

The Beijing question



TICKER
MIHIR SHARMA

Even as Donald Trump prepares to meet his counterpart from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, the attention of most Americans is focused on Trump's real opponents: The 20 or so politicians seeking the nomination of the Democratic party for president of the United States. There were so many of them that the debates are being staggered — half of them debated each other on Wednesday night, and the other half on Thursday.

Trump, typically, declared early on that the first debate was “BORING!”, and we cannot assume he was paying attention, even though he might have learned something useful. But the real question is whether Xi was listening. Because it came through in the debate that, even if Trump's methods are questionable, his reorientation of the US foreign policy towards Beijing may well be permanent.

When asked about how he would deal with the PRC, for example, the young Democratic from Indian, Pete Buttigieg, declared that “their authoritarian model is being held up as an alternative to ours because ours looks so chaotic”, but that the severity of the challenge from Beijing should not be underestimated or minimised by the Democrats. “They're using technology for the perfection of dictatorship,” he said. Another Democrat warned of what he called “Chinese malfeasance in the trade relationship”. Yet another accused them of “cheating”.

Fortunately for Xi, the only Democrat who looks soft on Beijing is also the one who has — at the moment — a comfortable lead in opinion polls. Joe Biden, who has been part of the establishment forever, is a paid-up member of the older bloc of Democrats who first saw the PRC through a Cold War prism and then through the ultimately deceptive lens of “engagement” leading to democracy and rule of law. Biden controversially said at a recent rally that “You know, they're not bad folks... but, guess what, they're not competition for us”. The Republicans are prepared to make Biden's stand on Beijing an issue — armed in particular with an accusation that the then vice president's son, Hunter Biden, flew on Air Force Two with his father to Beijing in December 2013 and then became professionally involved with a firm seeking to raise \$1.5 billion from state-connected lenders in the PRC.

So intense was the response, however, to Biden's remarks that he had to walk them back a bit, admitting that the PRC was “a problem”. And even if he himself appears to be relatively unconvinced of the threat, there is every likelihood that, if he elected, whichever Democrat he picks as Secretary of State will carry out what appears to be the new Washington consensus. Many there disagree with Trump's approach — trade wars are expensive, and painful, and often unproductive. But an attempt to isolate Beijing on trade, on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), technology transfer, freedom of navigation and other similar issues is extremely likely to continue under a Democratic administration.

India needs to adjust to this reality. The time for “balance” is running out. When the current US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, visited New Delhi this week he stood next to Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and declared that the BRI came not just with strings attached but with “shackles”. (Beijing officials declared that Pompeo was “under a spell or something” because he kept “slandering” the BRI. *The Global Times*, with its usual calm restraint, said that Pompeo's attitude was “phenomenally abominable”). The Trump administration has not yet figured out, unfortunately, that gaining ground against Beijing would require it to be nicer to other powers — too much effort has been expended undermining the US-India relationship of late, with trade issues being raised from “irritants” to “obstacles” over the past year. But New Delhi, too, has been nothing if not short-sighted. It needs to not just get the US on-side but to stop imagining that the PRC will behave like any other, docile developing country. Why, for example, did the Union commerce ministry include an envoy from the PRC in discussions on how to fix the multilateral trading system recently? Given the actual problems that are destabilising the trading system emerge essentially from the economic system of the PRC, that seemed a patently illogical decision.

Even if the Osaka G-20 summit ends with some sort of apparent rapprochement between Xi and Trump, there is no reason to suppose it will last. Both leaders are responding now to strong domestic pressures that have boxed them into a confrontational attitude. And even if Trump leaves the Oval Office in 2021, his Democratic successor may change the method by which this confrontation is carried on, but cannot alter its momentum. India prides itself on its “strategic autonomy”, but there will come a time, soon, when it should pick a side.

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The hail-fellow-well-met man of BJP

Because of his all-India appointments, J P Nadda knows the BJP organisation intimately. Workers know him well and he knows the chemistry of being a worker



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

Jagat Prakash Nadda has been appointed working president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Bilaspur (Himachal Pradesh) unit of the BJP is ecstatic that their boy has made good. The general impression is that even when he becomes a full-fledged president six months hence (that, apparently is the deal, for the BJP's constitution has no provision for a working president), he will work under the overall supervision of

éminence grise, Amit Shah. In any case, the BJP faces few electoral challenges for the next 18 months: Once the Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi assembly elections are behind us. So it is argued that Shah's absence will not really be felt and Nadda can't do much harm.

The BJP has had four presidents in the years the party has been in government. There was Kushabhau Thakre, who was a representative of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) heading the party when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was prime minister. Thakre was a pracharak and it is unlikely that the BJP will have any such individual heading the party in the foreseeable future. M Venkaiah Naidu was also president of the BJP during Vajpayee's prime ministership. There was the disgraced Bangaru Lakshman, who represented the BJP's experiment with social engineering (a Dalit, he was sacked caught taking a bribe and had to step down) and the irascible Jana Krishnamurthy.

All the presidents had their own style of running the BJP. Of all, Nadda will probably be closest to Venkaiah Naidu when it comes to choosing a role model. He is probably not as astute as Naidu but he has the same expansive style.

