

Scoring another own goal



COUNTRY CODE
RAHUL JACOB

The fable of the hare and the tortoise has long been used by many liberal foreign observers of India's economy. The hope has been that democratic India, with its sluggish reforms process, might eventually catch up with the bold pace of reforms and growth that dictatorial China has set in the past four decades.

This story, along with assorted magazine cover images of India as an uncaged tiger or a purposeful elephant, has helped policymakers in New Delhi believe India's turn will come... well, some time in the next millennium. China is now a \$13 trillion economy and India's GDP is at \$2.8 trillion, but who's counting?

In no industry is the gap between the two countries, exacerbated by the missed opportunities and policy failures of successive governments, as glaring as in apparel. China's exports, despite much higher factory wage costs, are several multiples of India's. India's share of the global apparel export market is today just 3 per cent. This must count as the largest self-inflicted wound in the history of the World Trade Organisation, given that India has the most unskilled labour in the world.

Happily, in this respect, the Bharatiya Janata Party government has a chance to make amends for past mistakes by streamlining India's web of inflexible labour laws that handicap apparel and other labour-intensive industries. The timing couldn't be better. The US-China trade war is opening up opportunities even for late starters such as India. Just a couple of days ago, Apple was reported to be completing a final evaluation of countries as diverse as Vietnam, Mexico and India as it prepares to move large parts of its supply chain away from China. Apple's as well as Foxconn's investment in India, however, will only become sizeable if this government actually makes radical changes to India's labour laws, especially those that require state governments' permission for firing workers in factories with more than one hundred workers. "Who is the state to decide when you can hire and fire," says Naresh Gujral, who built a successful garments export company before becoming a Rajya Sabha MP. "The government will not take over the factory."

To its credit, in its first term the Modi government gave employers in apparel and textiles greater latitude to hire workers on short-term contracts, but other than a couple of states such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the suffocating restrictions on laying off workers remained untouched. Even the changes in these two then BJP-ruled states were tiny. Raising the threshold for enterprises to lay off workers without government permission from those with 100 workers to those with 300 is minimalist in its ambition. When I was covering the dynamic factories in southern China at the start of this decade as a correspondent for the FT, one of my most memorable moments was finding myself outside the gigantic Shenzhen factory of Foxconn, Apple's largest manufacturer of iPhones. It was more a township than a factory, with about 250,000 workers.

In its second term, this government seems poised to make changes to labour laws but if this past week is any indication, it will be timid and effectively forfeit to Vietnam this huge opportunity offered by the migration of manufacturing from China. On Monday, the government approved a redrafting of the laws on social security and working conditions but postponed revisions to the codes on industrial relations – tellingly those relating to retrenchment.

Meanwhile, the gains to flexibility in hiring contract workers introduced by the government in the first term, have to be weighed against the aggressive enforcement of provident fund requirements that end up slowing rather than rapidly enlarging the formalised labour force. Nagesh Sharma runs a successful sourcing company that supplies retailers in countries such as the US and Europe with apparel from Africa, Jordan and India. He complains that two people in his office are almost exclusively assigned to tackling the whims of bureaucrats who enforce rules on provident funds and whether a company is liable for the contributions of employees of its labour contractors. Still, he praises state governments in Orissa and Jharkhand for subsidising training for apparel workers, often women.

When I spoke this week to Harish Ahuja, who heads Shahi Exports, the largest garments maker in the country with 60 factories and 115,000 workers, he seemed more concerned by reports that the government is considering an increase in the national minimum wage than by India's rigid labour laws, which his company has learned to live with. Most of Shahi's employees are women. The only contract labour used at its factories is for security guards and housekeeping.

But margins in apparel are razor-thin; an arbitrary national hike in wages would be another blow to an industry. In the past couple of years, India's apparel exports declined to \$15.7 bn, from \$17 bn in 2016. Tiny Cambodia, with a population less than Mumbai's, has seen its apparel exports almost double over the same period to \$12.2 bn in 2018. Bangladesh's stand at \$37 bn. The tortoise that is the Indian government still appears to be sleepy and sluggish while our competitors win this all-important race for populous, developing nations.

When Ram became a battering ram

It was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s for communal riots to start with just the kind of provocation evident in the Lok Sabha when members took the oath



WHERE MONEY TALKS
SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

The past is creeping in on us. Hindu-Muslim conflict followed a certain pattern in the bad old days when the uncouth British still ruled India. This week's proceedings in the Lok Sabha when members took the oath showed that shaking off what Narendra Modi deplored as "1,200 years of slave mentality", undying India is springing back to proud manhood, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) style.

