

The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Shadow boxing in Kolkata

In the recent showdown, both CBI and West Bengal police acted as pawns of their political masters



PRAKASH SINGH

THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN the Central government and the government of West Bengal over the investigation of Saradha and Rose Valley chit fund ponzi scam has thrown up a number of critical issues. Some of them are obvious and some require deeper examination.

Let us start with the obvious. It was a face-off between the CBI and the West Bengal Police — the crisis being precipitated by the CBI's raid of the official residence of Rajeev Kumar, Commissioner of Police, Kolkata, on February 3. Apparently, it was to question him on the scam because he had refused three summons sent earlier by the CBI. On the face of it, the action appeared unexceptionable. However, there are several unanswered questions in this context.

First, if such a strong action had to be taken, why could it not wait until the regular director of the CBI, Rishi Kumar Shukla, whose appointment had already been announced, took charge? An investigation which had dragged on for more than four years could have been delayed by a couple of days. It was indiscreet on the part of Nageshwar Rao, the interim director, to have shown the urgency he did. Second, prior to the raid, the press was told that the police commissioner was absconding and that his arrest was imminent. This was strongly refuted by the West Bengal Police, which clarified that he was in Kolkata attending to his official duties, and he had taken leave for just a day. If that is true, why was such a canard spread? Third, it is true that the police has the power to arrest an accused, and search a premises without warrant under Sections 41 and 165 of the CrPC. However, these powers are to be exercised with great circumspection. In the present case, the CBI would appear to have overstretched action under Section 165 of the CrPC. No wonder the Supreme Court, while asking the police commissioner to "faithfully cooperate" with the investigating agency, has, at the same time,

restrained the CBI from arresting him.

Having said that, did the Kolkata police and the state government go overboard in their conduct? The picture here is even murkier. It is a sad commentary on the state police if the CBI has to issue summons repeatedly without getting a satisfactory response from the concerned police officers. What is worse, the Kolkata Police had no business using their manpower to drag the CBI team to the police station on the ostensible plea of checking their documents. The reported siege of the CBI office by the local police was a crude show of strength. Events took a dramatic turn with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee jumping into the fray and sitting on dharna to demonstrate her support for the police. It is distressing to see chief ministers indulging in such theatrical gestures, forgetting the dignity of their office. The conduct of senior police officers of the state, who are also said to have sat on dharna, was also reprehensible. Politicians will remain politicians, but the All India Service officers are supposed to know the conduct rules and abide by them.

The CBI does not seem to have learnt any lessons even after the turmoil it has gone through. The Kolkata Police and the government of West Bengal also gave an impression of stonewalling investigation into a ponzi scheme in which about 17 lakh investors are said to have been defrauded of about Rs 3,500 crore. The state police are expected to cooperate with the central investigating agency and not intimidate and humiliate its representatives. Banerjee's gimmickry was regrettable, and so was the conduct of the senior police officers of the state.

The opposition leaders ganging up in support of Mamata Banerjee was political opportunism of the worst kind. Have these people ever thought of the lakhs of people who lost money in these ponzi schemes? Corruption is obviously not an issue with them.

Having analysed the obvious, let us go a

little deeper. The fact of the matter is that the police across the country is, today, generally acting as agents of the ruling class, and not as upholders of the rule of law. The central police organisations are not immune to politicisation, though they are comparatively better off. In the Kolkata confrontation, policemen on both sides were the pawns. What happened was a kind of shadow boxing. The real fight was between the Centre and the state government, one pushing its agenda through the CBI, and the other resisting it with the state police. Such misuse of police can be prevented if it is insulated from extraneous pressures, but then, who wants to give up his zamindari over the police? The SC issued directions as far back as 2006, but the executive of the country has a remarkable genius for frustrating judicial directions.

