

INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

SOCIAL FAUX PAS

It was a major social faux pas at the President's At Home at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Independence Day. Ambassadors and other important guests felt slighted at the cavalier treatment meted out to them and many left without even a cup of tea. This was after, setting a new precedent, the host, President Ram Nath Kovind, left his own party before the guests could even partake a morsel. That the President was leaving was amply clear since the military band played the national anthem, which is done only after the event winds up. To add insult to injury, guests were asked to reach the venue at 4.30 pm

when the function started only at 6 pm and continued till around 7.15 pm. Not even water was offered in the reception hall. In contrast, during the first two years of Kovind's tenure many had appreciated the effort to make the function more informal and friendly by permitting guests to mix with the VVIPs, after the walkway greetings with the president, prime minister and vice-president were over. But, because of heavy-handed security arrangements, intermingling of invitees is generally near impossible in recent times with guests segregated into separate enclosures with cordons.

VENDETTA POLITICS

P Chidambaram made himself scarce for the first 27 hours after his anticipatory bail from the Delhi High Court was cancelled, because it is the normal legal strategy to avoid jail till one applies to the appeals court. Otherwise you get stuck endlessly in prison. But his party felt that it was a PR disaster to take this course of action, as many on social media mocked a former home minister for going underground. But Chidambaram is not an emotive figure like Indira

Gandhi who won much public sympathy during the Janata rule for her arrest. Charan Singh, then home minister, had vowed that he would one day put Mrs Gandhi in the same cell he stayed in at Tihar. When a case was filed against her in 1978, she refused to seek bail, summoned the media to witness her arrest and sat on a dharna at a railway crossing singing an old World War-II song 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye'. Chidambaram refused to indulge in theatrics or even mention Home Minister Amit Shah's name. Many see parallels with both Emergency and post-Emergency arrests. They believe Shah nurses a grudge that Chidambaram as Union home minister ensured Shah as Gujarat home minister was implicated in the Ishrat Jahan encounter case, though the Gujarat government had got the tip-off on it from the Intelligence Bureau in Delhi. History has shown that vendetta politics seldom works.

SELF-APPOINTED REPS

Several opposition parties have stopped sending their representatives for TV political debates since they feel that the

anchors favour the government and they do not get a fair hearing. To overcome this handicap and to appear objective, the channels invite participants whom they term sympathisers of party X, Y and Z. This too has been objected to. Misa Bharti confirmed that the RJD had written to channels that they could not unilaterally decide who could represent their party. Even the RSS has reservations to all and sundry being dubbed as 'RSS ideologues'. At a recent TV talk show, a frequent guest described as 'RSS ideologue' asked sheepishly that the strap line be removed and 'political analyst' be inserted instead. The anchor protested that if he had to invite a political analyst he had a wider range to choose from.

QUESTIONABLE QUERY

The Congress straw poll among CWC and special invitees to select an interim president was fashioned so that all participants were intimidated into giving the same answer: the Gandhi family. The loaded question put to those whose preferences were sought was, "Everyone else wants Rahul Gandhi to continue.

What do you think?" A disgruntled Congress leader admitted privately that "an honest conversation is not possible in the party". While some blame the old guard, it had nothing to do with old or new guard. The truth is that the Gandhis believe they are indispensable and did not want to risk appointing a non-family member, even temporarily, to the job. They had in mind the example of Sitaram Kesri, who refused to budge once appointed.

UP'S SHADOW CM

The announcement of the new Uttar Pradesh Cabinet was delayed because the Delhi BJP high command had to check Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's list and make changes to ensure caste considerations, regional representation, and that some bad eggs were removed. Though to the outside world the Yogi is all-powerful in his state, in fact it is the little-known Sunil Bansal, state general secretary, organisation, who wields almost as much influence, since he has the ear of Amit Shah. Incidentally, Rajnath Singh's son Pankaj was again omitted from the ministerial list.

