

From inches to centimeters



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

Last October I was in Hyderabad to deliver a talk. A friend had loaned me his car and chauffeur, and I had resolved that even though I was going to be in Hyderabad for under 24 hours, I will make a visit to IKEA's first store in India.

Fortunately my flight landed on time and I could be at the store as it was opening for the day. The millions or thousands, who had lined up outside IKEA on the day of the opening were missing. It was after all a couple of months after the store had opened. My smart chauffeur had never been to the store, so one had to use the Google Map; it was not difficult finding the huge building done in the now familiar IKEA blue colour.

I told my chauffeur that I wanted to do a quick tour and will be back in 60 minutes. He surprised me by saying he would like to join me on my whirlwind tour of the store (looks as if the brand has managed to appeal to the middle classes as well).

The store is touted to be the retailer's biggest in this part of the world. And I am not surprised. In addition to all its usual sections, it also has a huge huge food court, the likes of which I have not seen in their other stores. It has probably figured out that the quickest way to an Indian's wallet is through his tummy.

As I was approaching the store I was wondering if Indians will ever adjust to the IKEA way of buying furniture. You first tour the store with all its displays. You keep making notes on the stuff you want to buy (at least the bigger items, not the furnishing and small stuff that you can buy and cart along). Then you head to the large warehouse to pull out what you want, the book shelf, the settee, the dining table. All nicely packed for transportation. You then take those home in your SUV and assemble them yourself (or help your son assemble it for his student accommodation). For those who have never bought an IKEA furniture, the box that contains, say the 'Billy Bookcase' also comes with its own set of screws, screwdriver etc. All in one. By the way, BBC.com (February 27, 2017) says that there are over 60 million of those Billy Bookcases in use around the world.

The firm seems to have done their homework. For one I saw a many more uniformed staff in the store. Compared to their San Francisco store, my favorite, there were possibly 10 times as many staff in the Hyderabad store. Many of them were locals, but I did see some who looked as if they had been air dropped from Sweden, the firm's home country.

As the store was filling up, I could see the friendly staff engaging with the rather bewildered looking customers. Some who were there for a "look-see". Some serious about planning their new living room, bedroom or what have you.

The brand has also gone the extra mile to help Indians buy furniture, the IKEA way. They have created several specialist services. First, there is the delivery service. You don't need to hire a minivan to take home the big book shelf or sofa. There is the assembly service, wherein you can ask the company to send an assembly person to your home. The little booklet even explains the cost of assembly, nicely catalogued to match the cost of the item. In addition they are also offering kitchen planning service, measuring service (yes, they will send someone to measure your home), installation service, interior planning service, home furnishing service and a few more.

The variety of services they have curated for India seemed a little excessive, but I suppose they will figure out what catches on and what needs to be pruned.

While the brand is teaching Indians to plan and buy furniture, a recent article in the Economist (January 26, 2019) speaks of how it is trying out a very different model in cities like Paris, London and New York. In a significant departure from their big box store model, the company is on its way to creating smaller experience centers, where customers can touch and feel the product. They can then go and order what they like online, to be delivered to their home or office. The report says that already 10 per cent of its sales happens through its online portal.

Indian consumers are getting used to better décor. Look at the mushrooming of décor related magazines. As Indians learn to use the living spaces better, furnishing, furniture, crockery, cutlery, bed linen all start gaining importance. Paint companies are experimenting with quick painting services and large format colour stores. Online furniture companies are getting well funded and are using their funds to set up experience centers in airports and city malls.

Finally, did I get what I was looking for. Yes. I am a big fan of the tiny innovations that IKEA does. One of the tiny innovations that I fell in love with almost a decade ago is the paper measuring tape. These are available at every corner of the brand's store. I had flicked a few from the San Francisco store. I was curious to know if I could get those in the Hyderabad store. Yes, I found them. And unlike the US inch tapes, these were in 'cms'. I wish they had printed 'inches' on one side. Maybe they will when they enter Mumbai this year.

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Mission Shakti: Winners & losers

It is no more relevant to the basic needs of Indians languishing below the poverty line than the annexation of Sikkim was all those years ago



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

The surgical strike may have been in space but its obvious targets were opposition parties on earth. But for me Narendra Modi's excruciatingly prolonged drama recalled George Verghese's editorial "Kanchenjunga, Here We Come" in the Hindustan Times when Indira Gandhi's government was about to gobble up the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim. "Perhaps there is no need for the common man to ask for bread", the article concluded with exquisite irony. "He's getting Sikkim."

Mission Shakti is probably a tremendous technological achievement and the scientists responsible for it deserve full praise. But it is no more relevant to the basic needs of Indians languishing below the poverty line than the annexation of Sikkim was all those years ago. "We are not just capable of defending (our country) on land, water and air, but now also in space," Mr Modi boasted. Since he had already told us that three other nations -- the United States, Russia and China -- already had the capability we seem to have acquired in the midst of a hectic election campaign, I cannot but wonder which of the three countries we must beware of. Not the US or Russia, surely? As for China, I remember a bewildered Deng Xiaoping telling Henry Kissinger that not only was Sikkim "entirely under the military control of India" before the annexation, but that India had "in no way strengthened" its forces there afterwards. "We don't fear that India will attack our borders," Deng added. If India won't do so down here, it isn't likely to do so up there.

