

Influencing the influencer



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

At a panel discussion organised by a media company I was made to share the stage with a group of new age digital marketers. It included the CEO of possibly India's biggest digital celebrity/influencer, Miss Malini, and a few more.

How do these digital mavens operate? What is their secret sauce?

One of the panelists, a pretty successful blogger/youtuber, explained that she posts three videos every week. And there is a particular day and time for the post to go live. One of the posts is a fun post that is sheer "time pass", the other is something that her followers will find useful. She was from the beauty domain, so the post was often about something related to grooming which would be useful to her followers. She keeps one more which is a sponsored post, that is often paid for by a brand.

Does she post "any" message as long as she gets paid for it? No! She is clear that her followers will get upset with her if she does not curate the content. So she is very careful what she posts, even as a sponsored message. She reaches out to companies when she sees a fit. And only accepts invitations if she feels it would be of interest to her viewers.

Interesting, I thought. Do celebrities who appear in television spots and charge a huge fee go through such a screening process, I wondered.

Intuitively the social media celebrity understood what the father of motivational research, psychology guru Ernest Dichter wrote about in 1966 in his *Harvard Business Review* article "How word of mouth advertising works". Why do consumers talk to friends about a product or a service? Dichter's research showed that there are three broad reasons. The first is what he calls "product involvement": You are so excited about a new product that you can't wait to speak about it to your friends. The second is "self involvement": You want to show off that you are the expert, you have inside information, you see yourself as an innovator. The third is categorised as "other involvement": Here you are genuinely concerned about the other person and want to share the information that will be of use to her/him.

I think in some ways the influencer who was on my panel was reflecting this age-old wisdom on why we spread ideas by "word of mouth". If you are an influencer then you need to know more than your followers. You need to project you have superior knowledge. But you should also be aware that you have to help your followers benefit from your knowledge, without rubbing their nose in the dirt.

The global influencer market is expected to grow anywhere around \$5 billion to \$20 billion; we don't have reliable figures for India and I am not even sure if these numbers are traceable. Given the fact that digital media is expected to grow to 20 per cent of the total media spends of ₹70,000 crore, we could assume that around 10 per cent of that may get deployed in various forms of influencer marketing games.

You may well ask me, "who is an influencer?". The definitions are difficult to come by. By broad consensus an influencer is expected to have upwards of 100,000 followers across various social media platforms of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter etc. There is also the category of nano-influencers who have a smaller footprint but a more stronger following.

Clients are learning the game fast, ably assisted by social media marketing agencies. Not only are they looking at the sheer number of followers but also the level of engagement. The more the engagement, the more genuine the follower-ship is.

The game is played better in the developed countries. For instance, it was reported that Johnson & Johnson, when it unveiled its new natural range of baby products, enlisted the support of 100 influencers who blogged about baby care. For the uninitiated, J&J owns and runs the world's biggest baby care website, BabyCenter. But it went out of its "own media" to reach out to influencers.

Influencer marketing is not restricted to just consumer products. I was recently updated about a pharmaceutical brand that used the power of doctor influencers to spread the word about a new therapy group. Obviously the brand was not mentioned in any of the influencer marketing efforts. I remember car companies sharing their yet to be released television commercial to auto bloggers. But that was in 2005. Now the game has moved to a new level.

On the one hand, there was a complaint from the CMO of a luxury hotel saying that she gets 10 requests a day from "influencers" asking for a free stay. And we saw earlier in the article how a powerful influencer picks and chooses who to promote on her channel. So if you are looking at using the power of influencers don't just look at the numbers. Also look at the quality of the numbers and the "purpose" being served by the influencer to his or her followers.

Remember, the words of the father of motivation research.

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Tricky road ahead

Sikkim's new Chief Minister PS Golay will have to achieve growth without compromising nature



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

The magnitude of the earthquake in Delhi obscured another one, elsewhere in India — in Sikkim. Pawan Kumar Chamling, India's longest serving and most successful chief minister, was dethroned along with his party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF). Chamling first became chief minister in 1994 and stayed in office, ruling with an iron hand and introducing many initiatives with virtually no opposition. The Opposition came in February, 2013, in the form of the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) led by the colourful Prem Singh Tamang — other-

wise known as PS Golay.

Golay has had a chequered past. He was a founding member of the SDF and a member of all but one of the governments Chamling headed. He then quit on the grounds of rising corruption and nepotism in the SDF to form his own party. In 2009, Chamling won all 32 assembly seats in Sikkim but in 2014, he lost 10 seats to the SKM, getting only 22 out of 32. He may have realised that he was approaching endgame because soon after Golay formed his party, he got a visit from the state government's vigilance department — presumably on instruction from Chamling — regarding misappropriation of government funds amounting to ₹9.5 lakh meant for distributing cows to beneficiaries under a state government scheme. This was an investigation dating back to 2010. A chargesheet led to a court case and conviction with a jail sentence and a fine. Despite a corruption conviction, it is a mystery how he was allowed to contest again — and when he came out of jail in 2018, he was given a hero's welcome, normally reserved for political prisoners. His party has a majority of just two seats in the Sikkim assembly.