This in turn comes from a long, long innings in the BJP as a worker and organisational man. Look around you. You don't see too many at that level and of that generation. Leaders high up in the government like Piyush Goyal and Bhupender Yadav have no experience of running the BJP as an organisation. Among his contemporaries, there is no one who has the organisational experience of Nadda: Nearly 40 years. He began life as a student activist in Himachal University in the early 1980s and won the students union election for the first time for the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). That election was a tie and he had to share the presidency with his rival so he served only half his term. He went on to become the all India organising secretary of the ABVP and then became president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM).

At that time, the other big BJP leader from the Himachal Pradesh unit of the BJP, PK Dhimal was not on the scene. He was in Delhi in the Lok Sabha and Nadda was the colossus in the assembly, second only to the legend of the BJP in Himachal, Shanta Kumar.

The turning point was the 1998 Assembly election in Himachal Pradesh. Narendra Modi

had taken over as BJP general secretary. The BJP had just eight seats in the outgoing assembly. After the election, the party won 31. In the outgoing assembly, Nadda had been the leader of Opposition. He expected to be made chief minister. But it was PK Dhimal who became CM. Modi may have had a role in that appointment. Anyway, Nadda swallowed his disappointment and became health minister in the Dhimal-led government. His affability and hail-fellow-well-met mien was summarised in what his colleagues used to say about him: Apparently when he met workers he would say ‘*kaam ke alaava koi kaam batao*’ (order me to do some work other than work).

When the BJP went out of power in Himachal, Nadda became a deputy to Nitin Gadkari who was then the party president. Gadkari got him to Rajya Sabha and promoted him. Eventually — and few people remember this — he became secretary to the BJP's highest body, the parliamentary board that has just eight members. He has served in that capacity more than seven years.

Because of his all-India appointments, Nadda knows the BJP organisation intimately. He is no longer a threat to anyone. He may not be able to draw crowds by his oratory but workers know him well and he knows the chemistry of being a worker.

Becoming national president of the BJP makes him overqualified to become chief minister of Himachal Pradesh. But who knows, that goal should be attainable one day. JP Nadda is a man to watch in the BJP.

LUNCH WITH BS ► DHIRENDRA K JHA | AUTHOR

Hindutva's ground realities

Jha, a close observer of this religio-political movement, tells Kanika Datta why the world of *sadhus* is an expanding enterprise

Dhirendra K Jha says he doesn't know much about eating out beyond the Press Club, so could I choose a place, preferably somewhere central? Mindful of the subject of his latest book, *Ascetic Games*, an expose of the murky world of *sadhus* and its connections with right-wing politics, and Narendra Modi's expressed aversion to the westernised elite, I gleefully select The Big Chill Café in Khan Market.

Sadly, my attempt at personal subversion falls flat: Jha says he is unfamiliar with Khan Market's restaurants but agrees to the venue. At the noisy restaurant, he expresses no interest in the elaborate Hollywood Classics-themed menu either. A cheese sandwich and cappuccino will do, he says indifferently. Naturally, The Big Chill Café does not produce something so mundane, so cheese and tomato panini it has to be. Regretfully eschewing the opportunity to dig into lamb chops on *Business Standard's* dime, I select a tuna melt sandwich and black coffee.

Jha, rail-thin and so low key it is hard to believe he is an important commentator on right-wing politics, has been a careful chronicler of the Hindutva project, putting in the slog of exhaustive ground reporting to write two well-received books. *Ayodhya: The Dark Night*, co-authored with journalist Krishna Jha in 2012, remains the go-to, much-quoted text every time the Babri Masjid controversy rears its head. *Shadow Armies: Fringe Organisations and Foot Soldiers of Hindutva*, published in 2017, traces the rise of Hindutva's semi-lawless para-organisations.

Ascetic Games: Sadhus, Akharas and the Making of the Hindutva Vote published in April, focuses on a less publicised aspect of the Hindutva universe. The *sadhus'* world is, to quote Jha in the introduction, “not... formed by the spiritual strengths of its ascetics but one formed by the brute force of syndicates of armed *sadhus* who fight among themselves — sometimes even engaging in open battles — for wealth and power.”

This profane world of murder, forgery and related criminality that flourishes under the veil of spirituality merges seamlessly with the “business end of things, the state and the openly communalist Hindu Right”.

The somewhat menacing bohemianism that is routinely on display for the world press at the Kumbh is central to their MO. Most people assume that these *sadhus* return to lives of devout ascetic contemplation afterwards, so Jha's revelations are eye-opening.

He describes how he came to write this book in the introduction. He and Krishna Jha were returning from a visit to Ayodhya while researching *The Dark Night* to trace how the *sadhu* Abhiram Das, a resident of Hanumangarhi, seat of one of the powerful *Vaishnav akharas* (or order), planted the idol of Ram on that fateful night of December 22, 1949. Outside the temple, he witnessed a group of *sadhus* viciously assaulting an elderly man while policemen nearby feigned disinterest and a small crowd watched but did not intervene. The man, a flower vendor for the temple, had been unable to pay rent for the past two months so the *sadhus* of Hanumangarhi decided to teach him a lesson. “This blatant display of violence by supposed ascetics was the first interaction with these people and forced me to examine it more closely,” he says. Once he finished *The Dark Night*, he started to try entering that world.