A TV panellist claimed the other evening that in her innocence, poor little Pragya Singh Thakur, added the august name of her guru

to her own because she didn't know better. Perhaps the saffron-swathed, bead-festooned, tilak-marked terror-accused really hadn't been advised of the form, but this can hardly be said of the other causes of tumult at what should have been a solemn ceremony. The chants of *Vande Mataram* and *Jai Sri Ram*, *Har Har Mahadev* and *Bharat Mata ki Jai* that erupted as a bearded Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen walked in his skull cap to the well of the house to take his oath could have been battle cries from some medieval field of religious conflict.

It was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s for communal riots to start with just this kind of provocation, at least in undivided Bengal. A Hindu procession from the temple would wind its way to the clash of cymbals and beat of drums past a mosque where the faithful were at their prayers. Or elaborate tazias, representing the tombs of Hasan and Hussain, grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, would be carried in procession past a prominent temple. Both sides sometimes refined on their provocations. The Hindu procession might be organised during the Muslims' Friday prayers. The tazia could be too tall to pass without lopping off a branch or two of a tree that Hindus regarded as sacred. The most offensive weapon in the

armoury of communal hostility was to leave some part of a dead pig or cow outside a mosque or temple.

Shades of that past lived again as those who are supposed to uphold what they proudly boast is the world's largest democracy heckled and intimidated colleagues of a different political or religious persuasion. The jeering and taunting of Opposition members wasn't merely a breach of parliamentary propriety. Unruly members were mocking the very idea of an inclusive India while the pro-tem speaker, Virendra Kumar, looked on.

Watching the disgraceful exhibition on TV, I felt Owaisi handled the situation well. His retaliatory "*Jai Bhim*" honoured the author of the Constitution, B R Ambedkar, while his "*Allah ho Akbar*", God is Great, was a stern reminder that no matter how many *ghar wapsis* are forced on timid or vulnerable Indians, no Muslim worth his salt denies his faith. It was also noticeable that while the Samajwadi Party's Shafiqur Rahman Barq responded to chants of "*Jai Sri Ram*" with "Constitution *zindabad*", his Samajwadi Party colleague, ST Hasan, preferred "*Hindustan zindabad*."

Muslims alone were not barracked. Sonia Gandhi must have resented it bitterly when saffron stalwarts patronisingly thanked her for taking the oath in Hindi. Almost every

COFFEE WITH BS ► AMITAV GHOSH | AUTHOR

Champion of possibilities

GHOSH tells Uttaran Das Gupta why it is impossible to not write about climate change today

The Stein Auditorium in New Delhi can accommodate a few hundred people, and during the launch of Amitav Ghosh's new novel, *Gun Island*, not one seat in the house was empty. I was sitting in the third or fourth row; whenever the doors to the auditorium opened during the discussion, you could hear the murmur of voices outside. Later, a long, serpentine queue of readers waited patiently to get their copies signed. During the post-launch discussion, people in the audience asked erudite questions to Ghosh, ranging from subaltern themes to the availability of opium in Varanasi.

But does Ghosh remember all his novels well enough to engage with readers like that? This is one of the first questions I ask him when we meet a couple of days later. "You know, honestly, I don't remember my novels that well," he replies, smiling. "Someone who read it yesterday remembers it much better than I, who wrote it 30 years back." He confesses to being stumped by readers who often come up to him quoting passages and asking him to explain. "When people quote a passage, I am often like: 'Oh my god, when did I write that?'" Ghosh's novels, as he knows, have been included in school and university syllabuses, making him popular beyond the usual readers of Indian literature in English.

We meet at a coffee shop at the Taj Mahal Hotel on Mansingh Road. Ghosh strolls in punctually wearing a chic blue shirt with its sleeves folded back casually. He is, of course, a familiar figure, but what is unfamiliar is a new goatee he is sporting, as white as his hair. He is possibly aware that it adds a touch of quirkiness to his otherwise calm personality; in the course of

our rendezvous, he frequently touches it with his fingers. He orders a decaf espresso; I order a regular one.

My name betrays my origins. "Are you from Calcutta?" he wants to know, and when I provide the confirmation, he also enquires about where I studied. "So, do you like Delhi? How long have you lived here?" he asks. When I confirm my undiluted love for the city, he wonders, "How do you live in this heat?"

