



A plant waits for its patrons

T. SAMPATH KUMAR

As Delhi residents for the past 34 years, my wife and I know that finding curry leaves is a big challenge in the city. For south Indians like us, curry leaves (*Murraya koenigii*) are an integral part of our dishes such as *upma*, *sambar* and *rasam*.

Compared with those in the north, we use significantly higher quantities of the green leaves. But these are not available in all vegetable markets of Delhi, and one needs to go to larger markets away from residential areas. Recently, flower sellers at temples frequented by south Indian devotees have started stocking them.

Fifteen years ago, we bought a sapling of curry leaves and began raising it in our balcony to meet the needs of our nuclear family. We bought a large cement tank with a long-term plan as this plant is a perennial variety and could become a tree over time. My wife was taking extra care by adding vermicompost and bio-mulching to save it in Delhi's hot summer. The plant has grown well and has been meeting our family's needs. The news spread in our housing society in Dwarka, and a few families started asking for the leaves. My wife gives them away with a smile.

After I retired from my job of 33 years in Delhi, we have to frequently travel now. Maintaining 50 pots of various plants in the three balconies of our apartment has thus become challenging. My wife is emotionally connected with the plants, and she has raised seasonal flowering varieties and a good collection of profusely growing money plants. We do grow vegetables as our hobby. Every morning, she walks straight into these balconies and look at the plants with care and affection. Hence, we had to evolve a pragmatic strategy to manage them when we are away.

Plant guardians

As my wife maintains strong social relationships in the housing society, she could allot 10 pots each to five families to take care of them during our absence. It helped that two of the families live on the ground floor with an adjacent open lawn.

This made our task relatively easier as our travels range from one to two months. Once back in Delhi, we shift them back to our balconies. Since the curry-leaf pot was large and heavy (about 160 kg of soil and the weight of the cement tank), shifting it frequently was not easy. We used to leave the plant to its fate with a heavy heart. Fortunately, the plant has survived and remained our perennial source for curry leaves.

A time has come for us last year when we had to lock our apartment for more than four months to live in our home town near Hyderabad. Following our standard operating procedure, we moved the plants to pre-designated families. We both looked at the curry leaf plant and fondly touched the leaves. My wife's eyes became moist and with a heavy heart, we threw our last glimpses at the fondly grown plant. We left Delhi in the third week of December 2018 and returned only in the last week of April 2019, after 130 days.

Once the main door was opened, my wife ran inside and opened the door to the balcony. And lo, the plant was alive, though a few leaves at the top began wilting. Leaves on the lower side were still green and fresh! My wife took a second run to the tap, bought a bucket of water and irrigated the thirsty soil and plant.

We thought the plant would die by the time we return, as there was a prolonged water stress. It survived to our surprise. We have now decided that though it is challenging, we will move the large pot to the ground and transplant the plant in our society's compound where the gardener will take care of it. Let it grow from plant to tree and meet the needs of all residents of the housing society.

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What we the people want

With the election results out, let us not instigate disruption, tolerate corruption or foment trouble; let the losers work in tandem to better India's 'being'

JACQUELINE COLAGO

We are masters at this game, aren't we, what with reports that the garbage in Delhi is piled vertically will equal the height of the Qutb Minar! Bengaluru won't be less worse, I assure you, but I am not sure which is the tallest building in the city's skyline to use as a measure: UB City or Utility Building. Well, let us not "chuck muck" at those, or a new saga will start because of their famous names. We have enough with our local lakes frothing and fuming in anguish at the muck chucked into them...

"Chuck muck" is an expression I have coined to describe what was on in full swing about the election that just got over! Consider the Rafale deal, for example! Did Rahul Gandhi meet French Prime Minister Francois Hollande on the sly to seal an international conspiracy instigated by his brother-in-law, Robert Vadra, or by Pakistan or whoever. Or did the Narendra Modi hug sway the HAL out of Hollande's favour and enable him to place his partner into the arms of the Ambani clan. Hollande spills some beans and apparently, they are from a can full of worms.

Endless arguments

Then onward, the chain of "I did, you did" begins. "Aided and abetted by an assault from Dassault," says one side. "What nonsense," rebuts the other party. Oh! So complicated for a common citizen like me to comprehend, who is convinced through media reports that these jets are required post haste for the nation's security.