It may be recalled that in 2013, there was a confrontation between the CBI and the Intelligence Bureau over the Ishrat Jahan encounter killing. That happened because the then UPA government was allegedly using the CBI to corner Gujarat's BJP leaders for their alleged involvement in the killing. The shoe is on the other foot today. It is high time that the CBI is given a legal mandate and allowed to function with a fair measure of autonomy. The Government of India should also seriously think of bringing "police" and "public order" in the Concurrent List. There has been a radical change in the law and order scenario since the Constitution was drafted. The states are not able to discharge even their normal functions, let alone deal with crimes which have inter-state ramifications, without central assistance. Bringing "police" and "public order" in the Concurrent List would only amount to giving de jure recognition to what obtains de facto on the ground.

The writer is retired Director General of Police, and is currently chairman of Indian Police Foundation

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

If PM's speech in Lok Sabha is an indication, campaign 2019 will be more about raising spectres, than promising dreams

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's reply to the debate on the motion of thanks to the President's speech in the Lok Sabha offered a sobering glimpse of the election campaign to come. A spectre, and spectral oppositions, underlay his speech. The PM warned against the coalition government. "Milavati sarkar" vs "poorna bahumat ki sarkar" (coalition government vs government with a majority) — the latter, he said, worked in national interest ("deshvayion ke liye samarpit"), the former did not. "Mahamilavat", or grand alliance, was associated, he suggested, with instability, corruption, dynastic politics, it was bad for a nation's health. He accused the Congress of dividing history into BC, Before Congress, and AD, After Dynasty, in order to project that nothing had happened before it came to power and to attribute all achievements to the Gandhis. At the same time, the PM himself repeatedly invoked a before-and-after scenario — 55 years of power play ("satta bhog") vs 55 months of service ("seva bhav"). He countered the Opposition's criticism against his government, that it shows disrespect to institutions, by questioning the Congress's own record, pointing out that it was the party that imposed the Emergency and misused Article 356. When the Opposition criticises him or the BJP, it runs the risk of criticising the nation itself, suggested the PM.

A degree of combativeness is only to be expected ahead of a crucial election. But if what the PM said, and what he didn't say, in Lok Sabha on Thursday is an indication, the campaign for 2019 may be more about stoking fear than promising hope. That is, the impending contest may be fundamentally different from the one in 2014 when the Modi-led BJP swept to power at the Centre, riding a wave. The election five years ago was aggressively, even nastily, fought, but it is possible to say that despite the name-calling and the jousting, the victor won on the strength of a dream, not a spectre. That dream was of Change, a break from the status quo, and the leaders and parties that had, in the popular imagination, come to be associated with it. It invoked a "New India", increasingly young and aspiring, first-time voters in the driving seat, looking for a new kind of political representation. Five years ago, the Modi BJP seized the moment as much as it created it.

Of course, that the next parliamentary election, even before it has begun, seems drained of optimism about the future, is not just a reflection of the apparent strategy of the ruling party, but also of the politics of the Opposition. So far, the best case being made by parties that have ranged themselves against the Modi-BJP is that they are anti Modi-BJP. A bare-knuckled fight has begun. By all accounts, there will be little reprieve from the gathering heat.

WHEN THE ROAD DARKENS

On the sexual offence crisis that casts a lengthening shadow on the church, Pope takes an important step forward

DURING A RECENT homily of Mass at Panama City's cathedral of Santa Maria Antigua, Pope Francis's admission that the Roman Catholic Church is "wounded by her own sin" — an oblique reference to the sexual offence crisis it is facing across the world — was an acknowledgment that the Church has taken cognisance of what has been a matter of grave concern among many believers. The Pope, by far the most unconventional among his predecessors, also indicated his intent for a course correction by calling a meet of the heads of national Catholic churches at the Vatican from February 21 to February 24.

In the last year, the resonance of the #MeToo movement has been felt across the Catholic Church, too, as sexual abuse scandals involving priests broke out globally. The anus horribilis that the Pope referred to in Panama saw the opening up of Pandora's box in Chile, where accusations of a cover-up led to offers of resignation of all 34 of the country's bishops, while the publication of a grand jury report indicted priests in Pennsylvania for sexual abuse of children for nearly seven decades. In India, too, breaking a long culture of silence, a nun of the Missionaries of Jesus order from the St Francis Mission Home in Kerala called out bishop Franco Mulakkal for allegedly raping her for over a period of two years, between 2014 and 2016. Mulakkal, who was relieved of his duties by the Vatican, now awaits trial.