Sikkim itself has a complicated history and it is sometimes hard to tell the villains from the heroes in India's annexation of Sikkim. The way

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On the job

Bikhchandani tells Anjali Bhargava how an undergraduate education overseas deprives a student of a network at home, a critical input in one's life journey

Observing what's unfolding around you can be rewarding. It was while working as a young executive on the Horlicks brand in erstwhile Hindustan Milkfood Manufacturers (HMM) that Sanjeev Bikhchandani, founder of job portal Naukri.com, noticed two things.

One, the office copy of *Business India*, the magazine with close to 40 pages of appointment advertisements, vanished within minutes of arriving. A journalist in that magazine would have spent hours and days producing articles she hoped readers would pore over, but readers seemed far more interested in job openings, where there were and how they could apply for them.

Second, in the open office environment at Horlicks, he couldn't help but overhear conversations between his colleagues and headhunters all the time. For almost every job that was advertised, there were 10 that were not. Headhunters would call his colleagues and they would have long conversations and sometimes his ears were with them instead of where it ought to be.

That's when the seed that became Naukri.com later was first sowed in his head. At the time, it was only a notion that there was an opportunity here, one he wasn't sure how to make most of. This was the early 1990s and there was no internet to speak of.

Bikhchandani and I are meeting for lunch at India Habitat Center's The Deck. He orders a couscous and lettuce salad and a grilled fish. I order a mushroom soup and a bowl of rice with baby spinach, falafel and feta, one of the best vegetarian options at the recently revamped restaurant. He has a fresh lime and soda while I stick to plain water.

Bikhchandani has been part of the founding team at Ashoka University and holds clear and strong views on the state of higher education in India. I am aware that he has even stronger views on the state of his alma mater, St Columba's and St

Stephen's. He says he doesn't want to discuss these more controversial issues and I try my best to bring them up. After trying in vain, I let him hold forth on the subject he's most comfortable with.

He begins with spending a few minutes on his background and life story. The son of a government doctor, Bikhchandani had a regular middle-class upbringing, growing up in the government colonies of Delhi while studying at St Columba's. Since "good boys study science" and "good boys get into IIT", he took the IIT entrance test — oddly twice — and cleared both the times. But unlike the herd, he paused at some point and questioned whether he actually wanted to be an engineer. "I realised that I wanted to be an IITian but not an engineer," he explains.

It was a blessing in disguise because once he passed out of school, the option of studying economics at St Stephen's opened up before him. He followed this up with an MBA from IIM (A), a decision that has stood him in good stead.

After he finished his MBA and worked with HMM for a little under two years, there was a phase — six/seven years — when he just "drifted". Although married and with a small child, he struck out on his own with a partner and worked on a few small ideas, none of which succeeded. He remembers those days of struggle, staying at his father's house without paying rent, supported partially by his wife who had a good job. But "those days were different, needs and aspirations were much lower", he remembers.

Time passed but the idea of Naukri stayed with him. By 1996, technology seemed to provide an answer. Even in those days internet and email were a new animal to the world (there were only around 14,000 direct email connections in India); but he could see a very real possibility of bridging the gap through a website. Put up a listing of jobs available even if they were just aggregated from

newspaper advertisements. Hopefully, job seekers would approach the site when they are looking for jobs. He roped in two partners on a part-time and stock option basis — one helped with the technology and the other with operations — and by 1997, Naukri.com had got off to a patchy sort of start.

In its early days, Naukri was more like a one-sided listing in which the team simply rewrote newspaper appointment ads and listed them. Soon, job seekers started coming on to the site to look for opportunities. In a while, companies started listing their offers on the site and Naukri started charging to host that information. In the first three years, the operation was bootstrapped. But by the year 2000, the site had acquired a life of its own and the team was able to raise \$1.7 million from ICICI Ventures. And the rest, as they say, is history.

In 2006, the site listed, and the share price doubled in a day. On any given day, the market price was almost 20 times the price at which it listed. After Naukri.com — in which Bikhchandani holds 27 per cent — had reached a certain size and scale, the company launched a whole host of ventures under the Info Edge umbrella including JeevanSathi.com, Shiksha.com, Quadrangle and 99acres. JeevanSathi and 99acres are both known brands in their industry now although 70 per cent of the revenues of the group still come from recruitment.

I interrupt to ask if people take these websites seriously and actually look for jobs through them. I don't know if anyone has landed a job through it.

If he's surprised at my ignorance or affronted by my frankness, he does a good job of hiding it. The site carries an average of 5 lakh job listings on any given day and around 12,000 new resumes are added daily. As many as 80,000 clients hire through the site. Naukri.com, with over 4,000 employ-

the first Dewan of Sikkim, John Lall (ICS), described it, instead of honouring Sikkim's sovereignty and China's feelings, India imported mobs of Nepali-speaking people from Darjeeling and Kalimpong, told the Chogyal (King) that his people had rebelled against him and annexed Sikkim.

