

Lessons from HK



TICKER
MIHIR SHARMA

It has been a fairly crowded fortnight in terms of news, and so some might have missed what, for me, has been the most interesting and perhaps important story of the past fortnight. This is a story that comes neither from India nor from Europe or from America, but from tiny Hong Kong, which has once again taken to the streets to protest interference by Beijing in the self-administering city's affairs.

When I say "interference by Beijing" and "self-administering", I am not being strictly accurate, of course, but that is because normal language cannot quite manage the shades of truth and falsehood that are necessary when dealing with authoritarian regimes. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is technically self-governing, but its parliament and chief executive are not exactly democratically elected. The current chief executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, was picked by an electoral college of 1,200 people that is essentially stacked with pro-Beijing members. A chief executive of Hong Kong cannot be associated with any political party.

Thus what the people of Hong Kong are protesting is the decisions of their own chief executive, which they say are serving Beijing's interests and not their own. In fact, they are protesting one decision in particular: A new extradition law that might allow the government to extradite residents of Hong Kong to mainland China for trial. In the sort of absurdity one expects under such systems, the Hong Kong government's claimed reason for this new law is to ensure that a particular extradition of a murder suspect takes place — but not to the People's Republic of China, but to the Republic of China or Taiwan. To add to the absurdity, Taipei has said that it will not recognise extraditions under the law, in solidarity with Hong Kong's protestors.

Perhaps all such demonstrations are futile. We don't know how strong the pro- and anti-Beijing factions within Hong Kong are, because it has never been allowed to hold a free and fair election. Further, the notion of a single unarmed town challenging the might of the People's Republic is a little absurd. Hong Kong's time is running out, after all. Beijing promised to honour "one country, two systems" for 50 years after it was handed Hong Kong by Britain in 1997. Soon, half that period will be up, and the freedoms of Hong Kong residents — including their freedoms of speech and assembly — are already under threat. Recently, for the first time, uniformed soldiers owing allegiance to Beijing were posted in the city, ostensibly to guard the Hong Kong end of a high-speed train line. Most importantly, the government of Xi Jinping has shown that it believes that Beijing's new strength means that it does not have to respect previously agreed on terms or norms. Given that, one could well say that "one country, two systems" is on its way out in practice even if not on paper.

Yet there is something worth considering about Hong Kong's anger. First, it is a useful reminder of the limits to the popularity of Beijing's systems and controls. At a time when many hitherto democratic countries appear to be degenerating into "managed", illiberal democracies, Hong Kong serves as a reminder that such managed democracies are hardly more popular.

Second, it serves notice to all large countries that they must be careful about sub-nationalism. Hong Kong is a Cantonese city. And yet its evening news is now being broadcast in Mandarin. A majority of primary schools in the city use Mandarin. It's easy to see why this might happen even without political involvement: Mandarin is useful for business with China, and Cantonese itself has long been denied traditional structures of support and derided as only a "spoken" language, without even an official dictionary. But identities that form around language are resilient to political pressure. Again, something that seems relevant to us in India.

Third, it allows one to consider the fact that the acceptance of the Chinese Communist Party's right to rule all Chinese people remains contested. Shorn of all historicist mumbo-jumbo, the "one China" policy means essentially that: It conceals a power grab by Beijing's leaders. The question is how long the rest of the world will pay lip service to such a naked piece of political manipulation. Given that the notion that Taiwan should hold a formal referendum on the question of independence from the mainland is gaining ground, this is not an empty question. At some point, governments might be forced to take a stand to defend Taiwan. For almost five decades, the world has backed Beijing's claims — from India's restraint of Tibetan activists, to Britain's decision to hand Hong Kong back to Beijing. As Xi grows in power, there is no telling how long this forbearance will last.

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PDS and the decline of farming



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
GEETANJALI KRISHNA

I miss them," sighs Rita Devi, gazing into her now empty cowshed. We are in her house in Kandhbari, a sleepy hamlet in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. "There was a time when many people kept cows in the village," she says. Today, most of us find it easier and cheaper to buy milk at ₹25 per litre from a local dairy. She runs the village Anganwadi but spends her mornings in her fields, where her family grows onions, garlic, corn and wheat. "It's a hobby, not a necessity," she says. "Farming gives me something constructive to do when I'm back from the Anganwadi." However, this "hobby" too may not last long.

Under National Food Security Act, 2013, up to 75 per cent of village population can be identified as eligible for food security. Consequently, with wheat being available in the government ration shop for less than ₹6 or less per kilo; rice at ₹8 or less (depending on the household's level of poverty) — it seems to have become cheaper for people like her to buy, than to grow their own food here.

Later, while out on a walk in the village, I realise that many locals have already done the math. Many of the fields look like they've been lying fallow for a while. This is the first year when the pre-monsoon rains have been very poor, so water scarcity is on top of everyone's mind. Most people I chat with while walking tell me that farming has now become too labour intensive. "My patch of beans is already half dead in this uncharacteristically hot and dry weather," says an old lady, who is watering her plants with a bucket. "Perhaps next year, I'll simply buy them from the local shop."

Education and the consequent rise in aspirations has also resulted in many veering away from agriculture. Villagers are now looking outward for jobs, and bemoan the lack of available farm labour to manage their fields. "Most people who used to work in the fields earlier have

found other more lucrative jobs mostly in the tourism sector," explains Hans Raj, who runs the local photography shop. He reminisces about the time when his family's fields used to be cultivated by farmers from a neighbouring village. "My grandfather, like everyone else in the village, had little money," he says. "So he would pay their wages in potatoes." The barter system worked perfectly until the ration shop opened. "We also started buying our food grain from there and today, we plant green vegetables, onion, garlic and maize for our own consumption only in a portion of our land," he says.

