

12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

“(Before surgical strikes) Then foreign secy said something was building up... He asked me to prepare... When strikes took place, we spent four days locked down in a safe place at the High Commission in Pak”



WHY GAUTAM BAMBAWALE

The terror attack in Pulwama that killed 40 CRPF men, followed by the IAF's aerial strikes on Balakot, have led to an increase in tension between India and Pakistan. A 1984-batch Indian Foreign Service officer, Gautam Bambawale was India's High Commissioner to Pakistan in 2016 and 2017. He was in office when India undertook

surgical strikes following the terrorist attack in Uri, and when Kulbhushan Jadhav was captured by Pakistan. Bambawale was India's ambassador to China in 2018, and handled the Wuhan Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping following the Doklam stand-off



“On cricket, my own gut feeling is that just because the emotions are high, doesn't mean we stop playing cricket with Pak in an international setting... It's quite silly to lose points when we know we can beat them

SHUBHAJIT ROY: What does the decision to conduct air strikes on terrorist camps in Pakistan mean?

Pakistan has been following a policy of bleeding India by a thousand cuts. That policy is of aiding, abetting and sponsoring terrorism directed at India. We have had terrorist incidents for almost 35-40 years, not only in Jammu and Kashmir but all over India. This is a low-cost strategy for the Pakistanis.

With the (surgical strikes) for the first time in 2016, and now again in 2019, what we have indicated is that the people of India have had it up to their necks in suffering from terrorist activities. Also, we have indicated — and the government can take credit for the bold and brave decision — that if Pakistan will not control terrorists, then we will go and strike them inside Pakistan. That is what has changed. A lot of people are describing it as a new template that has been brought to the table. I agree with that assessment. It is no one's case that one surgical strike, or one aerial strike, would force Pakistan to stop aiding and abetting terrorism. But we have increased and raised the costs for them to do this.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: We did not incur any casualties in the air strikes, but in such situations, things can go wrong. Were we prepared for that?

There is no doubt that it was a risky operation. But a lot of people in India are now saying that look, if Pakistan is not going to stop aiding and abetting terrorism, then we must take our own steps. These people are asking questions of our government. I think this government has only answered those questions by undertaking the surgical strikes of 2016 and the aerial strikes of 2019. I am sure the people in the government would have considered all the action-reaction scenarios, and only after assessing them would have decided to go ahead with it.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: You were India's High Commissioner to Pakistan when the surgical strikes were carried out by ground troops in 2016. How did you engage with the Pakistanis at the time?

The situation then was slightly different from what it is now. When the surgical strikes took place, the Pakistanis decided to deny it. And then they were not forced to react to it either. Regarding the decision to carry out those strikes, there were a number of options on the table. I cannot reveal the details, but I am very confident that the same options, maybe a few more, were on the table this time as well.

Much before the surgical strikes took place, and may be even before the attack on Uri, I had a long chat with the then foreign secretary, S Jaishankar, during one of my visits to New Delhi in 2016. One of the things he told me was that there was something building up. He said he did not know what will happen or what options will the government choose, but said if some action was taken against Pakistan, one of his primary concerns was to ensure that Indians at the High Commission in Islamabad remained safe. He asked me to prepare for a situation wherein everyone working at the Indian High Commission could be locked down in a safe place. We did actually prepare for that, and when the surgical strikes took place, we spent four days locked down in a safe place within the Indian High Commission.

AMITABH SINHA: So the former foreign secretary mentioned that something was building up against Pakistan even before the Uri attack? Then, were the surgical strikes a strategic decision rather than a response to an attack on the Indian State?

No, I am not saying that. My limited point is that the foreign secretary had enough foresight to visualise that we may get into a situation where the safety of the people in the High Commission in Islamabad could be at stake. He said that once he did not have to worry about the safety of Indians in Islamabad, he would be free to consider all options. So it is not that we had already decided to carry out surgical strikes before Uri. No, not at all.

AMITABH SINHA: There has been a debate on whether the recent aerial strikes were effective. For argument's sake, if we concede that there were zero casualties, and that the strikes probably did not hit the intended targets, would you even then say that the strikes were significant for India, strategically and diplomatically?