For far too long, complaints against the imbalance and abuse of power within the Church have been hushed up in the name of institutional sanctity. A pointed finger or a raised voice is treated as a mark of insubordination, a rebellion to be quelled by omission or intimidation. This problem is also partly a function of the people's relationship with those whom they consider to be custodians of faith — a curious mix of fear and fervour that refuses to assign blemish to religious functionaries. That, perhaps, explains the support Mulakkal received from a large section of society, or why, even now, the sisters who rallied around the nun in Kerala have complained about the tacit pressure that has come their way from their order for their stand. Yet, to paraphrase JRR Tolkien from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), the true test of faith is "when the road darkens". That is when old beliefs need to be reexamined in the light of new truths and complications recognised for accountability. The acceptance of the faultlines and the acknowledgment that the Church "so often failed to hear all those cries" of anguish is only the first step in that direction.

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As communication reverts from text to image, the urge to depict emotions accurately brings diversity to emojis

IN CASE YOU came to the internet party late, the headline of this editorial is one of the world's oldest emoticons, depicting a cool cat. Please take a moment to admire the laid-back ASCII whiskers, made of = signs, and the supercilious gaze, depicted by carets. The same cat after a long day at the keyboard would look totally bushed, like this: +=.+=

Back when the net was young, there were no pretty pictures, and people communicated only in text. Humans like to chat, rather than merely communicate, and electronic bulletin boards and Usenet were created to make it possible. But humans are visual first rather than textual (think of Lascaux and Bhimbetka), and so they made pictures out of ASCII text to convey their state of mind. Simple pictures like :-) smileys, and images like the famous "cow that drank Jolt", which is too absurdly complex to print here. In terms of communications efficiency, each was worth a thousand words. But for the Japanese, one of the world's most visual cultures — and also among the most communicative — this was not enough. They introduced colour images as fonts to mobile phones in 1997, and the world of internet communications changed forever. Emojis pervaded global culture and in 2015, the Oxford Dictionaries chose the Face with Tears of Joy emoji as its Word of the Year.

As emojis swept the West, skin colour became an issue. You can't have white hands slow-clapping when you're black. Gender sensitivities followed, and now we're ready for the next update. On cue, the Unicode Consortium, which keeps the world's keyboards in line, has released a set of 59 new emojis focused on inclusivity. They include wheelchairs, interracial couples and, mysteriously, a one-piece swimsuit. Now, we can spend the coming years arguing about why it's teal and not magenta. =^.^=



KHALED AHMED

IN THE 21ST century, all global paradigms seem to be coming apart because humanity has lost its moorings. The liberal order faces challenges, an anti-mercantilist global economy is losing the glue that held it together, and democracy itself does not seem to be a useful device to hold nation-states together. Outside the Western world, religion is making a comeback to recreate what scholars in the West had named the Dark Age.

I would rate Pankaj Mishra as an extraordinary Indian scholar. In his book, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, he tried to understand the minds of great Asian leaders — Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen in China, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Abdurreshial Ibrahim in the Ottoman Empire. He describes these leaders as "outsiders" within the main anti-colonial tradition.

Mishra had tried to understand the fissures in the 21st century world in an earlier book, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. Who else but the Buddha to understand the era of war and greed? Mishra highlighted aspects of the Buddha's thinking that we had ignored. He also tried to understand his influence on modern politicians such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. (We must bemoan the eclipse of Gandhi's thought in today's prosperous but violent India and admire Mishra for reminding his countrymen of what they had dumped by the wayside).

India also ignored Ashoka, its greatest Buddhist king, who didn't write his name on his edicts, didn't recognise caste, and told

WORLD WITHOUT SOLUTIONS

How Western liberalism has failed South Asia

people never to denigrate the religion of others nor praise their own. India focused, instead, on "Westernisation". In his *Temptations of the West*, Mishra looks at India's "Western-style modernity" — radiating from Bollywood films and post-Nehruvian high-growth capitalism — readying itself for internal and external conflict.