Chamling, however, says (possibly because he's a Nepali-speaking native of Sikkim) that the original Lepcha settlers of Sikkim who were subjugated for three centuries by Bhutia tribals from across Tibet perpetuated feudal systems and denied other tribals like Limbus and Tamangs, equal rights. According to Chamling, the rebellion against the Chogyal was actually a revolution that overthrew oppressive Qazi rule and radicalised scores of young men across Sikkim. Once he became chief minister, Chamling realised that he had to create his own constituency. He fought to extend reservations to castes like Limbus and Tamangs among the Nepali-speaking population of the state. In Sikkim, 20 per cent of the population is Bhutia-Lepcha and 40 per cent comprises Other Backward Classes. Limbus, Rais and Tamangs are around 20 per cent of the population. When they were included in the reservation net, they became Chamling's natural constituency. PS Golay is a Tamang. He challenged Chamling on issues of nepotism and corruption, and also administrative inefficiency. The very castes Chamling thought he was empowering turned against him.

Golay's campaign got traction. Sikkim's icon and famous footballer, Bhaichung Bhutia, also floated a party, Hamro Sikkim, ahead of the elections. India heard about

Sikkim's dark side: Corruption, drug addiction and mental illness. The state has just over six lakh people, but unemployment is high. It also has the highest suicide rate — 37.5 per 100,000 people, nearly triple the Indian average. Seven out of 10 teenagers in Sikkim abuse pharmaceutical drugs. One person in every family is involved in substance abuse. Though Hamro Sikkim did not win any seats, the problems it highlighted remain — and are PS Golay's headache now.

Golay (whose election affidavit, among other things, declares he has been married thrice; it mentions no divorces) will have to beat Chamling's record of growth and development. The erstwhile Planning Commission statistics tell us Sikkim recorded the steepest decline in poverty ratio the country has seen: from 30.9 per cent in 2004-05 to 8.2 per cent in 2011-12. You only have to read the 2014 Sikkim Human Development Report produced by a UNDP affiliate to understand the miracle. The HDR 2014 says between 2001 and 2012, Sikkim's net state domestic product grew, on an average, by 17 per cent every year — the highest among all Indian states — surpassing significantly the national average of 10 per cent. Sikkim has said 'no' to 13 hydel projects because they could have threatened the state's ecosystem. The alternative model of development is 'back to nature'. The state uses no chemical fertiliser whatsoever. Its orchids are world famous. The result? A Royal Bengal tiger was sighted in Sikkim in December, 2018, the state's first, and unusual at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet.

Prem Singh Tamang Golay will have to achieve growth without compromising nature.



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

ups. Besides evaluating start-ups, a large chunk of his time now is spent on mentoring start-ups. Often those who are starting out on this journey find him out, seek his advice and that is what he enjoys doing the most.

His involvement with higher education came about later in his life. "When I finished with St Stephen's and left Delhi University, I felt the whole experience could definitely have been better," he explains. Although Stephen's back then was a cut above the rest, he could see the benchmark for excellence at DU was rather low. "Completing the year's syllabus was considered excellent. St Stephen's, LSR and Miranda House were considered excellent as they completed the year's coursework," he adds.

As he started travelling overseas and visiting universities around the world to give talks and take classes, he could see the yawning gap between institutions in the rest of the world and those back home. That's why when the idea of Ashoka came up, he bought into it with Ashish Dhawan, Pramath Sinha, Vineet Gupta and others. "I had earlier dismissed all these misgivings convincing myself that this is not my problem. At some stage, I realised it was as much my problem as it was anybody else's." Bikhchandani — like a hundred others — became one of the founders of the university, contributing both time and money to the effort.

He's convinced India needs a 1,000 more Ashokas, arguing that when Indian students leave India to study abroad at the undergraduate level, they lose their network. "The friendships, the interaction with peers at college and the network it gives you through your life is lost," he explains, arguing that people often don't realise how critical this is. I agree as my college friends remain a more integral part of my life than friendships struck in school or at any other stage.

As we reach the end of our discussion, I enquire about his other interests — what he likes doing when he's not working. He reads, used to write a blog and spends most of his energy mentoring entrepreneurs. His own personal journey with Naukri may have come to an end but the success of every youngster he mentors will, in part, be his own. That's a full-time naukri!

The things we take for granted



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

Some time ago, Hindustan Unilever's #startalittlegood initiative released a short film, *The Shower*. A plush rain shower in a glass cubicle, the sort many of us have or aspire to have in our loos, mysteriously appears in a water-starved village. A farmer is startled when he accidentally turns it on. He drinks to his heart's content. A woman and a bunch of children follow. All of them drink that water. In the time it takes for an average bloke in the city to have a shower, half the village is able to slake their thirst. The yawning disparity in access to water, depicted in the film, moved me immensely. Soon after, I went to

Bhadrak district in Odisha and realised the film didn't even cover half of it. Even the most basic water amenities, people like us used every day, didn't exist there at all.