Meanwhile, it's getting late and time to end my leisurely evening ramble. I muse that the government's strong push for education and food security has resulted in more and more villagers opting out of farming. These schemes are important no doubt, but there has to be a parallel effort to incentivise farmers to till their fields. Else, many more could be headed in the same direction as Rita and Hans Raj. I wonder what will happen if all farmers stopped cultivating their land. I ask Hans Raj: Where will our food come from then? He has no answer. Instead, we watch the sun dip behind a hill; he lost in his thoughts, me in mine.

A break from chicken



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

Boarding schools teach you a thing or two about eating everything that's on your plate fast while keeping it away from predatory seniors and dorm bunnies. Growing up in a *fauji* household meant having to adapt to an equal opportunity palate — never forgetting your table manners while at it. Saying no to any food was never an option. Leftovers — a 21st century malaise — isn't something I recall from my childhood, not because there wasn't enough on the table, but because you weren't allowed a smaller portion of bitter *karela* because you wanted more of the mutton curry.

Our kids, growing up, were a little

more indulged, but they grew up with the same creed — nothing to be wasted, everything to be tasted, minus fuss or tantrums. Past their teenage years, they steered clear of junk food. Nor did they demur at carrying packed lunches to work — even though, sometimes, perversely, the cook would pack *lauki* with *tori*. There were occasional outbursts, but largely the household ate what it was served — and was thankful for it. Then my son married.

A list of things his wife does not eat would fill a page of this newspaper, so it might be simpler to list the only thing she does — which is chicken. She tries, poor child, but it's no easier for her. "Watermelon," my acerbic wife informed her, "is not salad." We eat — *ate* — a lot of salad because — surprise! — we liked it. Like most Indians, our meals are — *were* — primarily vegetarian, though we liked fish and fowl well enough to include it in our dietary plan. Now, though, it's not enough to have if for every other meal, it must be the only meal.

We were never partial to chicken or *paneer*, both reminding us of blotting paper with no taste to call its own. Given peer pressure about avoiding red meat, chicken entered our kitchen but remained at its periphery. We ate fish, prawns, pork, buffalo, squid, crab, mussels, quail, duck,

farm grown partridge, hare — and in the dim past, venison. The variety of vegetables was varied, there were pulses to pick from, and all manner of foods we took for granted. It was an echo of most middle-class homes that I am now forced to view through the lens of nostalgia.

Last week, my daughter and I accompanied my son's bride and her young nephew for an afternoon at the mall. Let me skip over the excessive hours spent in the stores to arrive at our menu for lunch. We began with starters that included honey chilli chicken and, in deference to my daughter-in-law's preference, salad marked less by greens and more by — right, chicken. Having pandered to so much fowl, who would have thought our main course would include a street curry *with chicken* and — while I distinctly remember saying the words "lamb", "pork" and "prawns" out loud — we had udon noodles with chicken, and wouldn't you know it, a late order of chicken dimsums.

My son and his wife are now spending a holiday in pursuit of chicken in Istanbul, giving us a week to spoil ourselves with helpings of broccoli, corn, beet, brinjals, mushrooms, zucchini, bokchoy, cluster-beans, peppers, lettuce. I'm making the most of it — for next week, we will be on a detox diet of chicken, *again*.

Rajnath Singh's dilemma

The new defence minister has to correct a major asymmetry. Will his discipline come in the way?



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

If Rajnath Singh was upset about being dropped from two cabinet committees — the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs and the Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs — he gave no public hint of it. The only indication that he was a bit hurt at being de jure number two in the government but not considered important enough to be included in the committees was an off-hand remark, made with a smile. "*Kya mein tumhe chhe foot sey paanch foot ke lagne laga hoon*" (do you think I now measure five feet instead of six), he asked an aide as TV

channels chattered on loudly about how Rajnath Singh *ka kad gir gaya hai* (Rajnath Singh has lost his stature). By the evening, the government had reversed the decision and reissued the notification. Not once did he suggest/offer/threaten/to resign.

Discipline has served him well. From a nondescript Member of the Legislative Council of Uttar Pradesh (UP) to a second term as a member of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) has been punctuated by important milestones. Rajnath Singh was UP's education minister, chief of the state unit of the party, president of the central BJP and a minister in the union cabinet several times. To say nothing of the overt and covert roles he has performed on the orders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent body of the BJP.

He was elected an MLA from Mirzapur in 1977 when he was just 26, a result of being associated with the student wing of the Jana Sangh during the Emergency and being jailed. The late 1980s and early 1990s in UP were the years of the rise of Kalyan Singh who appointed Rajnath Singh education minister in 1991. One of his first moves as minister was to bring, through an ordinance, the anti-copying law, making copying a non-bailable offence — which meant the onus of

proving oneself innocent was on the accused. Fourteen and 15-year olds were sent to jail on charges of copying. The pass percentage in the UP High School Board examination for Class X in 1991 was 58.03. In 1992, after the anti-copying law was put in place, it slipped to 14.7. Singh had to pay for his convictions: He contested the Assembly election from Mohana, a student-dominated constituency near Lucknow in 1993, and was defeated comprehensively. He was sent to the Rajya Sabha in 1994. He became a minister in the Vajpayee and later the Modi government.