All these motifs converge in Mishra's crowning work, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (2017). He writes in the book's preface: "I started thinking about this book in 2014 after Indian voters, including my own friends and relatives, elected Hindu supremacists to power, and Islamic State became a magnet for young men and women in Western democracies. I finished writing it during the week in 2016 in which Britain voted to leave the European Union. It went to the printers in the week that Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Each of these earthquakes revealed faultlines that I felt had been barely noticed over the years, running through inner lives as well as nations, communities and families."

Mishra unravels the moorings of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason — as presided over by Voltaire. And, he also dwells on the genius, who debunked the Age of Reason — Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was Rousseau, whom the soon-to-be-disenchanted Romantic poets deified. It is remarkable that in India, the Romantic poets like William Wordsworth were more influential than the Victorian poets. And Indians were not the only people inspired by the Romantic poets: "The Romantics seeded a whole tradition of Anglo-American criticism in the

19th century to which the conservative Dickens belongs as much as Thoreau, who famously asserted in his section on "Economy" in *Walden* (1854) that 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'. This largely moral critique of modernity was broadened by writers in countries playing catch-up with the Atlantic West. The Russians, in particular, stressed social facts: the ill-directed energy and posturing of political elites, and the loss of a sense of community and personal identity," Mishra writes.

He rebukes scholars who praise prosperity under despots: "Huntington, aware of his devoted readers among Asian technocrats, hailed the Shah of Iran as the epitome of a 'modernising monarch'. He claimed that Pakistan's military dictator Ayub Khan came close, 'more than any other political leader in a modernising country after World War Two', to 'filling the role of a Solon or Lycurgus, or 'Great Legislator' of the Platonic or Rousseauian model' (Ayub Khan was shortly thereafter forced out of power). Bernard Lewis returned from his first trip to Turkey in 1950 lionizing Atatürk and upholding the latter's enlightened despotism as a great success and model for other Muslim countries."

So, where have we landed in the 21st century? In a world of inequality of wealth, brawling people and nations with no solutions in sight. Mishra describes Islamised Pakistan and Hindu India as neighbours "driven by the narcissism of small differences".

The writer is consulting editor, Newsweek Pakistan



FEBRUARY 9, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

KOSYGIN'S VISIT

SOVIET PRIME MINISTER Alexei Kosygin will visit India in March, it is learnt. By that time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee would have returned from Peking after his talks with the Chinese leaders. For some time, the Soviet Union has been keen to know how far India and China are willing to accommodate each other on various issues. Once Peking suspected New Delhi of being over-friendly to Moscow. Now Moscow wants to know how friendly New Delhi will be to Peking. What worries the Soviet Union is that if China does make a substantial gesture on the border issue, the opinion in India may tilt towards China, injuring New Delhi's equation with Moscow.

BHUTTO VERDICT

EVEN THOUGH GENERAL Zia-ul-Haq has refused to interfere with the Pakistan Supreme Court's decision confirming the Lahore High Court's judgment sentencing Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto to death, diplomatic sources are hopeful that the world leaders' appeal for clemency may not go unheeded. General Zia told a British TV interviewer that he would not do anything to violate the rule of law. He said the rule of law must prevail and that the independence of judiciary must be maintained. He also obliquely warned the leaders of the world to keep their hands off the Bhutto affair and refrain from interfering with his country's internal matters.

BIHAR UNDERTRIALS

PROCEDURAL FORMALITIES ARE holding up the release of undertrials from the Patna and Muzaffarpur central jails on personal bonds in accordance with the orders of the Supreme Court. The chief judicial magistrate and sessions judge of the Patna Civil Court had not received any communication from the SC. The IG of prisons admitted that he had received a message from the government counsel about the Supreme Court's decision. The jail authorities at Patna had not received any orders from the concerned magistrates for the release of the undertrial prisoners referred to in the Supreme Court's order.