In Bhadrak, as we toured several villages collecting pre-intervention case studies for the international NGO WaterAid, I was impressed to see new toilets everywhere. Locals said that almost every household in the district had a toilet. The first person we spoke to was Minnati Bhal in Gobindpur village. She'd been relieved when a toilet was built for their physically disabled 11-year-old Smrutimayi. But the little girl remained completely dependent on her mother as the loo was about 100 meters away from their hut with neither piped water nor a paved safe path leading up to it. It originally had a commode but no rails for her to lower herself down on the seat. So Bhal still spends her day ferrying water in buckets from the communal tap. The toilet doesn't have an electricity connection either and we left with the heartbreaking image of the painfully thin mother carrying her painfully thin daughter to the toilet, balancing a torch to show her the way.

Then we met Rangelata Behera (60

who estimated she carried at least 40 buckets of water from the hand pump to the bathroom in her house every day. Her heavily-pregnant daughter-in-law couldn't do it, so the task of fetching water from the pump about 400 meters away, fell on Behera's shoulders alone. Babaji Mahalik (52) and blind since infancy, faces the same problem. "The toilet is there, but without a proper path leading to it and a piped water supply, he continues to be dependent on me for going to the bathroom," says his brother Kirtan Mahalik. In Madhupur, another village in Bhadrak, Bapun Barik a wheelchair user had a similar tale to tell. His father Babaji fetches water from the pond nearby to use in their brand new toilet. "I can't even imagine what it will feel like when water comes to our homes in pipes..." he said.

After a while, the faces and stories blurred, the refrain was the same. While toilets had been constructed (in a tearing hurry, many locals reported), not having piped water in them was a huge inconvenience. Later that evening, the faces of the people I'd met kept coming back to me. For people like them were still enslaved by the lack of the very amenities that people like us have taken for granted all our lives.

A summer invitation



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

I don't like being invited out in the summer, not for neighbourhood potlucks, casual get-togethers or dinner parties. When heatwave conditions — such as now — prevail, the walls radiate heat. You can spend an entire evening looking for the iciest spot to occupy, but you know it'll be pinched the moment you head for a refill to the bar. (In our home, the coolest spot is where the dog parks himself, and you dislodge him at your own risk). Since air-conditioning loads in homes are concentrated in the public areas, any walk through the house (to the library, for instance, or to use the washroom), implies a sauna-like tryst. If talking

about the heat isn't bad enough, experiencing it is worse.

But experience it you must, however briefly. In the dash from your house to the car, and again when you find a parking spot that's a jog away from your host's home. That's all the time it takes to burst into a sweat that no amount of deodorant can erase — making all that social kissing and hugging a smelly affair. With many female guests dressing up for Instagram, it's difficult to overlook their smudged mascaras, runny eyeliners and spottily lipstick lips. The more A-listers invited, the more you're likely to question the suitability of their proximity to you. Do you really want the hors d'oeuvres you saw your hostess assembling just a moment after she'd wiped the honest sweat off her shapely brow?

If airconditioned salons are far from ideal, can you imagine what it's like in the kitchen? Especially given the extra sautéing and grilling? Can you conceive your food is untainted of perspiration? What you don't see may not harm you, but if, like me, you have a hyperactive imagination, then, well, perhaps the solution lies in remaining hungry. "I'm on a detox diet," I've explained to my hosts on several occasions — but damn if the dinner doesn't look tempting. Fortunately, I have a strong will power, and a stronger belief

that alcohol kills germs, which comes in handy when you see the bartender handling the ice with his fingers.

It isn't just home parties that run such risks. Poolside parties might sound refreshing and summery but they're as gross. Hotel banquets are never free of stale smells — and not just on account of the food. The larger the party, the more time your pre-plated food is likely to have been exposed to the sweltering heat. Trendy restaurants have just one problem — they have terribly tiny kitchens unsuitable for hand plating — ugh!

Rashtrapati Bhawan may have hygiene standards that are a benchmark for the rest of the hoi polloi, but you had to feel sorry for the august assembly of guests who braved the temperature for a seat at the new cabinet's swearing in. As I write this, I am aware of a less honourable gathering that will collect at home this evening. I can guarantee that neither guests nor hosts are looking forward to the occasion. The kitchen is a mess. Airconditioning engineers have been tasked with cranking up the cooling. The denizens of the house have been snapping at each other. The cook is in a mood. I haven't been able to come up with an excuse to recuse myself from the melee. But I promise to remain on a detox diet.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

A cold shower

The buzz in presumably well-informed circles in the capital has been that Narendra Modi's second term in office will be different from the first. Having used the last five years to consolidate his and the Bharatiya Janata Party's political power, it is said that Mr Modi will now focus on the economy, and further that he is willing to front-load action in a way that he was not willing to do five years ago. Certainly, the economy needs fresh momentum, with quarterly economic growth dropping below 6 per cent, and hitting a five-year low. Growth for the full year is not very different from where the Modi government began. Readers might recall that the initial promise held out was of achieving double-digit growth. That being far removed from today's reality, India has also lost the claim to being the fastest-growing large economy; China is back ahead. That is a cold shower if ever there was one.

As I had written in these columns two weeks ago, this is a multi-faceted challenge, with problems confronting agriculture, manufacturing and exports, as well as fiscal and monetary policy — for both of which the room for manoeuvre is very limited. The larger narrative could be that the growth momentum generated by the first flush of reforms has petered out in the course of 15 years of relative inaction. A fresh wind is now required. Is the government up to the task?