By ideology, Jha is leftist — a paid-up member of the All India Students' Federation in his student days “but Delhi University, not JNU,” he laughingly clarifies — and an atheist and his books suggest that he is no fan of Hindu nationalism. So how did he gain such access to these *sadhus*? “I had to assume a different kind of identity most of the time,” he admits with a guilty grin. His credentials as a Maithil Brahmin from Darbhanga in northern Bihar proved useful in gaining access to Hanumangarhi, for instance. “Abhiram Das happened to be a Maithil Brahmin, and one of his disciples, who was the main priest in

the makeshift Ram temple, gave me the name of his village, Rarhi. I found three villages of that name: One in Samastipur and two in Darbhanga. The last one was actually Das' home, where I located his youngest brother who was still alive. This gave me an advantage.”

Later, he went to Haridwar, the main centre for the *Shaiva akharas*, which is heavily influenced by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). “They helped because I told them I wanted to write about the Sangh mahatmas. I gave them the impression that I would make them world famous. Becoming famous is very important for these *sadhus* because it brings them followers, money and so on. So that is when they started revealing things to me.”

But didn't they read his writing, I ask incredulously as the food arrives with disconcerting promptness. He shakes his head. “They don't read, even today. But the RSS guys have started reading me now so I am finding things a bit difficult...” he trails off as he doubtfully eyes the outsized sandwich oozing gooey cheese. A fork and knife are ineffective against the thick untoasted bread so I suggest he simply use his fingers as I was doing with the giant tuna melt. All the same, he admits, reporting in the Hindutva heartland is a risky business, which is why he never gives on-camera interviews and has a Twitter handle only to follow what others are saying.

As he manfully tackles the panini, I ask him about the political mobilisation for Hindutva. In *The Dark Night*, he and his co-author recount how an attempt to hold a *Sita Kirtan* as a build-up to installing the Ram idol in the Babri Masjid flopped because devotees were uninterested. How did Hindutva become such a fervent political movement just four decades later? The choice of Ram as a symbol of Hindutva politics changed everything: “It is very difficult for political organisations to attract people on the basis of religion,” he says, “so they chose this

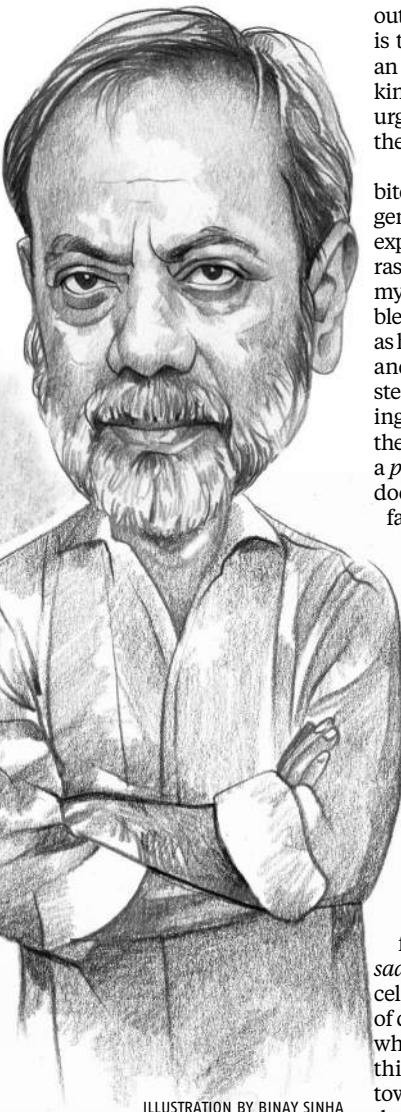


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

deity carefully by combining religious and political missions — to destroy the Babri Masjid and establish Ram Rajya. Hindutva was successful in creating synergy with the aspirations of the devotees.”

How come devotees aren't repelled by the *sadhus'* criminality which is so openly manifest? Blind faith is one obvious explanation, of course, but the kind of “ascetic cover” these *sadhus* use prevent believers from seeing through them, he points

out. “The most important technique is the way the Kumbh is staged” — an interesting verb to use. “It's just a kind of drama, you know,” he says, urging me to go to see “madness in the name of religion”.

Jha, having managed a couple of bites, abandons the panini — “I don't generally eat this kind of thing,” he explains apologetically. I am embarrassed because I have wolfed down my sandwich. He declines a more edible substitute so we order more coffee as he explains why the *sadhu* network and its money-making empires is steadily expanding and consolidating. “The RSS cadres have become the recruiting ground for *sadhus*. See, a *pracharak* gives up everything. He does not marry, is cut off from his family, gives his whole life to RSS, work in close association with religion and in constant touch with *sadhus*.”

As they start ageing, they can't go back home because they haven't earned anything. So they have two options. One, join politics but few people can do that. For the majority *sadhu*-dom is the only fallback. “When they enter then they use their connections to leverage their position and become part of that establishment,” he says.