Now he has become defence minister for that very quality: Discipline. He is representing a BJP government which has come to power promising to champion the cause of soldiers afflicted by prolonged neglect, bureaucratic interference and marginalisation in defence policy-making.

The seeds of the deformed national security and defence architecture, and mistrust in civil-military relations were sown at the time of Independence when the British Indian armed forces were converting from an imperial garrison of a theatre command to a national army. The origin of these uncivil relations is the oft-quoted dispute between C-in-C Kitchener and Viceroy Curzon. The insistence by Curzon to introduce an additional member in his executive council to exercise financial control was opposed by Kitchener. 150 years later, the legacy of that dispute lingers.

Except for Subhas Chandra Bose and Mahatma Gandhi who did not survive the aftermath of Independence, India's political leaders lacked military experience. Their sin-

gle biggest fear, patently unfounded, was a military coup. The existing army department was turned first into the department of defence and later the MoD. At the time, defence secretary H M Patel and his successor twice offered to integrate the service headquarters with MoD. But General Rajindersinhji and General K S Thimayya refused, fearing they would lose operational command and the panoply of pomp and pageantry by joining the ministerial whirlpool.

Soon, the army got fully involved in J&K, Junagadh, Hyderabad and Goa operations. While its prestige rose, its clout gradually declined. It was not even consulted in deciding crucial operational issues. Civilian bureaucracy, in cahoots with the political leadership, cut the services down to size. The generals were careless and naïve not to notice the diminution in their stature and status. But the civilian bureaucracy at once grasped the import of civilian control and went about following a policy of divide and rule: keeping divided the three wings of the armed forces and parrying proposals of their integration with the ministry, not without assistance from the services themselves. From the stunning decline in the Warrant of Precedence to the erosion of financial and operational autonomy, the decline corroded promotions, postings, ceremonial functions and even distribution of canteen profits. At one stage, the MoD also asked to scrutinise promotion exams and was told it was a professional matter.

It is this asymmetry that Rajnath Singh has to correct as defence minister. Will discipline come in the way?

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ SABYASACHI MUKHERJEE | DIRECTOR GENERAL | CSMVS

The people's curator

Mukherjee tells Arundhati Dasgupta how he plans to bring down the walls between people and their culture

Food is not on his mind as Sabyasachi Mukherjee casts a perfunctory look at the menu before suggesting that we sample the buffet, popular with office goers in the area. We are at Kala Ghoda, Mumbai's art district where Mukherjee works and lives, a stone's throw away from Copper Chimney, where we have seated ourselves in a quiet nook. Once an iconic restaurant for the rich and famous and a Bollywood favourite, the restaurant is a long way off its heydays.

Not too many people stop in for a bite here anymore and the restaurant has quietly dropped its tony status to sit inside the food courts of malls where it draws much more custom. For us however, its quiet confines are a plus; in a city where noisy restaurants are the norm, we have few choices and Mukherjee has even suggested a boardroom meet over a meal. I gently shot that down, hoping to draw him into a more candid conversation outside the oppressive demands of his workspace.

I needn't have bothered. Mukherjee speaks from the heart, even if he hesitates to shoot from the hip. Despite having spent his entire working life in the city, in south Mumbai, which may well qualify for the gangster status recently awarded to New Delhi's Khan Market, he has not picked up the fine art of privilege, doublespeak.

Originally from Santiniketan, where he schooled in the Bengali medium before studying museology and museum studies from M S University in Baroda, he came to the Mumbai as an intern with Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya or CSMVS. "I fell in love," he says. One look at the magnificent Indo-Saracenic structure that rose above everything else in the vicinity and he, a 25-year old who had wanted to become a social worker, was hooked. "I fell in love

and everything changed from there," he says.

He has been two decades (and some more) at the helm. Under him, the museum has undergone a dramatic change, shedding its old elitist form with mothballed artefacts and slow whirling fans into an open, well-lit structure bringing in exhibitions from all over the world. He has just set up a children's museum, a glass structure built around the old and majestic trees in the museum's three-acre campus. This is his most rewarding project he says. Keen on giving something to the children, by them and for them, he ensured that the first collections have been curated by a group of children too.

A few years ago, CSMVS drew much applause from peers across the world for another first, its 'museum on wheels', also a pet project of Mukherjee. "I used to wonder if the role of the museum is to enlighten the enlightened," he says softly, referring obliquely to the fact that CSMVS, like most major art and culture institutions in the city is situated in south Mumbai. In a way the people who come to the museum are mostly privileged city residents; although there are tourists from all over the country and the world coming in today, it was not always the case. "I used to question myself, what am I doing for the underprivileged and since 2009, I think the shift began. We reached out to NGOs and identified a strategy to take the museum to the people, whose culture we celebrate," he says.

The city has good people, he says and "if you have a good idea and can implement it, the money comes." The museum on wheels and the children's museum have found generous private and corporate donors. "There is a huge cultural hunger in the country and we do not know how to feed them,

everyone is curious but we don't have enough people to take this forward," he says. Mukherjee is a strong advocate for setting up dedicated Indian heritage management institutes and training people to look after what could be a goldmine for the country's exchequer, in terms of tourism revenue.

The food comes to the table, the attendants finally giving up on us making our way to spread. A few chicken and paneer tikkas and some biryani that Mukherjee asks for, specifically. No surprises as Copper Chimney sticks to the tried and tasted onion-tomato gravy routine that was once the norm in all city restaurants, but has long lost its taste. Mukherjee is a small eater, eats without spending much time over his plate. I wonder if it would have been better if we had organised a cook-in with home chefs, perhaps more in keeping with the style of a man who wears his accent and roots on his sleeve.