Change will have to begin with Mr Modi, who, by all accounts, has shown little active interest in macro-economic issues, preferring instead to focus on the effective implementation of projects and programmes (to good effect, of course, as the election results show). It is obvious that this neglect cannot continue. The prime minister has to address himself to understanding the key policy levers that are available to him, including (for instance) the government's stance on the rupee's external value and how it can be nudged down in order to make Indian exports more competitive. As a starting point, the belief in a strong rupee has to be given up.

Growth is hard to come by in an environment in which the overhang of financial mismanagement by banks and companies is still there, when too many businessmen are too busy writing down debt to think of making fresh investments, and when consumers are focused on the EMIs (equated monthly instalments) on their loans. For good measure, governments are sucking up too much of the available savings, preventing market interest rates from falling — affecting current cash flows and future investment. Tax revenue has fallen short this past year, and has to be given a boost; but how is one to do that in the middle of a slowdown?

In short, Nirmala Sitharaman as the new finance minister has her work cut out for her, as does Piyush Goyal, who is the new man in charge of both foreign trade and industry. Both will need to quickly put together their agenda for immediate action, along with medium-term policy goals: To make the use of capital more efficient, the labour market more flexible, and the physical infrastructure such as to be effective support for industry and trade. What is needed is systemic thinking, not ad hoc approaches that focus on quick fixes by impatient ministers eager to hit the headlines.

The finance minister could begin with further rationalising and reducing the number of rates for the goods and services tax. The Reserve Bank should press ahead with further cuts in policy rates. Disinvestment needs to be given a kick-start, with Air India an obvious starting point. But if this is to be a serious plan, the question has to be asked: Where are the buyers? Should the window for foreign buyers be opened wider, in this and other sectors?

And then, what about the underlying issues confronting agriculture, the water economy, and the business of improving the quality of education? All three issues are in the hands of new inductees into the Council of Ministers, and a key question will be how well they perform. As someone used to say, the nation wants to know.

Sushma Swaraj, a self-made success in patriarchal party

Sushma wasn't a typical BJP '*mahila*'. In her dignified departure, the BJP will miss an Indian woman politician with many enviable firsts

There was both a buzz and a hush in the front rows at Rashtrapati Bhawan as Sushma Swaraj walked in to sit in the front row with the most distinguished visitors, not head for the imposing platform where the new ministers were seated for the swearing-in. In her large fan club there was still a hope. Surely, Narendra Modi couldn't afford to go into his second term without his most popular minister.

Her health challenges are no secret. She, in fact, broke an old taboo in Indian public life by revealing — on Twitter — that she was undergoing a kidney transplant. She had handled her recovery very well.

On a new kidney, her immune system still getting used to it, she took on the Pakistanis at the UN, held meetings with her counterparts from across the world, and presented a picture of incredible poise and dignity. Never did a loose word or expression escape her lips, never a shot fired in anger or exasperation.

She made it her instrument to build an entirely new kind of diplomacy, reaching out to her compatriots across the world. Her rivals and sceptics did snigger that with Mr Modi running all of foreign policy, all she was left with was to resolve passport-visa-immigration issues on Twitter. If there were times when this bordered on being the overseas Indian's agony aunt, she didn't mind it.

In the Modi cabinet, no minister had a really great deal. Hers was a particularly tough one. The prime minister got much global limelight and glory, and she ungrudgingly made way for him. She, never short on charm, repartee and media adulation, had the old political smarts to read this writing on the wall. She stepped back, into a back-room role, and never uttered a word about him other than praise.

Having known her since 1977, the year we both started our careers in the same small city of Chandigarh, she in politics as the youngest cabinet minister in Devi Lal's Janata Party government at just 25, and I as a city reporter with the *Indian Express*, I know her to possess more fortitude and self-respect than most politicians. I am still not quite sure how she would have absorbed the new turn in her 42-year political career where she received applause as a visitor while her party's third government took oath. Particularly when her successor was S Jaishankar,

who had served under her for his entire tenure as foreign secretary (2015-18) and as ambassador to the US before that.

Maybe she would have drawn on her phenomenal inner strength and taken it philosophically. She also knew that this 'turn' wasn't merely a turn, but probably the conclusion of her remarkable political journey.

Although she was born in an RSS family in Ambala — her father was a prominent RSS functionary — she was first noticed as a defiant young lawyer for George Fernandes when he was arrested in the Baroda Dynamite Case during the Emergency.

Since Fernandes was a socialist, and as was Sushma Swaraj, the fellow lawyer she married in the thick of their anti-Emergency activism, she somehow acquired the aura of a fellow traveller. But she will remind you that her essential beliefs were of the RSS and the rest was just some popular misconception by socialist association. In 1977, as the Emergency ended and Indira Gandhi's Congress was routed, and she became Haryana's minister for labour and employment at 25, and was seen as a rising

Janata Party star and Fernandes protégé, not an RSS/Jan Sangh native.

Quite remarkably, especially for a self-made woman in Indian politics of the 1970s, she became president of the Janata Party in Haryana at 27. But once the Janata broke up later in 1979, she gravitated formally towards the breakaway Jan Sangh group. Her rise from thereon, as a self-made non-dynast, was phenomenal.