Firstly, in such situations we are not looking at benefit or loss, or victory or defeat. We are not thinking in those terms at all. The fact on the ground is that there

‘One surgical or aerial strike may not force Pak to stop aiding terror. But we have raised the costs’

Former ambassador to China and ex-high commissioner to Pakistan Gautam Bambawale says the message from the recent air strike on Balakot is that India can undertake such an exercise “successfully”, insists there is “no deep-seated hatred” between Indians and Pakistanis, and explains why, on listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist, India needs to be “transactional” with China



Former ambassador Gautam Bambawale with Senior Editor Shubhajit Roy in *The Indian Express* newsroom in Pune. Arul Horizon

is a lot of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. And we want to do something to raise the costs, to dissuade the other country from exercising this kind of option. I also want to say that the military strikes did indeed happen. We can quibble over whether 25 terrorists were killed or 200. That is something that we do not know about. But I believe that the strikes took place and were successful. That is also the most important part. That is the message. The message was not that 200 people were killed. The message was that we can undertake such an exercise to attack terrorist bases and infrastructure. And I think that message has been sent not just to the world but even to Pakistan.

ANURADHA MASCARENHAS: India wants to isolate Pakistan, but there is a SAARC summit that is due, and it has to be held in Islamabad. Do you think it will happen?

The SAARC summit has been due for some time. Pakistan is the next host. But we are not sure when it will happen. There are at least a few of us in the region — India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan — four out of eight members, who believe that this is not the right time to hold the SAARC summit.

PARTHA SARATHI BISWAS: China has been restrained in its response to the aerial strikes by India. What do you make of it?

The situation is not easy for China. From their perspective, terrorism is an issue that they realise is a problem across the world, including in China. The Chinese position on terrorism is very clear — they oppose it in all its forms and manifestations. On the other hand, they have this very close, tight strategic, economic, military relationship with Pakistan. Whatever they said at the time could also be due to the fact that our Foreign Minister was scheduled to go to China (for the Russia-India-China meeting). They were a little worried that she may cancel if they push too much. But the kind of reaction that came from the Chinese, even from the RIC meeting, I would say, is a step forward. It is much better for India than it has been in the past.

On the specific issue of listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist, I think we need to be transactional with China. If there is something that we can do for China — say at the UN, there is an important election where they want us to vote for them — we should ask for a quid pro quo. I say this

because last year when the grey listing of Pakistan took place at the Financial Action Task Force meeting, we were able to do this kind of transactional bargain with the Chinese. I think we can do it again. The timing is right. There is enough momentum internationally to get him listed.

MANOJ MORE: What do you make of the hatred that is portrayed between India and Pakistan? What is it like on the ground? Should we be playing cricket with them?

I don't think there is a deep-seated hatred for Indians among Pakistanis. The problem is that this terrorism, which is aided, abetted, supported, financed, by Pakistan, is bleeding us. That is the main thing that people in India would want to be stopped. You can discuss all kinds of things — music, literature — with Pakistanis very easily, but the moment it comes to bilateral issues there is a difference of opinion. It is because there is too much emotion involved, and it goes back to the times of Partition.

On cricket, my own gut feeling is that just because the emotions are high, doesn't mean that we stop playing cricket with Pakistan in an international setting. There is the World Cup (later this year). If we don't play, we will lose points. I think it is quite silly to lose points when we know we can beat them.

MANOJ MORE: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said he had tried to speak to PM Modi. Do you think the Indian PM should talk to his counterpart in Pakistan?

Imran Khan is not the first PM to say he wants talks. There were many before

him. For us, we have seen this happening before. The point is that if you want to have some sort of talks between India and Pakistan, I don't believe that the right way to do it is to start at the prime ministerial level. This is one of the reasons why we did not achieve success at the Agra talks in 2001. I would say that whenever we decide to talk to Pakistan, it should start at the lower levels. So you have to have preparatory talks at whatever level it is decided and then build up to a prime ministerial meeting.

Secondly, after the Pulwama attack, Imran Khan said 'give us proof and we will investigate'. Once again, this is an old record that has been played many times earlier. I want to go back to 2016. The moment the Pathankot attack took place, Nawaz Sharif said the same thing. At the time, we decided to believe them. We allowed their team, which included people from the military and the intelligence, to come to India, and the government faced a lot of flak for it. We gave them all the possible proof. It didn't go anywhere after that.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: Was the decision to allow a team of Pakistani investigators to access one of the most forward airbases a prudent move?

Sometimes you decide to place trust in these things. I think it was the first time in decades, if not ever, when we actually allowed a Pakistan investigation team to come. The idea was to share all the information that we have. Taking them to Pathankot was a decision at the highest levels of the government. We did not take them to sensitive parts of the base. We only allowed them access to areas that are relatively less sensitive.

ANJALI MARAR: How do you see India's presence, and Pakistan's absence, at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) this year?

