

The interests of the Revenue



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

The tragic passing away of V G Siddhartha, the founder of the Cafe Coffee Day empire — and a lot else besides — has led to much discussion on whether India and the Indian state is growing less friendly to entrepreneurs, industrialists and business. Siddhartha mentioned, in what appears to be a note he left behind, that he was facing harassment from the income tax authorities. The I-T office has strongly denied this, but this is not being generally believed. Many see their decision to block Siddhartha's access to his Mindtree shares at a time he needed to sell them as targeted harassment.

But the concern being expressed today goes beyond the specifics of this case. It feeds into a general fear that was born at the time of the government's anti-black money rhetoric, which then blossomed into a draconian law. In the last Union Budget, the finance minister announced that the super-rich would pay more in tax. This is in general not a problem for many people. But, again, the messaging around the tax increase — a return to the noises made by the Centre's faux-socialists in the Indira Gandhi era — was disturbing. Put that together with other measures in the Budget and since. For example, companies now will be vulnerable to criminal prosecution if they fail to spend 2 per cent of their profits on corporate social responsibility. How is a mandatory payment out of profits anything less than a tax? And why is the government levying a tax on companies for the benefit of NGOs? This is merely a way to direct more cash to the ideological affiliates of the ruling party, and to siphon away shareholder money to build up a Hindutva-vadi establishment in parallel to the state.

The Budget also included increased powers for some tax officials — men of the Customs, for example, are now given the power to detain individuals if they perceive a threat to the "interests of the Revenue". Some things have definitely gotten better over the past few years — there has been a concerted attempt to reduce the initial human-to-human interaction in the tax process for example. But it is also true that there is a widespread sense that the government intends to wring business for every paisa it can. High officials of the government and senior members of the ruling party have been complicit in creating that impression.

The simple truth is that India can ill afford this sort of atmosphere at the moment. We are going through a years-long crisis of investment from which we have yet to recover. Unless private investment increases, India will not return to the high-growth path that is necessary to create jobs and prosperity. But private investment will not recover if you choose to scare away investors. Do we want to create a system like China's, where the government lives in fear of capital flight on a massive scale? Already the government has extended criminal provisions of the black money law to include non-resident Indians, presumably because it feels that too many people are leaving the country and think they are doing so to evade prosecution. This is a clear misdiagnosis of what is going on. Even if individuals themselves are not leaving the country, they are seeking to diversify their interests and sources of income geographically. Some years ago, the scion of a well-known business house — when I asked him about their future business strategy — said that all he was interested in was ensuring that a majority of the group income came from overseas. This, he said, was purely a play to minimise political risk. If Indians themselves are chary of investing in India for fear of harassment, why would any foreigners do so?

The government is so short of money — thanks to the failure of its implementation of the goods and services tax — that it is both concealing the true state of the fisc and looking around for soft targets that it can bully for more money. In India, business is always a soft target. It feeds into a larger sentiment, that has been growing since the anti-corruption movement and that was kicked into high gear by demonetisation, that the rich have been protected for too long and that the Narendra Modi government will be able to kick them into shape. Nobody can deny that India has a problem with inequality. But it also has a problem with state arbitrariness and a lack of understanding of property and individual rights. We can only solve the inequality and growth problems if we allow the private sector a sense of security that will permit them to mobilise investment. Until then, India will continue to slide, under Modi, further back towards the dark days of the 1970s.

Much is made today about "the interest of the Revenue". But the true interests of revenue lies in growing the economy. And for that the private sector must be a partner of the Revenue, not an enemy.

General Ershad was not unlike Rajiv Gandhi

Both men were political innocents. In a sense, they were softies



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

General Ershad, who died the other day, is unforgettable for me for a reason he would never have guessed. For all the vilification, he was an innocent, not unlike Rajiv Gandhi. That was confirmed some time in 1988 or 1989 the Bangladesh deputy high commissioner in Calcutta called on me to say he had been transferred to Sydney. Chatting over coffee, he let slip his President had wanted him to invite me to Dhaka but he had ignored the instruction. Hosting the editor of a national Indian daily might have meant additional publicity for Ershad.

I guessed his sympathies lay with the Awami League. I also realised he could afford to flout his President and still prosper in his

career: Being consul-general in Australia's busiest city was preferable to an Indian posting. In fact, it was precisely this aspect of Ershad's persona — call it his weakness if you will — that was endearing in so far as anything about a head of state can be endearing. I couldn't imagine the tragically murdered Ziaur Rahman with whom I had had one disastrously explosive meeting ever being so indulgent to a subordinate.

Bangladeshis didn't appreciate the allowance I was prepared to make for Ershad on account of his humaneness. A rich Dhaka businessman whom I had first met at the home of Ershad's high commissioner in New Delhi with whom he was on the friendliest terms was holding forth once at a dinner party in London on the military dictatorship at home. He flew into a rage when I interjected that while it was true Ershad was a military man, if his mild rule was a dictatorship it was a vegetarian dictatorship. The Bangladeshi at once exploded that jealous Indians resented the progress Bangladesh had made despite being denied democracy.