Mr Modi's Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme and Rahul Gandhi's Nyuntam Aay Yojana are more relevant than extravagant, expensive, sophisticated space technology to the daily needs of India's poor. But who are the

poor? Commonsense indicates they amount to far more than the official admission of 20 per cent of the population. The former Reserve Bank governor, Raghuram Rajan, casts doubt on the reliability of GDP data. Ordinary Indians can't believe that a prime minister whose waistcoats are almost as fancy as Nirav Modi's ostrich skin jacket really is a "fakir" who can pick up his "jhola" and disappear, as he says. We are reminded of the jibe that Indira Gandhi's rallying cry should have been "garib hatao" and not "garibi hatao".

Her grandson intoned in commanding tones the other day, "We can't have two Hindustans, of the poor and the rich". Of course we can't. India's variety and diversity can't be reduced to two bald categories. Identities and vocations overlap. Caste can contradict class. Since a chai-walla calls himself chowkidar -- the prefix was flaunted like the Chaudhury title on the note announcing Wednesday's not-so-earth-shattering announcement -- so can the Harvard don that a touchy Brahmin like Subramanian Swamy is proud of having been before immersing himself in India's byzantine politics. If the present prime minister's chowkidar handle is not good enough for the Rajya Sabha member, he can fall back on the pandit to which India's

LUNCH WITH BS ► NARESH GUJRAL | RAJYA SABHA MP

Cut from a different cloth

Over *kadhi chawal* at home, Gujral tells Rahul Jacob & Archis Mohan that India must make it easier to fire workers and Parliament should pass a bill that ensures it works for 100 days a year

It is a truth widely acknowledged that economic illiteracy and obscurantism have long been helpful qualifications for an Indian politician. Circa 2016-19, the country has also become a hyperkinetic laboratory for eccentric experiments: Shock therapy to leapfrog to a "cashless economy" one moment, a basic income for the bottom 20 per cent of the population with little detail on subsidies to be cut the next.

As someone who built a successful garment exporting business and is a chartered accountant by training, Naresh Gujral is cut from a different cloth. His conversation is peppered with facts and figures. He makes no implausible claims about India overtaking China, but worries instead about the comparative advantage India once enjoyed in garments being forfeited to Bangladesh. When we meet for lunch at his home, he describes the data reported that morning showing millions of casual labour jobs have been lost by men in the countryside over the past couple of years as "frighting".

The Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament for the Shiromani Akali Dal launches straight into a detailed discussion on how Punjab's farmers could learn from the high-margin horticulture of Sikkim. The secret is a focus on organic produce, which allows farmers in Sikkim to make as much as "₹85,000 an acre", he says. An ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party government at the centre, he praises it and his party's minister for boosting the food processing industry, but believes there is a long way to go. "Ninety thousand crates of fruits and vegetables perish post-harvest," Gujral says. "The time has come to allow foreign direct investors into retail. They will create the supply chain and the cold chains." In a leap that is breathtaking, he envisions a world where Punjab's fruit and vegetables could be trucked to the former Soviet republics if and when

relations with Pakistan normalise. Gujral bemoans that successive governments have not followed the Swaminathan report's suggestions that would give the farmer a remunerative price for his produce because they seek to keep food inflation down: "We remember the farmer only at election time. Something permanent needs to be done otherwise we are headed for an agrarian revolution." He then quotes Rudyard Kipling to make an analogy between India's farmers and the soldier in peace time: "In times of war and not before, God and the soldier we adore. But in times of peace and all things righted, God is forgotten and the soldier slighted."

The phone rings; it is his daughter Diva, calling before boarding a flight to Delhi. We are sitting in a library jammed with books about art -- he has been an art collector for decades -- but also Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. Gujral is alone that day, but his family make cameo appearances. The phone conversation with Diva, a PhD student in art history in London, involves a lengthy anecdote that alarms Gujral: "My God... Then?... Oh my God... Good you managed to get out." He hangs up and then goes to the bookcase to fetch an engaging book on photography in India dating back to the 19th century that Diva co-authored. His wife Anjali, one of the most graceful women in Delhi, is on a week-long river rafting trip that started near the Nepal border. He shows us a video clip she has sent him that involves hoots of horror and delight as the rafts move towards the rapids. Gujral loses the thread of his narrative momentarily and embarrassingly so do we.

Farmer distress is not just about the price of their crops and the financial risk they take on, Gujral continues, but also brought on by indebtedness due to a lack of medical insurance and the high cost of

weddings. He expects Modi's health plan to address the first problem, but regards splashy weddings as a social evil encouraged by Page 3 gossip sections, our tycoons and India's celebrity culture. "We are glamorising weddings that have become prohibitively expensive. It is affecting our gender ratio and levels of indebtedness. Like Swachh Bharat, we need a mission (to push for simple weddings)."