Mukherjee sees his role as that of a culture manager, a custodian of people's culture. This is a different approach in a world where museums are seen as sterile spaces, meant to educate children and foreign nationals about past glory. Mukherjee was also rankled by the criticism leveled at Indian cultural institutions from all over the world, that the buildings with some of the most priceless objects in their custody were extremely cavalier about their privilege.

So what does a museum mean to him, having spent his entire life working in one? He takes no time to answer this one. "An open space for conversation, it is not a building or an object but an idea." The answer may sound glib but Mukherjee approached it with the drive of a research scholar. He began by defining what a museum must mean to the people and then worked his way backwards to draw up a strategy for

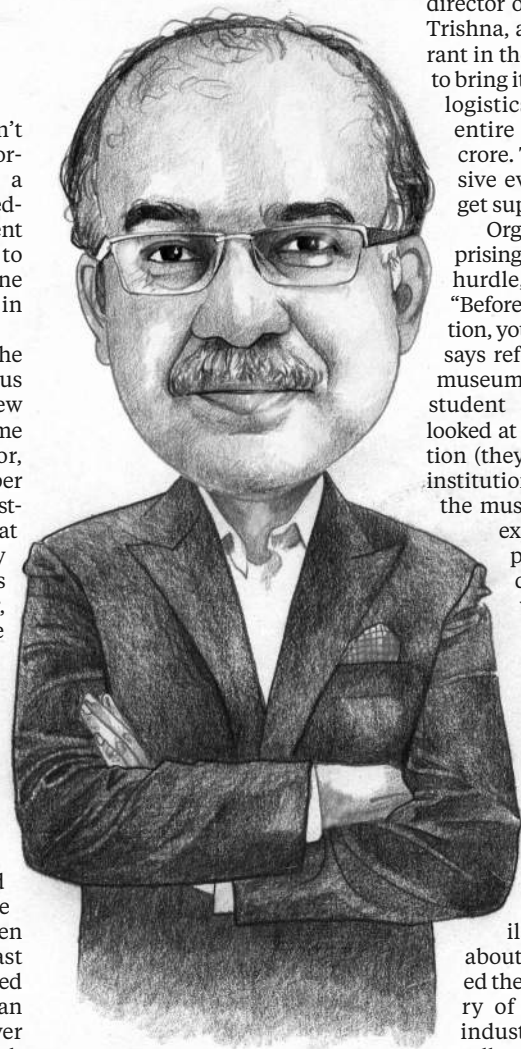


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

engagement and involvement.

He is ambitious he says but never really thought he would hold the top job. "A curator writing a few odd academic papers that is what I saw life as." And yet, he is the first museum director to have attempted anything as big as the India and the World exhibition in partnership with the British Museum. It took three years of planning and execution, but the beginning was over a meal with Neil MacGregor, a former

director of the British Museum, at Trishna, a popular seafood restaurant in the vicinity. "We were keen to bring it here but the cost and the logistics were daunting. The entire project cost close to ₹14 crore. This was the most expensive ever for us and we had to get support."

Organising the funds was surprisingly easy. Money is not the hurdle, mindsets are, he says. "Before you transform an institution, you transform its people," he says referring to his work at the museum. It helped that he was a student of history. Because he looked at the history of the institution (they have recently set up an institutional archive to document the museum's storied history) to explain himself better to his people. The idea was to demonstrate to those now working in the cavernous insides of the sprawling structure that they were walking on the shoulders of giants.

The museum was set up with contribution from wealthy industrialists, by people who wanted to give back to their city. Not just its founders, the collections carry a similar story. Mukherjee talks about the many who have gifted their collections, but the story of Sir Ratan Tata (son of industrialist Jamsetji N Tata), collector, lover of art, good food, music and interesting conversations, resonates the deepest with him. Most of the collection at the museum today is his donation, picked off the cultural hothouses of London (he died there in 1918) in the early 1900s. "He was collecting Indian antiquities and art objects in London at a time when they were being taken out of the country quite freely (as the property of the British rulers) and he gave it all to the museum as a gift," he marvels. It is a gift Mukherjee is determined to keep giving back.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Budget for five years, not one day

The finance minister is holding pre-Budget meetings with specific groups. Invitees proffer dozens of ideas at such meetings, from good to bad and positively zany. Inevitably, therefore, very few of the suggestions aired at such meetings make their way into any Budget. But finance ministers can and do get influenced by the kind of issues that are raised, since they are seen to indicate what people in general are concerned about — whether inflation or the deficit, or economic growth. This time may be no different.

The fiscal situation is stressed (when is it not?!), economic growth has slowed, tax revenue has fallen short and the deficit is high if it is properly accounted. Government debt too is about 20 per cent higher than it should be, and fresh borrowing is swallowing up almost all of household savings (partly because these savings have shrunk). Almost no household savings are therefore available to the private sector. Naturally, the Reserve Bank finds it difficult to force down interest rates in the market. On account of both the shortage of funds as well as their cost, investment has suffered.

The average rate of inflation has come down over the years from 7 per cent to 3 per cent, but savings schemes like the provident funds continue to offer zero-risk, tax-free returns of more than 8 per cent. This is ridiculously high and out of line with the money market. Naturally, real lending rates (ie after adjustment for inflation) are also among the highest in the world. If the government wants interest rates to fall and facilitate private investment, among the things it has to do is remove tax incentives on small savings. On the spending side, it should be doing as little as possible.