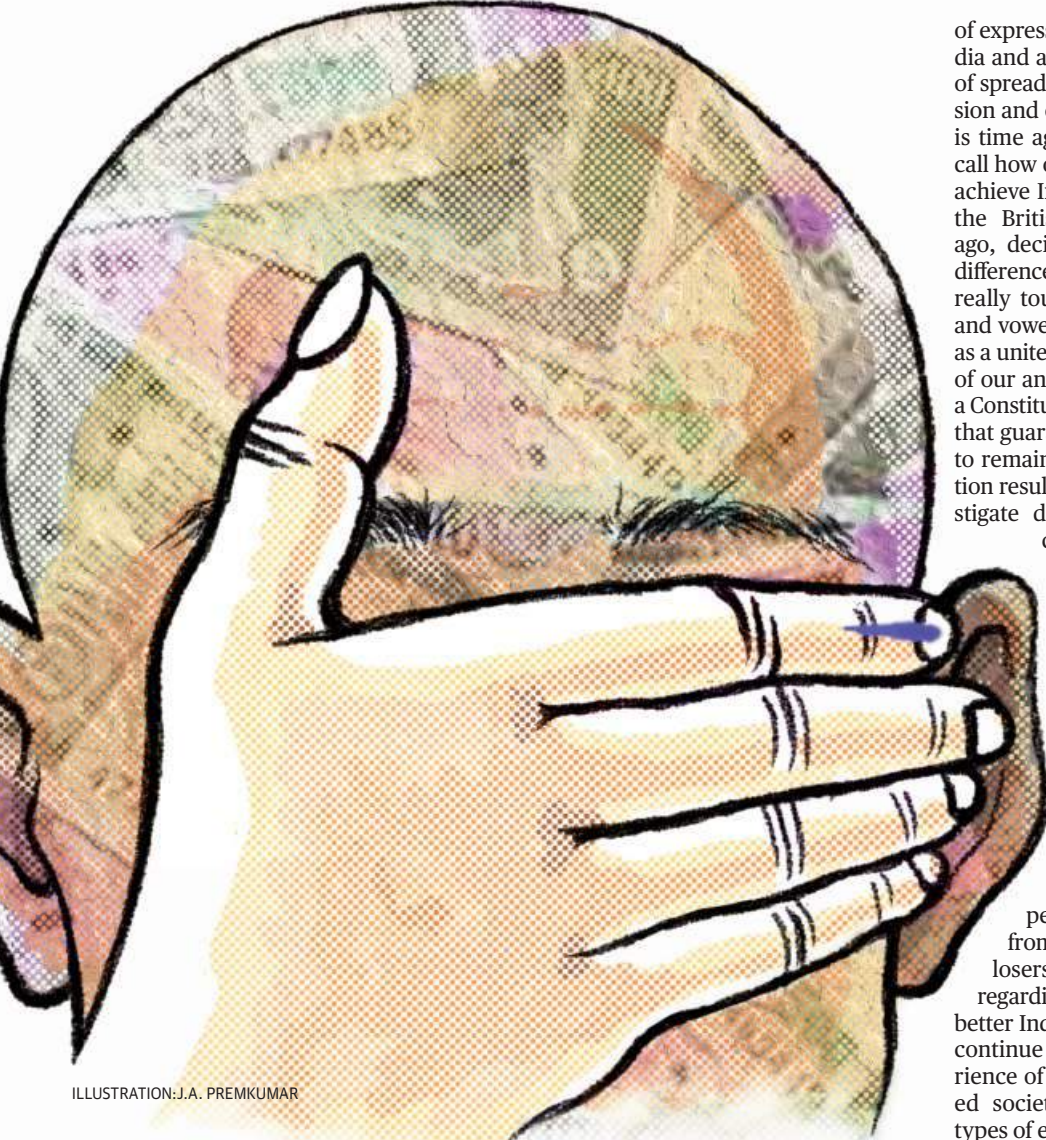


ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

However, perennial dithering dampens my confidence, as this "chuck muck" persists between government and Opposition, leaving us in limbo without clarification or conclusion. Endless pettiness with the usual slanging matches about who is gaining, with no meaningful dialogue nor substantive evidence to back claims to be placed before the public, nor a shred of regard for us the 1.2 billion citizens whose security was purportedly to benefit when Rafale jets would be induct-

ed by the IAF? Adding fuel to the fire are the Pulwama and Balakot bickering...