One collateral revelation from *Ascetic Games* is the fact that *sadhus* may be unmarried but hardly celibate, preying on the large cohorts of destitute women to be seen everywhere in India. One consequence of this is the presence in key temple towns of sizeable numbers of abandoned women. Male children are usually adopted by the *mahants* but girls fall prey to the same cycle of forced prostitution as their mothers. Their condition is worse than the widows of Vrindavan.

That should be his next book, I suggest as the bill arrives. But he says his immediate project is a study of RSS' activities around independence and how Gandhi countered the movement. Pragna Thakur's recent campaign bloopers suggest that that is a timely subject if there ever was one.

Are you a ‘volontourist’?



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
KEYA SARKAR

In order to avoid the extreme heat of Santiniketan from mid-May to mid-June, this year too, we took off for cooler climes. Although we wanted to go to Uttarakhand or Himachal we did not want to be anywhere near the tourist spots. So, after many hours on the internet, we chose a small village in Chamoli district in Uttarakhand for our respite. We decided we would divide our time between there and another little hamlet 30 kms from Dehradun. We rented two houses in the two places and our summer was sorted early in the year, by March in fact.

We decided to get off the train at Haridwar and take the road to our desti-

nation in Chamoli, a run of almost 250 kms. Thanks to the Modi government's grand plan of a four lane highway all the way to the sacred *char dhams*, the entire stretch from Haridwar to Rudrapur was a driving hell filled with loaders, tractors, bulldozers and just piles of rubble. Added to this, of course, was the traffic caused by pilgrims, tourists getting away from the heat of the plains and river rafters.

We arrived at our destination in nine hours having left Haridwar early morning. As we got out of the car and stretched our stiff legs, we realised that from the road the house that we had rented was a bit of a climb downhill. While the caretaker of the property dealt with the luggage, we braced ourselves for the descent worried that our wobbly legs would give way suddenly. As we were almost there, a young woman appeared and asked whether we needed help with any of the handbags that we were carrying. We were wondering who she was when she surprised us by speaking in *Bengali*. She said that she was from Bengal and was happy to have met us.

Wary from long hours of travel in the constricted space of the car, we were so happy to unpack and change and look out at the snow clad peaks that we forgot all about her till we met her again at din-

ner. It was then we learnt that she was a “volontourist” there. Never having heard of the concept, we listened attentively as she explained.

She was interested in travel writing and to pay for that, she was volunteering to stay here and help with the business of the homestay. She was given boarding and lodging but no money. Apparently, after the stint here was over, she had a few more such offers lined up where the deal was no money or barely some.

Over the next few days, we tried to figure her key performance areas. She said she was supposed to help the caretaker in his duties to serve the guests. As she warmed up to us a bit, she let us know that since the caretaker was older in age and experience (she was 21), he didn't take kindly to any instructions from her.

Since the caretaker did not stay on the premises, when there were no guests, she was completely alone on the property. A property with no fencing that neighbours could access easily. I asked her how she thought this experience would add to her resume. That I think triggered a reaction. Next morning, she declared she was going to leave the day we were to go, back to her home in Bengal.

We had managed to unshackle another youngster from the chains of buzzwords.

That stinking feeling



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

Some years ago, I mentioned to my wife that I would freeze mint leaves, lemon rinds and olives in ice-cubes, to be served in drinks — a party trick from my bachelor days. There were two fallouts from this conversation. One, my wife accused me of not treating her as well as I would my alleged girlfriends. And, two, she said that anything I could do, she could do better. Which is why guests began to discover odd additions to their beverages. “Most people do not enjoy chocolate in their whisky,” I said to her. “Tomatoes do not lend flavour to Coke,” I pointed out. “Cocktail onions can be served alongside but not in mixed

drinks,” I suggested. It wasn't till her friend Sarla told her to cease that my wife stopped further experiments with ice and incongruous ingredients.

I thought she had rediscovered that mojo last week when I popped ice into my sundowner and found it contained some manner of nuts and seeds. It also muddled the drink, so I had to throw it away and make myself a fresh one. What was in the ice was soon resolved. My wife likes to store peels, pips and other detritus from the kitchen for composting. In this heat, if it isn't taken immediately out, it begins to rot. To keep it from smelling, my wife had popped a bag of fresh garbage into the freezer that had leached into the ice-trays.

If you thought that was the grossest thing to come out of the fridge, you'd be wrong. A few years ago, caught on the wrong foot by guests who stayed for dinner when we had invited them for drinks, my wife ferreted around for things to thaw into a quick meal. But the frosting on the packets made it difficult to tell their content, so she decided to chuck one into the microwave oven. Soon, an odour not unlike a laundry filled the kitchen. The packet turned out to be a bag, long thought lost, of my son's briefs that he liked to

keep in the fridge to keep cool before wearing. We ordered takeout.

You'd think that might have taught us a lesson, but cracked bottles of beer and wine are routinely removed from the freezer. My daughter, who enjoys bursts of deep cleaning once every blue moon, will pull out jars of preserves, condiments and sauces, packets of imported salmon, chocolates and cheese, all long past their expiry dates. You'd think that might free up space and allow fresh produce in. You'd also think my wife would be hostile, but her reaction is strangely gleeful. “Oh, salmon,” she'll exult, “let's invite Sarla for dinner.” “I'm not touching the salmon, Mom,” my daughter will say. “You can have the potatoes,” my wife will suggest, “but I'm not wasting the salmon. And Sarla served me stale food last time.”

