The soft power myth



TICKER **MIHIR SHARMA**

International Yoga Day being one of the most recent and high profile aspects of this strategy, but Hindi movies have perhaps been the most

long-standing component. No evaluation of Sino-American tensions going forward is complete without an analysis of how American soft power is a crucial aspect of its competitive arsenal.

But some recent developments make it clear that this narrative needs to be complicated. The United States' National Basketball Association or NBA has run into trouble following a statement by an official for the Houston basketball team that expressed support for the pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. There was an outcry in mainland China, and the NBA dissociated itself from the statement. One Chinese-origin owner of an NBA team — Joe Tsai, an early backer of Alibaba — managed to respond by linking the tweet to the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. (Mainland Chinese nationalists can link anything to the Opium Wars, presumably because they have so little other reasons for a grievance against the world.) Subsequently, fans expressing pro-Hong Kong sentiments have reportedly been ejected from American sports games (basketball again, but this time in Philadelphia).

The NBA is very popular in mainland China. The traditional "soft power" assumption here would be that this means that American values of free speech and openness have a route into mainlanders' hearts thanks to their fondness for the NBA. But perhaps that traditional assumption is wrong — in fact, it might be the case that we need to do a full 180-degree turn, and wonder if it works in the opposite direction in some cases. When you rely on the private sector to project soft power, then, it is now becoming clear, the profit motive means that you are in fact providing a lever to other countries instead of extending the strength of your own.

Hollywood movies have long been subject to this phenomenon. During the Cold War, it was common to have movies that impacted on geopolitical issues in which the villains were related somehow to the Eastern bloc, or which expressed the Western bloc's values in clear contradistinction to those the Soviet Union might espouse. But you would struggle to imagine a similar movie made about mainland China in recent years. Now that it is a giant market for any big-budget movie, not a single value expressed through movies is likely to challenge the foundation of the Communist Party's authoritarian control. Worse, it will mean that studios bend over backward to indulge every single whim of the Chinese government or the most extreme of its hyper-nationalist online commenters. Earlier this year, when the trailer for the sequel to the 1980s classic Top Gun was released, the extent to which studios are willing to go became clear. In the original movie, Tom Cruise's leather jacket carried patches from the air forces of American allies, including Japan and Taiwan. In the sequel, the jacket was identical - except those patches were missing. Nothing underlines the cowardice of Hollywood more than the fact that it is willing even to compromise on a movie about courageous mavericks.

You think that's the deepest they're willing to go? Consider that the last reboot of *The Karate Kid* didn't have the protagonist practising karate at all. Nope, it was all kung fu, because karate is clearly too offensively Japanese for Chinese audiences.

What is truly ridiculous is that nobody imagines that he NBA or Hollywood is likely to koy power in the same way. NBA stars and managers can happily insult either Democratic or Republican parties, the president, the American system of government. Fans shouting "Help Puerto Rico" at a sports game are never going to be ejected. Hollywood constantly makes movies viciously attacking American political parties or big business or international finance. But Beijing's authoritarian power or its irredentist impulses would not be challenged in the same way. An outspoken Houston basketball star, who created headlines in the past by speaking out about police violence against African-Americans, on this occasion said "we love everything they're (China) about". The contrast could not be more stark. Soft power is supposed to be about the ability to project values. But it turns out that the only people who are successfully projecting their values on to the rest of the world using American soft power are the mainland Chinese. Only money matters. That's the hardest power of all.



international outreach

Passport and patriotism

My Indian passport has many disadvantages. But it's me



SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

assports are a hateful token of the politicisation of a fractured world, symbolising the elevation of petty national sovereignty above universalism that explains Brexit. There's a sense of utter finality, too, about the booklet I have just collected from India House in London for it will in all probability be my last passport. I said so casually to the cheerfully scruffy but very helpful consular assistant who was horrified. "You mustn't say such things!" he exclaimed in Hindi, "and during the puja too in Kolkata!"

My old passport, which has now been cancelled although it could have run to midNovember, was also issued in London. India's deputy high commissioner in Singapore was responsible for the one before. I had forgotten the man until half-way through a diplomatic occasion in another part of the world it suddenly dawned on me that he had once been my benefactor. Unusual for an Indian bureaucrat, he had been too polite to mention the debt. I say debt because in the bad old days before Maneka Gandhi's plea established a citizen's right to a passport, successive passport officers in India made one feel like a grovelling applicant for illicit favours. One incumbent hinted that a reciprocal gesture would not be amiss.

He dismissed my existing passport, also issued in London, as a document of convenience given only because the government in its compassion didn't want to leave an Indian abroad unprotected. Now that I was back, my financial, educational, political, professional and social credentials would be scrutinised before deciding if I was a fit person for the President of the Republic of India to accept responsibility for me. The police, too, were on the take. Groups of them turned up night after night for free drinks and dinner at a Chinese restaurant whose owner and his family were waiting for passports to emigrate. Of course, there were and are many much more serious abuses by both the authorities and VIPs like the Indian tycoon who mistakenly pulled out his second passport, a Swiss one, at a five-star hotel reception. But those are beyond my ken.