She did much to convince us that she had bought into the BJP's conservatism, from banishing the dancing Ajanta Apsara from national calendars, to banning *FTV*, railing against condom ads for "obscenity", protesting against the "*Sexy Radha*" song from *Student of the Year*, the explicit scenes of lesbian love between Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das playing sisters-in-law "Radha" and "Sita" in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, and more recently her views on surrogacy and her description of a rape victim as "*zinda laash*" (a living

corpse). But, that won't make her your usual, regressive BJP conservative.

There are a dozen aspects of her life and track record that tell you she is different. She led a very middle class, mainstream life, made her own personal choices when few in that milieu would, and relentlessly pushed at her party's glass ceiling, reinforced through generations of patriarchy, not in the least because its parent, the RSS, is all-male in its hierarchy.

She wasn't afraid to speak out when the most abhorrent form of Hindu conservatism erupted in Mangalore and young women were being pulled out of bars and thrashed for "immorality". She spoke out for freedom of choice and safety as a modern, independent woman and the mother of a young woman. Some in her party frowned, but she was letting her rapidly growing fan club know that she was different.

Sushma had made it known well in time that she was opting out when she announced she wasn't going to contest this year. As one who fought 11 direct elections for states and Parliament, she would never avoid a good fight, especially at an age so young — just 66 now. But health had been her challenge, a consequence of early diabetes. Her departure, therefore, was planned and dignified. The only thing I might have suggested was a formal statement at some earlier stage that she was not going to join the new cabinet.

That said, even her adversaries would acknowledge that she completes her career as a winner, and a party faithful. She was an Advani acolyte but, after the 2009 rout, when he was refusing to make way for the new generation, she unhesitatingly joined the party's good "gang of four" (with Venkaiah Naidu, Ananth Kumar and Arun Jaitley) to call on RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat to intervene and choose a young party president. That brought in Nitin Gadkari.

This, despite the worst-kept secret in national politics about her rivalry with Mr Jaitley. For the party's sake, they made common cause. There were times during these past five years she may have felt slighted, overlooked or passed over by the PMO. But, those with their ear to the Lutyens ground did not miss the significance when Mr Modi chose her over Mr Jaitley to stand in for him while he was overseas and his usual number two, Rajnath Singh, was in China. He asked her to be in Delhi rather than on her pre-planned visit to Dubai.

This was acknowledgement of the trust he had in her judgement as well as loyalty. It was also the peak of her political career. You could always debate what would have happened if the BJP/RSS had chosen her as that young leader of the future after Mr Advani. She is, after all, younger than Mr Modi. What kind of BJP would she have had then? Probably not as ideologically conservative as what we have now. And unlikely to be as

cohesive and united either. It's a good discussion but academic. In politics as in cricket, every star cannot end up as a Kapil Dev or a Sachin Tendulkar. Somebody will have to play the Rahul Dravid too, indispensable but denied the fullest fame and power. That's a fair description for Sushma Swaraj, the leader, if you'd forgive me this bit of pop sociology.

By Special Arrangement with ThePrint

Confessions of a 'Khan Market gang' member



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

If certification were needed, I have been part of the "Khan Market gang" for as long as I can remember. Never a fully paid-up member because I did not live in the vicinity but by virtue of kinship and close friendships a longstanding habitué since the 1960s.

Narendra Modi's denunciation of the Lutyens elite is another classist label on a par with Rahul Gandhi's insult of "*suit boot ki sarkar*". BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav, however, elaborates further. The thundering triumph of the election result, he writes, "has completed the rejection and decimation ... of the 'Khan Market cacophony' ... of pseudo-secular/liberal cartels that held a disproportionate sway and stranglehold over the intellectual and policy establishment of the country".

As definitions go, Mr Madhav's is reduc-

tive, superficial and without context. As a post-Partition refugee market — family-run shops below, poky flats above — it was principally the domain of Jan Sanghis, though Congress politicians such as I K Gujral and Jag Pravesh Chandra also had flats there. Its chief clientele was junior or mid-level bureaucrats who occupied the neighbouring housing estates of Shaan Nagar and Maan Nagar (now Bharti Nagar and Rabindra Nagar, respectively).

My uncle, an Information Service officer, lived in Bharti Nagar for decades. Downstairs was the patrician H D Shourie, father of Arun Shourie; his daughter, Nalini Singh, was married from that low-key home. Many of my school friends, sons of resolutely middle class officials, lived there. An elderly relative, a formidable Lahore matriarch, let out her two Khan Market shops facing Sujana Singh Park to a sharp-tongued *halwai* and carried on a noisy running feud over rent.

Over the years, mid-career civil servants *en poste* in the capital, such as Bhaskar Ghose, Arundhati Ghose, Aftab Seth, Ashok Jaitly and his wife, Jaya Jaitley, to name just a few, lived in adjacent *sarkari* housing. Nandini Mehta, the journalist and publishing editor, whose father was a high-ranking ex-ICS officer (and therefore occupied bungalows in Lodi Gardens and Lodi Estate), wrote a telling memoir of Khan Market in 2006: "It's an interesting exercise to try and recall what was NOT available in Khan Market ...

there were no readymade women's clothes, no bread except sliced white, no sneakers except smelly white or brown canvas keds, no cosmetics except talcum powder, kajal, and what was known as 'vanishing' or 'cold' cream. You couldn't buy a cup of coffee there — and you never saw a foreigner either (the diplomats shopped in CP)."