The OIC has recognised the anomaly that one of the countries with the biggest Muslim population was not part of the OIC, and this is a recognition of the facts on the ground. At the same time, we should not think that suddenly the OIC has changed its position completely. This is a process. And it is a process that will unfold in the next 15-20 years. Our participation in the OIC is a turning point, an important inflection point in our relations with West Asia and Islamic countries.

AJAY KHAPPE: Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was released very soon, in about 48 hours...

According to the Geneva Convention, they would have had to release him at some point in time. I think the way it must have happened is that Prime Minister Imran Khan might have said that if we have to release him after a few days, why not give him up today and claim credit for it. I hope that is what has happened because it then means that he has been able to convince the military authorities in Pakistan to do this. That is relatively a good thing. I think it was a good-will gesture, even if it came under international pressure.

AMITABH SINHA: Pakistan started the 'nuclear' talk on the first day after the strikes. They had a nuclear command meeting as well but probably decided not to go any further. So, their nuclear threshold is probably not as low as many in India thought?

They would have a threshold. I don't know what it is. Maybe people in government have a better idea. I don't think it is as easy to cross the nuclear threshold.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: How have we handled the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, whom Pakistan has accused of being an Indian spy?

I want to make only two points. Firstly, it is incumbent on any government that has signed or is party to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to give consular access, and till today, Pakistan has not given it to us. Our whole case at the International Court of Justice is this — that you have an international law that provides for consular access and these guys have not given it. The second point is that when a

military court undertakes a hearing, we don't know what happens. We don't know whether there was anyone to defend him. So that sort of proceeding is bad in law, and hopefully will be turned down by any international court.

SUSHANT KULKARNI: There is also a perception battle being fought after the aerial strikes.

If you look at the entire episode, you will see the big takeaway is that the entire international community stood by India's right to self-defence. I think that is the big picture and that is where we have won in this messaging war.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: There have been three incidents of stand-off with China in recent years. How has the approach of India changed?

You have to factor in the fact that India and China not only do not have a common boundary but we don't even have a common line of control. When you add to that the fact that both sides have better technology, better roads, better communication... What is beginning to happen is that the militaries of India and China, which used to be fairly far apart, are now coming closer to each other. Both India and China are also conscious not to push the envelope.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: The informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping in Wuhan last year was dubbed as agenda-less...

We decided that after the confrontation at Doklam, it was important to keep talking to each other. Both countries were able to talk to each other through diplomatic channels. And we agreed to have an informal summit between the leaders. The two leaders spent about eight to 10 hours together. In a formal setting, meetings usually don't last for more than an hour or so. They were able to cover a lot of topics... It helped clear the air, clear the misunderstandings. It was not an agenda-less meeting. Certain topics were agreed for talks. They covered that and much more.

Informal summits are probably a new diplomatic template that has been introduced. Later this year, when the elections are over, I think the Chinese President will visit India for an informal summit.



“If you look at the entire episode (aerial strikes by India), the big takeaway is that the international community stood by India's right to self-defence. That is where we have won in this messaging war

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

It is a mystery why the Prime Minister's Office held parallel negotiations undermining the efforts of the INT. It is a mystery why the three anti-corruption clauses were deleted. It is a mystery why the payment security system was jettisoned... The facts point to an oblique purpose. The CAG had a duty to probe these mysterious aspects and bring out the truth. He failed the country

The anti-national newspaper!

THE RAFALE controversy will not go away! If it had been pushed to the background because of the Pulwama terrorist attack and the retaliatory strike by the Indian Air Force, Prime Minister Modi brought it back centre stage by his provocative remark, 'If we had the Rafale aircraft...'

To his misfortune, within two days of his remark, *The Hindu* published another investigative article on the Rafale deal. The article punctured the conclusion of the Comptroller & Auditor General (CAG) that the NDA deal was cheaper than the UPA deal by 2.86 per cent. (The government's claim that the price it had negotiated was 9-20 per cent cheaper had been rejected in the CAG's report.)

WHICH DEAL WAS CHEAPER?

The issue is quite simple. Under the UPA deal, Dassault was required to give a bank guarantee and a performance guarantee. Under the NDA deal, that requirement was waived. While providing a guarantee the bank will charge the customer, in this case Dassault. That is the 'cost' of the guarantee — something that every businessman is familiar with. In the Rafale deal, since a sum of approximately Rs 60,000 crore was involved, the guarantee charges would have been stiff.