My worst passport memory is from Dhaka's dingy Lalbagh police station way back in 1965 when I had to pay several visits to ancestral Brahmanbaria in what was then East Pakistan. Deplaning in Dhaka, one had to rush to register at Lalbagh as the law demanded before boarding the Green Arrow train for Chittagong. There was always a pile of red India-Pakistan travel passports to be cleared, and the police officer on duty always shoved my blue passport to the bottom of the heap. Each time he came to it, he would again put it last and continue with the red passports while I gnawed my nails in anxiety for fear of missing the train. Once I made so bold as to hesitantly draw his attention to my dilemma and received such a snarl and a shouted order that I retreated in terror. East Pakistan is now Bangladesh. The police registration requirement has gone. But has the mind behind the law, the attitude that shaped it, changed?

I once bumped into Mother Teresa wandering around Bangkok airport looking lost. Offering to help her check in, I asked if she had a white passport and she produced one that was red, explaining, "The Indian government has very kindly given me this diplomatic passport." At the Air India counter, where I also checked in, she was, of course, instantly recognised, lionised and upgraded. Some time later, she appeared on the spiral stairs leading down from business - or first class looking for me. She wanted to know what a white passport was. When I explained it was an official passport, she murmured, "Thank you. That will be very useful for my sisters who have to bring back medicines and things", and went back to her business - or first class — abode.

I have often been asked in the 65 years that I have travelled continuously (not counting a family visit to Brahmanbaria in prepassport 1949 when we all had single-sheet India-Pakistan travel papers) why I didn't acquire a British passport. The answer isn't any lofty patriotism. The answer is that I would have been embarrassed to plonk down the royal coat of arms (or the American eagle for that matter) on a third country's immigration counter. It would have seemed like impersonation. My Indian passport has many disadvantages. But it's me. Being for 10 years, the new one will last out my lifetime.

LUNCH WITH BS > AMRUTA FADNAVIS | BANKER, SINGER & SOCIAL ACTIVIST A life of her own

Fadnavis talks to Pavan Lall about her vision of India, getting trolled online, and her views on what it would take to fix the country's infrastructure

hen one holds a public office, enduring the vicissitudes of fame are par for the course. For the spouse of a VIP, however, such an existence can include exhilarating pros and unimagined cons. That's something Amruta Fadnavis, wife of Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, has learned to come to terms with — and as some would say — the hard way.

Our lunch venue is at the sprawling Varsha Bungalow, the Chief Minister's official and imposing residence in the heart of Malabar Hills complete with gun-toting security personnel, patrol cars and the accompanying bureaucracy. As we meet during the Ganpati festivities, the menu will be vegetarian, I am told. En route to the dining hall, I am greeted by my hostess, who at first appearance could easily be mistaken for a TV soap star and at 40 may well be among the youngest in her position.

She was born to parents based in Nagpur. Her father, Sharad Ranade, was an ophthalmologist, and her mother, Charulata Ranade, a gynaecologist. Her early years were spent learning music, playing tennis and assisting her parents in social projects that included free eve check-up camps for the underserved. She is emphatic that her performance in the classroom was remarkable. "It was always first or second in school, nothing else,' she says. Was that because of an unbridled love for academics? "No it's because I am

by; I'm actually mocked," she laments. For the record, while Fadnavis counts Asha Bhosle and Lata Mangeshkar as her all-time favourites, she also experiments with Toni Braxton and Celine Dion ballads.

And then there are the barbs. Only recently, social media was rife with speculation that Axis Bank, where she's worked for the last decade, was on an account-opening spree for police officers. The suggestion was the accounts were awarded to Axis because of her husband's position. Fadnavis, vice-president and corporate head for West India at Axis Bank, says those accounts were opened several years ago - well before her husband became chief minister. Then she shrugs as if to say those are things you can do precious little about.

Before coming to Mumbai, Fadnavis got a BCom degree from the GS College of Commerce & Economics in Nagpur and then an MBA in finance from Symbiosis College in Pune. After that she joined Axis Bank in 2003 as an executive trainee. Then, around 2005, she was introduced to her husband-to-be by her parents through some common friends. "The marriage was completely arranged with horoscopes being compared and all." After a couple of months or so of knowing each other the couple decided to take the plunge.

Was two months long enough time to take a decision of a lifetime? "At the time Deven Devendra) was a second-time MI A from



answer would match that of any young urban educated professional, expect she has an inside track. "It's clearly the poor infrastructure and heavy traffic but I can tell you that new project files have been cleared, work has started and those things will make a difference when completed."