Neither bit of advice is what a newly elected government, with a massive mandate and promises to keep, wants to hear. Compared to last year, new or larger commitments for this year already include the cost of Ayushman Bharat and the ₹6,000 annual payout to all farmers — at a time when tax revenue is well short of the Budget numbers. Defence spending has been squeezed over the years and, as the finance minister would know from her previous perch in the defence ministry, the forces make do with lots of obsolete equipment. Further neglect could prove costly. Then, various unpaid bills from last year have to be paid. The approach to the expenditure side of the Budget, therefore, has to be one of extreme moderation. Any new or additional expenditure must be limited to the extent of matching savings under other heads. Such savings are always possible.

On the revenue side, the room for raising fresh taxes is limited in a slowing economy. The hard fact is that there is no fiscal space for the finance minister to manoeuvre — other than what will become available from the Reserve Bank through transfer of what is deemed to be its excess reserves. Given that the financial sector's troubles continue to impact economic activity, and the cleaning up of balance sheets is still a work in progress, the RBI windfall should be used to re-capitalise government-owned banks, and/or provide a special finance window for otherwise sound shadow banks that face liquidity problems because their existing sources of funding have dried up.

The best strategy would be for the minister to state the reality upfront (honest acceptance of the facts can be reassuring). She should make clear that she is playing a five-year Test match, not a one-day event. Her focus, therefore, should be on restoring fiscal sanctity and control (which financial markets will welcome), while energising her audience with reform policy initiatives for the long term. The subsidy bill can be tamed by reforming the public food procurement system; there is no need for an expensive buffer stock when each year delivers a grain surplus. And infrastructure investment can be funded by hawking existing assets (roads, discoms, etc) to long-term investors in operation and maintenance contracts, and using the money thus garnered to create new assets where the initial project risk is assumed by the government.

Return of the Gujarat Model

Narendra Modi's new PMO resembles the US President's Executive Office and he will govern through his 'cabinet' of hand-picked super-bureaucrats

The Modi-Shah-BJP establishment has an aversion to anyone but the faithful using the expression "Gujarat Model" to characterise their methods. We can see where they are coming from. Their critics have trade-marked that expression to mean their post-2002 politics of polarisation.

There is, however, a less contentious manifestation of the Gujarat Model as well: Centralised governance. Watch the latest changes in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), with three of his key aides

This is natural progression from the way Narendra Modi ran Gujarat. But, for everyone's comfort, let's simply call it the Modi Model of Governance. It was unveiled in Gujarat in 2001-02, evolved through his two full terms (2002-12) and two part terms (2001-02, 2012-14), and accompanied him to New Delhi. His second term as PM is its reinforced version.

If you are risk-averse, you might wish to borrow that statutory warning from mutual funds: Past performance is not a guarantee of future performance. Such caveats are not available to us, political analysts, as our published word lives on for public scrutiny. With Mr Modi, however, it has so far been quite safe to apply his past to his future action. Much can change, but in detail. The fundamentals remain firm.

Here are the five important pillars of this Modi Model:

1. "Supremo" chief executive with total control of the party through trusted lieutenants;
2. Governance through hand-picked civil servants, and retirement won't come in the way;
3. Mission-mode governance with a few ideas where visible results are possible within one term, to be executed by a few chosen people;
4. Never lose the ideological big picture;
5. Neutralise all opposition, within and outside, through reason, rent, pressure and intrigue (the ancient *saam, daam, dand, bhed*).

It worked brilliantly in Gujarat, a medium-sized and less diverse state. There were doubts if it would work for all of India. It did threaten to unravel a few times: Demonetisation, some foreign policy setbacks, especially in the neighbourhood after the initial euphoria, growth decline, job losses and the 2017 Gujarat election near-thing. But in the end, what matters is the bottom line. The 303 there settled it.

Like all capital cities, New Delhi's first instinct is bureaucratic: Mr Modi had no choice but to elevate his three aides. After he chose former IFS officer S Jaishankar to be his external affairs minister, he was under compulsion to upgrade National Security Advisor and former IPS officer Ajit Doval to avoid an

awkward rank-reversal.

Having promoted Mr Doval, in turn, Mr Modi was forced to give parity to Nripendra Misra and P K Mishra from the IAS. You should be careful to read too much in these, mere protocol compulsions. Other non-ministers have been given Cabinet rank in the past, notably the heads of the Planning Commission and NITI Aayog and, under UPA-2, even Nandan Nilekani as the head of the UIDAI.

This explanation fails for three reasons. First, because it is so obvious that in the Modi world it is illogical. Second, because it presumes Mr Modi had to make these changes under compulsion. There is nothing on Mr Modi's record yet that says he is prone to acting under compulsion, definitely not of bureaucratic protocol. Why would he do it now after winning an enhanced majority? And third, that nothing compelled him to pick Mr Jaishankar in the first place. He did that to a larger plan and the follow-on changes are merely elements of it.

This PMO, accordingly, is resembling the US President's Executive Office with the power of key cabinet officers (ministers) exercised from here. The PMO grew in Mr Modi's first term and controlled the ministries of his focus directly, from foreign affairs to sanitation.

Now, its leaders have grown, to the level of the cabinet ministers they hold to account on their boss's behalf. So even the pretence of a Westminster-style cabinet system, where the PM is the first among equals, is over. Think of a particularly hands-on American President running the State and Defense departments through a trusted NSA straddling both and an equally powerful White House Chief of Staff. Except, that in Mr Modi's case now he has two chiefs of staff.