Isn't it also a "chuck muck" let-down, when a hundred crore (?) residents in India, charged as being of dubious distinction are branded as termites? What a thoughtless and hurtful comment coming off the cuff of a senior leader of the ruling party, again with no proven statistics! If I delve further since the Lok Sabha 2019 election campaigning began, I can unravel so many loose exchanges between our pol-

itical parties that are undignified, insulting, demeaning and downright disturbing. They even attack the dead! They emphasise topics far removed from what 'we the people' require. What became of development and corruption elimination, bringing black money to book and perpetrators of scams to trial? To bettering the lives of the poor in education, health and better hygiene? To make women feel safer and embrace them in larger numbers into politics? To appreciating the freedom

of expression of those in media and allied fields, instead of spreading fear of suppression and even elimination. It is time again to proudly recall how our then leaders, to achieve Independence from the British seven decades ago, decided to rise above differences when times were really tough and unsettled, and vowed to live peacefully as a united India irrespective of our ancestry, introducing a Constitution par excellence that guarantees us this right to remain so. With the election results out, let us not instigate disruption, tolerate corruption or foment trouble...

The economy shows how we have not received so much of what was promised to us by the winning party during these five years. I hope they've learned their lesson that 'we the people' expect better from them and may the losers work in tandem regarding policies that will better India's "being"! Let us continue to enjoy the experience of sharing an inherited society mixed with all types of everyone emanating from our country's historical background.

"The joy of giving" starts by participating in programmes that chuck out the muck from within our hearts, minds and souls and involve *swacchh* for which plenty of Yojanas are created.

The change we want will emerge if from top to bottom, leaders to citizens, really do want this country to enjoy *acchhe din* - and I do not mean "din" as in "noise"!

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Fun in 50 km, framed by the bus window

Watching the world from a bus is an enriching experience, not to mention the buzz aboard

POOJA HARISH

Travelling by bus has led to many (mis)adventures for me. Using public transport was alien to me until I discovered I had to travel more than 50 km to and from college every week. The trial trip my dad and I made found me nodding off when it was time to get off, wandering on the wrong side of the road and losing track of the stops we had passed. Two months in, however, I was happy as a hamster in its hollow.

The buzz of life on a bus is exhilarating: children huddling together amid towering adults, like ducklings in the reeds; the elderly hoisting themselves up stoically on knees crooked at a permanent angle; the conductor

wading effortlessly through a honeycomb of humanity.

Politeness is normally hard to come by on a bus. Thankfully, I have only ever met polite conductors who gently reprimand some passengers as if they were family members: "How am I to exchange two hundred rupees for you, *amma*, have you no consideration?" "Don't plonk that mammoth bag on the steps, scooch over here." "Hey, you youngsters, to the back of the bus, now!" I am in awe of the way they tuck cheroots of currency notes between their fingers, unrolling them like Chinese fans while handing them to passengers.

Once a couple of women whipped up a quarrel. The squabble resonated in raucous ripples through almost



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

all the other women in the ladies' section, barring me and another girl who were exchanging bemused glances. The conductor and the driver could not conceal their amazement at the ease of vocal aggression that was resurfacing right before their eyes.

They actually begged the women to alight at the next stop before the bus turned into a Roman arena.

Another time I missed three transits while running alongside, with my luggage, on a 1,500-metre stretch between two bus stops. I made a

spectacle of myself: bag jiggling off my shoulder, my face convulsing with dismay each time a bus passed. It was a good 45 minutes before I flagged down a fourth bus and notified my father, who scolded me soundly. Watching the world from a bus window is one of the most peaceful and enriching experiences I have ever had. Gentle scenes of naughty affection that reach me from the roadside, much like little jets of water, lighten my peephole consciousness. The excellent playlist choices of some co-travellers regale me as if I was with a troupe of caravaners. The dust and derangement of travel makes me feel more human than a psychology textbook could.

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A beautiful mind

PALASH SENGUPTA

Haran Da had retired by then. He was a bachelor. Every day on our way to school and back, we saw him sitting in the balcony of his single-storey ancestral house in front of a chess board spread on a small table and play chess with himself.

Sometimes he hurried through the moves, but most of the time he would just sit motionless and ponder and smoke, and if it were not for the smoke curling out of his two nostrils at regular intervals, we would have thought he was cat-napping. And then without warning, he would lift his hand, slowly and deliberately caress the head of a Queen or a Horse, take it off the board, circle it twice in air and then thump it down on the desired box with a satisfied smile. This went on for hours. After doing with fondling a white piece, he took to fondling a black one.