Part of the problem is that all the talent in this part of the nation ends up in Mumbai. Decentralising the city and developing satellite towns is one solution. For example, moving government offices to townships nearby would reduce the incoming traffic to certain pockets of the city. "Cities need more parks. There ought to be a park five or 10 minutes from all homes," she adds. The other issue she feels strongly about is farmer suicides. People killing themselves for ₹25,000 is frustrating, she says. "We have to create systems where landlords can't push people to their deaths because that perpetuates a cycle. Children of such people also go ahead and commit suicide," she says, adding, efforts are on to change things around. She then talks about scientific farming and a water conservation scheme named Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan that aims to make Maharashtra a drought-free state by 2019.

I'm done with my lunch and taste a little bit of the gulab jamun placed in front of me. "That's homemade ... from Nagpur," she says. When will India's political parties come together for a common vision instead of adopting a winner takes all approach designed to obliterate the Opposition? "There's a reason for that and you have to ask what is the driver of politics? Ask any young person who wants to get into it and the real reason will be fame, money and power - not to bring about empowered change in the society issue is that we have just too many political parties in the system, not to mention extrem ities of wealth, she adds. A growing concern is that India is staring at a protracted economic slowdown. Is that something that concerns the banker in her? "We are in a down cycle and there are liquidity issues, and there is a definite slowdown that is more pronounced in some sectors than others - namely, real estate, manufacturing. More liquidity ought to ease the stress and it's important to realise that this is a cycle and that it will get better."

very competitive," comes the answer with a slow-spreading smile.

Our thalis, made of an alloy of nine different metals, arrive along with glasses of water and extras. It's a colourful medley of classic Marathi fare that includes dal, a cabbage preparation, spiced sovbean, green beans and vogurt. Fadnavis is served a mixed green salad speckled with red pomegranate grains. I throw her a quizzical look. "Too many sweets, too much eating out the last few days," is the explanation.

So what's it like to be a VIP's wife? I see a smile appear. "It's easier to get things done quickly. Every door opens, you always get a reception, and the associated respect and prestige is wonderful." she says. The downside? Her life is always under public glare. "I get trolled online for singing - which is my hobNagpur West and we knew nothing about politics but had heard that he used his position for a lot of social work and bringing about change, which resonated with my parents and me," she says, adding that she made it clear from day one that she would not be tied to the kitchen by her apron strings and would have a life of her own. "He was okay with that," Fadnavis says.

She has actually built a life of her own. In recent years, Fadnavis has walked the ramp in New York as a showstopper to promote the cause of young girls, has sung with Amitabh Bachchan, adopted two villages to help modernise them, worked with acid attack victims and even won awards for playback singing. "I'm a different person when I'm on stage," she tells me.

I take a bite of a crisp roti and scoop up

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

some green vegetables. They're not oily but have a fiery after-kick. I try the dal which is similarly punchy. Seconds later, waiters magically appear to replace empty segments on my plate. I realise this is a trap and that the thali will never be over unless I dismiss the waiters once and for all.

With friends like these...

What irks Fadnavis about India? Her

What is that one wish the chief minister's wife has? "I wish for India to be a super power but with compassion, without losing our core values and while keeping tolerance in place.'

That's a platform that might have a political future one day...

History keeper of Beni Ka Purwa



PEOPLE LIKE THEM GEETANJALI KRISHNA

am increasingly fascinated by 'lived' oral histories, especially, the ones told to me by people who have been on this planet for almost a century. Some time ago, while in Beni Ka Purwa, a tiny hamlet in UP's Banda district, I met 95-year-old Mulia Devi. Bent double but surprisingly spry, she'd just finished cleaning the village temple when we saw each other. She invited me to sit with her in the shady courtyard. I did and she rewarded me with her story.

Mulia Devi came to Beni Ka Purwa (named after her late husband) as a 12year-old bride. She recalled with precision when each tree was planted, and

every pond or well dug in the village. Sadly, she could also chronicle the demise of each big tree and the drying up of every single village well and pond. Listening to her, I realised she wasn't just the village's history keeper — she was also a living chronicle of its transformation from being a waterabundant area to one now known for its crippling summer drought.

'When I arrived in this village, all one had to do was dig a two-foot trench and groundwater would pool in," she said, her fingers busy on rosary beads. The pond across the temple had water all year round. "Over 30 years ago, my family had a well made next to it," she said. "When the well was being dug, there was so much water at 24-feet that they couldn't dig any deeper." Not far from it, there was a larger pond. "It was deep enough for an elephant to drown," she recalled. With the increasing pressure of population and the consequent need for more land and water, the two ponds started drying up in the summer about 10 years ago. "The land just couldn't keep up with the thirst of the growing population," she said. "Only the pond in front of the temple remains; the bigger pond has long gone and houses have been built over it now," she said. Small farmers aren't able to till their

land anymore because of water scarcity. "People seem poorer than they used to be though paradoxically, they have more money than their fathers did," she said.