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Victims of an evil system

IT WAS with deep interest but little sympathy that I watched the arrest of P Chidambaram last week. As I watched that small army of officials from the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation enforce their authority on a man who was once their boss, memories flooded back of what happened to me when Mr Chidambaram was Finance Minister. I have told the story in full, gory detail in my book *India's Broken Tryst*, but a precis is necessary.

I was staying in the seaside home of a friend. It was a lazy Saturday afternoon. I was half asleep in front of the TV when the study in which I rested filled up with a group of men (and one dwarf-like woman). They screamed in unison that I had to 'come down at once'. The Government of India, they yelled, we are from the Government of India, and this is a raid. On the way down I accidentally touched the dwarf woman and she screeched 'don't touch me' as if I had molested her. When I got downstairs, I saw that there were around 30 people in the raiding party. Their first purpose seemed to be to intimidate me.

This is not easy. I yelled back when they yelled at me and this calmed them down. But, my protestations that the house they were raiding did not belong to me made no difference. They went through my private things and evaluated every little piece of jewellery I had. When they did not find whatever it was they came in search of, their aggression waned slightly but only slightly. There continued to be menace in their manner as if they were dealing with a criminal who was guilty till proven innocent. These men were from the Enforcement Directorate.

What happened to me happens to thousands of ordinary Indians routinely. Anyone trying to run a business, no matter how small, is constantly at the mercy of officials who handle economic offences. Criminals and terrorists are treated as innocent till proven guilty, but with supposed economic offenders, this basic principle of justice is usually reversed. Anyone who thinks that the platoon of TV reporters who covered Chidambaram's arrest were there by accident needs to think again. Live television has emboldened officials to make the most of their 15 minutes of fame, so media trials of 'celebrity offenders' are now the norm.

It is hard to feel even a modicum of sympathy when political leaders become victims of the unjust system they have created and carefully nurtured. If there are those in Narendra Modi's government who are gloating privately about what happened to a man who was once a powerful minister, I urge them to stop and reflect. Tomorrow it could be their turn. And, the day after it could be yours. Our investigative agencies have licence to use primitive methods of investigation. Ordinary tax inspectors today have powers to arrest those with 'black money'. The men who made this law clearly did not notice that these officials are among the most corrupt in the Government of India or that 'black money' can be planted and a false case made.

The manner in which Chidambaram was publicly humiliated last week was wrong. There was no reason for officials to start jangling over walls in that fake show of diligence. There was no reason for the media to be informed so that TV reporters could cover every detail of the arrest of a former minister in the Government of India. But, the reason why it is hard to feel sympathy for Chidambaram is because in the many years he spent as Finance Minister and Home Minister he never once tried curbing the powers of agencies like the Enforcement Directorate.

The methods they use are so barbaric that a young businessman jumped out of a window in Delhi's Loknaya Bhawan once rather than spend another night in the custody of the men torturing him for information. Dr Manmohan Singh was Finance Minister then and I remember drawing his attention to this tragic suicide. He said he was horrified and that he would do something about it, but this was 30 years ago and nothing has changed.

Before he was arrested, Chidambaram made a moving speech in the Congress party's head office. He said, 'I believe that the foundation of democracy is liberty. The most precious Article of the Constitution of India is Article 21 that guarantees life and liberty. If I am asked to choose between life and liberty, I shall unhesitatingly choose liberty.'

If only he had remembered this when he was Finance Minister he may have done more to guarantee the liberty of those hounded by his officers in the Economic Offences Wing. It is hard to feel sympathy for political leaders when they become victims of the system they have created.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

When the next recession could lead to a revolution



FARHAD MANJOO

A RECESSION looms, and the nation's CEOs are growing fearful.

It isn't the potential of downturn itself that has them alarmed — downturns come and downturns go, but whatever happens, chief executives, like cats, tend to land on their comfortably padded feet.