Indira Gandhi invented the position of Principal Secretary in 1971 and appointed P N Haksar there. Haksar was followed by V Shankar under Prime Minister Morarji Desai. The position was then briefly abolished as Charan Singh's Janata Government detested centralisation. It returned with Mrs Gandhi in 1980 with P C Alexander. There was one more difference now. Pre-1977, she still had some powerful ministers in her cabinet, including Jagjivan Ram. Now she had almost none. The only minister with some power was probably a young Pranab Mukherjee.

This is what comes closest to Mr Modi in his second term with some differences. First, he doesn't lead his party directly but through Amit Shah. Second, unlike Mrs Gandhi, whose ideological objective was continuity, his is change, especially in the way Indian secularism has been defined by the Gandhi family.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

He told us that in his first speech to his party on the day of the results. And third, he has no family or dynasty. In that sense too, he is comparable with a US president. Not entitled to infinite terms, although not limited to two like him either. After him, there may be another party leader. Not other Modis.

A legitimate criticism of Mr Modi's first government has been its lack of talent. I too have fretted about it, describing it as the most talent-averse establishment in independent India. The reason those close to him gave then was, so what if we do not have talent and experience. We will learn. But we aren't going to win power and gift it to others.

That, in a way, was a repudiation of the Vajpayee school of team-building. He had drawn talent from everywhere. Jaswant Singh was non-RSS, Yashwant Sinha and Rangarajan Kumaramangalam were recent entrants to the BJP, George Fernandes was the first and last non-BJP, non-Congress minister in the Cabinet Committee of Security yet in a coalition led by either. Arun Shourie was a powerful change agent who brought the force of his intellect and integrity from outside.

Mr Modi and Mr Shah did the opposite in their first term. They were averse to giving any political space to outsiders. They also had a deep distrust of professionals, specialists and technocrats. The fate of the two RBI governors with a formidable academic reputation is evidence.

Critics like us were dismissed as being outdated in our thinking, or unwilling to accept that a government could be run well without faces familiar to Anglicised Delhi elites. By the fourth year, however, as the economy floundered, and after some state election

and by-election setbacks, there were signs of change. The latter reshuffles saw the lateral entry of retired civil servants, like former IAS officer R K Singh and former IFS officer Hardeep Puri.

They've both risen in stature. See the induction of Mr Jaishankar at such a high level as a logical progression from there. And ditto for the elevation of the PMO trio. The two programmes closest to Mr Modi's heart and politics — sanitation-

water (combined now) and Ayushman Bharat — are with two empowered former civil servants, Parameswaran Iyer and Indu Bhushan, respectively, brought back from the World Bank/ADB and re-employed.

The Modi Model we see now is still the old Gujarat Model. But with an acknowledgement that governing India is more challenging than governing Gujarat, the talent it needs isn't all available in the BJP, and he will now reach outside. But only to those he has known and trusted over time within their career services. Keep a close watch in this term on a presidential Prime Minister Modi, governing through his "cabinet" of super-bureaucrats.

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A bibliophile's summer reading



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

For me the long, languorous days of summer and the arrival of the rains are inextricably associated with books and reading. In pre-television and digital times, when power cuts were more frequent and entertainment restricted to transistors and movie halls, books were an escape, a stimulant, a soothing elixir. It is a habit that has not faded. Here is my best list to fend off seasonal torpor and other disturbances.

The most applauded and talked about book of the year is *Early Indians* (Juggernaut; ₹699) by former business journalist Tony Joseph. In a lucid and enthralling narrative that combines forensic examination with the compelling twists and turns of an unfolding mystery, Mr Joseph unearths the story of our ancestors from 65,000 years ago. Sifting through up-to-date research in archaeology, linguistics

and recent advances in ancient DNA testing — often the province of opaque scholarship — he answers unsettling, controversial questions: Who were the Harappans? Did the "Aryans" migrate to India? Are north Indians, south Indians and tribals genetically different from each other? He challenges the notion, unshakably dear to Hindu chauvinists, that "Aryan" or "Sanskrit" or "Vedic" culture is synonymous with Indian culture — that it "was imported flat-packed and then reassembled here". It was but one of several migrations, he argues, supported by robust evidence, since the origin of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa. If his conclusion is plain (but not simple with its ugly, present-day ramifications) it is this: "We are all migrants. And we are all mixed."

One of the invigorating pleasures of reading about the past is the way history is retold as an ongoing serial, weaving travelogue, memoir, architectural or political churning.

Giles Tillotson, the British but Gurgaon-based architectural historian, is a dab hand at this cross-fertilisation of genres. For fans of his earlier books on Agra and Jaipur, he now completes the Golden Triangle trilogy with *Delhi Darshan: The History and Monuments of India's Capital* (Penguin; ₹499). His knowledge is wide yet his dissemination often elegant and deftly diverting. Here is how he describes the disquiet of Delhi's populace at the advent of the

young Akbar in 1556: "Anyone born just before the [Mughal] conquest had seen such change that it must have left them reeling in dizziness. First the Mughals come and knock out the Lodis; then the Surs come and knock out the Mughals; then the Mughals come back and knock out the Surs; and now the emperor falls downstairs and is succeeded by a teenager."