It began to rain and Mulia Devi commented that a good monsoon could breathe new life into the trees and wells in the village. For, every successive drought has resulted in the demise of the trees her husband and father-inlaw planted decades ago. Mulia Devi pointed to a depression on the banks of the pond. "A huge neem tree stood here, planted when I came here as a bride over 80 years ago," she said. When it fell, I felt an old friend had died." With the gradual demise of old trees, she said as she hobbled over to offer prayers at the base of an ancient peepal, the villagers lost much more than the shade they provided. "The death of every tree eroded the soul of the village," she said.

Mulia Devi has also noticed that over the last few years, people are digging more and more tube wells in the village. "The more the number of tube wells, the less the amount of water there seems to be," she said. "In the same way, the more the number of people in my village, the lonelier I feel now that my generation is almost entirely gone."



PEOPLE LIKE US KISHORE SINGH

f vou're known by the company you keep then ours hasn't been particularly salubrious. Among our motley friends are gasbags, kleptomaniacs, pretenders and charlatans. There are those who've pinched our ideas, jobs and friends. We've been asked out for dinner to a restaurant but left to pay the bill on some flimsy pretext. Our cars have been borrowed and returned battered and bruised. Some have asked for loans of clothes, others of furnishings, some even our home for setting up meetings with prospective suitors for their children whose weddings we haven't been invited to.

"I like maverick people," I've explained to my children when they've held them up as examples of people not to fraternise with. (Truth is, I find it difficult to pass moral judgement on others.) "You don't give up on people simply because of some tiny flaw," I've explained to them. Only to be reminded of the time one "forgot" to return a considerable sum of money he'd borrowed on the promise of returning it the following day. Another was found lurking in the neighbourhood bushes after inviting us home, to be informed by his wife that they weren't in the mood to entertain that evening, and slamming the door on our face. Or the night that a neighbour asked to be allowed home to watch the World Cup on our television because his TV was bust, then asked his friends over, who helped themselves to our bar and left the home trashed.

There are some we've supped with, or had a drink or coffee with - often as a professional courtesy - who are cooling their heels in judicial custody in London, Mumbai or New Delhi. It's enough to cause you to lose faith in mankind. Those are the ones who flew too close to the sun, but our intimate circle is less prone to such grand malarkey, more likely to pinch hotel towels than shareholders' wealth.

The proof of our pilferage is confined to the odd toilet roll, ashtray or salt-andpepper set — pinched with confidence rather than guilt. There has been the occasional robe too, but only when the hotel has helpfully initialled it with the letters of one's name, making recycling impossible. I don't really like the slippers provided in hotel rooms, so I've never had the urge to pick those up — but my wife has managed to save a set of fruit plates purloined one visit at a time from her hotel room, when buying a dozen might have been simpler — and less expensive.

And what does one make of an acquaintance - my wife's - who, when invited to spend an evening with us, left behind a large gift bag which, when opened after she had left post several hugs and endearments, turned out to consist of several years' assiduous collecting of hotel pickings - soaps, shampoos, conditioners and moisturisers? At a loss, my wife did the only sensible thing promptly shared the spoils with the staff. A seasoned thief when it comes to pinching plants from her varied circle of friends, she stands vigil when her kitty gang visits to ensure they don't return the compliment. Unfortunately, she isn't always on her guard when inside the home - which is why we don't know who made off with the cutlery at the last party. Be warned: She'll be watching closely when we visit next.

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WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

Privatisation to the rescue

he idea of the moment is privatisation. Railway stations and trains, airports, the Container Corporation, Shipping Corporation, completed highway projects, Air India, Bharat Petroleum — all of them and more are to be put on the block. And we're talking not disinvestment but real privatisation, with change of control — last delivered by Arun Shourie in the Vaipavee government. Narendra Modi, it would seem, is finally going to act on his stated position that the business of government is not business

There may be other motivations. For instance, to rebuild the government's reputation for positive action, since the view has gained ground that the 2016 demonetisation and the flawed goods and services tax have been responsible to some degree for the economic slowdown. Another objective may be to simply close a widening fiscal gap. The government has been announcing one new spending programme after another, and one tax giveaway after another. As the bill has got bigger, tax revenue has fallen short. Money has to be found from somewhere, lest the fiscal gap become embarrassing. The Reserve Bank of India has been made to cough up a one-time transfer but that won't be enough. Privatisation could therefore be handy — except that, with less than half the financial year to go, much of the announced sale of government assets is unlikely to be done by March-end.

Regardless, privatisation is welcome. Fiscal purists would quarrel with the idea of selling assets to pay for current expenditure — such as the payout to farmers and the health insurance programme, for the obvious reason that the process cannot go on forever. At some point, the list of assets available for sale will run out. But that is a distant prospect just now, and on the positive side one must reckon on the systemic benefits of a better use of assets in private hands, and/or better service, which is the real logic of privatisation.