Apart from press conferences, I met Ershad only once. My wife and I were visiting Dhaka at the end of 1985 — making an excuse of the launch of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation — when he invited us home to tea after the captains and kings had departed. He lived in a modest bungalow in the cantonment area

and the simplicity of his lifestyle matched the unimpressive architecture. Yet, everything about Ershad seemed to provoke criticism. Bangladeshis said he lived in the cantonment for reasons of security. They said the little boy toddling about the living room wasn't really his son but adopted. Some suspected him on account of the time he had spent in India. It was widely claimed that the homely Mrs Ershad had been formally declared First Lady so that she could have her own office to receive businessmen without having to share her cut with middlemen. She was compared with Indonesia's Tien Suharto who was popularly called "Madame Ten Per Cent".

Ironically, Suharto was someone Ershad admired. He told us that evening he was discussing with the Indonesian strongman some constitutional means of permanently involving the army, his country's most efficient institution, in Bangladesh's governance. He needed a prime minister, he said, to receive and see off visiting VIPs: Being busier than the US president he didn't have time for airport duties. He spoke of Islam not as a believer but as someone who acknowledged the most important unifying and driving force for his people. Apologising to my wife for

sounding anti-feminist, he argued that Hasina Wazed could never become president because only a man could lead a Muslim nation at prayer.

Perhaps this was wishful thinking. Kamal Hossain put it down to ignorance. "He's never heard of Razia Sultan!" was the latter's dry comment when I told him afterwards. Whatever the reason, it was a gross miscalculation. Ershad also believed he had scored hugely over Bangladesh's "India lobby" (meaning Hasina) by extracting Rajiv Gandhi's promise to involve Nepal in tripartite talks on sharing the Ganga-Padma waters. It was another miscalculation. When it didn't happen, a senior Bangladeshi diplomat explained that India couldn't afford to face Bangladesh and Nepal at the same time because it claimed upper riparian rights with the former, and lower riparian rights with the latter. Ershad could never have anticipated that an Indian high commissioner who translated his poems would oppose tripartite river talks tooth and nail and work relentlessly on Rajiv to renege on his commitment.

Both men were political innocents. In a sense, they were softies. But despite tales of violence, human rights abuses, corruption and womanising, Ershad was luckier than Gandhi. He died peacefully in his bed in the fullness of years.

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COFFEE WITH BS ► MANU S PILLAI | AUTHOR & HISTORIAN

Placing history in context

Pillai tells Uttaran Das Gupta how he is trying to find balance in the conflicted landscape of history

History is a battlefield — not only for those fighting in these battles, but also for those chronicling it, that is, the historians. A few years back, I reviewed a book, *The Ivory Throne*, about the House of Travancore in Kerala and its extraordinary regent Sethu Lakshmi Bayi. The tome ran well into 700 pages and it took me a while to read it, but the intricate narrative blew my mind. The author, Manu S Pillai, went on to win the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar the next year. He followed it up with *Rebel Sultans*, a history of the Deccan Sultanate. As if two thick books in three years were not enough, he has published a third one this year, *The Courtesans, The Mahatma and the Italian Brahmin*.

So when I meet him in Delhi, I am compelled to ask what many of his readers and admirers have been wondering: How does he write so many books so quickly? "The first book took me about six years to write," he says, "so it was a long-drawn process. The second one took about two years — and it was published two years after the first one. This book, the third one, comprises essays I have written over the past three or three-and-a-half years for my weekly column ("Medium Rare" in *The Mint*)." He adds that he practically lives in the archives and libraries. "It is pretty much my 24x7 job now," he says, "which also means I want to keep producing this work."

We are at Perch, a chic café at Vasant Vihar, in south Delhi. Pillai suggests we order a Vietnamese-style pour-over coffee and a cheese platter. I ask for a meat platter as well.

Unfortunately, for my purposes, it was not the ideal location, what

with the ambient music and the large turnout. The reason why it is so popular becomes obvious when our order is served.

"I have been out since morning recording another podcast," Pillai says, "and will be going to Khan Market for a book signing after this." Being a famous author is hard work, isn't it?

I have read Pillai's latest book cover to cover, and have deciphered its enigmatic title, but I also want to hear it from him. "The title represents some major interests I have in my research," he says, before embarking on an explanation. The *Courtesans* refers to any one of the six courtesans in the book. "In 2019, why are we still thinking of history as if it's only about kings and battles and empires," he says. "Why is there no history through the eyes of women?" *Courtesans* are a wonderful way to look at history, since they were often highly educated, refined and great contributors to society. One of the courtesans in Pillai's book is Begum Samru,

who begins her career as a dancing girl in Delhi and goes on to become a military leader with her private army, often protecting the vulnerable late Mughal emperors.