Instead, the cause of their fear appears to be something more fundamental. As Alan Murray, the CEO of *Fortune*, writes in a cover story chronicling the C-suite anxiety: "More and more CEOs worry that public support for the system in which they've operated is in danger of disappearing." They're worried that when the next recession breaks, revolution might, too. This could be the hour that the ship comes in: The coming recession might finally prompt the masses to sharpen their pitchforks and demand a reckoning.

Company executives are right to worry. A downturn will mark the end of a record period of uninterrupted economic expansion. The US economy has been growing for more than a decade, stock indexes recently hit new highs, and the unemployment rate is at a 50-year low.

And yet the vast majority of Americans will not look back on the past decade as years of fat and plenty. This was a gilded expansion, a decade of creaking wage growth and profoundly unequal outcomes. The number of Americans receiving food stamps is 40% higher now than in 2008, yet we have twice as many billionaires as we did a decade ago.

This was an expansion driven by outsized gains to a handful of "superstar" firms in "superstar" cities. Economic devastation reigned in rural areas alongside catastrophic success in urban ones — an expansion marked by housing crunches and infrastructure nightmares that every level of government seems incapable of addressing. Corporate profits grew as if there were no tomorrow, but they didn't trickle down to everyone else. Instead, dividends and stock buybacks got bigger while CEO pay went through the rose-gold roof. The rest of us got smartphones, money-losing conveniences and mountains of student debt.

And so, when recession comes, we'll be right to ask: Was that it? Is this the best it gets? And if so, isn't it time to go full Elizabeth Warren — to make some fundamental, radical changes to how the US economy works, so that we might prevent decades more of growth that disproportionately benefits the titans among us?

But the CEOs now have a plan to head off revolution. They want you to know: Actually, they really do care about the world. Like, a lot.

This week, in a statement widely feted by well-meaning Davos types, the Business Roundtable — an association of chief executives of nearly 200 companies, declared that the era of soulless corporatism was over. The Business Roundtable once held that a corporation's "paramount duty" was to its shareholders. Now, the Roundtable is singing a new, more inclusive tune. A corporation, it says, should balance the interests of its shareholders with those of other "stakeholders", including customers, employees, suppliers and local communities.

I spent a tedious few minutes this week trying to come up with an analogy to convey how thoroughly empty I found the Roundtable's gesture to be. I think I got one: Imagine a co-worker has been stealing your lunch from the office fridge for years. Then, one day, he strolls in with a big grin and grand announcement. Maybe he unfolds a scroll and blows a trumpet. He has realised that "lunch maximization" might not have been the best approach after all, and he will now try to be aware of the wider consequences of some of his actions. Yes, he still really wants your lunch. Yes, he will probably still fight any efforts to prevent him from taking your lunch. But you should know that he also feels a tinge bad about how it's all worked out.

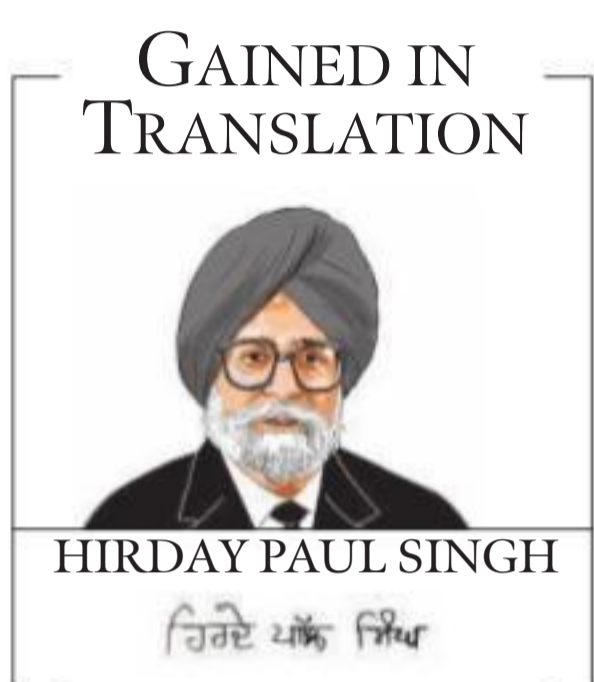
I mean: Yay? It's nice that CEOs have vowed to turn over a new leaf. But their statement lacks any call for greater structural changes in the US economy — changes to how companies are taxed or regulated, or how executives are paid.