Will it work? Yes, if unlike with Air India the last time round, the government puts out sensible terms for sale or lease. As for who might buy, it is true that most domestic business houses are still in de-leveraging mode, the focus being on reducing debt. Also, many established businessmen find their ability to invest badly eroded by bankruptcy proceedings, or by shares pledged against loans being sold at rock-bottom prices. Anil Ambani, the Ruia brothers, Subhash Chandra, and others have all suffered on this account, while Gautam Thapar and the ex-Ranbaxy Singh brothers are among those who have seen a loss of both financial as well as social capital. On the other hand, corporate de-leveraging over the past few years has reached a point where quite a few companies are sitting on large amounts of cash or have headroom for taking on more debt, but are not investing because of the consumption slowdown. The chance to enter new businesses or buy quality assets may induce them to open their cheque books. Besides which, there could be some international interest.

All this comes with political risk. The RSS chief has sounded a warning on some aspects of policy, and there are stirrings of unrest among trade unions. The Modi government is strong enough to over-ride such resistance, but it should be aware of reputation risk. Privatisation in many countries, including India, has come arm-linked with controversy. The risks get heightened when decisions on complex financial questions about long-term leases are rushed through in a hurry, without mandatory consultations - something already aired in connection with the lease of airports to the Adani group.

Meanwhile, it is not clear why the focus is on entities in the transport sector. While the privatisation drive is masterminded by the Prime Minister's Office and NITI Aayog, it could be that two dynamic ministers are in charge of most of transport: Nitin Gadkari and Piyush Goyal. But that is no reason for not taking a hard look at the more difficult choices facing state-owned entities in other sectors — specifically the loss-ridden telecom twins that have no hope of viability, and government banks, which have already swallowed up an unconscionable ₹2 trillion of taxpayer money in the past five years.

The ghost of Swadeshinomics

RSS's economic philosophy laid out by Mohan Bhagwat runs contrary to Modi government's recent policies. And it is unlikely to prevail

he *Sarsanghchalak*, as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) calls its chief, makes his equivalent of the State of the Union address on Dussehra at the organisation's headquarters in Nagpur. It always makes some news, but more so now that the BJP is in power, in its second term, with a bigger majority than in the first. Also, when this government is delivering what are considered the RSS's "core concerns": Scrapping of Article 370 in Kashmir, the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), and the Ram

Mandir in Ayodhya. The chief for a decade now, Mohan Bhagwat made more news than usual this year because he waded into the issue of lynching and his definition of who's a Hindu and who's an Indian - both necessarily synonymous His arguments on both issues were contentious and drew much attention, some in criticism and, among his faithful, in appreciation. In the process, a very significant issue that he dwelt on at great length was missed. That's what we are exploring more critically today.

It will be useful if you listened to just some parts of that 63-minute speech again — just the first minute,

and then about 14 minutes from 28:00 to 42:00, laying out his economic philosophy. The key lies in what comes in the very introductory seconds. He begins by mentioning the important anniversaries of two most eminent and venerated Indians - Guru Nanak Dev (550th anniversary) and Mahatma Gandhi (150th). I do not believe many outside the RSS-BJP ecosystem, or those who follow and study Indian politics closely, would be so familiar with the third — Dattopant Thengadi - whose centenary year, he noted, would begin soon (November 10).

That name may not ring a bell. And certainly, he wasn't somebody in the same league as Guru Nanak and Gandhi for anyone, not even the RSS. But he was important enough to find a mention alongside the other two. That it was no insignificant platitude or a passing flourish becomes evident once you hear the second part of those 14 minutes carefully.

Born in Wardha, not far from Nagpur, in 1920, Thengadi was one of the modern (post-Independence) founding fathers (it isn't politically incorrect to use that here) of the RSS and the ideology of its political offspring in both its avatars, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and Bharativa Janata Party (BJP) now. His area of interest was the economy. His thought has defined the economic worldview of the RSS more than any other, especially in the past 30 years, or generally when India began opening up its economy.

Thengadi was a fellow traveller of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Both formed the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the labour arm of the RSS, together in Bhopal in 1955. They also fought bitterly and unforgivingly during the six years of the Vajpayee government. On the economy, Thengadi was the biggest thorn in his side, opposing all his decisions, especially



the privatisation of public sector undertakings (PSUs), reduction in import tariffs, and opening up to foreign direct investment (FDI).

At one point, he demanded the head of Yashwant Sinha, then leading the reform push as finance minister. Vajpavee resisted for a year, but eventually gave in. Thengadi had real power within the "sangathan"

(organisation) as BJP/RSS people often describe themselves collectively. He also detested Arun Shourie. He likely celebrated when a Supreme Court judgment harking back to old Socialist mindsets, ruled that it was mandatory to seek a parliamentary vote before selling any PSU. It stopped Mr Shourie in his tracks. Important to note in today's context that this happened exactly when the Vajpayee government had put the two big oil-marketing companies -Hindustan Petroleum Corporation and Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL) — on the block.