Gujral believes politicians, starting from the prime minister, must campaign against this unaffordable extravagance. His father, former United Front prime minister I K Gujral, who died in 2012, is mentioned often. Only 40 people attended his own wedding, he recalls, but his father later held a reception where everyone from the president of India to a peon who had worked for him was invited. They were served "tea and coffee, cola, *barfi*, *elaichi* and *saunf*". The bill came to ₹3,000. "This is so much a tale from a bygone era that it is hard to suppress a gasp. When one of his two daughters was married last year, Gujral, 70, notes with approval she insisted her parents invite only people she and her husband knew personally.

We make our way to the dining table while Gujral stops to cheer up the family's golden retriever, Kaiser, who looks as large as a lion but is depressed because of Anjali Gujral's absence. As we sit down to a meal of *kadhi* and rice, *aloo methi*, *bhindi* and chicken curry, Gujral shifts to a pet subject: Ensuring our labour intensive industries have a chance to compete. Gujral wants the dumping of under-invoiced imports from China that he says encourage hawala transactions stopped by a quick imposition of tariff and non-tariff barriers: "The Chinese have killed our toy industry, they have killed our *kohlapuri chappals* manufacturing." He wants state governments to create incentives based on the jobs new enterprises create, not just on the

first prime minister developed an aversion even before Britain's imperialist Daily Express took to calling him "Bandit Nehru".

But Dr Swamy errs in believing brahmins are too superior to be chowkidars. Brahmins are men of all seasons. A Bihar politician commented wryly during the Mithila agitation for separate statehood that for all their ancient scholarship, Maithili brahmins had become known in modern times as cooks in Bengali households. His colleague added that even if Maithili brahmins did cook for Bengali families, they maintained their distinctive status by not partaking of any food cooked by their employers. That's snobbishness for you.

The British understood the subtleties of our interaction of caste and class even better than we did. The Tory politician, Michael Heseltine, who challenged Margaret Thatcher for the top slot, was once subjected to a patrician put-down: another Tory sniffed he had "bought all his own furniture..." instead of inheriting it. That's why the colonial regime inserted an intermediate class between First and Second (or was it Second and Third?) on railway trains. It was for the well-born poor like the Karnataka brahmins who pleaded with B.P. Mandal for OBC status. Of course, the Bharatiya Janata Party's now deposed and exiled grantees who preferred to rumble along in a rath or a DCM-Toyota van know nothing of trains. But the chaiwala turned chowkidar who organised Murlidhar Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra from Kanniyakumari to Kashmir can't have forgotten his tour operating stint. Like the Maithili brahmin cook, he is getting his own back now.

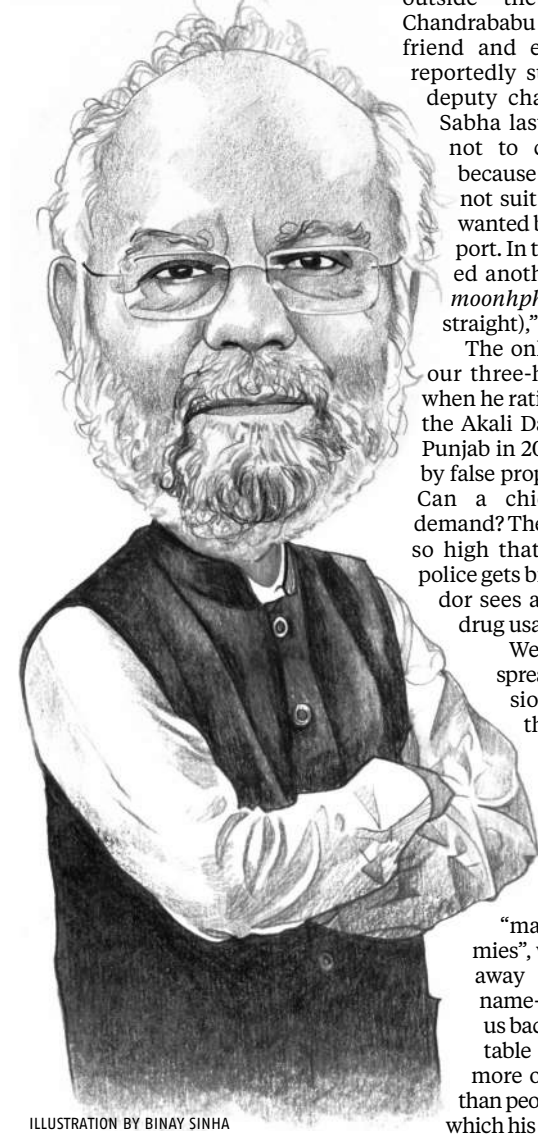


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

BJP, he adds emphatically, "FDI does not come to countries where there is no communal harmony on the streets." This plain speaking has made him popular with members outside the ruling coalition. Chandrababu Naidu is a long-time friend and even the Trinamool reportedly supported him to be deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha last summer. He chose not to contest in the end because he felt the role would not suit him and because he wanted broad, bipartisan support. In the end, the BJP wanted another candidate. "*Mein moonhphat hoon* (I say it straight)," Gujral chuckles.