The rising heat — not only in Delhi but all over the world — is as much the theme of *Gun Island* as it is of his previous book, *The Great Derangement*. In the previous book, a work of non-fiction, he had written that literature on climate change is always in danger of being pigeonholed into genres of fantasy or science fiction, as literary fiction rarely ever deals with it. So is *Gun Island* Ghosh's attempt to address this? He has, after all, been engaged with the issue; if you scroll through his Twitter feed you will find retweets of news reports on how the cataclysmic climate events are wreaking havoc all across the world.

"In *Gun Island*, I was trying to write about the realities of the world we live in," he says. "And climate change is now an undeniable fact of our lives. Just look outside: This incredible heat wave, the drought." The temperature in Delhi had soared to 48 degrees Celsius just a few days ago; there is news of a severe water crisis in Chennai. A delayed monsoon and the fears of a drought are very real this year. With the situation worsening, it is obvious that climate change will displace more and more people. Ghosh's novel also has several characters who are social, economic, and climate change migrants.

"A lot of the migrants end up in Italy, where I spent a lot of time," says Ghosh, adding that he went to several refugee camps and processing centres for migrants, interviewing people who were there. "There were of course many Arabs and people from North Africa, but also many South Asians, especially Bengalis — from both West Bengal and Bangladesh." This, Ghosh says, significantly changed his perspective about things. "The situation we are faced with today is really very complicated."

Italy does play a major part in *Gun Island* — one key character, Cinta, is an Italian historian; the book is dedicated to two Italians: Anna Nadotti and Irene Bignardi. While Bignardi is a friend of Ghosh — "Since 1986", he adds — Nadotti is his Italian translator. "You know, my books are very successful in Italy and one of the reasons for that is because she is such a good translator." Though this is the first time he is writing about the Mediterranean nation, Ghosh claims Italy has played a very important part in his life for about 30 years. "Italy is a mysterious kind of a place in a way," he says. "It exercises a strange kind of a gravitational pull." In the course of researching this book, Ghosh learned Italian. "It opened up Europe in a new way to me."

If Italy is new in *Gun Island*, the Sundarbans is old. Anyone who has followed Ghosh's career over the years will experience a sense of déjà vu while reading it. A number of characters of a previous novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), reappear. There is also the figure of a goddess and her cult — in this



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

the themes I have been interested in — Sundarbans, dolphins — all of them are in this book. Also, etymology, history, the past... it is nice really how all these threads have come back but in a new way." Ghosh says reading medieval Bengali poems, especially the *Manasamangal Kavya*, planted the seed of this novel in him.

If the themes are somewhat familiar, there are other things that are not. For instance, unlike Ghosh's earlier novels which are intricately plotted in the realistic mode, in this, the narrative often moves forward through chances and coincidences. A character gets a call, someone gets bitten by a snake... and so on. "Isn't this a bit convenient?" I ask him. "Well, you could say that," says Ghosh, "but there are no novels without such events." He describes how he was warned in Bengali by someone as he was walking down the street in New York in the mid-1980s as a chunk of concrete came crashing down. "Such things happen, you know, and if a critic feels there are too many coincidences in my novel," says Ghosh, "well, so be it."

I finished reading *Gun Island* the night before our coffee date and I felt it was a love story. I also thought that perhaps the novel was an invitation to the reader to be vulnerable, like one often is when in love; it was an invitation to eschew the rigid principles of the realistic world and explore a different kind of a narrative. "When you start writing fiction, you always make yourself vulnerable," says Ghosh. This also links in very well with the migrants, setting off on very difficult but incredible journeys, disproving the certainties of the nation state, the immigration rules. "It's absolutely staggering," he says. "And that's what *Gun Island* is about — possibilities present in our world but which we often deny."

Ode to a pavement dweller



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
GEETANJALI KRISHNA

His name was Mohammed Abdul Kasim Ali Shaikh. He'd run away from home at the age of eight, been sexually abused repeatedly and soon realised that the best way to survive was to engage in sex work. Later, when he contracted HIV, doctors assured him of treatment as long as he furnished his Aadhaar card. He didn't have one. So he came to the shelter for the homeless run by Aman Biradari in Geeta Ghat on the Yamuna's banks where he received medical treatment and embarked on a quest for a dignified life. He gave up sex work and started playing a rickshaw. But less than a month ago, an errant vehicle mowed him down

while he was asleep on the pavement.