"The Mahatma does not refer to Mahatma Gandhi, as some might think," says Pillai. "It refers to Mahatma Phule, who — long before Gandhiji turned up at Buckingham Palace in a loincloth to scandalise everyone — arrived at a banquet for the grandson of Queen Victoria in Pune in a torn shawl to show the mirror to colonial rulers." Pillai asserts that Phule has been garlanded and enshrined as a social reformer, but this sort of veneration sanitises his rather radical polemic. "He lived in Pune,

which was a seat of Brahminical orthodoxy. Brahmins claimed that they were superior, being born from the head of the cosmic creator. Phule asked: 'Does this mean the cosmic creator menstruates through his mouth?'. Similar questions were asked by Kabir or Basava — both of whom feature among the dramatis personae in Pillai's book. "Indian history is as much about asking questions as it is about sanctified thought," he adds.

In the introduction to his book, Pillai writes: "We live in times when history is polarising. It has become to some an instrument of vengeance, of grievances, imagined or real. Others remind us to draw wisdom from the past, not fury and rage, seeing in its chronicles a mosaic of experience to nourish our minds and recall, without veneration, the confident glories of our ancestors." I ask him where he sees himself in this rather conflicted landscape. "I am trying to regain that elusive thing called balance," he replies, smiling. "History is neither on the extreme left, nor on the extreme right — it is somewhere in the middle. It is necessary to reclaim that middle ground, especially in our contemporary world where everything seems to be so black and white." He asserts that the contemporary polarisation over historical narratives tells us more about our insecurities and anxieties than about history.

Perhaps, a consequence of this anxiety is a spurt in popular history writing in India — Pillai is arguably the biggest success story of this phenomenon. (His first two books were bestsellers, and this one is well on its way to becoming one.) At the same time, there seems to be a conflict of sorts between popular history and tra-

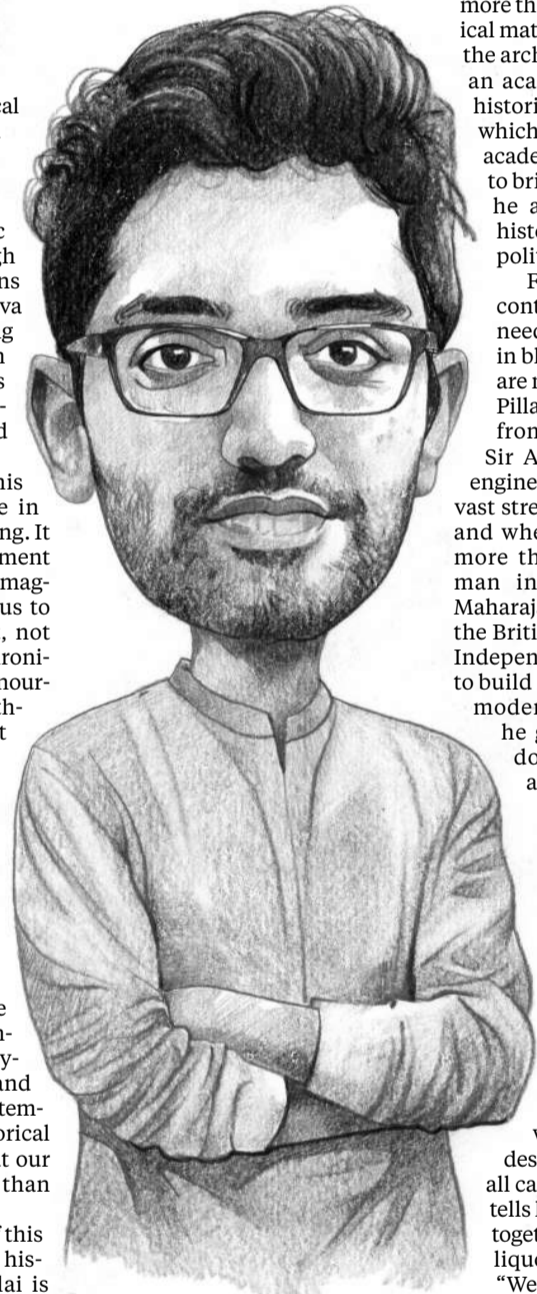


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

ditional or academic history. "Where do you see yourself in this?" I ask him. "I see myself as a bridge between the two," he replies. "I bring academic rigour to my writing. *The Ivory Throne* had

more than a hundred pages of critical material. All my work involves the archives. But I don't write like an academic." Pillai says many historians are doing great work, which often remains confined to academic circles. "It is essential to bring it to a wider audience," he adds, "because everyday history is being mutilated for political purposes."

For politicians, he says, context is a bad thing. "They need grand narratives, things in black and white — but there are no dichotomies in history," Pillai says, providing examples from his book. For instance, Sir Arthur Cotton, a military engineer responsible to irrigating vast stretches of Andhra Pradesh, and where even today, there are more than 3,000 statues of the man in two districts. Or, the Maharaja of Jaipur who stood with the British during the First War of Independence in 1857 but went on to build hospitals and bridges and modernising his kingdom. "Is he good or is he bad? What do you focus on?" Pillai asks. "As I said, context is very important."