The only exception through our three-hour conversation is when he rationalises the defeat of the Akali Dal in the elections in Punjab in 2017. "We were done in by false propaganda about drugs. Can a chief minister curtail demand? The margins of profit are so high that the world over the police gets bribed. Any drug corridor sees a higher incidence of drug usage."

We don't raise widespread allegations of collusion and corruption in the Akali government because Gujral, in party-spoken mode, is less interesting. He is soon reminiscing about his father telling him that in politics he must "make friends, not enemies", which sounds a world away from today's nasty name-calling. He transports us back to the family dining table of his youth that had more opposition politicians than people from the Congress, which his father was then a minister of. He remains hopeful that a private members' bill he introduced will be passed to ensure Parliament works 100 days a year and makes up for time wasted in shouting matches. It is now 4.30 pm. Kaiser is bored by our long farewell in the garden, fuelled by permutations of electoral arithmetic, that has extended our meeting by 45 minutes, and wants to go back indoors. Gujral has one last point to make: more business people need to be nominated to Parliament. "When you come through the hassles and struggles of business life, your mind is wired differently. You are more connected to reality."

capital they invest. As Bangladesh gets well ahead of India in garment exports, India's absurdly inflexible labour laws need to be urgently revamped. "Foreign investors want normal labour laws that are prevalent in other countries. No one enjoys sacking people but if your business conditions are such, you have to let people go."

Unusually, Gujral is unafraid to speak up for foreign investors -- and for communal harmony. Reiterating a comment he made after a rash of attacks on minorities and Dalits, which likely angered many in the

A day in the life of a chowkidar No more air kissing



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

The other day a friend asked me to search for the word *chowkidar* on Twitter. Dozens of Twitter handles prefixed with *chowkidar* opened up. Prefixing a hashtag to *chowkidar* in the search bar opened up another can of worms altogether. As politicians, opinion makers and the obnoxiously opinionated battled it out over the humble epithet of social media, I found myself thinking of D P Singh, an actual *chowkidar*. His life story isn't unique; in fact, it is pretty much like that of many others like him who have found employment in the city, thanks to the widening divide between the rich and the poor. But it shows how empty election rhetoric is.

Singh is from Gaddopur, a village outside Prayagraj. His family has a small piece of land that does not yield enough to feed their growing numbers. "A couple of years ago, when my younger brother's son got married, we realised that revenues from farming were just not enough," he says. Dividing the tiny tract of land would have devalued it further. Instead, Singh took up a job as a security guard in Delhi, leaving his younger brother to till the family land. Their agricultural income has further dipped and today, the lion's share of Singh's salary of ₹14,000 per month goes into supporting his eight-member family back home.

In Delhi, Singh works as a guard on a 12-hour shift in a private house. "I share a tiny room with two beds with three other men," he says. "Two of us work nights; we sleep during the day while our other two roommates work." His monthly expenditure is over ₹5,000, and Singh is acutely conscious he needs to save more. "My daughter is in college now and I need to save money for her marriage," he says.

In January this year, Singh's mother had a stroke. "I had to rush home to be with her," he recalls. "When I returned after a week, my employer

deducted my salary as I only get two holidays in a month." Singh borrowed ₹50,000 from his roommates to pay her hospital dues as he had no savings. A month later when she died, he had to take unpaid leave for 15 days again.

"Since then, I've been repaying my loan in small installments," Singh says. He now works overtime on his off days to make extra cash. He also cleans cars after his shift ends at 7 am. Sometimes, he goes to the neighbourhood temple or *gurdwara* to get a free meal. Every paisa counts, he says, for his roommates expect him to repay the loan within the next four months. "I worry what will happen if I fall ill," he says. "That's why I'm thinking of calling my brother's son to Delhi -- with my contacts, I can easily get him a job as a *chowkidar*."

As Singh dreams of adding another kin to the ranks of *chowkidars*, I muse that Twitterati on either side of the political fence needs to walk for a day or two in their shoes to understand how precariously India's unorganised sector teeters on the brink -- even when on paper they may earn more than the minimum wage. Till then, their election rhetoric will remain as empty as the Jan Dhan accounts of Singh and lakhs of others like him.



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

It is only me, or has anyone else noted that social kissing seems to have been consigned to the dustbin of history? It seems just the other day we would mwah!-mwah! our way through parties, and everyone from acquaintances to strangers was fair game -- but no one offers you their cheek for an aerial peck any more. Having checked with hostesses who should know, I'm informed that it was the gauche arrivistes who sounded its death knell. Not knowing its proper etiquette, they ended up landing full-blown smackeroos when the whole point was to ensure that nobody's faces actually touched. Can you imagine what it did to the makeup of your spouse, or

partner, having to literally rub cheeks with dozens of guests?