When Ms Mehta's brother and she sneakily bought a copy of James Thurber's harmless humour titled *Is Sex Necessary?* at Bahrisons booksellers, Mr Bahri rang up their mother and said, "I want to warn you, your children are reading very unsuitable books." Thankfully Bahrisons still exists and I recall amiably chatting with fellow browsers such as L K Advani and Romila Thapar in later years. Like any commercial hub, Khan Market never subscribed to political or ideological divisions.

On freezing winter evenings my cousins and I would pool our meagre weekly allowance to splurge on bowls of canned tomato soup and greasy hamburgers in dingy Alfina restaurant. It was the only one. There was one printing shop, The Services Press, one children's clothing store called Chun Mun, and next door, our GP Dr (Miss) Gilani's clinic. The only posh establishment, among small time shops purveying modest merchandise, was Empire Stores, with provisions that ranged from "ham to boxes of toilet paper (it came in shiny rectangular sheets) to liquor".

In the high noon of Indira Gandhi's "quota raj" of the 1970s, key beneficiaries of grace-

and-favour housing near Khan Market were my peers and colleagues in the media. The list is too long but to mention some names: Nikhil Chakravarty, Raghu Rai, Amita Malik, H K Dua *et al.* At times it seemed that senior members of the news bureaus of the main dailies all lived in subsidised flats. By the 1990s this form of largesse began to wane; they were turfed out, the vacancies allotted to droves of more officials.

Mr Modi and the ruling political elite's disdain of the media is well-established but to condemn Khan Market-goers as an entrenched herd of "pseudo-secular/liberal cartels" would necessarily include a swathe of New Delhi's official establishment who are the neighbourhood's main residents. An IAS officer, member of an informal group of batch mates that regularly met to pick over the election campaign, said the other day: "We're checking out Khan Market's beer bars, one by one."

If Khan Market today — a neon-drenched spectacle of blingy shops and pricey eateries — is what it is, it's not due to the dramatic shift in political dispensations but because free-market India is another country, with its gilt-edged (but guilt-free) high spenders. Shakespeare is worth recalling:

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Or as a WhatsApp message offering cheap credit this week pitifully sums up the new age of Narendra Modi: "*Ab hum sab chaabidaar hain.*" (We are all key-holders to the kitty.)

journeys of inspiring customers — the most famous being the one about the 700-pound man working to drop his extra weight. It is a fascinating portrayal that engages, excites, and entertains, all while showcasing the Nike product being used.

Indian creative and digital agencies seem to be completely missing the mark with using social platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and even Facebook in quite the way they should be used. Most clients don't understand the medium, its apertures or its opportunities. At basics, most creatives even today are shot in horizontal format with 99 per cent art directors not understanding (or appreciating) that the content will eventually be viewed and consumed in a vertical format. Hence needs to be shot vertically. Now, that needs reconditioning of the mind. And adjusting to new realities. Which, to say the least is difficult to do. Similarly, most new social media offers combinations of video, text, pictures, blurbs, emojis, doodles, animations all possible to use concurrently in the same set of Stories. In India we have minimal use of anything but video. Similarly, there are features like 'highlight', 'swipe-up', and 'UTM codes', each designed for greater interactivity and brand-push. Most digital designers are still unfamiliar with all these.

In essence, story-telling is *passé*. Stories in the social space are brand-centric, interactive ways to display, highlight, ask-and-sell, up-sell, pre-sell and sell-out. In India we have a lot of learning ahead.

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If 'Chernobyl' was made by Russians

EYE CULTURE

LEONID BERSHIDSKY

"*Chernobyl*," the *HBO* mini-series that ends on Monday in the US, isn't easy to watch as someone who lived in the Soviet Union in 1986 and who has since visited the Chernobyl exclusion zone. But, like many of my compatriots, I'm watching it — and thinking it should have been made in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus, not by an American entertainment channel.

There are two reasons for this. One is authenticity — despite a valiant attempt at it, the series falls short. But the other, more important reason is that this kind of harsh sermon on the importance of listening to experts and running a government for the people, not for its own sake, should have come from one of the affected countries. Those countries, apparently, haven't learned the lessons well enough to make a movie like this.

The authenticity part will probably be lost not just on Western viewers but also on the younger generation of post-Soviet ones, too. The producers tried hard to re-create the late Soviet material culture, even though it does look as though they found the objects at a flea market — they look 30 years the worse for wear. I know for a fact from several reporting trips that Russian miners don't drink vodka right at the mine, before they wash off the coal dust. And in the late '80s, they didn't require soldiers with assault rifles to keep them in check when a minister addressed them. For that matter, the soldiers in the series appear to hold their weapons US style, butt to the armpit, not Soviet-style, across the chest.