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

The Pope, the Dharmaraja

The pontiff's UAE visit is historic in terms of inter-faith harmony and peace. But do the symbolic compromises he made diminish his moral sheen?



PETER RONALD DESOUZA

POPE FRANCIS is the person closest to being a Dharmaraja today. He has no army. His domain has no international currency. He rules a postage-stamp size state and yet, his visits to countries across the world, and his pronouncements on global issues, receive media headlines and global attention. For example, his encyclical *Laudato Si*, ("praise be to you" in Latin), was debated by scholars and policy-makers across the world for its perspective on climate change, refugees, and the global system of production and consumption that is threatening life on earth. We have no right, he wrote, to exterminate other species that, by their very existence, also reveal the glory of God.

In 2018, he admonished the leaders of the World Economic Forum in Davos when he told them that we "cannot remain silent in the face of the suffering of millions of people whose dignity is wounded, nor can we continue to move forward as if the spread of poverty and injustice has no cause." Pope Francis's moral message is globally discussed for his statements are seen as being truthful and on behalf of a just order. In these morally uncertain times, he is regarded as a beacon who leads us on what is right and wrong, just and unjust. More than any other leader since Nelson Mandela, and before that Mahatma Gandhi, he is today's Dharmaraja.

So, how should we view his visit from the February 3-5, to the UAE?

The UAE is a modern Arab nation seeking to occupy a global niche as a country promoting tolerance. They are sponsoring an inter-faith dialogue between Muslims and Christians to jointly combat religious extremism. 2019 has been designated as the year of tolerance. The UAE government website announces their goal to "eradicate ideological, cultural and religious bigotry in society" in pursuit of which they invited Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, to co-sign, and offer the world, a Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together. This is an important step in inter-faith dialogue. It is a historic achievement and that it took place on the 800th anniversary of the meeting between St Francis and the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil of Egypt when, in the middle of the conflict, St Francis asked to meet the Sultan who received him with the utmost grace and courtesy, and must be applauded. For St Francis, it served as the inspiration for his prayer "Make me a channel of your peace".

The visuals of the signing are remarkable in the warmth and brotherliness that they convey between the Pope and the Grand Imam. We see them greeting each other with a kiss, in the friendly Arab manner, and then laying the foundation for a church and a mosque that will be built side by side in Abu Dhabi. These pictures were beamed to billions across the world, sending out a message of fraternity very different from the images



CR Sasikumar

of hostility between the two religions that ISIS had earlier conveyed. In the ongoing dialogue for peace and harmony between two of the world's largest religions, the papal visit was an important contribution. The UAE must indeed be complimented for convening the meeting.

The other significant achievement of Pope Francis's visit was the open-air mass in Abu Dhabi. Upwards of 1,30,000 Catholics publicly practised their faith. To this big achievement must be added the small gesture by the regime, to rename the Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed mosque as the Mary, Mother of Jesus mosque. All these gains, symbolic, political and real, were because of Pope Francis. The UAE also gained considerable international legitimacy from his visit.

Pope Francis, however, had to make some compromises. The humanitarian disaster in Yemen that he has often spoken about as the great tragedy of our times, where millions face starvation and where women and children have been killed by advanced weapons used by the Saudi government and its allies, including the UAE, was only mentioned by him in Rome before he left. In UAE, he denounced the war only in general terms when he, at the Founders Memorial, asked us to return war "to its miserable crudeness. Its fateful consequences are before our eyes. I am thinking in particular of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya". He did not mention the role played by the UAE in the tragedy in Yemen. Diplomacy, or strategic thinking, meant that he had to keep silent.

He made another small compromise. This was more visual. The reception he received from the regime was fit for a secular head of state. Defence aircraft flying overhead, emitting smoke in the papal colours. A 21-gun salute. A motorcade, fit for a king, where his innocuous KIA looked out of

The question I am struggling with is: What should the Dharmaraja have done? Were the gains of his visit — the tolerance and freedom to practice religion — much greater than the compromises he had to make? Is a pure uncompromising position unavailable to a global leader? Must they always engage in a moral bargain between benefits and losses? Did Pope Francis make a defensible bargain? These are not easy questions to answer.

place. The images somehow seemed out of place for a man who took the name of St Francis of Assisi for his papacy. The video of his arrival showed the Versailles-like grandeur of the Sheikh's palace, incompatible with the philosophy of a man who berated the global leaders at Davos on the causes of poverty.