There had to be a downside to all that social kissing, not least of which was to do with oral hygiene. More people from the upper echelons of society than you might imagine have bad breath and -- worse -- body odour. But social etiquette demands you not recoil in horror, leading to an uneasy awkwardness when a periodontal-infected associate should lunge at your face, causing you to either asphyxiate by holding your breath, or draw in odours pungent enough to knock you out anyway. No wonder air kissing has come to be referred to as death-by-breath.

Nor was there any saving grace in learning first-hand what your air-kisser had been imbibing before you got into a clinch. There is nothing as offensive as the smell of wine (red is particularly unpleasant), or coffee, the meaty stench of half-masticated kebabs (worse if they've been accompanied by onions), or blue cheese, being blown full gale into your face. Most Indians are indiscriminate about what they put into their mouths, and to have it sururate in the proximity of your nose isn't the best beginning to an evening out. How many social climbers in New Delhi even know that when you peck at a cheek you must draw in your breath, not blow it out?

The perfunctory air-kiss has now been replaced by a half-hug, as awkward a gesture as any. Close friends and family get the full hug a la Modi, but acquaintances are met with an untidy greeting that looks as though adversaries are aligning their shoulders to run a race, or in preparation for a dance, while holding each other's hands, or waists, behind their backs, which looks and feels -- stupid? Standing thus parallelly, instead of facing each other, may be great for avoiding bad-breath boo-boos, but hardly the ideal way to conduct a conversation.

New Delhi, or even India, isn't the only place where the correct way to greet a person is under discussion. The international handshake is increasingly under attack with people prone to wondering where the hand in question might have been before it gripped yours. There is an increasing fear of germs being exchanged through the handclasp, something millennials are particularly loath to do. Pass on the flu, or cold, or other creepy-crawly viruses? The handshake might offer a photo-op for world leaders, but increasingly they're adopting the Indian *namaste* on global platforms -- only, it's still rude not to take the proffered palm. But is the handshake on its way out? I'd tell you, only I'm reeling from radish breath over my face.

Dump 'Statistical significance'

Did you know that gorging on dark chocolate accelerates weight loss? A study published in 2015 found that a group of subjects who followed a low-carbohydrate diet and ate a bar of dark chocolate daily lost more weight than a group that followed the same diet sans chocolate. This discovery was heralded in some quarters as a scientific breakthrough.

If you're still hesitant about raiding the supermarket chocolate aisle, rest assured: The study's results are statistically significant. In theory, this means that the results would be improbable if chocolate did not contribute to weight loss, and therefore we can conclude that it does. A successful test of statistical significance has long been the admission ticket into the halls of scientific knowledge.

But not anymore, if statisticians have their way. In a coordinated assault last week, which included a special issue of the American Statistician and commentary in Nature (supported by 800 signatories), some of the discipline's luminaries urged scientists to ditch the notion of statistical significance.

Critics argue that statistical significance can be misleading because it sets an arbitrary threshold on the level of uncertainty science should be willing to accept. Roughly speaking, uncertainty is expressed as the likelihood of observing an experimental result by chance, assuming the effect being tested doesn't actually exist. In statistical lingo this likelihood is known as p-value. Statistical significance typically requires a p-value of less than 5 per cent, or 0.05. A p-value of 0.049 is under the 5-per cent threshold; thus results returning that value are considered "significant." If p=0.051, by contrast, the results are "not significant," despite the tiny difference between the two values.

This has led to myriad problems. One is that there's a perceived crisis of reproducibility in science, in part because the p-value itself is uncertain: Flawlessly repeating the same experiment can produce different values, crossing the magical significance threshold in either direction. Another problem is the practice of (often innocently) testing many hypotheses and reporting only those that give statistically significant results.

The latter issue is nicely illustrated by the chocolate study, which was nothing but a sting operation designed to show how easy it is to draw international media attention to flashy results even when the underlying science is cringe-worthy. The experiment was real, but it had only 15 subjects. Worse, 18 different hypotheses were tested, including "chocolate reduces cholesterol" and "chocolate contributes to quality of sleep." Life may very well be like a box of chocolates, but if you roll the dice enough times, you know exactly what you're going to get: results that are both statistically significant and fallacious.

I agree that the term "statistical significance" is part of the problem; abandoning it is the right thing to do. In its place, statisticians advocate a more nuanced view of uncertainty. For example, scientists can report a range of possible conclusions that are compatible (to different degrees) with the data.

But the problem runs deeper. The broader issue is that the choice of a career in medicine, the life sciences or the social sciences (with some exceptions, like economics) isn't typically indicative of a passion, or even an aptitude, for mathematics. Yet these sciences are thoroughly infused with statistics, and a shallow understanding of its principles gives rise to numerous fallacies.

In a 1994 editorial in the BMJ, the late English statistician Douglas Altman wrote that many medical researchers "are not ashamed (and some seem proud) to admit that they don't know anything about statistics." It does appear to be a sociological phenomenon.