She likes us to eat our food cooked fresh from ingredients that aren't. Only, she forgets what's in the deep-freeze too often. Last night's risotto caused soap bubbles to form in my mouth because the cheese my wife thought she'd used was actually laundry soap she'd put away. And to think I had to wash my mouth out with it when I hadn't even said a bad word — only thought it.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Imported horsemen

And so the fourth and final horseman is heading back across the Atlantic. Viral Acharya will soon follow in the retraced footsteps of Arvind Subramanian, Raghuram Rajan, and Arvind Panagariya. Media comment projects the country as the loser, but no one is alarmist in the way some were when Dr Rajan headed back to Chicago. Nor does current comment reflect the extreme fears raised by Dr Acharya in his famous speech about central bank independence. But then, neither do too many people reflect the view reportedly expressed by Arun Jaitley as finance minister, that one of the mistakes the Modi government made was to import economists from abroad.

Let's be clear: The country IS the loser when it loses top-flight economists. But before we come to that, consider the possibility that experts can be wrong. Dr Acharya's academic qualifications and expertise in central banking are widely acknowledged, but he does have to answer questions on his record at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). On his watch, the RBI's macro-economic analysis has been wrong on the inflation rate as well as the economic growth rate — over-estimating both. Flowing from those misjudgments, he has been wrong also in his advocacy of interest rate policy, opposing two of the recent rate cuts announced by the RBI.

There is the question of cultural fit. Foreigners doing business with Indians find that Indians don't say "No" when they disagree, preferring to shift ground or resort to indirect signalling. That's unlike in the US, say, where you are expected to bluntly say "No" if that is your position. Similarly, those within the Indian government system do not speak out publicly against the government they serve. When you are governor or deputy governor, you do not have the freedom of speech that an ordinary citizen enjoys. Differences are aired only internally. On the occasions when someone feels the need to start a public debate, it is not done in apocalyptic terms. Naturally, when Dr Rajan and Dr Acharya spoke out bluntly (in the case of the former, on issues with which he was not officially concerned), it did not go down well. And yet, on the one issue (demonetisation) on which one might have expected Dr Rajan to take a stand, he became a homegrown Indian: He advised against, then went along.

Still, it was not a mistake to hire these economists. Dr Rajan's determination to clean up banking led to the asset quality review, which exposed the extent of the hidden rot. Next, while it is no secret that Dr Rajan and his deputy (later successor) Urjit Patel did not get along, it was under Dr Rajan that Dr Patel formulated a policy framework for the RBI, making inflation control the primary goal of monetary policy. This reflected international thinking on the issue, but was contrary to the view of previous, homegrown governors like Y V Reddy and Bimal Jalan. Still, monetary policy has been recast.

In the finance ministry, Arvind Subramanian's many policy prescriptions were usually ignored by the government despite his strenuous advocacy. But his report on the modal rate for the goods and services tax did get indirect acceptance, while his opposition to multiple rates has found partial purchase after his departure. Dr Subramanian has also been recognised for raising the quality of analysis in the government's annual Economic Surveys. But after his recent questioning of the official growth numbers, he must be *persona non grata*.

At the NITI Aayog, Arvind Panagariya came early and left two years ago. He did not get as much face time with the prime minister as he may have expected, perhaps because his reformist thinking on macro-economic policy was tangential to the approach of the Modi government, which has been more interested in programmes and projects, and in specific issues like how to reform medical education. The NITI Aayog played its part here, but Dr Panagariya's big ideas like coastal economic zones have not materialised.

Today, with growth having slowed and macro-economic challenges in every direction, would the government have benefited from the advice of "Harvard" economists? Perhaps, but judging by past record it probably would not have paid much heed.

When Modi's fans & foes agree he's unbeatable

Modi loyalists believe they've destroyed Congress by being better at their game: Welfarism, national security obsession bordering on jingoism, and an almighty personality cult

Even in times so polarised that we fight over the colours of our cricket team's kit, there is one thing both fans and critics of Narendra Modi agree on: That he is unbeatable. Now, and in any foreseeable future.

First, the BJP loyalists. They think their hold on power is now unshakeable for a quarter of a century. Broadly, that would make it about equal to the Congress rule during 1952-89, broken only by the short period between 1977 and 1979. This is only fair, they say, as the nationalist Right must have the same opportunity to mould India as the secular Left did after Independence.

In five years, they've already shown how fragile the old socio-political formulations, especially of hard secularism, are and how easy it is to take away socialism and welfarism from the old Centre-Left — only to execute it better, and convert this efficient delivery to the poor into votes. The project to change the ideological and philosophical colour of gathering academia and intelligentsia is already progressing well.

With repeated majorities, they believe, they will have the time to achieve much of their ideological objectives by 2025, early in Mr Modi's third term. The remodelling of India into their concept of Hindu Rashtra, they believe, can be achieved in the next six years, within the ambit of the same Constitution, basic character and all. That year also happens to be the 100th anniversary of the founding of the RSS.