If one deal was loaded with guarantee charges and the other deal was not loaded with guarantee charges, common sense will tell us that, before the two prices are compared, the guarantee charges in the first deal should be taken

Bank Guarantee charges	€ AAB1 million
Performance Guarantee & Warranty charges	€ AAB2 million
Total	€ AAB3 million

The CAG used alphanumeric codes because he had promised the government to 'redact' the price information! He did the government a huge favour. However, the CAG was forced to conclude as follows:

"Therefore, the total saving of AAB3 million € accruing to the vendor by not having to pay these Bank Charges should have been passed on to Ministry. Ministry has agreed to the Audit calculations on Bank Guarantees but contended that this was a saving to the Ministry because the Bank guarantee charges were not to be paid. However Audit noted that this was actually a saving for M/s DA when compared to its previous offer of 2007."

CAG FAILED THE NATION

The guarantee charges remained hidden from the public and a meaningful comparison could not be made about the prices of the two deals. *The Hindu* story has ferreted out the information from the report of the Indian Negotiating Team (INT). The charges were € 574 million. If this amount is taken out of the UPA deal and the two deals are compared, the

NDA deal is more expensive by € 246.11 million. At the current exchange rate of Rs 80, the NDA deal is more expensive by Rs 1,968 crore. On this count alone, each of the 36 aircraft will be more expensive by Rs 54.66 crore.

It is a mystery why the Prime Minister's Office held parallel negotiations undermining the efforts of the INT. It is a mystery why the three anti-corruption clauses were deleted. It is a mystery why the payment security system — sovereign guarantee, bank guarantee and escrow account — was jettisoned. These could not have been done out of 'love and affection' for Dassault. The facts point to an oblique purpose. The CAG had a duty to probe these mysterious aspects and bring out the truth. He failed the country.

The Hindu is bringing out the hidden aspects of the deal one by one. And what is the government's response? The government is accusing the newspaper of using 'stolen documents' and threatening to slap criminal charges! The Attorney General of India was fielded by the government to hold out these threats!

FAMOUS STOLEN PAPERS

In 2012-14, the Government of India obtained the names of account holders in Swiss banks that had been hacked and passed on to France and Germany. The Income Tax department issued notices, raised tax demands and launched prosecutions. Was the I-T department acting on the basis of 'stolen documents'?

Similarly, in 2016, 11.5 million documents were leaked from the computers of a law firm (stolen by someone?) to a German newspaper, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, which shared them with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The I-T department had no qualms about releasing the names of account holders who were Indians or NRIs and issuing notices to them.

The famous Pentagon Papers were actually a secret report commissioned by the US Defense Secretary on the Vietnam war. It was leaked in 1971. *The Washington Post* was preparing to publish them. The US government sued the newspapers. The US Supreme Court by a vote of 6-3 allowed *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to publish the documents without the risk of censorship or punishment (403 US 713). Justices Black, Douglas, Brennan Jr., Stewart, White and Marshall put freedom of speech above vague concerns of national security and held that spread of information was critical to keep the democratic process intact. No one even mentioned 'stolen documents'!

History is repeating itself, this time in India. Mr Modi and his ministers will brand *The Hindu* as anti-national or worse. Regardless of the invidious, readers will continue to read the newspaper. The Rafale aircraft will arrive. There will be an inquiry. The truth will be out. The life of the country will go on.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

A suicidal Opposition?

NARENDRA MODI'S decision to order the Air Force to attack jihadist camps in Pakistan has had the unintended consequence of throwing our Opposition leaders into a frenzy of confusion and self-loathing. India has never before responded militarily to a jihadist attack, so initial shock and confusion can be forgiven. For this to turn into self-loathing cannot. The Prime Minister is not wrong when he says that their hatred of him is so deep that they have transferred this hatred to India and our Armed Forces as well. To prove that Modi is a liar they started singing the praises of Imran Khan in concert.

This cue was picked up by their supporters on social media and in important western newspapers. This extraordinary, unexpected praise for the Pakistani Prime Minister caused people in the Islamic Republic to announce plans to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Imran Khan was embarrassed enough for him to say modestly that he was unworthy of such an honour and that it should go to someone who could bring peace to Kashmir. This did not deter India's opposition leaders. They continued their campaign to prove that he was a statesman and Modi a warmonger.