To find examples of ignorance, one doesn't even need to look for statistical subtleties. I was amused to read a few years ago of the "one in 48 million baby" who was born in Australia on the same date as her mother and her father. Under the assumptions presumably made by the good doctor who announced the miracle, the odds are actually 1 in 133,225 (1 in 365 squared, not 1 in 365 cubed). The same thing is likely to happen on any given day, somewhere in the world.

These anecdotes don't amount to statistically significant (oops) evidence, but there are plenty of surveys showing widespread misuse of statistics.

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Modi's 2019 mantra: Vote for secure *din*

Modi isn't going to voters on his track record but on the fear of the terrorist across the border and the Muslims within. It's a battle on his terms

The most obvious question an incumbent seeking re-election should be asking his voters is: Are you better off than you were when you voted me to power? For Narendra Modi it could rather be: Do you feel more secure than when you voted me to power?

If the answer is "yes", you can't expect to ride to a second term on an upsurge of insecurity. If it is "no", why should the same people re-elect you? In the Modi world, however, a third possibility can be created. Are you feeling less insecure than you did, probably, in the week of 26/11 in 2008? A conventional politician goes back to the voters on his own track record. A cleverer one does so on his rivals'. Mr Modi is anything if not clever.

You can quibble on detail, but the Modi government is right to boast that in its five years there has not been a big terror attack outside Kashmir, in what we may call for convenience as mainland India. Barring two failed strikes in Gurdaspur and Pathankot, both within miles of the Punjab border, Pakistani groups have not been able to hit anywhere else. Never mind that the preceding five years under the UPA were quite safe too, and Kashmir quieter, because even the Congress has forgotten that.

Mr Modi isn't even building a campaign on his own successes on national security. He is, instead, building further insecurities. It is like, read my lips, after me, the deluge of Jaish, Lashkar and ISI terror.

In 2014, he won on the promise of hope. Five years later, he wants another term on the threat of dark terrorist fears from Pakistan. Anybody opposing him, especially the Congress, is in cahoots with Pakistan. That is why he says that only terrorists and Pakistanis want him defeated. In the same breath, he also accuses his opposition of having been soft on terrorists, of daring to demand evidence of success in his cross-border raids and disrespecting the armed forces.

What does this shift from optimism of 2014 to fear in 2019 mean?

The Modi-Shah BJP believes in what we may call "total politics" — where politics becomes your only avocation, entertainment, obsession and addiction 24x7, and when winning power is no longer confused with the trust that holding public office usually implied. Today, you use any method to get public office. Then we shall see what we can do with it.

So, if you can artificially conjure up a paranoia, it is sharp, useful politics. On the other hand, going for re-election on your five-year record is dangerous. Because people then check your claims with their reality "today". You can hide all data on jobs and fix GDP calculations. But once you ask people how they feel, they will make an immediate reality check. In any case, no matter how many may have benefited from your schemes, toilets, Mudra loans, Ujjwala LPG connections, agricultural support direct transfers, power connection and so on, the number of those left out will still be greater. You want to know how dangerous it is? Ask L K Advani about the "India Shining" campaign of 2004.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Mr Modi's early speeches have indicated the things he will talk about: Pakistan, terrorism, corruption, and the lack of nationalism of his position and critics. And things he mostly won't: Jobs, growth and agricultural stress. What this means is, he is setting this election up so he doesn't have to defend himself against the charges the opposition throws at him. He will, on the contrary, attack them.

Terror, read with Pakistan, has another subtext: Muslims. Mr Modi and Amit Shah won in 2014 by "othering" the Muslim. They ran a power structure — cabinet, top constitutional and administration positions — where Muslims were excluded to the extent of being disenfranchised. They won a majority in the Lok Sabha, fielding just seven candidates from

Hopping from hope to hope



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

the vision of a Ram Temple, cow protection and the like.

I also predicted the BJP would not be able to deliver on either front. Quoting myself, "The hardliner pining for a Hindutva raj will be disappointed. So will the voter who is hoping for miracles in terms of economic growth."

Five years later, there is no Ram Temple. There are legions of unemployed. India's largest automobile manufacturer has just cut its production by 25 per cent, suggesting that there isn't much growth either.

Of course, the BJP did win 31 per cent vote share in 2014 and this was enough to deliver a parliamentary majority. In hindsight, the key to that campaign's success was the message of hope. Loud promises of *acche din* and *vikas* — 20 million jobs, doubling of farm incomes, ₹15 lakh in every bank account, etc. was the message that won the election.

In 2014, around 150 million first-time voters exercised their franchise. That huge cohort of 18-22-year-olds voted in the hope of jobs and good days, as the surveys and exit polls showed. A majority of those youngsters voted for the BJP.

Hope won that election. That hope was

transmitted to huge crowds, by the mesmerising speeches of a great demagogue. It was delivered house-to-house to individual voters, by the dedicated workers of the world's largest NGO. Counter-messages were drowned out in social media by the efficient machinery of the BJP's cyber-cell.

