.

Today, in the name of nationalism, Kashmiri students are being thrown out of their colleges in Dehradun, Kashmiri merchants

are being thrashed in Delhi, Kashmiri workers are fleeing mob fury in Muzaffarnagar, and some hotels in Agra have put up signs directing Kashmiris to stay away. In an appalling perversion of duty, Meghalaya Governor Tathagata Roy, who is a constitutional representative of India's president, endorsed a call for Kashmiris to be boycotted.

In the name of nationalism, we are asked to remain silent as fellow Indians who have nothing to do with Pulwama are treated like hostiles. In the name of nationalism, it is never the right time to ask questions of the government about security lapses, about why the prime minister did not attend the all-party meeting following the attack, and how he reconciles his warm reception of the Saudi Crown Prince with his tough stand on terrorism. It is to the government's credit that China has been forced to censure the attack and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (albeit belatedly, and without naming the Jaish's leader, Masood Azhar) — that is a step in the right direction. Why, then, is the prime minister also stoking "the fire that burns in your hearts" rather than seeking to calm the irra-

tionally vengeful?

In the name of nationalism, we are hostage to competitive grieving and competitive rhetoric regarding the military. Ask yourself, why this virulent nationalism, at this particular moment? Why a "nationalism" that closes ranks against its own people? Why a nationalism that treats a military and human tragedy like low-hanging electoral fruit?

In the chaos created by volume over substance, it is easier to blur the distinction between "Kashmiri" and "Muslim", and easier to draw a line from "Muslim" to "terrorist". If you find yourself burning with righteous rage that can only ruin more lives and spill more blood, dear reader, stop and ask yourself how much you're being played.

Those who invoke those flag-draped coffins to incite hatred should take a cue from the CRPF itself, which set up a helpline for Kashmiris in distress, and created a fact-checking team to debunk the fake images and videos being circulated to rouse passions. *The Quint* quotes the chief spokesperson for the CRPF, as saying: "[Our jawans] did not lay down their lives so that their death could become the cause for communal hatred."