Modi loyalists now believe they have established a social contract with India's poor, much as Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi had done.

They believe they have destroyed the Congress not by Hindu nationalism, but through being better at old Congressism: Welfarism, a national security obsession bordering on jingoism, and an almighty personality cult. This new social contract with the poor has made Mr Modi unbeatable, they think.

The best armies can lose wars, but they are tested for their nerve in orderly retreats as much as in heady victories. The Opposition, led by the Congress, is breaking ranks and retreating into self-destruction much like our army in 1962, commanded by cowardly generals who fled first, and bumbling politicians.

The mood is characterised by their sanctimonious outrage at the voters. The Congress believes "Modi

has won but India has lost", which the PM brought up in Parliament this week to taunt the Opposition. Allies of the Congress and others fare worse. For example, Karnataka Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy's outburst at job-seekers: "You voted for Modi, ask him for jobs" is typical of this bankruptcy. And Mayawati blaming her own ally Akhilesh for her defeat — hers is the most panicky politics



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

now, followed closely by Mamata Banerjee. The Bengal chief minister's call to the Congress and Left to join her in a common front against the BJP is morally bankrupt, politically nutty and psephologically unwise. It is as if Mamata has already conceded defeat in the next assembly elections. Others — from the Left to Naveen Patnaik, Jagan, KCR and Stalin — do not count.

It is tempting to buy into the Opposition's mood — that Mr Modi is unbeatable, particularly with his 95:5 superiority in resources, tightening control over the institutions and an increasingly supplicant media. What can you do if the voters want an elected dictatorship?

Historically, post-Rajiv Gandhi, this has been the approach of the Congress. It gets so contemptuous of people who reject it overwhelmingly that it doesn't even go back and ask them why. Yogendra Yadav, in his psephologist avatar, made a startling finding: That the Congress never makes a recovery in a state once its vote share has fallen below 20 per cent there.

It just gets so angry with the voters' "stupidity", as if to say, ok guys, you don't deserve us and we don't need ungrateful people like you. This, the outrage of the spurned feudal, is a reasonable explanation for Rahul Gandhi not showing up in Amethi in even five weeks after he lost the loyal family bastion. You can't be so dismissive unless you've concluded that Mr Modi is now unbeatable. So, the opposition to Mr Modi is better left to "liberal" activists, intellectuals and PIL warriors. The challenge of a political reversal, therefore, is diminished into the heady but collegiate idea of "resistance".

If both the Modi backers and opponents are right and he's permanently unbeatable, the first casualty will be political commentators like us. There

will be nothing more to say. The fact is, politics never becomes frozen or static for long. It is mostly cyclical, though the wheel can sometimes take really long to turn, as it did with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

The history of democracies is filled with examples of the self-destruction of both, who declared victory or defeat too early. But there are also many of those who refuse to give up, absorb the shock and lessons of defeat and rebuild — but with patience. The best examples are both Indira's Congress after the Emergency and then the Advani-Vajpayee BJP.

Indira Gandhi rebuilt herself within two and a half years, via jail and riding an elephant to Belchi. When she saw a weakness in the Janata government, notably national security, she attacked it devastatingly and succeeded.

In 1980, the Janata Party, which included the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, disintegrated in humiliation and Indira Gandhi made a thumping return. But the Vajpayee-Advani duo led their defeated troops into an organised retreat and regrouped into a new party, the BJP. Within four years, it suffered a bigger setback, reduced to two in Rajiv Gandhi's 1984 landslide. As did the rest of the Opposition.

But they didn't go into a sulk. They analysed their weaknesses and put their heads down with determination and humility. And, remember, Rajiv had won 414 seats then. Mr Modi still has only 303.

Within three years, that same devastated opposition had reduced Rajiv to a lame duck. Rajiv's errors helped, but the opposition, especially the BJP, did a brilliant job inside Parliament and outside, aligning with Congress dissidents and Opposition leaders it had fought with, and worked with activists and the media to unravel Bofors and other scandals.

The real reason why it raised itself to power in 1998 was that it found a big idea the Congress and Socialists couldn't counter: Ram Mandir and new Hindutva. You can test it, but a big idea was needed as an alternative idea. It's taken 35 years, but the BJP is now as dominant as the Congress in the past.

The best way to learn lessons in politics, in victory or defeat, is from evidence from your own times. Mr Modi may have the aura of an irresistible conquistador now but he is human. He isn't an "avatar" (or "autar" as they'd say in the heartland). Within months of his 2014 landslide, Arvind Kejriwal beat him 67-3 in Delhi. Only because his AAP then was a big new idea. Political change of that kind needs radical surgery. Homeopathy won't do.

This is the season of cricket, and I will invoke a brilliant Asaduddin Owaisi description for Mr Modi: He walks into Parliament with the nonchalance of a Vivian Richards coming out to bat in supreme contempt of the bowlers. Then

there's the "solution" England found for their Richards problem: Just set a deep, defensive field, let him keep hitting and you block his shots until he gets bored and makes a mistake. Endless patience, self-preservation, waiting for the adversary to make errors is also a strategy. The first prerequisite, even more than intellect, is a bunch of guts and some fire in the belly.