Thengadi's wasn't a lone voice. His first child, BMS, rotested against the Vajpayee reform era, often louder than the Left and the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress, and grew in strength. Meanwhile, he had formed two more powerful pressure groups: The Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) in 1979 for farmers, and Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM) – which we are all more familiar with today - in 1991. Remember that year, 1991? When the big Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh reform was launched? The SJM subsequently built a national voice and stature by opposing globalisation of trade, beginning with what was called the Dunkel Draft. K N Govindacharya, then the customary RSS man in the BJP as general secretary, was its most prominent spokesman.

By the end of Vajpayee's tenure, the relationship between the two had deteriorated visibly. Often, when a modern new idea was mentioned, Vajpayee would say with a smirk something like "arrey bhai, Thengadi ji ko kaun sambhalega... (who will manage Thengadi now)". But it was in spite of that bitter fight that Vajpayee cleared Bt cotton seeds. In 16 years under Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi, not one new seed has been cleared.

power. Later that year, on October 14, Thengadi passed away. Probably with the satisfaction that the new UPA government, controlled by the Left, had dumped privatisation forthwith and launched a flurry of welfare schemes of just the kind he would have wanted.

N ow that we know more about Thengadi, whom the Sarsanghchalak listed among eminences like Guru Nanak Dev and Mahatma Gandhi, we can translate the 14 minutes on the economy in his annual sermon better.

Quick summary: There's an economic crisis, but don't make too much of it. Why paint the devil on the wall? GDP isn't the only measure of growth. Crack down on corruption, but don't victimise the innocent. We believe in Swadeshi, but that doesn't mean we say isolate yourselves. Trade is global but we should buy only what we cannot make and need. Why import even cow semen from a Brazilian hybrid developed with an Indian native? Use Swadeshi. He then talks about how exports are good, imports are bad, the RSS principle of frugality, buying only what you must, protecting what you make from competition, and so on

Some of it isn't exact translation but my faithful interpretation. Then he comes to FDI. Again, paraphrased: Foreigners can invest but learn from countries that insist on one domestic board member with veto rights. So, foreigners own the shares but power is with our government. On the other hand, see what's happening. Our (new) companies are seen to be owned and run by Indians, but once you look deeper, shareholding is with the Chinese. This is classical Thengadinomics.

It also runs contrary to many of the recent moves and promises of the Modi government as it battles India's gravest economic downturn since 2008. It is opening more areas to FDI, negotiating new trade arrangements, especially with America, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership closer to the region. It has also announced massive privatisation as the mood-lifter for the economy and a plasma transfusion for the fisc. Both, trade deals and PSU sales, are being opposed by the SJM, as are new agricultural, especially seed technologies.

On each front, the Modi government has made moves in the opposite direction: What would make Vajpayee smile and Thengadi frown. You know what, the biggest PSU put on the block now, BPCL, is exactly what Vajpayee had been thwarted from selling in 2003. We can also see it isn't something Mr Modi thought of just now. Buried in the 187 obsolete laws repealed in a 2016 mass-cull was also the 1976 Act passed under Indira Gandhi to nationalise MNC Burmah Shell and rename it BPCL.

We can't say as yet if, by holding forth on Swadeshi economics in such detail, Mr Bhagwat is showing his intent to fight back again. It is unlikely, given the power differential between Vajpayee and the current prime minister. But not impossible. Our hope: An ideology has yet to be discovered which might even believe that the best way to get out of a hole, especially of the kind India's economy has fallen into, is to keep digging deeper.

The fight ended in 2004. In May Vajpayee lost By special arrangement with ThePrint

There's a lot in a name



standards and this usually leads

sometimes lapses in their service passengers abuse them anyway! Another of my friends has to loud screams on social media. had to take his share of social Actually going by the volume of media lumps because he has abuse received by my friends, the same name as the CEOsuch lapses happen quite often. founder of the Sahara Group. Anytime a flight is delayed, He actually contemplated or some passenger's luggage is changing his name by deed poll offloaded in Port Blair as he flies when the group was first under to Chandigarh, the airline CEO's investigation, and when the CEO

images in their portfolios.

sake, he gets the short end of the 1980. A namesake of his, an acastick. He is regularly abused by people, who disagree with my Jadavpur constituency, in what journalistic opinions. He also was then Calcutta. This gent was occasionally gets embarrassing- representing a fringe Bengali ly personal emails from old chauvinistic outfit, the "Amra friends of mine, cit-

ing incidents from Social media must be my murky past in absolute hell for gory detail.

anybody, who shares Interestingly, his/her name with a the prominent politician ite a few of

Unfortunately for my name- version of this problem back in demic, stood for elections from Bangali" Party.

My father had a brief, intense

NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

My father was then a professor at Jadavpur University. People

assumed

The Pakistani laureate EYE CULTURE

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

→ hen diplomats in India and Pakistan have made it their

where he could pursue his life's calling unafraid of being killed for calling himself a Muslim.