However, Shaikh's end turned out to be different from the fate that awaits most of his homeless brethren. A couple of months before his death, Karwan-e-Mohabbat, the movement to awaken humanity and develop solidarity among different communities, had made a short film on him as part of an ongoing series on the lives of working-class people. Consequently, many have watched his video and mourned him. In stark contrast, most of Delhi's estimated 1.8 lakh population faces a bleaker, lonelier end.

A few weeks ago in Yamuna Pushta, I had some macabre conversations with the homeless living there. We met a man too weak to even pull himself into shade and out of the scorching sun. "In a day or two, he'll be dead," said Vijay Kumar, desensitised as only someone who has lived long enough on the streets can be. "We'll complain to the municipality, they'll take their own sweet time to come while he festers in the heat. Then they'll arrive with that ominous plastic bag that we all know is likely to be our eventual fate..." Others with him spoke of how long the unclaimed bodies of the homeless lie in the morgue. "In fact, we all joke that the only time we'll make it into newspapers is when the municipality

publishes a photo of our corpses in the hope that someone comes forward to identify us," said Rajesh Kumar, a rickshaw puller who has lived in Yamuna Pushta for 40 years.

Death, it seemed, was never far from anyone's mind here. The hard life, exacerbated (or eased, depending on one's standpoint) by alcohol, drugs and gambling, shaved off years from their life expectancy. Access to medical care was another issue — as in Shaikh's case, hospitals often ask for Aadhaar before offering treatment. Later, this was brought home to us when we met a 20-year-old boy too weakened by tuberculosis to even walk. "I don't have the strength to stand up," he said, "let alone go to a hospital and expect treatment without an ID card."

I left Yamuna Pushta alone that day, as my companion Gufran Alam of Aman Biradari stayed behind to ensure help and treatment for the two sick people we'd encountered. "Nobody cares about the homeless," said Rajesh Kumar as I left. "We're faceless while we're alive, invisible when we die."

In that sense, Shaikh was lucky. The Karwan-e-Mohabbat video has ensured that at least his death was noticed — even though he'd been faceless, invisible and alone when he was alive.

My Yoga Day moment



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

There were anxious moments as we examined the spoils we'd managed to assemble for International Yoga Day. My wife's yoga mat was worn out in parts. She hadn't exercised in a while so the mat was used for things it was never intended for — repotting plants, handwashing clothes, drying vegetables for making pickles, bathing the dog. My daughter's yoga mat was pretty and pink, almost new, but she insisted on its replacement as it was no longer trendy. I'd never owned a yoga mat. And now here was an invitation to participate in a yoga event to which I'd said yes. The Italian embassy had kindly invited

spouses, and children over 13, so I persuaded my daughter to agree to accompany us, even though it was the crack of dawn.

My wife volunteered to buy the yoga mats, one for each of us. The embassy had suggested round neck Ts of the kind I didn't own, and "stretchable" shorts, so my wife took a measuring tape to my expanding girth. "It's all that junk food you eat," she announced grimly. My daughter contended that if I was to get new clothes, so would she. "Seeing how I'm doing you a favour," my wife pointed out, "I'll need the car and driver." I could understand her not wanting to drive and park in the heat, but most days when my wife purloins the chauffeur, I have to Uber it home from work.

My wife has a fear of missing out on things. If she "borrows" the driver for a lunch appointment with pals, she might ask to be taken to a salon first to get her hair done. Her itinerary will be erratic: Drop by to say hello to a friend's cousin who's in town for a day, career off to an exhibition to post photographs with the artist on Facebook, stop by at a pop-up, decide on coffee and cake with another friend she hasn't met in a fortnight, squeeze in a film because... why not? And then call

to say the rest of us shouldn't wait up for dinner, she just happened to have a change of clothes and shoes in the car and decided to meet a bunch of "girls" for wine and gossip.

So, on the day before our yoga rendezvous, I'd reconciled to managing the commute on my own. According to the driver, my wife started with coffee at a friend's mother's home because she saves jars of homemade marmalade for her, then dropped it at a saree sale, decided on an unscheduled potluck with another girlfriend, went shopping for veggies and meats at INA Market, drove to some far corner for organic fertiliser for her plants. At home, appearing remarkably guilt-free, she observed, "What with all the errands I ran for all of you, I didn't have the time to get you the yoga stuff."