He also narrates the story of Shahuji Bhonsle, the nephew of Maratha ruler Shivaji, who ruled Thanjavur from 1684 to 1712, and was also a poet and playwright of some talent. In his play, *Sati Dana Suramu*, he parodies social conventions with a Brahmin besotted with a "untouchable" woman. Overcome with desire, the Brahmin abandons all caste traditions. The woman tells him why they cannot sleep together: "We eat beef, we drink liquor." The Brahmin replies: "We drink cow's milk but you eat the whole cow. You must be more pure." Pillai asks: "Can you imagine a contemporary playwright writing this?"

Perhaps that's the reason why history has become even more poignant now.

Jal Chaupals in the city



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

Recent reports have calculated that the almost a quarter of all groundwater extracted globally is extracted in India. India beats even China and US in groundwater extraction, which is perhaps why the rate of groundwater depletion in the country has increased by 23 per cent between 2000 and 2010. Many people react to such news with a shrug — after all, isolated individual efforts would be little more than drops in the ocean. But a recent experience of a Jal Chaupal, water budgeting meeting, in Mahuee, a village in UP's Banda district, made me realise that every drop counts after all.

As the monsoon clouds rumbled ominously overhead, a group of 50-odd people

gathered in a government school classroom where Sadashiv and Prashansa Gupta of Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan were waiting to kick off the meeting. Using a tool developed by WaterAid, they asked the group to estimate their individual water usage by activity — bathing, laundry, toilet, kitchen, livestock and more. Amid good-natured ribbing and a lot of laughter, the group collectively estimated exactly how many buckets of water they used daily for different tasks while Sadashiv painstakingly entered the figures on a water consumption table on the wall.

By now, the entire group was involved in the water budgeting exercise. Everyone wanted to speak in the next part of the activity — water availability. They enumerated every single water source in Mahuee while the facilitators estimated how much water each is capable of providing, highlighting the gap between the demand for water and its actual availability. Then the group collectively estimated groundwater depletion in their village by comparing the depth of new and old wells and tube wells. Using the example of a bank account which would run out of money if there are more withdrawals than deposits, the two facilitators ended the meeting by driving home the importance of recharging groundwater aquifers to ensure continued availability of water.

As the numbers kept adding up on the table, many in the room started looking visibly uneasy. For Munni Devi, as for others in the group, the meeting was eye-opening. "It has made me realise that even though we are drought-stricken every summer, we use so much water," exclaimed Munni Devi, 40 years old and heavily veiled. A young was sitting behind her declared that the best way for him to help save water was to bathe once in 10 days. Everyone laughed but seriousness returned when an older man in the group pointed out that earlier, when their village pond had water, they'd bathe their animals there. "Since the pond dried up about three years ago, we've been using fresh tube well water for this purpose," she said. "The Jal Chaupal has made me realise that even people like me who live in a state of acute water shortage can cut down on water usage by becoming more conscious about it."

As the meeting ended, I realised that collectively making their own water budget had perhaps brought home the urgency of the water crisis that's looming over us all today. Back in Delhi where my neighbours were having their driveway hosed down with as much fresh water as Munni Devi uses in a day, it struck me that perhaps what we need is Jal Chaupals in our water-greedy cities too — not just in villages like Mahuee.

Being AWOL isn't much fun



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

We are all, as you read this, AWOL, a spontaneous family rebellion against the crippling claustrophobia and corporate babudom of office. All but my son, that is, who refused to join in the clan protest because, as he said plaintively, "I don't have any more leave left, Dad, not even a half-day, or a few hours, so if it's all right, I'll go attend office. Besides," he pointed out, "some of us still need to bring a salary home." He is, at heart, an office-bee, but please don't tell him this because he is sensitive about such matters. The one day he decided he wanted to be as impulsive as the rest of us, he declared he

would go late to work — and he did. By all of 15 minutes.

This morning, his wife decided to join the kinfolk at their sit-in, by sitting it out. I'm not sure whether she's part of our dissent group or not because she left at her usual office hour, saying she was "visiting". Maybe she's only humouring us and has gone to work, or maybe she has genuine errands to run. Eventually the truth will be out. She's partial to whisky, you see, and I plan on having a conversation with her when she's on her second tot this evening.

At first I was alone so being AWOL didn't feel like much fun. There were piles of books to read, so I did that over a couple of days while bingeing on Netflix intermittently. But these are guilty pleasures and less fun when you can do them legitimately, on your own time. So I brooded a bit, nagged the cook, told off the maali, poured myself a couple of G&Ts, pottered around the study, OD'd on caffeine, smooched around for unhealthy things to eat and was bored by the third day.

Which is when I pestered my daughter to skip office on the spur-of-the-moment, which she did with a text to her supervisor. But being the conscientious type, she's been

wracked by remorse since. Worse, being an organised person, she doesn't know what to do with the free time that's come her way out of the blue. So she's mooning around the house while being critical of its upkeep and maintenance instead of catching a movie, or heading to the mall for some retail therapy. It seems she enjoys these things only when she's under pressure, so it might be better if she returned to work, but it's a weekend now so her joylessness will cast a gloom over the next days.