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And I do not seek to judge him, which is why I referred to Dharmaraja. Yudhisthir, at the urging of Lord Krishna, Bhima and even Arjuna, spoke a half-truth to deceive Drona — that his son Ashvattama was dead. Drona, on hearing the news, laid down his arms having lost the will to fight. Was this a compromise similar to the one made by Pope Francis?

Yudhisthir was the epitome of virtue and truth in the Mahabharata. Drona came to him for the truth about Ashvatthama's death, certain that Yudhisthir would not deceive him. He lied, or rather, told a half-truth. "Ashvatthama is dead", he said, and then in sotto voce said, "the elephant". By doing so, he saved his army from the unrivalled skill and wrath of Drona. But the wheels of his chariot that had been floating in the air because he was Dharmaraja dropped and touched the ground. Must the Pope's visit to the UAE, because of Yemen, be seen in the same light?

The writer is professor at CSDS, New Delhi. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Taliban meetings with Afghan powerbrokers, following negotiations with the US, hold out the prospect of an end to this long conflict. But women are especially and rightly concerned about the possible price." —THE GUARDIAN

The importance of Peranbu

The Tamil film captures the anguish and joy of parenting a child with special needs



JAISHREE MISRA

I SAW PERANBU, persuaded by my friend Priya A S who told me it was about a single parent bringing up a child with cerebral palsy. This was on the last day of a short, busy stay at my mother's house in Thiruvananthapuram but I knew once I'd left for Delhi and onwards to London, I would not get the chance to see this film.

So, while my mother and aunt distracted my daughter by taking her to visit a cousin, I raced across to one of Thiruvananthapuram multiplexes to catch the morning show. Not without trepidation, I must say, as I am wary of films that purport to carry "good" messages. I recall having gone to see *Black* in London when similarly well-meaning friends told me of how worthy and moving it was. Yes, *Black* had an unusual theme for Bollywood — especially for its time — and certainly one that needed, finally, to be addressed by Indian cinema. But by dragging the issues surrounding disability into the darkest, most tortured realms, what *Black* did was merely reduce disability to a horrifying and pitiable condition (a Chaplinesque dance sequence by Rani Mukherjee didn't help).

I have to say, with some relief, that *Peranbu* was no *Black*. For one, both Mammooty and Sadhana, the girl who plays his daughter, a teenager with cerebral palsy, have put in astonishing performances. The anguish, fear and occasional resentment of both characters were conveyed (in Sadhana's case, by necessity) mostly through their eyes and with the minimum of dialogue or drama. What most captivated me, however, was the portrayal of a parent who is suddenly left to care for a special needs child — one of the most subtle performances I have seen Mammooty deliver. It was almost reminiscent of the father in the stage production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Mark Haddon's funny and moving story about a single father trying to manage his autistic son. Watching that play in London nearly reduced me to a sobbing wreck but it was only much later that I realised it was the father I wanted to weep for and not the son.

Haddon is not himself a special needs parent but he has taught children with autism and hence his insight. Watching *Peranbu*, I wondered where the empathy had come from. While I would have wished for a bit more levity (yes, believe it or not, there is plenty of comedy in the lives of people with special needs), this film did at least reveal some flashes of happiness. It was both moving and amusing to witness the sheer relief displayed by the father the first time his daughter takes a sanitary pad to the bathroom, insisting on fixing it herself. "Such small achievements are like climbing Mount Everest," he says.

I was also moved by the manner in which Paapa, the daughter in the film, takes out all the confusion and anger she experiences at

her mother's sudden departure on the person who is now her primary care giver. This was not film but honest and so reflective of real life that I felt a moment's shame for the occasions on which I have severely resented being my daughter's primary carer and, by default therefore, her natural punching bag every time she feels let down by someone or something that she can neither explain nor understand.