And because a public corporation's most direct incentives remain tied to stock performance, there's no reason to believe that corporations will voluntarily move away from pleasing shareholders alone, despite the new, high-minded ideals. In fact, the fanfare surrounding the Roundtable's empty statement could be read as an effort to stave off structural economic reform rather than accelerate it. It's a way for the CEOs to tell us that they're on the case, so we don't have to resort to something unthinkable, like a Warren presidency.

If I sound cynical, it's only because I'm not a complete idiot. In the Donald Trump era, America's CEOs have become masterful at talking out of both sides of their mouths. They'll rush to issue virtue-signaling denunciations of the latest outrage from Trump in order to please their woke, restless customer bases, while on the downlow, they'll champion his tax cuts and regulatory dismantling. And when the president gets too rowdy, they'll tell him to knock it off over a friendly dinner.

It's all a game to the moguls in charge. Their greatest fear is that we'll stop playing. NYT

Revisiting Partition



HIRDAY PAUL SINGH

AFTER MUCH rhetoric and grandstanding, the powers-that-be abruptly abrogated Article 370, along with some parts of Article 35 A, which were an integral part of the secular Constitution of India. This drastic act has created a very fluid situation. We know not what will be the shape of things in near future. But there are many rumours swirling around, there is talk that this will further deepen the divide between people of two communities. And that it will lead to more bloodshed. If this happens, the outcome may also be very similar to what occurred at the time of partition of India into two.

August 15, 1947, which is a day of independence for India from the British rulers, is also a day of 'ruination' for a large number of people. It was on this day that India was politically partitioned into two separate lands — India and Pakistan — on the basis of religion. Its after-effects were horrifying. Unfortunately, I was one of those witnesses to this holocaust, when I had just entered the very impressionable teens. This event left an indelible mark on my memory, and even today, when I have crossed over to the mid-eighties, the memory of those days makes me shudder.

I had an almost idyllic and peaceful childhood, while living in a tiny township named 'Preet Nagar' (Town of Love). Set up in 1938 by my father Gurbakhsh Singh (renowned Punjabi novelist and short-story writer), it was equidistant between Lahore and Amritsar, and surrounded by many villages, big and small. Thanks to its vibrant natives, masters in their creative fields, it was recognised as the first rural socio-cultural hub of Punjab. The ideal of this township was that here "all hearts should throb in unison, and the atmosphere should be filled with the mesmerising tunes of songs celebrating love".

But when the Independence Day of India and Pakistan was being celebrated in all other parts, life at Preet Nagar came to a standstill. It tentatively became part of Pakistan, as it was at the fringe of villages where a majority of the population followed the Islamic faith. But fortunately there was no unwanted commotion whatsoever in this area, as the simple-hearted villagers themselves knew not their future. But on August 18, when the actual line of demarcation was drawn, after giving due consideration to natural compulsions, our township along with a number of villages having Muslim majorities were assigned to India.



Suvajit Dey

We know not what will be the shape of things in near future in J&K. But there are many rumours swirling around, there is talk that this will further deepen the divide between people of two communities. And lead to more bloodshed. If this happens, the outcome may be very similar to what occurred at the time of Partition

Now the minority started dominating over the majority. Excited by this sudden change, incited by outsiders, and pressured by the large-scale forced migration of non-Muslim population from Pakistan with their attendant tales of violence, the people around here launched widespread killings of innocent Muslims. This forced the migration of Muslim population towards those areas which were now a part of Pakistan. Those who were without much means took shelter in our township. True to real human values, residents of this township provided them best possible protection according to their abilities. At an appropriate time, they also arranged for their migration to Pakistan.