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Our permanently stunted children



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

A pet theme of Bollywood's separated-at-birth plots is of the one brother who grows up to be a good cop, and the other an underworld criminal. The reality couldn't be more distant from this lost-and-found pop fantasy. For instance, if they happened to be born around the villages of Muzaffarpur and other districts of Bihar and adjacent Uttar Pradesh, chances are they'd be lost early on from dire illness, malnutrition and impoverishment; and were they to survive the trauma, they would likely develop into physically stunted and emotionally deprived specimens.

An example of this is the recent hit Netflix series *Delhi Crime*, a gritty, dramatised reprisal of the brutal gang rape of 2012 that paralysed the nation and stunned the world. In the serial the police

— from officer to constable — are valorised as made of sterling stuff, but it's the rapists and killers in the bus that transfix us: Glassy-eyed, unrepentant, meagre, and morally wasted youth — escapees from the grinding deprivation of the Hindi heartland, adrift in the crevices of the metropolis. Of the six, one killed himself in jail, four are on death row and the sixth, a juvenile, was let off after three years.

As the police track the criminals to their families in villages, it requires no quantum leap of the imagination to link their likes to the distraught, destitute families who dragged their encephalitis-afflicted children to the dysfunctional, desperately understaffed rural clinics and district hospitals in Muzaffarpur this month, and in Gorakhpur last year.

"*Garmi, garibi aur gaon*" is how one newspaper summed up the cause of the current outbreak of children's deaths, a death knell that tolls louder and is a glaring aberration in the prime minister's ambition of transforming India into a \$5-trillion economy by 2024.

"And what do you know about hunger and poverty?" the 19th century novelist and social reformer Charles Dickens was known to rhetorically ask audiences of wealthy Victorian burghers who quizzed him about his cautionary stories of burnt-out childhoods — of starving children put to flight, worked to the bone in toxic fac-

tories, and taking to crime in their short, brutish lives. (Dickens's had first-hand experience when his father ended up in a debtors' prison.)

The trouble is that there is no dearth of information and research on malnutrition and child mortality in India. Other than the copious district-wise analysis available in the National Family Health Survey 2015-2016, here is what Unicef's Global Nutrition Report for 2018 states: "More than half of the world's children impacted by wasting (26.9 million) live in South Asia. Of the three countries that are home to almost half (47.2%) of all stunted children, two are in Asia: India (46.6 million) and Pakistan (10.7 million) ... India holds almost a third (31%) of the world's burden for stunting, so researchers at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) used district-level data to understand spatial differences in the distribution of stunting across India's districts — with 239 of 604 districts having stunting levels above 40%. This data was then used to inform policies and action."

The last two words — "policy and action" — that are operative. Given the informed context, and cause and effect of the recurring deaths, scant investment is quoted as the primary reason of a shameful health care system. This may be the case but it is inefficient use of resources, no clear chain of delivery, and an overriding lack of accountability that are at the

root of the persisting evil.

Legislators zip in and out, mouthing empty words and proffering bereavement cheques; district administrators spring into action only when the crisis explodes in television headlines. No one is sacked. On the contrary struggling medical staff are besieged by intrusive journalists and — as in Gorakhpur in 2017 — even jailed for shortage of emergency oxygen supply. In Muzaffarpur, an uneasy ruling alliance between Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) and the BJP shadowed the unfolding disaster in execrable political point-scoring.

Blighted childhoods are an urban reality as much as in the hinterland's perilous zones. Close by my house in a middle-class south Delhi neighbourhood is a large (usually overflowing) municipal garbage dump; alongside is a makeshift shack where the local "press-wallah" and his family irons laundry day in and out. It is a ubiquitous Delhi scene, with one difference: When not delivering crisply ironed clothes to local customers, their children play on, and pay their keep, by picking through plastic bags of garbage. Their main companions are a group of fierce street dogs that howl through the night.

Dickens would have taken the situation and spun fiction, mapping the children's future in a twisted tale of prostitution, abuse, theft and jail. If they survived they would be immortalised as Artful Dodgers and if they perished, they would end up in forgotten graves like a thousand others.

nate to pick up the voucher from my office while I took the flight!

I would credit Mr Goyal, despite all his current troubles, for all that Brand Jet stood for: Top-class service deliveries, a charming crew, a nice, friendly airline. Better still he never imposed his own personal brand, his own personality, on the airline brand. Kingfisher was a spitting image of Vijay Mallya: Loud, garrulous, opulent. Virgin is what Richard Branson is. Vistara is in many ways Ratan Tata ... genial, up-market.

I have met Mr Goyal a few times. He always comes across as someone earthy, somewhat middle-class, surely nowhere as classy as the airline he built. His sartorial style too is pretty ordinary; he speaks chaste Punjabi and he has no airs that characterise the rich-and-famous. The Jet brand was, however, in no way tied down, or held back by the personal brand of the promoter. It happens often enough — owner-promoters or trophy CEOs invariably bring their own personality traits to bear upon the corporate brand they helm. Mr Goyal thankfully let Jet flourish as a brand independent of what he personally stood for or represented.

Jet may no longer fly again. It may have got grounded for various business reasons ... bad management, bad loans, bad karma. But bad service, no. Even in ruin, Jet retained its one essential brand quality: Dignity.