In previous years, I'd looked on enviously as acquaintances attended one or another yoga event. Now, here, finally, I had a chance to be a participant, no longer a voyeur. "I do hope you don't mind too much, darling," said my wife, carting her worn out mat to the embassy, while I looked on. "Don't worry," I sighed — for, truthfully, even with a mat and yoga wear, I wouldn't have known what to do anyway.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Missing the dividend

Every country in the course of its development sees drops in its birth and death rates. Since the two drops take place at different speeds and the death rate falls before the birth rate, the transition period is marked by high population growth before things stabilise. The transition also sees a change in the age-wise population mix: The percentage of people in the working age (usually taken at 15-65 years) begins to rise, peaks and then falls.

If a greater percentage of the total population is working, it gives the economy a boost in its income, savings and productivity, and brings with it other benefits. Countries that use the transition period successfully therefore enjoy an economic boom. Between a quarter and 40 per cent of the rapid growth that the countries of East Asia enjoyed in the second half of the last century has been attributed to what has come to be called the demographic dividend.

The demographic transition is measured with the dependency ratio, ie those outside the working age (young and old) as a percentage of those in the working age. India's ratio in 1980 was more or less the same as in 1960, at about 75 per cent. This period was marked by the low, so-called Hindu rate of growth. The ratio or percentage began dropping after that, just as the economic growth rate picked up. The fall in the dependency ratio accelerated from the mid-1990s, from roughly 70 per cent to 60 per cent in a decade, and to a little above 50 per cent in the subsequent decade. It is unlikely to be a pure coincidence that these have been the years of India's fastest economic growth.

Some projections suggest that the country's dependency ratio will flatten for the next two decades before it starts going up. Such a trajectory would be different from those of some of the countries in East Asia, including China, which managed to reduce their dependency ratio to 40 per cent or less before reversing gear. India is unlikely to manage that because its birth rate did not fall fast enough — a failure of its health and nutrition policy. That may well come in the way of the country achieving the sustained growth rates of between 8 per cent and 10 per cent that some East Asians achieved.

The question has to be asked: Is India going to miss some more of its potential demographic dividend? If so, it would be for two reasons: The demographic dividend can be fully exploited only if the people in the working age are actually working. And second, if those working have proper education and skills, making them productive in the workplace. On both counts, as everyone knows, the country has fallen short. An employment survey recently released by the government says that only half of those in the working age are actually working; that figure used to be 64 per cent in 2004-05. As for education and skills, the education surveys by Pratham and the patchy progress of the skills programme tell their unhappy stories.

Nevertheless, if India's dependency ratio remains in the low-50 per cent range for the coming two decades before starting to climb, the window of opportunity is still open to make up for egregious failures on the health, education and employment fronts, and to reap what remains of the demographic dividend. The problem is that the southern states, West Bengal and one or two others — ahead of the northern states on the demographic transition — have already seen the window of opportunity close, or will see it close in the next five years. The window will remain open for another decade or so for a bunch of other states, while laggards like Bihar will continue to experience the demographic transition for much longer.

These last happen to be the states where the health and education attainments are the poorest, so how much of a dividend awaits them is an open question. Remember that the demographic dividend is available only once in a country's time trajectory, because the population transition occurs only once. Time is a luxury the country does not have.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



The Trumpification of the Fed reserve

Like it or not, its next move will be political

In late 2015 then-candidate Donald Trump accused Janet Yellen, chair of the Federal Reserve, of being part of a political conspiracy. Yellen, he insisted, was keeping interest rates unjustifiably low in an attempt to help Hillary Clinton win the presidency.

As it happens, there were very good reasons for the Fed to keep rates low at the time. Some measures of the job market, notably prime-age employment, were still well below precrisis levels, and business investment was going through a significant slump — a sort of mini-recession.

Fast forward to the present. The employment picture is much stronger now than it was then. There are hints of an economic slowdown, partly because of the uncertainty created by Trump's trade war, but they're considerably fainter than those of 2015-16. And Trump himself keeps boasting about the economy's strength.

Yet he is openly pressuring the Fed to cut rates, and is reportedly looking for ways to demote Jay Powell, the man he himself chose to replace Yellen — declining to reappoint Yellen, according to some reports, because he didn't think she was tall enough.