In shrill tones they denounced Modi and his ministers for lying about the number of dead jihadists in the Balakot camp. When I tweeted about the absurdity of Indian political leaders believing the Prime Minister of an enemy country over our own, my timeline was flooded with tweets saying that Modi had 'lied for four years' so nobody except a 'bhaktan' (devotee) like me believed him any more. And, why is it so easy to believe Imran Khan? He is the face of a military government that has lied for decades about promoting jihadist attacks on Indian soil. It has become a new strategy in an old war. Pervez Musharraf is one of my least favourite people but it pleased me to hear him say that Jaish-e-Mohammad was very much a Pakistani jihadist outfit that was created by the army but must now be stopped because it had tried to assassinate him twice.

Returning now to how our opposition leaders have behaved in a time of national crisis. I would like to state clearly that in my view, their behaviour was disgraceful. Rahul Gandhi as the man who hopes to replace Modi as prime minister later this year behaved with an irresponsibility and petulance that should seriously worry the Congress party. His first response to the air strike was to applaud the bravery of the Indian Air Force. Not one word about the Prime Minister's courage to make a decision that no prime minister has been able to make in the past 30 years despite terrible jihadist violence on Indian soil. Does the Congress president believe that the Air Force crossed into Pakistan without the Prime Minister's permission?

Other opposition leaders like Mamata Banerjee did not cover themselves with glory either. In a series of shrill, hysterical speeches she screeched about how she supported India and supported the Armed Forces but she would never support 'Modi-babu'. Has she not noticed that he is still India's Prime Minister and that whatever action was taken in response to Pulwama could not have been taken without his consent?

By the end of last week our opposition leaders had done so much damage to India's image that a Pakistani friend asked me if it was possible that the Pulwama suicide bomber had done what he did at the behest of Modi. "After all he has an election coming... won't this really help him?" I tried to explain that in a real democracy like India it is simply not possible for a political leader to kill 40 of his own soldiers and expect this to remain a secret. But, despite my attempts to convince him otherwise, he said more than once that our own political leaders and journalists were saying that this is what happened.

The media is entitled to express different points of view. But, for senior Indian political leaders to start sowing horrible doubts about the nature of the Indian State should disqualify them from being in public life. There have been times of crisis before when Congress prime ministers have been at the helm and, if my memory serves me correctly, I cannot remember anyone questioning their character, their patriotism or their intentions. In their pathological hatred of Modi, the men and women who lead the coalition that hopes to defeat him could have harmed themselves more than they have him.

With just weeks left for the election we still do not know what the coalition of opposition parties stands for politically or economically. They have wasted so much time attacking Modi that they have come up with neither policies nor strategies that go beyond asserting that Modi has to go. And, then what?

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

TIMELY COVER-UP

By the time clear satellite images were made available to the public, the Pakistanis had smartly finished reconstructing the roof over the bombed seminary at Balakot and attempted to cover up the destruction, officials say. Satellite photos could not be taken on the night of the aerial strikes because of the darkness. The next day the cloud cover prevented a satellite image being shot. On the third day, the Indian authorities managed to get a satellite picture revealing that the building had been damaged, particularly the roof, but the image was hazy. Instead of releasing this photograph immediately, it was simply put out on Twitter in the hope that a better shot would be available later. When commercial satellite photographs were finally taken more than a week later, the site did not look as ravaged as the first satellite image, thanks to Pakistan's swift restoration efforts, officials believe. But even in the later photos the blackened areas to the north of the building indicated significant damage.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

Many wonder how the number of Pakistani casualties at Balakot was estimated at 250. The figure was first put out on Twitter and Facebook by those who had reportedly been fed by Indian Army intelligence sources in Kashmir. It was picked up by two TV channels. Adding to the confusion was Pakistan's initial claim that two Indian pilots and two aircraft were downed. Since India had only one missing pilot and aircraft, several Internet sites put out the theory that one pilot was actually a Pakistani who had been lynched by his own countrymen in PoK, assuming he was Indian. But the name of the dead pilot, supposedly the son of a former Pakistani Air Marshal, turned out to be fake.

DIVIDED WE FALL

After Balakot, there have been renewed efforts to avoid divisions in the Opposition ranks. Mamata Banerjee, Sharad Pawar, the trusted US-based family friend of the Gandhis, Sam Pitroda, Muslim leaders from Uttar Pradesh and others have all voiced their concern. The

problematic states where opposition parties are likely to cut into each other's vote share and help the BJP are: Delhi, Haryana and UP. In Delhi and Haryana, the local Congress leaders are against an alliance with AAP. In UP, the Congress is still hoping for a last-minute compromise with the BSP-SP alliance, which is feeling the heat because the Congress has emerged as a third force. Several BSP and SP potential Lok Sabha candidates, who lost the nomination because the partner was allotted the constituency, have joined the Congress in the hope of a ticket. The defectors to the Congress include former SP MP Rakesh Sachan from Fatehpur Sikri, former BSP MP from Sitapur Kaiser Jahan, and former BSP MP Kunwar Chand Vakil, who hopes to get the Congress ticket from Agra. The hurdle in the effort to persuade the SP and BSP to allot more seats to the Congress in UP is Mayawati's demand for seats in several other states as compensation.