Circa 2019, the first-time voters of 2014 are five years older. Many are unemployed, or selling *pakodas* perhaps. I don't recall any survey ever that indicated a widespread aspiration towards selling *pakodas*.

There has been a huge marketing campaign, buttressed with dubious data, to try and convince everyone that their lives have changed for the better. There is also an anecdotal, but very concrete understanding across many households, that family members remain unemployed.

Will those somewhat older voters keep faith with the BJP in the hope that *acche din* will somehow, miraculously, dawn sometime in the next five years? The answer to that question could swing this election.

That 2014 cohort also has younger siblings. About 135 million voters will be eligible to exercise their franchise for the first time in 2019. Those youngsters will have

noted that many of their elder brothers and sisters don't have worthwhile employment prospects. Will they put their trust in the party that promised so much, and failed their elder siblings? The answer to that question is also critical.

The BJP seems to have abandoned the *acche din* and *vikas* planks or at least, it's been soft-pedalled in the 2019 campaign. This time around, the BJP campaign is centred on pseudo nationalism: To wit, anybody who doesn't vote for the BJP, or indeed, questions its track record is "anti-national". That's an absurdity, given that roughly 70 per cent of India doesn't vote for the BJP. Sadly perhaps, elections are not decided by the rational.

Balanced against that, it's the Congress offering hope through its NYAY proposal for Basic Income, and through commitments to rationalise the goods and services tax, remove "Angel Tax" and curtail the "inspector-raj". Are those promises believable? Well, if you believed that the BJP would transfer ₹15 lakh to every bank account in 2014, you may conceivably believe that the Congress will transfer ₹6,000 into every 25th bank account in 2019.

Will the average voter vote for hope again? Or will hatred of the "anti-national" triumph?

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About 'Us'

EYE CULTURE

AISHA HARRIS

In Jordan Peele's horror hit "*Us*," Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o), a wife and mother of two, is haunted. During a visit to the Santa Cruz, California, pier as a child, she was briefly separated from her parents and stumbled upon an eerie funhouse — and her doppelgänger, Red. She hasn't been the same since.

Now, as an adult returning to that same beach on a vacation with her husband, Gabe (Winston Duke), and two children, her fears have returned. Stirred by the memories of that fateful night, Adelaide confesses what she saw to Gabe. "My whole life I feel like she's still coming for me," she reveals. A disbelieving Gabe cracks a joke, but moments later, Red (also Nyong'o) and the counterparts of the entire family descend on the house, determined to claim what they believe is rightfully theirs.

"*Us*" is awash in cultural references and cinematic nods, but perhaps more than anything else, it feels like "*The Twilight Zone*," the classic TV series that Peele is reviving next month on *CBS All Access*. In creating Adelaide and Red, Peele has reimaged a classic character and trope found in that anthology series: the protagonist forced to reckon with another version of him or herself, and the desperate need to be someone else.

The twisted path that connects "*The Twilight Zone*" to "*Us*" leads most readily to the Season 1 episode "Mirror Image," which Peele has cited as an inspiration for his film. In it, Millicent Barnes (Vera Miles) waits at a bus station, and realises she has crossed paths with her doppelgänger. Only she can see the curious figure; no one else at the depot believes Millicent's claim, and she slowly begins to unravel.

Millicent explains to Paul, a man waiting for the same bus, that there must be a parallel universe and each person has a counterpart. For unknown reasons, the two worlds can converge, allowing the counterparts to enter our realm. "In order to survive," she continues, "it has to take over — replace us, move us out, so that it can live."

The doppelgängers in "*Us*" aren't explicitly described as coming from parallel universes, but Red calls her connection to Adelaide a "tethering," an unshakable bond — and the movie makes it clear that once the two meet for the second time, as adults, they cannot coexist peacefully.

A version of this conflict between selves plays out heavily across many other "*Twilight Zone*" episodes. Season 5's "Spur of the Moment," for instance, follows Anne, an 18-year-old engaged to a stuffy but father-approved investment banker, who encounters an older woman in black while horseback riding. By the end of the

this country's 14 per cent Muslims and, then, a massive landslide in Uttar Pradesh — where almost 20 per cent of the voters are Muslim — without fielding a single Muslim.

So successful has this strategy been that today the Congress is even shy of contesting the BJP on this mass exclusion for fear of being called a "Muslim Party".

Seeing an ideological breach there, there is no surprise that Mr Modi would try to widen it. That is why: Pakistanis and terrorists want me defeated. So does the opposition. And what's their most solid vote-bank but the Muslims? So, repeat after me, terrorists, Pakistan, Muslims. And again. If the Muslims won't vote for me, good luck to them. The Hindus will unite against them.

It won't work if I build this campaign directly against fellow Indian Muslims. So, the danger has to be from the Muslim alien — the Pakistani and "pro-Pakistani" Kashmiris in the heartland and the west; Bangladeshis in the east.