But this humanitarian act of our township made its residents "personae non-gratae". This gave a great advantage to anti-social elements, who started looting and marauding it. The peaceful life of this

township was instantly guillotined. Thus, by the fag end of that year, the entire population of this township had to move away to safer places. This made every one of them a refugee in their own homeland. This stroke of history left many horrifying marks on this township, which was once a blissful land of dreams.

By the time India became a republic, earnest efforts had been made to wipe out the depressing atmosphere prevailing in this township. It was hoped that this township would also revive, quite like the mythical bird phoenix that rises from its own ashes. Concerted efforts were made to revive the golden period of this township where people led a wholesome co-existence regardless of the differences of religion and caste. But unfortunately, being very close to the borders, with an unfriendly, unreliable and unpredictable neighbour, most of the old residents were scared of coming back. So life in this township carried on at its own slow pace, but the magical atmosphere of the olden days never returned. This is a big tragedy.

Having witnessed these tragic happenings, I do sincerely hope the situation currently prevailing in Jammu and Kashmir will not lead to the ghastly happenings that took place in 1947. I hope and pray that the complicated Kashmir problem will be amicably resolved and settled for the good of the whole nation and of Kashmir itself.

Singh is a writer and graphic artist. Translated from Punjabi

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

RSS CHIEF Mohan Bhagwat has a question troubling him which he wants debated. He asked the question at the time of the Bihar elections four years ago. It embarrassed the BJP then and he had to keep quiet. But he has raised it again. It is a question which is at the heart of the RSS and its vision for the future of India. Only someone not in electoral politics can raise such a question. It deserves a serious debate.

Bhagwat's quota poser needs a debate

Bhagwat asks how long should the SC/ST reservations last? Of course, these reservations were put in the Constitution for a 15-year period initially. The view was that the historic disadvantages visited upon the SC/ST people over millennia deserved to be corrected. A period of 15 years must have seemed sufficient in those hopeful days when, on the threshold of freedom, people believed that independent India will achieve economic miracles once foreign rule had ended. Alas, decades of slow growth made reservations unremovable.

The expression 'Scheduled' is because at the end of the Round Table Conferences held in early 1930s, the British government published a White Paper in which they listed in an Appendix (Schedule) the

castes and tribes of India which were to get special treatment as and when Dominion Status was granted. This was a victory for B R Ambedkar who had worked relentlessly to win concessions for Dalits.

But there is a fundamental problem in any Constitution which treats all citizens as equal but has to push Affirmative Action for some subgroup of the population — Black Americans in the US and SC/STs in India. Bhagwat's dream for the ideal Hindu Rashtra wishes to treat all those who reside in the land of the Indus — call them Hindis (defined as including Muslims, unlike V D Savarkar's definition) — as equal. Leaving Muslims aside, the basic contradiction is between the ideal of equality among Hindus and

the facts of the hierarchical social structure of Hindu society. To make matters worse, since the Mandal Report commissioned by the Janata government of 1977-80 (which included the Jana Sangh), these hierarchical inequalities have been valorised by OBC reservations. It is not just the SC/STs but the 7,000 jaatis who claim inequality and want to preserve reservations.

Bhagwat wishes all reservations would wither away and Hindus could be a single people. He knows it cannot happen yet but he wants to pose the question of equality versus entrenched reservations. This is what he wants to discuss. At what stage of prosperity can India give up reservations? After all, other democratic societies have income and class inequalities

but do not require affirmative action. Why not India?

But if being Hindu requires everyone to have a caste identity, then hierarchy is ineradicable in a Hindu nation. Hindu Rashtra has to be fundamentally socially unequal or it is not Hindu. Separate cells each for the 7,000 jaatis define a Hindu society. Bhagwat knows this difficulty. The RSS has always wanted to unite Hindus into a single mass, overcoming caste divisions which are social not religious. No matter how prosperous India becomes, social hierarchy is likely to remain. Can Hindu society have jaatis without hierarchy? Can caste divisions be horizontal not vertical?

Bhagwat deserves a debate and an answer.