All these inaccuracies, big and small, mitigate the harshness of the movie for viewers with friends and family affected by the disaster. They serve as a filter, a reminder that this is, after all, an American TV series, not a documentary, and that none of the horrible things on the screen are real.

But even with that filter, the tough messages of the series come through loud and clear. For one thing, people are often unprepared for the enormity of something like the Chernobyl disaster; they tend to get confused, and try to fool themselves into thinking that the world isn't actually collapsing around them. That goes both for people on the immediate

scene and for the big bosses saddled with the final responsibility. These are situations when experts should be called in immediately and allowed to make decisions unhindered by political expediency or established chains of command. No amount of heroism and fatalism, powerfully portrayed in the series, is an adequate replacement for expertise.

Of course, coverups and defensiveness in such situations are heinous crimes; the Soviet Union tersely admitted the Chernobyl disaster to the world two days after it took place, and Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev took 18 days before he spoke about it to the nation. By then, much of the area around the power plant had been evacuated, but May Day parades had taken place in nearby cities even though it could have been dangerous for people to be out in the open. By the time he felt free to speak, Gorbachev focused on criticising Western reports blaming the Soviet Union for the disaster. The reports would have been there in any case, but they would have been more accurate had the Soviet Union not tried to conceal the extent of the damage.

Remarkably, some Russian reactions to the series are in that vein, too. It's clear to most Russian viewers, though, that the *HBO* production is not some kind of American propaganda effort.

The question that keeps popping up in my mind is why none of the three ex-Soviet countries most affected by Chernobyl has produced such a powerful re-creation of the 1986 events for the world's edification. It would have made sense for Russia, with its current nuclear leadership, to show that it has learned the lessons.

Yet somehow it was the network that produced "*Game of Thrones*" that found the courage, the money and the considerable skill that went into the making of "*Chernobyl*." Now, the world at large will know the story from this version. That the post-Soviet nations left it to the *HBO* is, of course, not comparable with the original Soviet failure to report openly on the disaster. It is, however, a regrettable sin of omission that in the 33 years that have passed since Chernobyl's Reactor 4 blew up that the post-Soviet world hasn't produced anything as compelling as *HBO*'s flawed but riveting product.

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What Indian brands don't understand



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

One of the most visible trends in 2019 has been that more and more brands are getting 'human' as the circle of trust on social media tightens. In 2018, social media hit a kind of nadir. It was in fact a crisis year ... the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the subsequent Facebook Congressional hearings led to greater demand for improved confidentiality, greater data security, better ethics, and enhanced transparency. Twitter too faced a lot of heat because of the huge number of bots on its platform and was forced to purge millions of fake accounts; as a result, over 60 per cent of users no longer trust social media.

This has forced smart brands globally to focus less on maximising reach, and more on generating transparent, quality engagements that are immersive. As a result, more

than 64 per cent of the top brands in a Hootsuite survey in the US said they have either implemented Instagram Stories into their social strategies or plan to do so in the next 12 months. Similarly, Stories — the vertical, disappearing videos invented by Snapchat are growing 15 times faster than feed-based sharing. The same trend is visible on Facebook. Today over a billion users on social media use Stories as the primary way to share things with friends and family. As social media pivots from text-based platforms to truly mobile networks that enable capturing of in-the-moment experiences, Stories embody that creative pivot.

In India, however, very few brands and their creative partners understand the true meaning or intent of social media Stories. Currently, for Indian digital agencies and most clients, Stories are really, and actually, visual stories seen on a smart-screen as opposed to television ... cheaper, digitally shot, long narrations, mostly with a societal twist, and released first on YouTube. Then viralised on WhatsApp and Twitter. Sometimes promoted on Facebook and Instagram too. So, based on this understanding and interpretation of digital 'stories' the highly controversial HUL Brooke Bond Kumbh Mela film and the Surf Excel Ramzan ad which too generated a maelstrom, were created. Both touted as Stories but actually just long duration videos that told a story. The nuance and the differentiation in the digital ideation and execution is still not

being fully comprehended by content creators and their clients in India. The much acclaimed Gillette ad with the daughters as barbers or the PregaNews ad with the transgender protagonist are in the same mode: good, engaging stories, great creative renditions; but not really Stories as social media actually understands them.

There are brands around the world that have excelled at Stories. J. Crew, the clothing company, for example, created an exclusive pre-sale of its new rose-coloured Jane-in-Pink sunglasses, through a pink-themed photo-shoot which promoted the limited availability of the new range. The sunglasses were a sell-out because of the differentiated handling of the product narration which had curiosity, intrigue, envy, and even a bit of greed built into the communication. Similarly, Airbnb's *Travel Tuesday* series of Stories utilises professional photographs and user-generated content from Instagram to provide users with inspirational travel ideas. However, rather than just display the pictures of beautiful travel destinations around the world, the company transforms each photograph into an interactive quiz. Viewers are asked to identify the specific destination shown in the story through a poll feature. And after the reveal, viewers are prompted to 'swipe up' in order to activate the incorporated link that directs them to the company's website. Nike cleverly weaves Instagram Stories around the lives of not only famous athletes but also shares the