My wife decided to go AWOL too, even though she works out of home, fleeing to Pune for a one-day event that is next week. When someone — I think it was me — pointed out that perhaps she didn't need to go so many days early, my wife pretended she'd mixed up her dates, and what with non-cancellable flights and cab bookings, it was all fait accompli, so she'd try and make the most of it even though she hated leaving us alone. It sounded like a well-executed getaway, leading me to think my daughter and I should have planned our absences better. Meanwhile, there's still the matter of my daughter-in-law to clear up — if she's AWOL, why isn't she as miserable as us?

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Security...for citizens

The "suicide note" purportedly sent out by V G Siddhartha mentions aggravations that have earned him much posthumous sympathy. Among the aggravations, almost inevitably, is harassment by tax officials. In response, the income-tax department has put out a detailed note, with the assertion that the late "coffee king" had confessed to an unreported income of about ₹350 crore. However, someone presumably informed on the subject has contended that tax officials acted prematurely in seizing shares held by Siddhartha. The full facts will emerge in due course. It is possible that this case, like many others, will testify to the Jekyll-and-Hyde worlds in which many of our businessmen (feel they have to) function.

The charge of tax harassment has struck a responsive chord in the business community and the broader public. The finance minister is well aware of the issue. In her Budget speech, she used picturesque imagery from classical Sangam literature to say that if the elephant enters the paddy field it will trample far more paddy than it can eat. It is also worth recalling what an earlier finance minister, Jaswant Singh, said in his Budget speech 16 years ago: "Let us, to start with, readily acknowledge that the essential entrepreneurial character and the creative genius of our citizens is our greatest asset." Later in the speech, he talked of moving "away from a suspicion-ridden, harassment-generating, coercion-inclined regime to a trust-based, 'green channel' system. I do this entirely on the basis of my faith in my countrymen and women."

Mr Singh stood tall at the time for emphasising that taxpayers must be treated with respect. So it is worth recalling what he committed to: "First, hereafter, stocks found during the course of a search and seizure operation will not be seized under any circumstances. Second, no confession shall be obtained during such search and seizure operations. Third, no survey operation will be authorized by an officer below the rank of Joint Commissioner of Income Tax. Finally, books of account impounded during survey will not be retained beyond ten days, without the prior approval of the Chief Commissioner."

Businessmen who have been subjected to tax surveys or search and seizure operations will be able to confirm whether these promises have been kept. Meanwhile, on the positive side, the use of digital technology has made tax dealings simpler and safer for the average taxpayer. Most importantly, it has helped to obviate the need for direct personal contact between the taxpayer and assessing officials, removing much of the harassment and (mostly) petty bribery that had been rampant. In addition, immediately after the new Modi government took office, more than two dozen senior tax officials were sent packing — reportedly because of corruption charges. One presumes that sent a powerful message down the line.

But if power tends to corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely (as Lord Acton famously said), it is notable that there is a fairly consistent pattern to recent tax and other raids: They have tended to focus on those opposed to or critical of the government. Meanwhile, the government has been busy getting parliamentary approval for legislation that arms officials in multiple departments with extra powers to prosecute, arrest, sequester, brand as terrorists, and so on — with fewer safeguards, and with greater concentration of power in the hands of the central government, at the expense of states.

Now, it is possible to make the case for prison terms for traffic offences like speeding. Other countries too provide for it, limiting extreme penalties to extreme cases. And the home minister has assured that the government's many new powers will not be misused. But can even the most powerful and best-intentioned minister guarantee that in a country where everyone knows that the abuse of power is routine? Wouldn't it make more sense, then, to opt for a lighter touch, and the Jaswant Singh approach?

Particularly after the scandalous sequence of events at Unnao, what people have been made conscious of is the need for statutory protections that ordinary citizens can be assured of without having to appeal 25 times to the police, and institutional safeguards that buttress them, even as they fret about the danger of disproportionate penalties.

3 defectors, 6 murders, 3 rapes, 1 party

The stories of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, Sanjay Singh and Sakshi Maharaj and what they tell us about our politics, policing, justice system, and the BJP

Two-and-a-half champion serial defectors have been in our political headlines lately. The first, and the most familiar, is Kuldeep Singh Sengar of Unnao rape-murder infamy.

The second is former Amethi 'Raja', ex-MP and ex-minister Sanjay Singh, who has just jumped the Congress party's sinking ship.

And the third is Sakshi Maharaj, the BJP's recently elected Unnao MP. We count him as half because he hasn't done anything particularly political or criminal lately. He only earned what we might call a mention in despatches, or collateral infamy, for having called on Sengar in jail to thank him for supporting him in the Lok Sabha election in his domain.

All three are serial defectors. There are about six (at last count) fully or partly unresolved murder cases they are, or have been, linked to. And, at least three rapes which remain unresolved, just like the murders.