Mr Modi is not unique in this approach. In democracies across the world now, beginning with Donald Trump, mass leaders are learning to talk only to their base, make fear the rest, and marginalise them.

From Mr Trump to Mr Erdogan to Mr Netanyahu to Mr Modi, they also use some combination of the same elements to build a fear-complex among their majorities, as if they were in fact the minority in their own country. Check out Mr Trump and Mr Modi: There is an enemy outside the borders (illegal immigrants for Mr Trump), there is a bigger enemy within — the Left-liberals, minorities, opposition and the free media, the "compulsive contrarians", I came from nowhere to challenge the entrenched, entitled classes. What the Washington Beltway is for Mr Trump is Lutyns for Mr Modi. I am the first truly smart choice you've ever made, everybody before me was an idiot. History begins with me. But you've seen nothin' yet. Give me just one more term. You can laugh at this. But it won't help you defeat Mr Modi because his sizeable base loves it.

Where does it leave the opposition? If Mr Modi can keep his own base together, and the rest divided, he is home easily. The Congress cannot fight him on corruption, given its own reputation, and national security, where Mr Modi's rhetoric is unmatched and fortified by the recent strikes. Every time an acknowledged Modi critic questions his claims on the strikes, it will make it tougher for the Congress to even join the debate. Mr Modi has, therefore, got two things right early on. A divided opposition, and a battle set up on his terms.

With its minimum basic income, or the NYAY move, the Congress has at last demonstrated a resolve to shift the battlefield. Its promise of ₹6,000 per month is more than Mr Modi's ₹500 to small farmers. Further, it is traditionally seen to be a more welfareist party, just as the BJP is seen to be more nationalist. There is much joblessness and farming distress, and far too many people are unhappy for this not to find some traction.

The question is: Does the Congress have the reach, skill, resources and time to force Mr Modi to respond to this issue instead of what he would prefer? Even if it does, it has no roots left where most of India's poorest live: West Bengal, Odisha, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But NYAY has an interesting ring to it as a political idea. There might still be a few days left for it to stitch up some alliances and give Mr Modi a real fight instead of a walkover.

By Special Arrangement with ThePrint

EU needs to do more than ban plastic forks



LEONID BERSHIDSKY

wash up on European beaches, as well as on plastic fishing gear, another large source of the marine pollution that the European Commission estimates costs the bloc's economy up to €695 million (\$780 million) a year in damages to tourism and fisheries.

Banning plastic forks, straws and those pesky balloon sticks by 2021 and making sure plastic caps remain attached to bottles after opening is, however, hardly a big step forward. The plastics industry, which lobbied intensively to water down the legislation, still isn't happy about "extended producer requirements" for the makers of food containers, beverage cups and bottles, cigarette filters, wet wipes, plastic bags and fishing nets. These companies will need to cover clean-up and recycling costs. But member states must implement the programs. That makes the approach inefficient, especially in newer EU members, which have weaker institutions.

The EU is better than most places at recycling plastic waste. The recycling rate has passed 40 per cent. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's latest comparative data are for 2014, when Europe recycled about 30 per cent of its plastic waste, three times the US level.

Japan and Australia, not to mention

emerging economies, are also far behind. But Europe produces so much plastic waste that it is collectively the biggest exporter, despite the high recycling rate. Restrictions by China, which used to be the world's biggest plastic dump, have drastically reduced EU exports. Europe was forced to cut the outbound shipping of waste, but for the most part, it merely replaced China with other receiving countries, Malaysia, Vietnam and Turkey chief among them.

It's not as if these countries have built up their recycling capacity overnight.

In Vietnam, only 10 per cent of locally produced plastic waste is collected. A significant amount of the import goes to so-called "craft villages," where the plastics are processed informally on a small scale, and the unused waste — up to 30 per cent — is burned or dumped in rivers. No wonder Vietnam, along with some other Asian economies, started restricting the import of some plastic waste last year.

As a European resident, it's easy to feel good about garbage collection and recycling practices. In Germany, we have the highest recycling rate in the world, 56 per cent, and sorting trash correctly is almost an instinct. But the exports and what happens to them ruin that feel-

good story for me. They should ruin it, too, for EU-level and national regulators. Clean, green Europe is really a major polluter of countries it used to colonise.

A truly principled European plastics policy should go much further than the legislation approved by the European Parliament. There's no reason not to set EU-wide dates for the phase-out of all single-use plastic items except biodegradable or fully recyclable ones. Outlawing coffee stirrers but not plastic bags is illogical.

Demanding that producers pay to raise awareness of the environmental damage of their plastic products, as the new rules do, is a convoluted way of solving a problem that most European consumers already acknowledge. The focus should be on convenient alternatives to plastic packaging for the products purchased at the supermarket — and any choice at all when ordering online.

Demanding more from producers should go hand in hand with export and land-filling restrictions on plastic waste. Without them, a phaseout will take too long. I'm happy to sip my cocktails without a straw, or with a paper one, but at this point, there's not much to raise a glass to.

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