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English comeback

EYE CULTURE

AMOL AGRAWAL

One cannot escape the recent performance of the English cricket team in one-day internationals (ODIs). After pioneering the game, the focus of the English has been mostly on Test cricket, particularly the Ashes. But they are beginning to take an interest in the shorter form of the game too.

Since playing the first ODI in 1971, England have played 737 of this variety of the game, won 371, and lost 331, with a win-loss (W/L) ratio of 1.12. Analysts say England's performance was reasonable till the 1992 World Cup. They reached the final three times (1979, 1987, and 1992) in the five World Cups till then. This is reflected in the results as the W/L ratio in 1971-92 was 1.22 (203 matches) and then declined to 0.93 (457 matches) at the time of the 2015 World Cup.

It was their early exit in the 2015 World Cup which forced the authorities to act. They completely changed the team, and infused specialists and fresh blood. Above all, they asked the cricketers to play fearless cricket and developed a team spirit. In 2016-19, we see a spectacular turnaround with a W/L ratio of 3, leading to their rise to number one rank in ODIs. Eoin Morgan has been captain since 2011 and instrumental in bringing about the change.

The real impetus came from the batsmen. Just like Sri Lanka batsmen of yore, the English batsmen have blazed their way to breaking not just old records but their own too. The runs per over have improved from 4.97 to 6.34, leading the team to hold the record of the most consecutive 300-plus scores. They also hold the record for the highest team score (481) and most analysts believe they will break the barrier of 500. In the recent World Cup match against Afghanistan, they hit 25 sixes, breaking their own record of 24. In the same match, Morgan scored 17 sixes, which is another record. Compare this to former England captain Alistair Cook, who scored 10 sixes in his entire ODI career!

Their real test is the current World Cup, which is being played in England. Starting as the favourites to win the cup, they made a blistering start, only to lose to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Now that they have lost to Australia, it could be really difficult to even qualify for the semis! But whatever may be the results, the English ODI team has put its stamp on ODI cricket.

Apart from English cricket, there is another English institution that is trying to reclaim its lost status. This is the Bank of England.

Sweden's Riksbank, born in 1668, may have been the first central bank, but it is the Bank of England that shaped central banks and their practices the world over. However, the Bank of England lost the race, first to the Federal Reserve as the US

The Jet brand that Naresh Goyal built



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Jet Airways may be gone, but I remain a loyal fan of the brand and the airline. It was, without doubt, one of the best Indian brands to have been born, and built, after liberalisation in the 1990s. If I were to describe Jet Airways in just one word, I would choose to describe it as "dignified". And that is saying a lot.

I was one of the passengers on Jet Airways' first ever flight, 9W 321, from Bombay to Ahmedabad on May 5, 1993. On that hot summer day, as the first Jet aircraft with a distinct blue and ochre livery and an oblong serrated sun denoting speed, slowly taxied for take-off, it ignited my love affair with an airline that I flew as my first choice for well over 25 years, logging a few

million Jet Privilege miles, criss-crossing India and the world.

Naresh Goyal, Jet's promoter, a genial, mild-mannered Punjabi from Patiala, was almost unknown in corporate circles back then. Not very many folks took him seriously when he promised that Jet Airways would deliver "a new and superior air travel experience on the ground and in the air". The core values of the brand were even back then built into the brand colours: Blue for professionalism and yellow representing warmth. Similarly, the chosen corporate symbol — the Flying Sun — was conceptualised as a graphic representation of an aircraft's tail-wing speeding past the sun.

Jet, without doubt, built a world-class airline. At least for me as an Indian, the professionalism and customer friendliness matched, in fact most times exceeded, the best in the world. Jet was not just about a professional, elegant and friendly cabin crew or efficient ground staff. Or about on-time arrivals and punctuality. Or clean aircraft with clean loos. Or good food and good wine. It was just a flying experience you were comfortable with. The piping hot *masala chai* served at the Jet lounge in Brussels (their European hub at one time), for example, was just a small joy that made you feel good after hours of travel. I would look forward to a pot-full of the *chai* before embark-

ing on the next leg of the flight. Yes, a small touch, but a very relevant, very endearing one. Similarly, the *dal* served with the Indian meal choice on every flight was just right. The *aam panna* welcome drink too always had the right taste, the right consistency. The *imli goli* digestive was a unique, and very welcome, Jet introduction. Jet was Indian. Quintessentially Indian. Classy Indian.

On Singapore Airlines the *rotis* served with the Indian meal choice, even in Business Class, are always refrigerator-cold. I have mentioned that to my friend Chef Sanjeev Kapoor, who curates their Indian menu, many many times, without any change or improvement. In the years I used to fly Lufthansa frequently, my enduring image of the stewardess in First Class was that of a stern, superannuated school teacher. On Emirates, honestly, I always have this feeling that the staff are very condescending, maybe because of the colour of my skin.

On Jet, somehow, I always felt very much at ease. I remember once checking in at Delhi airport, only to discover that the 4-voucher business ticket I was carrying had no more flight coupons! The girl at the counter just smiled at me, handed me my boarding card, and just asked me for my secretary's number so that she could co-ordi-