The layered history of old cities is not seamless; it is a saga of disruption, political revision and tectonic social shifts. I have come to the Pakistani anthropologist Haroon Khalid's *Imagining Lahore: The City That Is, The City That Was* (Penguin; ₹599) late but what a treasure trove of storied Seat of empires, adored city of the Mughals, the capital of Ranjit Singh's Khalsa raj, and the beating heart of Punjab, its frontiers at times stretched from the outskirts of Delhi to Peshawar. Mr Khalid's wanderings take in Sufi shrines, the ruins of Hindu havelis and temples, and encounters with Lahore's endangered minorities. He does not follow a structured design but creates a luminous, captivating tapestry.

Empress of the Taj: In Search of Mumtaz Mahal by Timeri N Murari (Speaking Tiger; ₹350) is another kind of journey. Mr Murari carts his family — two sisters and wife — in Arjumand Banu's footsteps as she trails her husband on ceaseless campaigns in the 17th century. Little remains; and in Burhanpur, Madhya Pradesh, where the young queen, who evoked such peerless passion, breathed

her last, not a trace. It is a moving chronicle of the maelstrom of history.

Rescuing once-prominent figures from the margins to shed new light on modern history is also the job of the archivist and reporter. British journalist Andrew Whitehead's *The Lives of Freda: The Political, Spiritual and Personal Journeys of Freda Bedi* (Speaking Tiger; ₹499) is the remarkable story of an Oxford graduate who married a handsome Sikh B P L Bedi in 1933, moved to Punjab, and adopted Indian dress and custom. Together, the Bedis defied convention, lived a spartan life of leftwing intellectual and political rigour, organising trade unions, throwing themselves into the *satyagraha* movement, and going to jail. Later Freda Bedi joined Sheikh Abdullah's Naya Kashmir movement and became a high-ranking Buddhist nun. (There is a touching photograph of her young son, actor Kabir Bedi, being ordained a Buddhist monk in Rangoon.)

And for those wishing to celebrate Girish Karnad, his collected plays in three volumes by Oxford University Press (where he once worked in Chennai in the 1960s) have gone through numerous reprints. Few explored aspects of Indian history, myth and folklore in drama, film and public debate as vigorously to hold up a mirror to our times.

Missing one volume on my bookshelf, I rang my reliable, well-stocked south Delhi bookshop for a copy. "Sorry, Sir, all sold but we're taking orders." Mr Karnad, I imagine, would have chuckled and feigned mild surprise. Even so, a bibliophile's summer can run into dry patches.

Shikhar Dhawan get only a handful even today, and the likes of VVS Laxman, Zaheer Khan, and R Ashwin got nearly none. But Yuvraj defied all such mundane thumb-rules and apparent marketing logic (if any), commanding his own price for brand endorsements on a par with Dhoni.

Brand Yuvi is not just about some of the biggest sizes ever hit by an Indian — his 125-metre-six heaved off Brett Lee at his peak in the 2007 T20 WC; or the stratospheric prices commanded by him at IPL auctions — ₹14 crore in 2014 and ₹16 crore in 2015. His brand today is about his compassion and his charity post his successful fight with cancer. It is the caring, concerned, and considerate Yuvraj spending his own money under the YouWeCan Foundation for societal good — very rare to see among celebrities.

But whereto from here? Yuvraj had famously once said in an autobiographical insurance ad, "*Jab tak balla chalta hai, thaata hai...*". Well, given his popularity and appeal, he could follow in father Yograj's illustrious steps and star in a few Punjabi movies! Or emulate Sidhu — join politics. Follow his first captain Ganguly — become a cricket administrator. Do a Sehwal — try commentating. Copy Dravid — coach budding cricketers. But what I would love him to do most is to become a life coach and share his incredible story of struggle, success, and survival with all. Viva la Yuvi!

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When Britney posts on Instagram

EYE CULTURE

CAITY WEAVER

However meagre our lives, celebrity Instagram accounts offer certain reliable comforts: front-facing studio-quality portraits of our favourite stars standing or sitting alone in careful outfits; most photos taken from the manubrium up, so that our entire phone screen is dominated by their proportional features. And, if the celebrity is Beyoncé-level famous, a gorgeous unending colour story we can fall through forever: a block of white, silver, gold and indigo clearly curated by someone with the patience to learn colour theory. This is the fame trade-off in 2019: We give them attention and a lightly engaged readership with the potential to translate to advertising revenue; they give us stylised, intimate glimpses of a life more elegant and photogenic than our own.

On Spears's Instagram, the light is uncalibrated — as likely to charge in from floor-to-ceiling windows offering 360-degree California views as to issue from a single overhead light bulb located behind her, casting her face in shadow. Her feed is a place where Britney can share her favourite quotes, be it a typographical exhortation to stay "extra sparkly" or a musing from Nietzsche about an artist's inability to endure what is known as "reality." But her most memorable, jolting posts are ones that crop up every once in a while, seemingly with no rhyme or reason to their frequency: Britney, alone, pretending to be walking on a runway inside her home.

The plot of each is roughly the same: Spears quickly struts straight-as-an-arrow toward the camera in a selection of outfits that are not particularly fancy — the sort of clothes a woman might have in her closet, if she had one: a red off-shoulder minidress with glittering embroidery; a red off-shoulder minidress with flamenco sleeves. The editing is fast, amateurish and jarring; frequently Spears is back at her point of origin striding forward in a new outfit before she has finished walking out of frame in her old one. The footage presents her as a human GIF, repeating small motions with minute adjustments ad infinitum in the hallways, passages, corridors and loggias of the Italianate airplane-hangar where she lives.

Because the videos are a kind of art brut expressionism, empty of context, they fill viewers with questions. Who is filming? Why these clothes? Did Spears learn how to edit video clips? And, most perplexing, what does she want us to feel when we watch? Is she to be viewed as an inno-

cent girl playing dress-up? A sexy human Barbie with an infinite closet? Regardless of intention, the clips are illegible, generating primarily a voyeur's guilty, mystified confusion.

Spears's mental and physical well-being has been a subject of renewed speculation in recent months, ever since she cancelled a planned Las Vegas residency and announced an "indefinite work hiatus" in January. In April, *TMZ* reported that she had checked into a mental health facility. An hour before the *TMZ* story was published, her Instagram account featured its first new post in months (an unusually long fallow period; before the hiatus announcement, a typical rate was several posts per week). It was an image of an inspirational quote, alongside the caption "We all need to take time for a little 'me time.' :) " She made a series of funny faces at the camera "after therapy."

But rather than deterring gossip, each new post has only watered the conspiracy theories flowering in the tens of thousands of comments beneath it. Would a message authored by Spears really feature an emoticon smiley, when history has demonstrated her preference for emoji? Would Spears really post herself working out to a Michael Jackson song two months after her former choreographer Wade Robson accused Jackson of years of sexual abuse in a well-publicised documentary — with a hairstyle and outfit identical to those in a video she posted 13 months earlier? Do apple emoji mean the legend Britney Jean Spears is about to release a single called "Apple Pie" or does that song not exist?

It's widely known that Spears's adult welfare is under the conservatorship of her father. Inevitably, this arrangement leads people to wonder if Spears is slapping on a smiley face because she wants to or because she has been ordered to by the entity in charge of her. In recent months, the hashtag #FreeBritney has gained popularity on social media among fans who suspect the latter.

Spears's most recent runway video opened with a phone camera angled from above. In a perky voice edged with exasperation, she addressed the lens. "For those of you who don't think I post my own videos, I did this video yesterday. So, you're wrong! But I hope you like it." Decades of performing have given Spears uncommon poise in heels, but the display is slightly off-kilter. She doesn't smile. Because Spears is on a "hiatus," this was ostensibly a peek at her free time. But it certainly looks like a job.

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Vi Vi Vi Vi Vi Vi Viva la Yuvi!



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

I was at Lord's on July 13, 2002, during the NatWest Series final between India and England. Sachin Tendulkar was out fifth at 146. Virender Sehwag, Sourav Ganguly, and Rahul Dravid were already gone. India still needed 180 runs to win. The situation was pretty grim. In walked a tall, well-built, handsome 19-year-old Punjabi lad. Over the next 18 overs, the gutsy young batter partnered with an equally gritty Mohd Kaif to score a masterly 69 runs and take India almost to the doorstep of victory. A star was born that day. The one and only, Yuvraj Singh, India's Warrior Prince.

I saw him on television at the 2007 ICC World Twenty20 loft Stuart Broad for those

six savage (but sublime) sixes. Incredible! Unbelievable! I was at the Wankhede on April 2, 2011, as Yuvraj ran from the non-striker end to hug his captain M S Dhoni after that legendary lofted maximum that won India the World Cup. And I saw Yuvraj step up to receive the coveted Man of the Series award. There were tears in his eyes. The prince had come of age.

In the Dentsu Celesta celebrity study of 2008, Yuvraj had the highest scores on research attributes like unique, innovative, prestigious, distinctive, stylish, cool, tough, fearless, sexy, and macho. His brand map back then dwarfed all his cricketing colleagues, bar Dhoni. And he was miles ahead of the Khans, and almost all of Bollywood. Outside of the brand tracking study, my own description of Yuvraj would use different adjectives: Aggressive, daring, dashing, entertaining, flamboyant, and fun. Maybe even charming. But if I were to describe him in just one word, it would have to be mercurial. And if I would be allowed to add just one more, it would surely be swashbuckling.

Actually, 'mercurial' has been both the making and the un-making of Yuvraj Singh. Both as a player, and as a brand. Definition of 'mercurial' as per the *Cambridge English* dictionary is 1. changing suddenly and often 2. intelligent, enthusiastic, and quick. But the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary lists capri-

cious, fickle, temperamental, unpredictable, and volatile as synonyms of 'mercurial'. When Yuvraj was a serious candidate to helm India as captain of the cricket team just before the World Cup in 2007, the selectors chose to go with the *Merriam-Webster* version, preferring a more 'dependable' and less-excitable Dhoni for the job.

But Yuvraj is someone you could never afford to ignore. It was the sheer force of his personality — go-getter, groovy, gregarious — that got so many brands to use him as their ambassador. Over the years, Yuvraj endorsed a long list of well-known brands: Microsoft Xbox 360, Reebok, Pepsi, Puma, Parachute, MTS, UC Browser, Revital, Lakshmi Vatika, Birla Sun Life, Royal Stag, Laureaus, Benz, and most recently Cadbury Fuse. He is, of course, also the face of his own 'YouWeCan (YWC)' line of apparel and accessories. Contrary to popular belief, not very many of us understand or appreciate how difficult it is to get brand endorsements in cricket if you are not a reigning captain or an ex-captain. Statistics show that brand owners have favoured team captains — Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Tendulkar, Ganguly, Dravid, Dhoni, and Virat Kohli — for more than 80 per cent of all cricketer endorsements ever. Which is why Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, and Navjot Sidhu got so few in their heydays, Rohit Sharma and