He enjoyed tremendous professional success but was heartbroken priority to shame each oth- by the fact that he had to leave his er on the international stage, the country. It was a wound that festered work of making peace is left to the in his heart until the very end. people of both countries. What they Though he could not reside in seek is not a political office but an Pakistan, he wanted to be buried opportunity to end decades of hos- there after his death. This wish was fulfilled. Unfortunately, those who carried hate in their hearts would not let him rest in peace even after he died. Salam was the world's first Muslim Nobel laureate but the word 'Muslim' was defaced from his gravestone. That is why the title of the film replaces the word with ******. 'Muslim Salam wanted to stay connected to his roots, and to give back. He dedicated much of his time, expertise and resources towards establishing the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, where voung scientists from Pakistan and elsewhere in the Global South could pursue their research interests in a supportive environment and engage in dialogue with peers from all over the world. After stepping down as an advisor to the government of Pakistan, he became a strong advocate for nuclear disarmament. He also visited India. Amidst the rich archival material used in this film is a video clip featuring Salam wherein he is asked to give a message to politicians. "First of all, they should get rid of nuclear weapons," he said. Whether India and Pakistan are willing to listen is anyone's guess especially when the leadership on both sides is not only uninspiring and jingoistic but caught up in meaningless gestures of one-upmanship that do not benefit their citizens in the least. Salam was born in pre-partition India. He knew of a time when the two countries did not exist as separate entities carved out of bloodshed and barbed wire. While the film does not explore his thoughts on the Partition of 1947, Salam did witness that horrific chapter of history which was drenched in communal discord. Decades after the violence that broke out under the watch of the British, India and Pakistan are still locked into a conflict that is influenced by religious extremists. The value placed on scientific temper and critical enquiry is on the decline. It is in this context that Salam is an extremely relevant film. It encourages viewers to question state-sanctioned narratives and sectarian violence but also refrain from whitewashing Salam into a hero without any flaws. Watch the film to learn more.

VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

wo of my friends have strong social media presences. Both have a largeish follower counts on and Twitter. Instagram Facebook. Their timelines are toxic for the same peculiar reason. They are targets of abuse from strangers.

This is because one shares his name with that of the chief executive officer (CEO) of a large airline, while the other has the same name as the CEO of a large online retailer. Airlines and online retailers are consumer- individuals. It doesn't seem to

ed passengers. Anytime there's a problem with delivery, or there's some issue with some product sold by the retailer, the retail CEO's namesake is tagged by customers. The messages are always angry and rarely polite. It can descend into personal threats, and some of the abuse is vile.

Both of them (they know each other) have to live with this. They have ALL CAP disclaimers on their social media profiles clearly stating they are not the individuals with whom they share their names. They also have

that they are entirely different facing organisations. There are matter — angry customers and to share the most fetching

namesake is tagged by the affectwas incarcerated.

I have actually been the beneficiary of a much more benign version of coincidence of nomenclature. I too have a namesake, and friend, who is well-known in the fashion and retail industry. Indeed, the pair of us ended up getting friendly because we kept receiving messages meant for the other person. This continues to

happen and it includes essential stuff like telephone bills. It also includes Facebook "friend requests" and professional emails meant for the other person. Given the industry he inhabits, the Facebook requests I

mugshots up there, indicating receive in error are often from aspiring models. This is where the benefits accrue. Models tend what

models who wanted Indeed, there could to get up-close and be some interesting personal with him insights, for any social scientist who have stayed in touch collated and analysed with me, even after I clarified that I wasthe impact of naming coincidences on n't the person they wanted. They conthe lives of tinue to send me ordinary people updates about their

careers. I'm not complaining enquiries about his suddenly to networking and career-building, but I do find it rather odd.

All of us have a "form letter" stating that messages, FB requests, etc., have been made to the wrong person. My namesake and I have also developed a habit of filtering, and passing on, like the seems important stuff.

acquaintances also made puzzled

about this scattershot approach developing an affection for the cause of Bengali chauvinism.

> Social media must be absolute hell for anybody, who shares his/her name with a prominent politician. Indeed, there could be some interesting insights, for any social scientist who collated and analysed the impact of naming coincidences on the lives of ordinary people.

Identity and separatism



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

he government says Kashmir is now open to tourists. That's good. After all. it's now more than two months since the Modi government further rendered the provisions of Article 370 ineffective and, in a Colin Powellesque move of "shock and awe", turned the state of Jammu and Kashmir into a union territory.

Kashmiri Muslims have been outraged but silenced. Pakistan has been mewling like a cat stranded on a tree. China, the global exemplar of human rights, has been growling to pacify Pakistan. Indian liberals who have been taken in by the hearts the rest of regional identities

lost liberalism of Article 370.

All this is in accordance with the script. What is not, however, is the

response of the Kashmiri Hindus, who were so mercilessly kicked out of the Valley in 1990. They had been left to fend for themselves by successive central governments, which thought this was nasty but quite ok.