Further, all three remain in persistent demand. They own the votes of their caste and pocket boroughs, they know their ways around the law, and they have that one attribute all political parties weigh above everything else: Competence, honesty and of course morality. It is the blessing of winnability.

It just so happens that all three have ended up in the BJP. Until 48 hours ago, when Sengar was finally expelled.

We are so fixated on his life as an alleged criminal and a don, or 'Bahubali', as they are called in the Hindi heartland, that we risk overlooking his equally varied and colourful public life. In 2002, the local 'daddu' became an honourable MLA for the first time, winning Unnao on the BSP ticket.

Next, he defected to the Samajwadi Party (SP), and won from the neighbouring Bangermau and Bhagwant Nagar constituencies in 2007 and 2012, respectively. This is when it had become fashionable, and widely accepted that the SP was patronising criminal mafias, especially those of the Yadavs and Rajputs in Uttar Pradesh. In 2017, sensing the wind, he moved to the BJP and became an MLA.

It was the same year, in fact just about three months after his election as BJP MLA, that the unfortunate teenager came to her MLA seeking help for a job and complained that he "raped her" instead, and, after doing so, "wiped my tears and offered to help me find a job".

Sanjay Singh has changed so many parties that I can't even feel confident giving you a definitive

chronology for fear of being fact-checked. He was linked to a famous murder, although discharged.

It was the "supari" killing in Lucknow of then national badminton champion Syed Modi (July 28, 1988). He was a prime suspect, but was let off for want of evidence as both Uttar Pradesh Police and the CBI failed to find much against him. So, innocent until proven guilty, we all must accept. Just that it was another of those heartland murders where the hired guns were convicted but nobody found out who hired them. Bhagwati Singh, one of the two hired guns, was convicted. The other, Amar Bahadur, was murdered during the trial. Sounds familiar?

After the murder, Sanjay Singh married Syed Modi's wife, then Ameeta Modi (nee Kulkarni). Around the time the CBI was handling this murder case, much in the headlines then, V P Singh — Sanjay Singh's distant uncle through his first wife Garima's family — had rebelled against the

Congress and became prime minister. Time for Sanjay Singh to move from the Congress to the "uncle" too.

A decade later, he joined the BJP, won Amethi on its ticket, defeating Capt Satish Sharma in 1998, but that Parliament was short-lived as the Vajpayee government lost by one vote in the Lok Sabha.

In the 1999 election he contested against Sonia Gandhi, his friend and mentor Rajiv Gandhi's wife, in Amethi on the BJP ticket. This is when Sonia had chosen a second constituency in the south, Bellary, just to be safe. I spent a bit of time in Amethi then, followed Singh's campaign, and his slogan was so catchy that it still rings in my ears: *Sanjay Singh ke dar ki maari, Sonia bhaag gayi Bellary* (Sonia is so terrified of Sanjay Singh that she fled to Bellary). Of course, Sonia won both.

As the "hawa" shifted, he returned to the Congress in 2003. In 2009, he was elected on the Congress ticket from Sultanpur, next to Rae Bareilly and Amethi. As his term ended, anticipating a rout in Uttar Pradesh, he managed a Rajya Sabha nomination from Assam from the Congress. That term ends now, the Gandhi family is finished now, so he has found new "uncles" in the BJP yet again.

Now, the half. Better or worse, you decide. Sakshi Maharaj, born Sachchidanand Hari Sakshi, has been a shining star of his backward Lodh community (Kalyan Singh, former BJP chief minister, iz from the same caste, and Sakshi Maharaj's patron). In 1991 and 1996, he won the



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Getting your facts right



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The fact checking website, Altnews, recently launched a mobile app. This can be used on an android device to request a fact-check of any given content, be it a verbose WhatsApp forward, or a digital image. All that's required is "long-press" and Share. The website will revert within 72 hours with verification.

The time frame may seem long. But quite apart from sheer volume, fact-checking any given item often requires tedious "digital legwork". Social media content mixes fact, fiction, opinion and

garbage to create misleading narratives. What is amazing is that well-educated people often swallow nonsense without any application of thought or judgement. This is especially true when there is some religious element to the narrative.

My school WhatsApp group contains a bunch of very smart people, (present company excepted). We recently received a forward alluding to the "fact" that many Indian places of worship, dating back many centuries, had been built in a "straight line" running 2,383 km, North to South.

Much was made of the fact that these aforementioned places of worship predated "the creation of imaginary lines on Earth by the British scientist about 100 years ago". Somehow the builders had known how to put these all in a straight line before GPS was invented. The edifices in question are all placed between Longitude 79.06 East and 79.91 East according to the forward. Several people on my school group went "Ooh! Aah! The glorious Wisdom of the Ancients!"

Assume for arguments' sake that this forward is fact-checked for rigour. The basic hygiene start with checking that

the places mentioned actually have the stated coordinates. These do seem to be approximately correct according to GPS, which was probably used by the creator of the forward.

Now, we could check the rest of the content for veracity. We use map grids, of latitude and longitude, to define the coordinates of any place. According to the forward, longitude and latitude — imaginary lines — were invented by "a British scientist, about 100 years ago".