I was also struck by the father's observation, early in the film, of the devastating effect there is on people with limited understanding when they cannot comprehend why seemingly beloved people suddenly disappear. A kind-hearted stranger sells her lakeside house to the father-daughter pair and briefly amuses the girl by dancing for her. But, when the time comes to leave and she waves goodbye, the realisation of this new loss proves unbearable for Paapa who, once again, unleashes her grief onto the only person she knows will take it.

Paapa's mother's absence presents some narrative problems but one must acknowledge, however reluctantly, that mothers have been known to abandon their children too, sometimes for their own survival as seems to be the case here. In a brief but bold moment, in a film-within-the-film, the idea is mooted that these are perhaps the only parents in the world who wish their children to die before them. I found this too very affecting, having been ghoulishly fascinated by a news story I read a few years after emigrating to England in which a woman took her 12-year-old son with special needs onto the Humber Bridge before persuading him to leap off it with her. Such is the nature of this tormented love that sometimes death together should seem more merciful than life without each other.

I wished desperately to see the girl in *Peranbu* go to a good special school or a warm, happy residential home so that she could enjoy peer company and her father could return to work. I'm only too painfully aware, though, of how, in India particularly, this is sometimes easier said than done.

Fortunately, a redemptive twist showed that love and support can come in the most unexpected places and from the unlikely of people. Given such love, most people with special needs respond like flowers to sunshine. I should not deliver further spoilers for those who have not seen the film but will conclude by saying that my own daughter's unexpected saviours have been step-parents — both of whom she adores more than her biological parents — a few kindly teachers and carers at the schools and residential units she has been lucky to attend and some friends and family members, unfailingly generous to her with their time and attention. I became aware a long time ago, when my daughter was growing up in India, that being a special needs parent is sometimes the loneliest place on earth to be. What *Peranbu*, made 35 years later, told me was that things haven't changed very much. And that is an almost unbearable thought.

Misra is the author of eight novels published by Penguin and Harper Collins in the UK. Along with other special needs parents, she helped set up a residential home for adults with learning difficulties in Dera Mandi on the outskirts of Delhi



RUCHI GUPTA

Nobody speaks to the young

The youth need a sense of purpose and political identity, not sops

SIXTY PER CENT of our country is under the age of 30. Yet, there is little substantive participation of our young in defining the direction of the nation. The average age of our MPs at 56 years is more than double the median age of 25. Statistics are not available for other groups who shape our politics — academics, activists, media — but a quick check of the top names in each area is indicative of similar underrepresentation of youth. And this is reflected in our public discourse.

Talk to young people across the country and what stands out is their feeling of being talked at, pushed around, and dismissed. Consequently, young people respond to rejection with rejection. Ask 10 young people outside of the elite circuit about political developments in the country — most will struggle to respond. Refer to political leaders from various fields and ask the youngsters to talk of their stand on some topical issues. They will shrug. Name the top public intellectuals in the country and most may not even have heard of them. We can, of course, say that young people today are selfish. They are too distracted and lack commitment. But this is, at best, a partial truth. The larger political class and process simply have not been able to establish relevance for young people. Youth, today, are responding to the cues and incentives around them; and paying atten-

tion to those who are reaching out to them.

Ask a young person to name the top five actors and s/he can. Sports statistics? Yes, sir. Specifications of the latest phones? Indeed. Song lyrics? Of course. The young are very much paying attention. Just not to us. See also the dedication of the young person who fancies her chance at celebrityhood practising a dance move, the boy spending time at the gym. There is no lack of commitment there. Young people are searching for recognition, for an identity in which they can take pride in. Because there are no accessible pathways that can help them get recognised in constructive politics, they are choosing other options. Association with a celebrity, styling themselves like him/her gives that sense of belonging. To be "discovered" in many ways offers a better probability of escaping their circumstances than studying in a dusty college somewhere or working in a dead-end job. Thuggery, bullying, majoritarianism offers a sense of power when as a whole there is a dispiriting lack of agency.