I have a lot of Kashmiri Hindu friends and my brother's wife is a Kashmiri Hindu. They are very happy but have also been stressing the need to preserve the Kashmiri identity, whatever it is. That is their right and it should not cause offence.

But what I cannot understand is why they think their identity is somehow more important than any other Indian identity, or superior. What's so special about it?

Two questions arise from this. One, why has this belief persisted and strengthened over 70 years when almost all other non-tribal regional identities have receded; and two, should these self-important notions be ignored just as

and minds arguments have been were, or be pandered to? What weeping gently, mourning for the has been the Kashmiri contribution to India after 1947?

The answer to the first question is clear. Separateness and identity got fused because of Article 370, on which Jawaharlal Nehru had insisted.

But the answer to the second question is unclear because of a very simple thing: While Nehru's solution was to a political problem, the identity issue is a sociological one.

And sociology is not uni-dimensional. It is very hard to tackle. There is the added complica-

tion: The Kashmiri Hindu identity was always quite distinct from the Kashmiri Muslim one. It's become even more so now.

This is the problem that needs resolving.

The experience of Tamil Nadu offers some hints. It took half a century there — from 1918. when the Dravidian Justice Party was formed, to 1967, when its successor, the DMK, came to power — for it to be resolved. It consisted of a peaceful acquisi-

tion of power by the majority. Had Kashmir been given a similar opportunity – instead of

Article 370 — we would not have ulation, were the ones who were had the primary-secondary idensocially powerful. Today they are tity problem now. It would have been primary identity Indian, secondary identity Kashmiri.

have in common is that in both places the minority was disproportionately powerful. Few people acknowledge it but at its core the Tamil Nadu problem Modus vivendi between the Brahmins and the rest was one of power.

most of the land and the accompanying political power, while the Muslims were the peasants and powerless. In 1935 it was the Hindus who persuaded the Maharaja to exclude all non-Kashmiris from owning land in Kashmir. That law eventually came back to bite them in their backside.

Brahmins were insignificant as landlords. But they held social and administrative power. Their power was based on their ability to exclude. It was, if you like, the club approach to power.

has now been pretty much evicted because the Brahmins, despite being a minority, constituting no more than 4-5 per cent of the pop-

ly enough, that he tility. The proxy war might be profitable for the global military induswas the politician. Thankfully, this trial complex, but it has had was pre social debilitating consequences for indimedia. But we had viduals sharing cultural affinities to field many that borders cannot erase. As the ones holding the reins strange phonecalls. Friends and tighten their grip, others rise up to

resist. Artists have always found ways to collaborate even though the visa regime conspires to eliminate contact between Indians and Pakistanis. Not only are they enabled by social media but many of them have opportunities to meet in a third country away from the cartographic anxieties of nation states threatened by cul-

tural exchange. The latest Indo-Pak venture that celebrates this desire to overcome barriers is a documentary titled Salam: The First ****** Nobel Laureate, which is now available on Netflix. It is directed by Anand Kamalakar, who was born and raised in India but lives in New York, and produced by Omar Vandal and Zakir Thaver, who grew up in Pakistan and moved to the US for their higher education. This film pays tribute to a Pakistani scientist named Abdus Salam (1926-1996), who was awarded

the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979. Such an honour is rare, and he was acutely aware of this as a Muslim man from a so-called Third World country working in a predominantly white and Eurocentric universe that looked in a patronising manner at people like himself. Unfortunately, Pakistan did not care as much about his commitment to his faith. Under the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, it became an Islamic Republic which persecuted the Ahmadivva community that Salam was part of. Ahmadis were forbidden from calling themselves Muslims because they did not consider Muhammad as the last prophet.

The genocide of Ahmadis in Pakistan has come up for discussion in global human rights forums but the volume of reporting has remained abysmally low. This film will hopefully change that. The fact that Salam had helped set up Pakistan's nuclear programme did not earn him any brownie points with the religious extremists, and he felt compelled to live in Europe

The Tamil solution What Tamil Nadu and Kashmir tion. In Kashmir, however, the

In Kashmir the Hindus held

In Tamil Nadu, in contrast, the

In Tamil Nadu the minority

less than 2 per cent. The liberals don't seem to mind very much. This eviction was achieved by economic and administrative means comprising constitutionally and judicially mandated reservations in jobs and educa-

eviction was violent.

Today the Brahmins and the others of Tamil Nadu have found a modus vivendi where both fiercely defend their Tamil identities — together. But barring some nut cases, they have no love for separateness.

In Kashmir it's the opposite. Separateness fully defines the Kashmiri Muslim. There is no place for the Hindus or even other Indians

It would be highly optimistic to think the Tamil solution can be repeated in Kashmir. It's too late for that now because Article 370 in its coming, living, and dving, too, has rendered the Valley a mental wasteland where a Kashmiri Muslim has no clue what he or she wants: To become a Pakistani, to remain Indian, or become independent.

That's why they are better off as a union territory until they sort themselves out.