This is rubbish. Gridded maps have been in use for at least 2,300 years. Greek sailors used them. Eratosthenes — the first chap known to have made an accurate guess about the Earth's dimensions — proposed gridded maps, more than 300 years Before the Common Era (300 BCE). It is safe to assume that the Mauryans, who had extensive contacts with the Greeks, also used gridded maps.

Since the places of worship mentioned are of more recent provenance than 300 BCE, it is highly possible the architects did know how to put things in a straight line, by using gridded maps, sextants, and their knowledge of trigonometry.

Now let's come to misleading content. A cursory look at a map tells you that the straight "line" in question is not a line as defined by that wise ancient,

Euclid. It has both length and breadth. The distance between 79.06E and 79.90E (the Western-most and the Eastern-most places mentioned) is around 100-105 Km along a 2,383 kms stretch, North to South. So the forward is referring to a rhombus, 2,383 km long and 100-odd km in width. That's about 2.4 lakh square km. Given any arbitrary area of that size, one can undertake to find places of worship, police stations, houses of ill repute, liquor vends and petrol pumps in any desired orientation whatsoever.

So how does the fact-checker deal with that forward? Can it be dismissed it as absolute garbage? It is not. There are glaring errors of fact such as the historical provenance of latitude and longitude, for example. But the places mentioned have the right coordinates.

The really misleading information is that they are not a straight line by any definition of the term. It probably took the creator of that forward about 15 minutes to put it together. It would take a fact-checker several hours to check all the details and even then, in the interest of "balance", he would have to say it was misleading rather than absolutely false.

AltNews deals with more sophisticated and pernicious versions of such rubbish, day in and day out. Kudos to them for maintaining their sanity and rigour.

tribution on the backseat and brings growth upfront.

It is here that Mr Modi must play his role. He needs to put aside his first-term approach to policy, which was to consolidate things. Now the time has come for him to follow Nehru's example and look for growth. For that he needs wisdom outside the circle he is familiar with.

He needs new ideas, which can come only from people who have brains and are capable of rationally structured thought. He must set aside his suspicion of such thinkers and find someone to help him out of the hole the UPA landed India between 2004 and 2014.

This hole consisted, in part, of a massive loosening of the rules of economic governance, which Ms Sitharaman can be trusted to tighten. But it is Mr Modi himself who must look around for a proper eminence grise for NDA II.

Nehru turned to Mahalanobis against the run of play those days. The state had only a peripheral, regulatory role in economic activity. Today the opposite situation prevails.

What Mr Modi needs, therefore, is an equivalent of the Avadi resolution but which is the opposite in content, saying that the state will step aside because it can no longer deliver. And just as Nehru made the state the leading force, Mr Modi must make the private sector the leading agency for growth.

This will truly reverse Nehru's legacy, a project that is very dear to Mr Modi's heart.

The social trigger

EYE CULTURE

ADRIJA SHUKLA

When was the last time you saw a post on a social media platform and it triggered emotions? Happiness, sadness, pride, fear or anger? If you observe carefully, it happens quite a lot. To an extent that we tend to simply ignore it, thinking it is normal.

Social media and tech firms revolutionised the way people communicate. But with the passage of time, these firms transformed into giants and their platforms became capable of doing something, perhaps, no one ever thought of — hacking human emotions. How? The biggest hack in the history of social media gives a glimpse.

"How did the dream of a connected world tear us apart?"

Netflix recently released a documentary, *The Great Hack*, sets out to seek an answer to one of the most difficult questions, staring at the face of democracy and human society in the age of information technology: Right-wing parties are coming to power, across the world, and people are more polarised now than ever. Do social media and tech giants have any role to play in it?

The documentary, directed by Karim Amer and Jahane Noujaim, investigates the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal, along with the people involved in it. The firm was accused of manipulating voter behaviour in 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit vote, among others. In March 2018, a whistle-blower, Christopher Wiley (a former CA research director) came out with shocking revelations about how the information of nearly 87 million US Facebook users was sold to the firm. But Facebook called it an information leak.

When David Carroll, a professor of media design, got to know about the hack, he demanded the British firm to share the data it had on him. "As I dug deeper, I found that these traces of ourselves are being mined into a trillion dollar a year industry. We are now the commodity," said Mr Carroll. "The question I kept asking myself was, who was feeding us fears? And how?"

Project Alamo, which was collecting digital voter database for Donald Trump's campaign was spending \$1 million a day on Facebook ads. CA was working on it, too. To send people personalised messages, the firm had 5,000 data points on every American (who had a Facebook account). Of course, these people had no information that their data was being used for political advertising. The firm, through the bombardment of personalised advertisements, persuaded people (the identified persuadables) to vote for

Lok Sabha election on the BJP ticket. As an accused in the Babri Masjid demolition case, he seemed to have ideological purity.