We cannot ignore Young India if we care about our democracy. Nor can we pick and choose what we want to prioritise — our politics has to be representative of their needs and aspirations. We have to talk about the things that matter to them in a language that they understand. At the very least, this means priori-

tising the educational, employment and identity concerns of young people in our daily discourse and politics. Yet, a few examples in each area bring out its skewed nature.

Equal educational opportunity has become a purely rhetorical statement, like the way beauty pageant aspirants reference world peace. Seventy per cent of our higher education is in the private sector and, increasingly, even public universities are getting privatised with the onset of "self-financing" courses making a complete mockery of the role of education as a tool for socio-economic mobility. Entire universities are completely notional: There are no classes, students study in coaching centers. Three-year courses are taking up to five years to finish. The examination system is a complete sham. Students are paying exorbitant fees and graduates are saddled with debt without job prospects. Yet our focus on these issues is episodic. That too, when there is some immediate crisis, despite the fact that students are the most visible face of a progressing India. Our inability to prioritise even the concerns of this subset is indicative of how we are failing our entire youth population.

Similarly, our approach to employment is highly utilitarian. Employment is not just about economics, it is also linked to one's identity. Yet there is very little conversation about how to imbue meaning and pride in

the lives of those at the lowest end of the work chain. We want those who work with us to demonstrate "work ethic" — reliability, punctuality, diligence — but it is unclear what exactly is gained for the young person in being all these three things? Will my domestic worker advance to chief domestic worker or become head of a dishwashing company if she were the best domestic worker? If we want the vast majority of our young people to imbibe these virtues of collective living, then we need to create those avenues for them where these will be recognised and rewarded. We have to acknowledge the essential role of young people in nation-building and create meaningful opportunities for them to engage with politics and governance. This is important because young people suffer from additional barriers to entry because of their age and inexperience.

All of us have a desire for self-expression and to be part of something bigger than ourselves. If those of us who have the power to shape platforms and narratives are unable to make our politics representative of the aspirations of the youth, they will simply look for meaning elsewhere. The consequences will not be good for our country.

The writer is AICC Joint Secretary, national in-charge of NSUI

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HEALING TOUCH

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'In first operation after polls, 10 Naxals killed in Chhattisgarh' (IE, February 8). The development of the tribal areas and empowerment of tribal communities is the only way to check the Naxalite movement — not bullets. Jobs should be created for tribal communities, there should be educational institutions exclusively for tribal children, medical facilities should be improved, and roads should be developed in tribal areas.

Veena Shenoy, Thane

AFTER THE CUT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Making the cut' (IE, February 8). Financial markets have welcomed the cut in the repo rate but naysayers are likely to call it a politically-loaded decision because the general elections are round the corner. The rate cut will make home loans and other loans cheaper. Banks, in turn, have to tighten norms for lending, especially because recovery has been a major problem. Availability of funds at cheaper rates will give an impetus to manufacturing and trading as well as the retail sector.

Bholey Bharadwaj, Mumbai

GANDHI STANDS TALL

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Mahatma's many deaths' (IE, February 8). Nothing can be more shocking and disgusting than to watch people re-enacting the assassination of the Father of the

LETTER OF THE WEEK

ARAB SPRING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A visit, a milestone' (IE, February 6), Pope Francis's visit to the UAE, at a time when the Arab World is grappling with many problems, is significant. No matter what religion people follow, it is time that the world comes together and helps the Arab world in freeing it from terrorism and other problems.

Anish Esteves, Mumbai

Nation. Such people are clearly unaware of Gandhiji's contribution to the freedom movement. The Mahatma will always rule the souls of Indians.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

DESPERATE ACTIONS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Politics of anti-corruption' (IE, February 8). The new-found zeal of the ED and CBI are desperate actions to create an image of the government as an anti-corruption crusader. Its other planks like Ram Mandir and development have misfired. Unless the legislature is cleansed, the bureaucracy cannot be made accountable.

Vasant Nalawade, Satara