Solitary play

We never saw anyone taking the seat on the other side of the table. Many times I thought to go up to him and ask who the winner was. Whether it was black or white that won most games? Was he cent per cent neutral or had he a favourite to whom he always would clandestinely reveal the other's machinations? And if not, if indeed he was impartial, then how was it possible for him to plan his moves for one army and then start counter-planning in favour of the other without ever disclosing the secrets of his hidden intentions to either? Was it at all possible for anyone to function in a manner that one section of his brain will wilfully refuse to know what the other section is thinking of? I also wanted to know what his feelings were in the end since both the victor and the vanquished were his slice only. He was renowned for his fiery temperament. So I did not dare to approach him.

Haran Da had long since stopped playing chess with himself. His chess-table, chess board, his small cane chair and the ashtray are gone with the wind. His one-storey house is now an evening club where young men play carom and cards. But today I know what it is to be both the 'sieger' and the 'sieged' at the same time; to be the speaker and the counter-speaker in one; to identify with a group and fight for it tooth and nail and then quickly cross over to the opposing camp and take on arms. Nothing is impossible for the human mind to achieve. It's only a matter of perspective. The world is still full with people like Haran Da and that astonished school-going child.

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The colonel and the 'film extra': how a toddler broke the ice

The friendly three-year-old quickly made the World War veteran a willing accomplice to his young charm

S.G. VOMBATKERE

Casually observing the interesting doings of a small boy the other day brought back memories of five decades ago in 1969, when my son Shivoo was little. At the age of three-plus, as most children are, he was very friendly, very inquisitive, and quite without inhibition. Also like many other children, he took every opportunity to share his knowledge, such as it was, with anybody and everybody.

It was when I was a newly promoted Major posted in my regimental centre, that Shivoo first met the Commandant at a swimming competition finals which I had organised. The Colonel was a Second World War veteran and an acclaimed professional soldier. He had an equable and genial nature

and was loved, respected and admired by all, but he was also a disciplinarian with whom one did not dare take liberties.

My wife, Asha, was seated next to the Commandant in the front row, and was having a difficult time keeping an eye on Shivoo who, by nature, would not keep still for a moment, and at the same time trying to engage the Colonel in conversation.

A genuine doubt

Suddenly, when Asha succeeded in trapping Shivoo on his return from one of his short forays, his clear voice rose during a lull in the background hum of conversation among the spectators. Having discovered the fatherly figure seated next to his mother, Shivoo asked his mother, "Who is this uncle?" I was



ILLUSTRATION: SATVIK GADE

horrified when I turned to see Shivoo gently poking the Colonel in his midriff with a tiny finger as he repeated the question. I began to breathe again when the Colonel merely smiled and gently pinched Shivoo's cheek, while my wife explained that the gentleman referred to

was the Commandant.

Shivoo was apparently satisfied with the explanation, though possibly he could not fathom why an "uncle" was being called a "commandant". The butterfly-stroke swimming event was about to begin when Shivoo perhaps decided that he had to

share his new-found knowledge with the assembled officers and ladies. So he stood up between the Colonel and Asha, faced the gathered spectators, and again gently prodding the colonel's midriff, announced loudly in his clear, sweet voice, "He is the commandant. He is the commandant," obviously for the benefit of those who may not have known this gem of freshly acquired knowledge. Liking the sound of what he had said, he repeated it several times for good measure, continuing to gently prod the Colonel with his tiny finger. Once again my heart stopped, expecting the disciplinarian in the Colonel to tick me off. But he laughed out loud, gently pinched Shivoo's cheek again, and called him "film extra", and I started breathing again. I won-

dered who the principal actor was.

The laughter from the assembled officers was drowned by the starting gun and the splash and excitement of the butterfly-stroke swimming race, while Shivoo asked his mother whether butterflies could swim, and the Colonel was spared his further attention.

From that day on, until his untimely demise years later, when Shivoo was a strapping Lieutenant in the Navy, the Colonel always fondly referred to Shivoo as "extra". Few senior officers are made in the mould of this admirable Colonel these days, and I treasure his memory every bit as much as I do the memories of the "extra's" pranks and doings.

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Knowledge is dead, school serves the living

School education is meant to equip students with life skills and make them future-ready

ARADHANA SINGH

Candid conversations on mental health

Mental illness is barely talked about in the country because of the taboo, the 'uneasiness' attached to it

OSHIN MALPANI

Battle against bedbugs

There is a regular fight going on against them, with and without our volition

GADEPALLI SUBRAHMANYAM

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