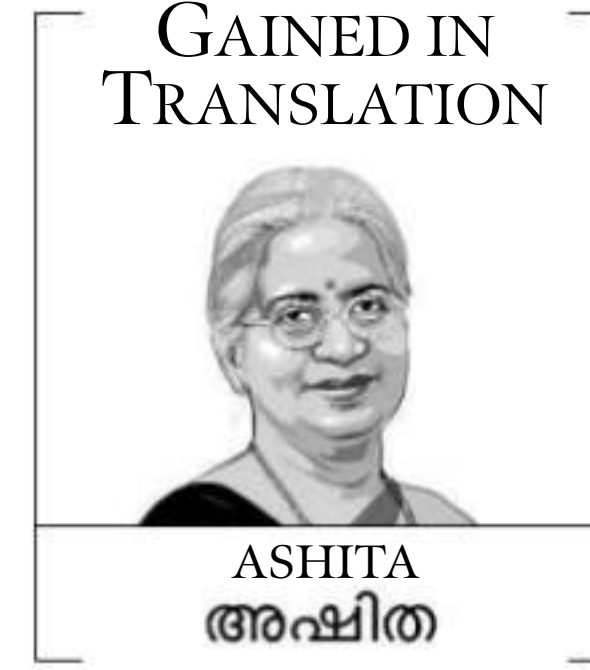
SLOW START

Rahul Gandhi is annoyed that the BJP's publicity campaign has already got off the ground while the Congress has yet to finalise a firm for its advertising. The BJP has gone for the same well-known publicity and advertising firms as it had done in 2014, and its campaign slogan 'Namunkin ab Mumkin Hai' (the impossible is now possible) appears in a slate of recent government ads. The delay is reportedly because two factions, one led by Anand Sharma, who heads the Congress's publicity committee for the Lok Sabha elections, and the other by Jairam Ramesh, who is the coordinator of the party's core group, are working at cross-purposes. One side has even accused the other of inviting firms for presentation of their powerpoint proposals for shortlisting without calling all the committee members. Another grouse is that a little-known firm has been shortlisted.

SONS RISE

The Congress is yet to announce nominations for Lok Sabha elections in Madhya Pradesh, but the scions of three political dynasties have been given the go-ahead to start campaigning from their respective family seats. MP Chief Minister Kamal Nath's son Nakul, who till now has stayed in the background, hopes to contest from Chhindwara, the parliamentary seat which his father won nine times. Arjun Singh's son Ajay Singh may have lost the election last time but is all set to contest from Satna. Arun Yadav, former PCC chief and the son of former minister Subhash Yadav, will stand from Khandwa.

Guru and me



THERE WAS a time, 35 to 40 years ago, when there was an unspoken consensus in society that a woman who had not gotten married by the age of 30 would stay a spinster all her life. I doubt if this perception has changed even today. A woman aged over 30 is considered a decaying vegetable, unattractive like the dry desert, a burden that no intelligent young man would want to bear.