But wait, there's more. While there are, as I said, hints of a slowdown here, there are much stronger warning signs in Europe, where manufacturing is slumping and recession worries are

on the rise. Yet even as he tries to bully the Fed into cutting rates, Trump flew into a rage over reports that the European Central Bank, Europe's counterpart to the Fed, is considering rate cuts of its own, which would weaken the euro and make US industry less competitive.

If these various positions sound inconsistent to you, you're just not thinking about them in the right way. The common principle is simple: Monetary policy should be whatever serves Donald Trump's interests. Nothing else matters. And Trump's current rage at the Fed should be understood mainly as an expression of frustration over the failure of his 2017 tax cut.

Yes, the tax cut gave the economy a boost, as you'd expect from policies that widened the annual full-employment budget deficit by about \$400 billion. (Imagine what the Obama economy would have looked like if Congress had let him spend \$400 billion a year on, say, infrastructure.) But it was a pretty modest boost, considering, with much of the tax cut being used just to buy back corporate stock.

More to the point, the tax cut was a political bust: Trump isn't getting much credit for good economic numbers, and a plurality of the white working-class voters on whom the tweeter in chief depends believe (correctly) that his policies mainly benefit people richer than themselves.

So Trump is, in effect, demanding that the Fed



PAUL KRUGMAN

bail him out of the consequences of his own policy failures. And if that were the whole story, the appropriate response would be some polite, Fedspeak version of "Go to hell."

But as it happens, Trump and his tantrums aren't the whole story. There is, in fact, a strong case that the Fed was too quick to raise interest rates from 2015 to 2019 — that it underestimated how much slack there still was in the US economy and overestimated the economy's underlying strength (which it has done consistently over the past decade).

And there is correspondingly a case for partially reversing recent Fed rate hikes, and cutting rates now as insurance against a possible future slump — getting ahead of the curve. Donald Trump is the worst possible person to be making this argument, but that doesn't mean that the argument is wrong.

So what should the Fed do?

Central bankers, like those running the Fed, try to portray themselves as apolitical and technocratic. This is never quite true in practice, but it's an ideal toward which they strive. Thanks to Trump, however, whatever the Fed does next will be seen as deeply political. If it does cut rates despite low unemployment, this will be seen as giving up its independence and letting Trump dictate policy. If it doesn't, Trump will lash out even harder.

And if I were Powell, I'd be worried about an even worse scenario. Suppose the Fed were to cut rates, and growth and inflation end up being higher than expected. Conventional policy would then call for reversing the rate cut — right on the eve of the 2020 election. The political firestorm would be horrific.

And I'm sorry, but in Trump's America no institution can ignore the political ramifications of its actions, if only because these ramifications will affect its ability to do its job in the future.

What this means for monetary policy, I think, is that while straight economics says that the Fed should try to get ahead of the curve, the political trap Trump has created argues that it should hold off — that it should insist that its policy is "data-dependent," and wait for clear evidence of a serious slowdown before acting.

Now, this might mean that if the Fed does eventually cut rates, whatever boost this gives the economy (which would be limited in any case, since rates are already quite low) will come too late to help Trump in the 2020 election. But if that's what happens, Trump will have only himself to blame.

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Shekhar Gupta's column 'National Interest' will resume next week.

When prime time is not for prime news



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

If India was a sitcom, it would be considered absurdly scripted, to well beyond the point of fantasy. In the past few weeks, hundreds of children have died, in government hospitals, of causes that are neither new, nor untreatable. This is a replay of similar mass deaths that have occurred in the past few years in the same places.

An Air Force plane disappeared in the North-East and the wreckage was discovered only days later. There were no survivors. There were multiple gunfights and ambushes in Kashmir during this period, with several paramilitary servicemen being

killed. Chennai, Marathwada and several other regions of the country went dry, as water became a really scarce commodity due to the coincidence of a delayed monsoon and the hottest summer on record.

One would have thought that these events would have monopolised the headlines, and dominated the mindspace of a nation that seems to obsessively consume news and views. There should have been questions asked in Parliament about the outrageous deaths of those children.

There should have been outrage at the deaths of soldiers fighting a forever war. There should have been emergency measures taken weeks ago to ease the drought conditions and enquiries made as to why such relief was delayed. There should have been hard questions asked about how the Air Force plane disappeared off the radar and crashed, without being located for so many days, in a highly sensitive border state.