His ideological commitment, however, couldn't survive the BJP's denial of the ticket to him. He joined the SP, where Mulayam Singh Yadav welcomed him gleefully. Sakshi Maharaj said the BJP's policies were now anti-poor. But you know why he was denied the ticket despite his winnability? He had been accused of murdering Brahm Dutt Dwivedi, a close associate of then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

In 2000, Mulayam sent him to the Rajya Sabha. In the course of time, the murder case "faded". Not to miss out, he got involved in some more "action" soon enough, accused, along with his two nephews, of the gang-rape of a college principal. The holy man spent about a month in Tihar jail, but was discharged for want of evidence, as he was in the Dwivedi murder. Disappearance of evidence for murder and rape, a familiar UP story, you see. Just that you have to ensure you are on the winning side. Always.

By 2002, he knew the Samajwadi Party wasn't getting anywhere, so he left it, accusing Mulayam of a host of awful things, ranging from casteism, to dictatorship, to, and you might like it, capitalism. He now informally joined then BJP rebel Kalyan Singh's local Rashtriya Kranti Party, essentially a Lodh party.

The Sakshi saga continues. In 2009, the government charged him with setting up a fictitious NGO and collecting ₹25 lakh illegally. Sujata Verma, his follower and a former principal of the college he owned (Maharani Avanti Bai College), was named an accomplice. In 2012, he rejoined the BJP. Soon enough, she was shot dead while returning from his ashram. Sakshi and his associates were accused of murder.

He promptly went underground, and then surrendered and was freed on bail. His efforts to get the FIR quashed in the Allahabad High Court in 2013 failed. The next year, he was sworn in as a Lok Sabha member of the BJP. His "honour" was restored. And with such an illustrious career, we are now complaining that he went to Sitapur jail to thank Sengar?

What's common between these three diverse lives, and what does it tell us about Indian politics? First, that winnability is now the only morality that parties seek. Criminality, multiple rapes, and murders do not matter. After all, why would you take the stress of politics if you didn't need some such distractions to resolve.

The formula then, at least in the heartland, is to build a local vote bank. It can be based on caste, mafia power, and, ideally, a combination of both. Then you either become winnable personally, or hold the key to others' victory or defeat.

Then, all parties would vie for you. You can happily choose the winning side, always, and take anything, murders, rape, robbery, rioting, cheating, embezzlement in your stride. Until a feisty teenager, struggling for breath through a ventilator, her father and most of her family murdered, ruin it all for you.

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Who will be BJP's Mahalanobis?



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

A few days ago, Puja Mehra, an accomplished economic journalist, wrote an article asking who, if anyone, was Narendra Modi's A N Varna or Montek Ahluwalia or Bimal Jalan or Y V Reddy or Vijay Kelkar, bureaucrats who had helped former prime ministers. Even Indira Gandhi, who, like Mr Modi, was wary of intellect, turned to P N Haksar, who gave economic shape to her political imperatives.

What Ms Mehra meant to ask was from where Mr Modi gets his economic advice. This question has been puzzling observers of the Indian economy for the last five years. No satisfactory answer has emerged.

That said, the question, though necessary, is not sufficient. The more com-

plete question would be: Who will be Mr Modi's Mahalanobis?

P C Mahalanobis was the econometrician-economist who guided Jawaharlal Nehru's economic thinking. It was he who developed the economic model for the Second Five-Year plan, which, growth-wise, was a great success.

And there hangs a tale. It is worth recounting because it is so very apposite for India's economic vexations today.

In the four years after Nehru won the first general election so overwhelmingly, there had been very little visible economic progress. Primarily, not enough jobs had been generated.

Also, the inflation rate was climbing. Forex was running out. The savings rate was a mere 5 per cent. The Budgets had no headroom because revenues were stagnant. The private sector had thrown in its hand, saying "we don't have the money to invest". The banks were refusing to lend except to a few.

Politically, Nehru reigned supreme after defeating his critics in the party. But members were quietly starting to grumble. As with Mr Modi, everyone was getting very impatient.

It was in that overall context that the Congress passed the all-important resolution at Avadi in 1955. It said the government would lead the way in the economy.

But the deeper problem remained:

What to do next and whatever it was that was to be done, where to get the money for it?

Nehru turned to Mahalanobis for the first question and for the second, to T T Krishnamachari (TTK) — a businessman — whom he appointed finance minister. Mahalanobis prepared the blueprint for growth and TTK raised the money for it. The Second Plan was born. It delivered good growth.

Modi's muses

Who will do all this for NDA II? While Nirmala Sitharaman is the perfect fit for the TTK-type revenue-raising role, you can't expect her to do a Mahalanobis as well. She is completely honest and totally single-minded in doing whatever is required of her. She will be effective and unpopular, which is just what you need of a good finance minister.

But it would be idiotic to blame her — or any finance minister — for not being able to produce investment because investment depends on far too many things for a mere finance minister to handle. Indeed, it depends primarily on the prime minister.

Always, for investment to restart, a new economic view and a completely fresh perspective is needed. Two periods — 1958-65 and 1992-96 — bear testimony to that. Basically, such a view puts dis-