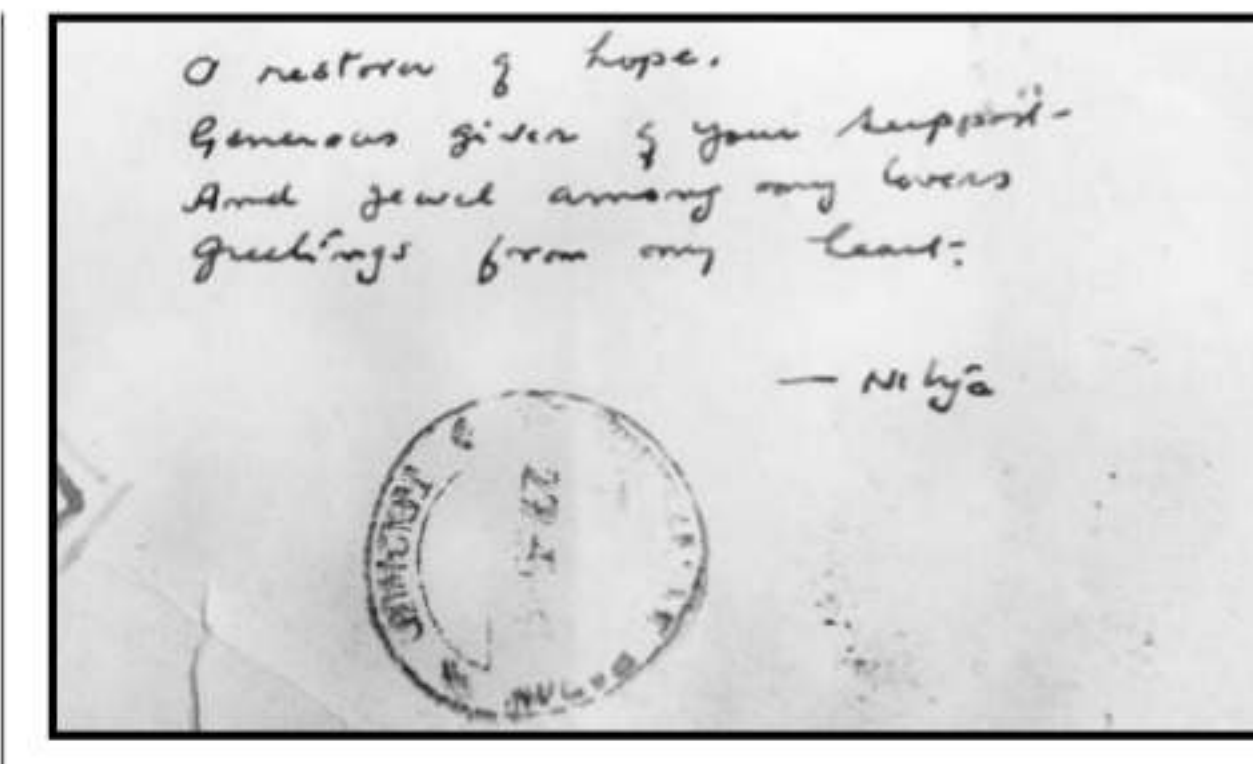
After an overprotected childhood and a stormy youth, I had remained unmarried at 27. My younger sister had got married at an age which was deemed appropriate. All this was a topic of discussion in the neighbourhood. People were discussing that I may not be a woman, or perhaps that I was a transgender, and that a moustache may be growing above my upper lip.

I had been forced to take a degree in English literature, though my preference was Economics, because it was thought that girls with a degree in English were preferred for marriage by the uneducated boys working in the Gulf. Marriage proposals from people as varied as a Class VIII dropout who had joined the Army to Class X-pass stenographers came for me, a postgraduate and university topper. There were some relatives who advised me to join an ashram and resolve the conundrum!

Though it was easy to run away to the ashram, I did not have any spiritual inclination. If there was a god, he was there somewhere. I never felt he had any interest in me. Nor I in him. It was a time I believed that Marxism was the loftiest dream humanity had seen. I was a committed atheist.

At that time, at 27, I got married. A year later, a child was born to me. By 32, Guru arrived in my life. There was a particular reason for it. The daughter of a distant relative had committed suicide at 19. I had struggled to console the parents, who were distraught, and was wondering who to turn to for advice.

I thought of all the literary figures. None of them, I felt, had the self-awareness to handle this. Then, one day, I saw my daughter



The letter that the writer received from Guru Nitya

ter kiss the photograph of a bearded man on the open pages of *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. Smiling, I asked her: "Who is it baby?". She answered: "Swami".

Curious, I took the magazine. I didn't think he was much of a *sanyasi*. The article was about home. I started reading it and got hooked. Not bad, this *sanyasi*, I thought. He had opened the doors to a vast area of knowledge of which I, who ran a household, was unaware. I decided I would ask him about my predicament. The editor of *Grihalakshmi* (a Malayalam women's magazine), PB Lalkar, got me his address. That's when I became aware that he was a *sanyasi* and was staying at an ashram in Ooty.

Lalkar assured me that he would reply if I wrote. But a grave fear enveloped me. I feared that my life would never be the same hereafter and thought someone was pushing me down a cliff. I strained for about four to five days and wrote to him, telling him I faced no problems in life, and in a suitably vague tone asked if Guru did respond to such persons. I got a response in clear, legible handwriting. What was surprising is that I recognised that it was not Guru's handwriting. So I wrote back: "Received your letter. It felt as if someone has extended a rose to me after taking away its smell. When Guru writes to me, I want it to be in your handwriting."