However, the headlines really consisted of the deep analysis of religious slogans being shouted by newly elected MPs in Parliament, the parsing of sundry remarks made by godmen displaying their ignorance about evolution, one idiot's assertion that encephalitis can be cured by homeop-

athy, weird advertisements for "vegan water", and the triumphant celebrations of India's cricket victory over Pakistan in the ICC World Cup. The last, at least, was a rare event in that it was a slice of good news in the middle of a flaming, hot summer.

A free press is not necessarily an unbiased press. The media curates what it presents to the public, and that curation is driven by multiple considerations. The media, free or not, depends on advertisements. A substantial chunk of advertisements comes from the government.

So the media is sensitive to what the government wants to see, and, more importantly, does not want to see. In addition, the media highlights what it thinks the public wants to see because advertisement rates depend on TRP and page-views.

Hence, the priorities of the media will always be shaped by what it thinks will draw the largest audiences, and attract the highest advertisement rates, rather than by the "importance" of news. So the events highlighted on prime time reflect what the media thinks the paying public wants to see, and the events not highlighted indicate what the media thinks the government would rather not have on display.

Of course, it's not as though the events I

considered headline-worthy didn't make it to the news. There were reporters on those beats who diligently reported on those children's deaths. The media followed up on the crash and the encounters. The water crisis was reported on, in grim detail. But this was considered less worth headlining than the slogan shouting.

It is not as though the press in India is entirely free. Both anecdotal evidence and the hard data suggest that the press has seen its independence eroded in the past few years. Indeed, freedom of expression in the broader sense had been curtailed. Journalists have been jailed on flimsy grounds. Social media posters have been charged with sedition and the Indian government has registered a vast number of complaints against posts on Twitter and Facebook. At least one journalist covering a rail accident has been tortured

India has dropped lower and lower in global media rankings such as the World Press Freedom Index. The Indian media continues to cover unpleasant events and reports on things that don't necessarily show the government in a good light. But the erosion of independence shows up in the things that make prime time and the things that don't.

Politically liberal, economically illiberal



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

A few days ago, in a Chennai newspaper, which is also one of India's leading newspapers, there was an article full of gloom and doom for India's future. The predictions were dire.

The author, Harsh Mander Singh, who was once in the IAS, is now a full-time social activist. He has always been a severe critic of governments, regardless of which political parties are in power. More often than not, he is in the right, morally as well as in a practical sense.

The article, however, is a perfect example of the disarray in which, for want of a better name, the Nehruvian liberals find themselves after the overwhelming victory of the BJP in the 2019 election. Their world has come to an end.

By a strange coincidence, there was

another article, this time in *Dawn*, which is published from Karachi, by a well-regarded Pakistani economist called Anjum Altaf. Like the Indian writer, he also summed up the Indian liberal anguish.

He says that the Nehruvian project was always an elite one in which a small group of brown Englishmen sought to impose British political values upon India. He quotes Sunil Khilnani, author of the best-selling book *Idea of India*.

Khilnani had written that, in 1947, the majority of Indians had no idea of what they had been handed. So Nehru and his descendants had fought hard to tell them what it was, namely, religious tolerance, liberal values, and, overall, a very upper class but liberal English way of conducting national affairs — only for the English, of course.

Altaf says all that is now history because underneath the veneer of secularism and other democratic values, Indians are basically intolerant and undemocratic. In short, India has reverted to type. The hidden message to Indians is "we went before you, that's the only difference".

Politics, yes; economics, no?

Such views have been expressed by a whole range of scholars, activists and laypersons, among whom we must also count Amartya Sen, whose scholarship is not in doubt but, increasingly, his interpretations and fears are. That said, an opinion

doesn't become good or bad depending on who holds it. So it is a pity that that's exactly how many liberals think.

To all these people, I want to ask the question: How is political liberalism consistent with economic illiberalism? How do we explain the brutal suppression of Article 19(G) of the Constitution since 1950 — I should add — which guarantees the right to every citizen to freely carry on any business in any way he wants?

The Left liberal answer has always been that if by economic illiberalism is meant direct state participation and persistent intervention in economic activity, it is necessary to achieve egalitarian economic outcomes, such as the mitigation of poverty. Really?

But should we then not also ask why the opposite, namely, political illiberalism, should be inconsistent with economically egalitarian outcomes. After all, China's political illiberalism — and before that of all of South East Asia — has delivered highly egalitarian economic outcomes that the Left liberals admire.

Thus, those who rightly extol the virtues of Nehruvian political liberalism wrongly ignore Nehruvian economic illiberalism. Take any piece of Nehru-era economic legislation and you will find illiberalism is writ large on it.