I received a reply even for that. That's when I realised that Guru was in his 60s and dictated his responses to children in his ashram. I sought his advice on my relative's concern. If their daughter died at 19, tell them to conduct the wedding of 19 girls, was his advice. There was no tinge of sympathy in his reply. What a stone-hearted man, I thought.

I squabbled with him for nearly a month, telling him we are ordinary people and that we feel distraught when someone

dear to us dies. His response was that it was stupid to grieve for more than a month when someone dies. What I remember is that I didn't write to him thereafter.

Then, one day, I received a letter, the gist of which was that he was visiting Thiruvananthapuram for a lecture and would visit me. I panicked. After a time of youth, when I sowed the wind to reap a whirlwind, I was living within the happy confines of marriage with a little pearl. I did not want anyone to breach that space. Besides, I had no idea how to talk to a *sanyasi*. And, he was the head of a gurukul. He will come accompanied by cars, with many disciples and admirers — how shall I receive them? This left me confused.

So I immediately wrote back: "You don't have to come. It is not important to meet me. If you still wish, please do not come accompanied by many cars or admirers. I don't like all that," I wrote in my letter.

He replied: "I am old. So, I need at least one person to help me." Peter Oppenheimer accompanied him. Not knowing what to tell him, I stayed mum. He had a glass of water and bid me goodbye. After returning to Ooty, a letter came in my address. This is that letter:

"O restorer of hope; Generous giver of your support — And jewel among my lovers; Greetings from my heart" — Nitya.

On reading it, I felt it was a letter to Muni Narayana Prasad (a *sanyasi* disciple of Guru). I felt that he, in his old age, had got the address wrong and posted it to me instead. Surprisingly, the greetings he sent me in the letter he wrote with his own hand just before his samadhi were the same — except that the letters were a little wobbly.

The writer is a celebrated Malayalam short-story writer. 'Guru' is the late seer and scholar Nitya Chaitanya Yati. Translated by Amrith Lal

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

ANY DAY now, the Election Commission will start the process for the general election of 2019. All the political parties which register to contest will assert an untruth. Under the Representation of the People Act, as amended under Rajiv Gandhi's prime-ministership, all parties contesting the election have to declare that they adhere to the principles of socialism. All parties, bar

All socialists now

none. It is one thing for the Leninist parties CPI, CPM, CPI (M-L) and even Forward Bloc to say they are socialist. But beyond that, how many can truthfully assert that they are socialist? Is the BJP a socialist party? During early days, the Jana Sangh used to assert their belief in Gandhian Socialism. But now they follow Deendayal Upadhyaya, who consciously searched for a path rejecting socialism and capitalism. The Congress used to be a socialist party. But as of December 2017, it is a Hindu nationalist party (Shaivite tendency). It could say it is a liberal Hindu nationalist party or even that it is a liberal Hindu socialist party. And why not? There are Christian Socialists and Zionism originally was a socialist movement. Anyone can call them-

selves socialist. Even the casteist parties of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who follow Ram Manohar Lohia may call themselves *samajwadi*, but they show no special commitment to socialism. Casteism and socialism do not go together. George Fernandes, who died recently, had his Samta Party and he was probably the last of the remnants of the Congress Socialist Party which became Praja Socialist Party and then split many ways and is now defunct. The assertion that India is a secular socialist democratic republic was foisted upon the Preamble to the Constitution when India was oppressed under Indira Gandhi's undemocratic Emergency. Secularism is in the text of the

Constitution. The Constituent Assembly had seen no need to put it in the Preamble. Socialism was never officially adopted in the Constitution, nor by the Congress which only resolved to work towards a 'Socialist Pattern of Society' at the Avadi session of AICC. To declare India to be socialist was grossly unconstitutional. This was compounded by Rajiv Gandhi in amending the Representation of the People Act and adding the requirement that all parties declare their belief in socialism. It was a massive misuse of his majority. Luckily after that the Congress has never won a majority. The fact remains that the electoral procedure is built on a tissue of false assertions by all but a small number of Leftist political

parties. Hypocrisy is a common coin of politics but there ought to be a limit. In a country where people rush to file a PIL for the most trivial of causes, no one has as yet challenged this set of untruths. It is like a collective conspiracy. We all know that no one means it when they say they adhere to socialism and no one cares that they are lying. *Satyameva Jayate* may be the national mantra but not in election procedures. The most offensive part of this practice is that it is a violation of the Fundamental Right of Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Speech. Why should an Indian citizen not assert that she does not believe in socialism and wants to start a party which explicitly says so? Is India a democracy or not?