As a result, the Indian economy has become like a car that has the appropriate

wheels on one side — political liberalism — and scooter wheels — economic illiberalism — on the other. It moves like a man with aggravated hydrocele.

The irony is that the very liberals who are now lamenting the passing of Nehruvian political values and ideals are also demanding the dismantling of his rare economic liberalism. For instance, even Dr Manmohan Singh has, from time to time, said that Indian labour laws need to be made more "flexible", meaning less liberal.

Likewise, the same set of people who brought in the MGNREGA in 2006 have thought nothing of asking for abolishing subsidies for the poor. These were the cornerstone of Indira Gandhi's economic policies.

Thus, we have confusion at every stage in the Left liberal minds. They are well-meaning people no doubt. But they still need to stop cherry picking from the Nehruvian bush.

I can offer them one model from which to copy: The British Labour party of the late 1990s, namely, New Labour. Nehruvian liberals can, likewise, can become the New Liberals. They need to strike a balance between political liberalism and economic illiberalism by abridging the former and expanding the latter.

It is such a pity that Rahul Gandhi didn't ask me because I would have told him that the BJP is trying to do exactly this — and once again stealing the liberal thunder.

Boredom is bliss

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHEK

Let's discuss boredom. I know it's boring — you would rather scroll through your Twitter or Instagram account (I would prefer binge-watching videos on YouTube or OTT platforms).

Yet, we must admit that with an endless array of information and entertainment, boredom has become something of a rarity — perhaps, even, a luxury. And, it's bliss, at least sometimes.

First, what creates boredom?

According to the authors of *'The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention'*, a paper published in September 2012 in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, boredom is the aversive state that occurs when we (a) are not able to successfully engage attention with internal (thoughts or feelings) or external (environmental stimuli) information required for participating in a satisfying activity; (b) are focused on the fact that we are not able to engage attention and participate in a satisfying activity; (c) attribute the cause of our aversive state to the environment.

Basically, boredom is a state of feeling underwhelmed. Studies show that a person would probably rather choose to be shocked than be alone with his/her thoughts for as little as six minutes.

Still, boredom is essential for happiness in our lives. Research has found that it activates areas of our brain that link to negative emotions like fear and disgust, as well as, areas that govern our ability to plan and behave in a goal-driven way.

Researchers Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, both at the University of Central Lancashire, explained the creativity-boosting power of boredom in two rounds of studies. In both rounds, participants were either assigned the boring task of copying numbers from a phone book or assigned to a control group, which skipped the phone book assignment. All participants were then asked to generate as many uses as they could for a pair of plastic cups. Mann and Cadman found that the participants who had intentionally led to boredom through the phone book task had generated significantly more uses for the pair of plastic cups.

Boredom felt during passive activities heightens the "daydreaming effect" on creativity — the more passive the boredom, the more creative a person could be afterwards.

The findings suggested that boredom felt during passive activities heightens the "daydreaming effect" on creativity — the more passive the boredom, the more likely the daydreaming and the more creative a person could be afterwards.

American writer and filmmaker Susan Sontag had once said: "The life of the creative man is led, directed and controlled by boredom."

According to American and European researchers, when people's minds wander, they're more likely to think about their future. In a process known as "autobiographical planning", they most frequently plan and anticipate their goals while daydreaming.

Daydreaming actually involves more than just beating back boredom — in fact, according to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, scientists at Bar-Ilan University demonstrated not only daydreams offer a welcome "mental escape" from boring tasks, they also have a positive, simultaneous effect on task performance.

Actually, feeling bored is like an alarm bell in a person's brain, sending a warning that something isn't right. And in the search for a solution, we upgrade ourselves.

The sense of disillusionment that accompanies boredom also encourages a person to re-establish a sense of purpose and helps connect with someone by acting altruistically.

Besides, there is a growing body of research which shows just how important boredom is for a child's development. "When confronted with walls of 'I'm bored!' adults don't need to rush in with an organised activity or a new toy or game. Encouraging the child to find his or her own solution will help them develop autonomy, creativity and coping skills," Teresa Belton of the University of East Anglia, and author of *Happier People Healthier Planet*, wrote in an online article.

So, next time when you have nothing to do, don't take out your smartphone and jump into social media, but allow your mind to wander. Boredom is precious.

And with this, I'm bored. It's time I checked my phone and dove into that glowing screen.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport