

Ease of doing what?



COUNTRY CODE

RAHUL JACOB

In the midst of drinks last Saturday with an ex-colleague, the conversation took an unexpected turn. If he wanted to return to India, his wife declared, he would need to hire a secretary or marry again because she never wanted to be involved in applying for an Indian visa again. She was joking of course, but it was a reminder of how difficult the process of getting permissions to travel to India even in an age of electronic visas. My friend's rites of passage had been complicated by the fact that he used to be a foreign correspondent in this country. What additional security benefits accrue by asking visitors to list every Indian city they have travelled to, for instance? Asking an Irishwoman, meanwhile, if she has Pakistani ancestry is a bit silly. Five years ago, a Singaporean friend said he would not revisit the country after he was interrogated as he did not have the special permit to return to India within a month of arriving here. He needed to catch a connecting flight. A 70-person business delegation from China had to cancel meetings in India this week because the visas did not come through in time — and this is just weeks after Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping were sipping coconut water on a beach.

Our capacity to make visas difficult has meant we have handicapped our ability to capture the more than 10 per cent of global GDP and 27 per cent of global services exports that come from travel and tourism. There are few more labour-intensive industries for a country with a low-skilled workforce such as India's than tourism. Yet, this is just a microcosm of how difficult it remains to do business in India — or even just get here. For that reason, the Modi government's focus on moving up the ease of doing business rankings of the World Bank is admirable and the jump to 63 in a few years spectacular. Yet anyone courageous enough to run an honest business in India must wonder about the weighting of parameters for this list.

True, the bank's survey says India remains well behind when it comes to enforcing contracts and registering property. "It takes 58 days and costs on average 8 per cent of a property's value to register it" the bank says. About 1,445 days is needed for a company to resolve a commercial dispute through a local court, almost three times as long as it takes in high-income economies.

Do a straw poll of any business friends and you will laugh and weep at what they go through. I asked one about the permissions and licences required to build a hotel. There are almost 70 needed. Moreover, a number require the permission of the police; operating a swimming pool needs our cops to wade in to the matter but also approval from a fire safety officer. Bars in hotels are allowed to be open for 24 hours in Delhi, but music must stop at 1 am. (Surely a hotel's guests can use tripadvisor to forcefully complain if hotels play music too loud?) The Delhi government's recent edict that alcohol must be thrown away if it has been open for about a week should get an award. How is this a foolproof method of ensuring that alcohol is not adulterated? Has the meddlesome genius who thought this up spent time in India's duty-free shops where sales assistants bore you senseless with how long a whiskey has been aged when all you want is a faster payment queue?

Then, there are our courts. They are not as speedy as the government in seeing an opportunity for revenue enhancement but — as the Supreme Court's ruling that telecom companies pay billions of dollars in back taxes going back years shows — about as unpredictable. Vodafone CEO Nick Read's straight talk of a few days ago might have upset telecom ministry officials, but a collective 3 billion euros writedown of Vodafone's India business to zero speaks volumes. Even the tabloids in London are covering this saga as if it were a Prince Harry rant.

The giant torture chamber that doing business in India represents means a business journalist is never short of material. Sometimes, it cuts close to home. This summer I moved from Hong Kong to Bengaluru. The forms sent in advance for customs clearance required 25 signatures. Then, a week before my shipment arrived, I was asked to deposit my passport, my taxpayer identity card and my Aadhaar with the handling agent dealing with Chennai customs, ostensibly to prove where I lived. A page in my passport stamped by customs now declares that on 28/6/19 I brought "annexure II and III of goods worth ₹75,000" and other personal goods (including faded old clothes, mildewed books and pots and pans) worth ₹1 lakh. My music system, which includes a 15-year old compact disc player with a tray that needs a nudge and speakers I bought in 1988, was slapped with about ₹9,000 in import duties after being grandly described on the receipt as a "home entertainment system". There is a method to the madness.

Telling *didi*



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

KEYA SARKAR

Our house in Santiniketan is bordered on one side by the railway track that runs from Kolkata to north Bengal. Beyond that there is a bustling township called Makhdumpur that shares little in terms of profile of residents or their enterprises with Santiniketan which is in most part a university town.

Though we knew of the existence of a temple across the rail track we never gave it much thought till recently when it started blaring tuneless *kirtan* over the loudspeaker at 5 am for half an hour and at 7 pm for an hour.

Our first response was to complain to our local police station (which has even

set up a helpline for senior citizens). Their first response was that they cannot do anything because the temple did not fall under their jurisdiction. On second thought they said, we should come back after November 11 for a discussion because till then they were busy with *bandobast* for the President's visit to the university for its annual convocation.

It was then that I had the idea of "*didike bolo*" or tell *didi* — a campaign which West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been running to address grievances of citizens. The idea has been attributed to Prashant Kishor, the man who is helping Banerjee in the 2021 Assembly polls.

Despite many advising me otherwise saying "nothing will come of it", I refused to be cynical and dialled the number that had been staring at me from billboards across the state. I was greeted by a very pleasant voice who took down my name, location, my educational qualification, whether or not I was a member of any party and then transferred me to someone else who was actually going to take down my complaint/suggestion. I must say this Q&A routine was unlike any other experience with call centres. The man on the other side seemed to know what he was talking about and this was certainly Kishor training.

The next person asked me whether I had approached any local authority with the problem. I said I had approached the police. She took down details of where the temple was, exactly how far from my home, the timing of their noise polluting *kirtan* etc.

Within minutes of ending the conversation, I got a unique ID sent by sms to my phone. However, 10 days went by and I heard nothing from *didi* and the *kirtan* remained unfettered. So I called back and was politely told by a recorded message that my number and complaint had been listed and I would be notified of progress. Excellent use of technology, I thought, to block progress questions. But what then was the unique ID for?

Ever hopeful I went on to the *didikebolo.com* to see whether I could put in my unique ID someplace to track progress. There was none. So this time I called from another number. I was asked my name. But I quickly interrupted the person at the other end to say that I had already registered a complaint but now I wanted to know what was happening. He verified that I had indeed registered a complaint and asked me politely to wait some more for redress. I asked whether there was any target timeframe for that. He said he wasn't aware of any. So what is the unique ID for, I asked.

"Just a placebo," I imagined he uttered under his breath.

A lot rides on Sri Lanka elections

The winner of its upcoming presidential elections could alter the nature of India's relationship with that country



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

In a few hours, Sri Lanka will have a new President, its eighth executive president. In 2015, an unlikely coalition of rival parties — the Left-leaning Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the free market supporter United National Party (UNP) — that was cobbled together by incumbent President Maithripala Sirisena and supported by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, defeated incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa of the Sri Lanka People's Party (SLPP) and led to the formation of the first National Unity Government (NUG).

This began to unravel two years ago. The conflict and power struggle climaxed when Sirisena, in a constitutional coup, dismissed Wickremesinghe and appointed Rajapaksa as Prime Minister in 2018. It took the intervention of the Supreme Court to reinstate Wickremesinghe in December 2018. The conflictual relations between the executive head of state and the head of government has led to totally dysfunction governance and was the main reason for the Easter Sunday 21/4 (occurring on April 21, 2019) terrorist attack, Sri Lanka's first since 2009, which sounded alarm bells that another internal conflict, this time against Muslims, might be in the making. Two parallel enquiries investigating the bombings were ordered by the President and the Prime Minister.

The rift between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe climaxed when Sirisena asked his defence secretary not to invite Prime Minister to National Security Council (NSC) meetings. Former Defence Secretary Kapila Waidyaratne is the latest to confirm this in his testimony to the parliamentary commission. Political instability has taken its toll on the economy. Tourism has been crippled after the suicide bombings and caused a loss of ₹20 billion. Political co-habitation between President

and Prime Minister has just not worked. Mahinda Rajapaksa was the last President to use his all-powerful office to his advantage. He won the war but antagonised the western community and India by cosyng up to China.

The political impasse is expected to be broken by presidential elections currently on. The UNP is leading a major alliance, the National Democratic Front whose agenda is national security, democracy and the economy. UNP's presidential candidate is the youthful Sajith Premadasa, minister for housing and construction. He is the son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa who was assassinated by the LTTE. Sajith's election could set the precedent for father and son becoming President of Sri Lanka.

The SLPP is on a high after sweeping local body elections in February 2018. That Mahinda Rajapaksa's younger brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, would be the presidential candidate was a foregone conclusion. Like his elder brother, Gotabaya (popularly known as Gota), a former Colonel in the Sri Lanka Army, is a strong and ruthless leader remembered for synergising the war victory against the Tamil insurgents, the LTTE, as defence secretary. He is a better known face than Premadasa but carries

war-excesses baggage. Gota has in his favour, the backing of the Sinhala Buddhists and his reputation as a tough administrator. However, where he will lose out is the north and east which are dominated by minorities. By contrast, while Sajith Premadasa is seen by aspirational younger Sri Lankans as a potentially good administrator, he is also carrying the baggage of his party, which is blamed for the current economic woes of Sri Lanka.

The comprehensive mishandling of the Easter Sunday bombings by the fractured ruling coalition will provide Gota, if he wins, an opportunity to reset the country's intelligence and counter terrorism grid. But there is more to national interest than just national security.

India was integral to an international effort in 2014-15 to dislodge Mahinda Rajapaksa, seen to be uncomfortably close to countries like China, Pakistan, Russia, Libya and North Korea. It was during his regime that China was able to spread its influence across south and central Sri Lanka with connectivity projects — ports, airports, expressways and an upcoming commercial city — and enhancing political and defence cooperation. The first Chinese submarine docked in Colombo Port during the Rajapaksa era. Entrapped in Belt and Road debts, Sri Lanka has had to lease Hambantota Port to China for 99 years and the future Colombo Port city complex for 90 years. The UNP government was able to nominally arrest the rise and growth of China during its term.

The Rajapaksas have been out of power for five years. Their victory will return strategic advantage to China.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ SAMEER NAIR | CEO | APPLAUSE ENTERTAINMENT

On the creative continuum

Nair tells Vanita Kohli-Khandekar how various industries — devices, payments, telecom — have created the perfect storm in the media business

Sameer Nair loves his food. The last time I had lunch at his office, the 54-year old CEO of Applause Entertainment had ordered some awesome mutton and chicken dishes from The Bori Kitchen. This time we agree that his secretary would book us at a place he fancies. And that is how I land up at Boteco in Mumbai's Bandra Kurla Complex one Wednesday afternoon. Just as I am settling in, Nair walks in from his office next door. We start discussing food immediately. He's ravenous because he's skipped breakfast for our early lunch. He orders a *carne na pedra* or thin slices of steak and a side dish of pork sausages with tapioca chunks. I go for the *pato assado do boteco* or roasted Peking duck. He quaffs a Coke and I sip on hot water as we start talking shop.

Nair's chuffed about getting the rights to make the Indian version of the popular Israeli show *Fauda*. Applause, the Aditya Birla Group's entertainment arm, had been defunct for some years. So when Nair bumped into chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla in 2016 and mentioned that his contract (as group CEO) with Balaji Telefilms was coming to an end and he might do stuff on his own, Birla snapped him up. Very few people in the business combine an instinct for content with a firm grip on its costing, the broader business scenario and a huge network of relationships within the creative ecosystem the way Nair does. He is erudite, watches huge amounts of cinema and shows and is totally with whatever is happening.

There seems some cosmic correctness at work here: The man most identified with getting *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) and the *saas-bahu* serials to Indian TV screens, one who ran its largest broadcaster Star India, is now applying his mind to bringing the most disruptive and cutting edge shows online. His journey on the creative continuum that has shaped the Indian media market and audience tastes, continues.

Nair joined Applause in 2017 with the broad idea to build a content company. So far seven Applause shows such as *Hello Mini* and *Hostages* have dropped online. Another six are in post-production and many others including films and short form content are in various stages of development. Interestingly enough, the first set of Applause's shows such as *Criminal Justice* (based on a BBC show) and *The Office* began streaming on Hotstar, owned by Disney's Star India. Star is Nair's old home, the

firm where he came into his own, found fame, fortune and of course, Amitabh Bachchan.

The food arrives. Nair starts cooking his steak on the hot stone and offers me his *tapioca chips*. The duck is good but the portion is huge. Nair happily takes a piece of it while I try one of the thinly sliced steaks. The chomping and chewing is interrupted only by our deep dive into the past.

It was in August 2000 while waiting for Bachchan on the sets of (then Star India's) KBC at Filmcity in Mumbai that I first met Nair. An easygoing chap he'd done everything from selling yellow pages to making ad films before he joined as a producer-director for interstitials for Star Movies in 1994. Interstitials are pieces of content that fill the breaks during a film. He reckons he would have made behind-the-scenes kind of stuff that included interviews with stars for about 200 films. That is when his early friendships and network in the film and creative industry were formed. Soon he became head of promos and presentation for Star Plus, the flagship channel and also handled movie acquisition. But he was always on the fringes of the system.

He soon grew restless. "In February 1999 I was like 'this is too much, what am I doing, I want to be a director'. I had a movie idea and even set up a time to meet Mr Bachchan on a Friday morning at 11 am. But I couldn't go because I got promoted to programming head that day. One year later when I took KBC to him, he said what happened to the movie script you wanted to show me," he laughs. As programming head Nair kicked off a lot of shows that were "much appreciated and applauded but got us no ratings", he says. There was *Rajdhani*, a political drama a la *House of Cards*. There were the Star Bestsellers, one-hour films from directors who now rank among India's biggest — Imtiaz Ali and Rajkumar Hirani among others. Star Plus did comedy, fiction, and talk shows. However, nothing hit the big time.

For nine years after it entered India, Star struggled. It had the odd success in Channel [V] or Star News but despite being one of the earliest entrants, rivals Zee and Sony had run away with the game. After its divorce from Zee in 1999, Star was finally free to do Hindi programming. It needed a show that would cut across age groups, soio-economic barriers and get India together as if it was the "India-



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Pakistan cricket final", as (then) CEO Peter Mukerjee put it in his brief to the team.

Nair, all of 34 then, was key to this transformation. He zeroed in on KBC, Siddhartha Basu and insisted on having Bachchan as the host though it took three months to convince him. KBC hit the TV industry like a tsunami. Nair quickly followed that with daily soaps, an unknown quantity during primetime then. *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* among others took off and Star dominated the rating charts for six long years. That is the base on which it went on to become India's largest media firm long after Nair left

in 2007 to set up Imagine TV.

When KBC hit the screens, India was at 70 million TV homes, about half of which were watching cable and satellite TV. Today more than 95 per cent of India's 197 million TV homes use cable and satellite. That is over 800 million people. Add about 600 million (who may or may not own a TV) who have broadband enabled phones. Isn't this a whole new ball game? "One big difference since the early 90s is, then we were creating content, throwing the cables, building distribution, content and even the ad industry. Today distribution is in place, the whole e-commerce industry has built a degree of trust so people are happy to buy video online. Therefore various industries — devices, payments, telecom — have created the perfect storm," points out Nair.

We are on the last few bites of duck and steak. There is an air of contentment around the table when we ask for the dessert menu. We decide to share a coffee panna cotta along with cappuccinos.

How does he feel about being in this new world, knowing that he has been there at the birthing of the old one? "This is not a new world for me... storytelling has always been around. Even before KBC there were weekly dramas like *Saans* or *Tu Tu Main Main*. These (online dramas) too are like weekly dramas but they are made together and binged on. Netflix was a great distribution idea (not content). From 2000 onwards India skewed towards the daily soap opera and that killed fiction. Now OTT is bringing it back," he reckons. "A drama series is like three-four movies. You want to work with better actors, writers, directors and all of it is on location. In TV you air an episode and it is gone. Drama sits on the platform," he adds. So does a lot of other content like talk shows that "the rise of news channels had destroyed", he says.

What does this Sameer Nair with all that he knows and has seen bring to the table? "I bring what I have learnt. I have worked with wonderful teams on the creative side. Success or failure is the outcome, the process of creation is fun. I work well with people. And one thing I do is decide — good or bad — I decide. I am not a deer caught in the headlights. In a crisis, I will step up and say that this was my decision. The creative business is like clay on a wheel, you have to keep your hands on it, tapping and touching. If you let go the clay will fall apart," says Nair.

After a meal like that, it is holding myself together for the rest of the day that worries me. Nair however is raring to go to his next meeting as we bid adieu.

Simply having a wonderful time



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Surely the most tedious entertainment dreamt up by the glitterati must be the formal sit-down dinner with your names neatly pre-placed, so you're separated from your partner and left floundering amidst strangers you're unlikely to meet again, but with whom you're expected to engage. It might appear like the height of glamour with oodles of cutlery and waiters hastening forth with refreshments of wine and changes in the plating service, straight out of *Downtown Abbey*, but that picture doesn't, alas, say it all. You're offered a place on the long table not because you provide scintillating company but because your host expects you to

have one essential quality — patience — during which a multi-course meal likely to last over two hours will be served. And no matter how much you're tempted, given the dreary somnolence that's part of its routine, you simply cannot feign an appointment and hasten your departure, which will be considered the height of bad manners. Since speeches too are post-prandial affairs, you're expected to stay till coffee is served — which is good because you'll need the caffeine to stay awake.

Proficient hostesses have found that several smaller tables are usually better than one long table — such as the 100-seaters I have sometimes found myself at, which may make for a grand photograph, but renders table service untenable. By the time the starters arrive — cold and chewy, because plating takes time in the kitchen — the wine waiter can no longer be spotted, and your glass has been empty for something like 20 minutes. Getting your main course wrong is almost guaranteed, but never-ever make a scene because you'll attract the assembly of the disapproving service staff, the other guests will glare at you, your unrequited course will be removed but do not count on its replacement because — guess what? — the chef prepared only 35 helpings of jerky chicken, and they're all over.

God help too if you're stuck between

the club bore and the professional curmudgeon. Just last week, I found myself sandwiched between a manufacturer of soft toys on one side, an agriculturist on the other. Conversation, expectedly, was stilted. The toy manufacturer did furry toys that got dirty requiring specialised dry-cleaning, services so far unavailable in India. Great if I was a PE looking for a business opportunity, but I chose to pass on it. An opinionated lady sitting by his side and finding him dull as well, opted to speak over his head instead, but since the subject of her choosing was mostly complaints about food — too much spice, too little protein, too much diversity — while masticating loudly, I was forced to seek refuge in the agriculturist on my other side. My knowledge of manure processing techniques and soil rejuvenation improved by leaps and bounds, but to say I was overwhelmed might be an overstatement.

But occasionally things do get interesting — as happened a while ago when a gentleman with a grudge against the world was assigned a seat across from me where he simmered silently till, sufficiently satiated with a blend of wine and whisky, he exploded in rage. He hurled abuse, flung a glass, embarrassed his corporate host, amused the host's detractors, and in the bargain provided amusement and scurrilous gossip for most. I admit to having a good time.

The Kejriwal alternative

On one side of the pink bus ticket issued free to women passengers in Delhi is a picture of its chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal. His statement appears above it: "Main chahta hoon ki aap aur aapka parivar khub tarakki karein. Jab mahilayein aage badegi, tabhi desh aage badega." (It is my wish that you and your family make progress. It is when women move ahead that the country moves ahead.) Some 2 million women ride Delhi's public buses daily — of the 16 million residents of the city.

The campaign, transparently a build-up to the Delhi elections, due in February, reminds one of the pictures of Narendra Modi looking down at you with a self-satisfied smile from hoardings put up at 60,000 petrol pumps across the country. In a lower corner of the hoardings, women who have received subsidised cooking gas cylinders thank Mr Modi, as though it is personal largesse. The hoardings had to be pulled down at election time in the summer, but are back.

The Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP's) Kejriwal is a political alternative to Mr Modi, at least in Delhi. But consider the many ways in which they are similar. The state government has introduced an all-costs paid chief minister's *tirthyatra* to sundry places of pilgrimage: Mathura-Vrindavan, Rishikesh-Hardwar, Anandpur Sahib, and Ajmer Sharif. You might think it is none of a secular state's business to be sponsoring religious pilgrimages, and there would be howls of protest if Mr Modi were to do something similar. In fact, the Congress spent money for years on a haj subsidy, which the Modi government scrapped last year — and just as well too. Still, we are into *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*, not a hard western-style secularism. So everything goes.

Then consider rival strands of populism. Where the Modi government offers free toilets, free medical insurance, and free doles to farmers, Mr Kejriwal offers free electricity, and free bus and metro-rides. Mr Modi does not ask where his bankrupt government will find the money, and Mr Kejriwal, who runs Delhi with three times the national per capita income, does not ask why such freebies are needed. Is it that he does not feel the need for more money? After all, property taxes in the city have remained unchanged for 15 years — without even any indexation for inflation!

Both leaders are prone to exaggerated claims. We have heard for five years about 1,000 mohalla clinics being set up, but their number totals fewer than 200 — or less than one a week! Sounds suspiciously like the claims about the country being open-defecation-free, or Aadhaar saving the government a tonne of money? As for the public buses on which women can now ride with free tickets, no bus has been added to the city's 5,000-strong fleet since 2010 — apparently because the state government doesn't know where it would park them.

As for operational style, while Mr Modi has converted a cadre-based party into one that sings his hosannas from sunrise to sunset, Mr Kejriwal has converted what was a mass movement against corruption, and for a change in political culture, into a party over which he holds untrammelled sway.

In short, Mr Kejriwal is almost exactly the package that Mr Modi offers: Personal aggrandisement, the building of a personality cult through full-page newspaper ads day after day, populist schemes involving subsidies (whether affordable or required), abandonment of secular principles, exaggerated claims, and no checks on leadership. Is there a method to this careful mimicking of style and substance? Perhaps, because at the time of the last election, Mr Kejriwal had mentioned that his voter base was the same as that of the BJP.

There is a difference, though. The hard edge to the BJP's communalism is missing in AAP; there are no Pehlu Khans or Mohammed Akhlaqs being killed here. So perhaps Muslims feel safer with AAP — though, ironically, the police in the city are controlled by Amit Shah! Equally important, where the BJP's education programme is occupied with such projects as wiping out the hated Nehru from history books, AAP has focused on improving the education imparted in government schools. We should celebrate that difference.



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

With every passing day, in actions large and small, the push and thrust of the majoritarian state becomes apparent. Defining who is an Indian precisely, or what constitutes "Indianness", has always been a problematic issue for rulers down the ages. The ambiguities surrounding the question today are evaporating as divisions sharpen in the soil of *jannabhoomi*.

If you are an Indian-born Hindu, you are relatively safe, whatever the degree of dissent you might profess; being a Muslim, however, could cast you in a wider penumbra of being "The Other" for doing the same. It carries the risk of being sidelined, excluded, or even punished — as in the recent case of the overseas Indian writer Aatish Taseer.

Many see the unanimous Supreme Court judgment on Ayodhya as a nuanced and politi-

ically pragmatic balancing act between contesting Hindu and Muslim claims to the site. The best that can be said about the verdict is that calm has prevailed and a conflagration avoided. But those in disagreement argue that Hindu proponents of the Ram temple have been unfairly rewarded for acts of destruction and demolition of the mosque by being handed over the entire 2.77-acre site; Muslim contestants have been relegated to second-best by the allocation of 5 acres to build a mosque elsewhere. It is not only Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi who has dismissed the compromise as an act of unwanted charity ("the Supreme Court is Supreme but not infallible"); retired Supreme Court judge A K Ganguly says he is "perplexed and disturbed" by the judgment and the Supreme Court's failure to protect the rights of minorities. "It is... undeniable that the mosque was demolished by sheer act of vandalism. Even the Supreme Court has in its verdict said that it was a gross violation of rule of law and act of vandalism. In that scenario the question is that who has been wronged. It is the minorities that have been wronged."

More than three months after the reading down of Article 377, the Kashmir valley is frozen, now literally as well as figuratively. A premature heavy snowfall on November 7 buried Srinagar in foot-deep snow and landslides blocked the Jammu-Srinagar highway. Power outages lasted several days, a precursor to the bitter winter ahead. Mobility is further

Wrongs you cannot right, just repent and regret



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Hamara Bajaj is possibly one of India's most memorable advertising campaigns. Unforgettable, more so since Bajaj scooters were ubiquitous, a part of every home, every family, when the campaign was first aired in 1989. In 2006, Chetak, the flagship scooter from the Bajaj stable was withdrawn from the market. In 2010, the young scion of the Bajaj family, Rajiv Bajaj, decided to pull the brand entirely out of the scooter business, with the specific intent to focus on its motor-cycles offering.

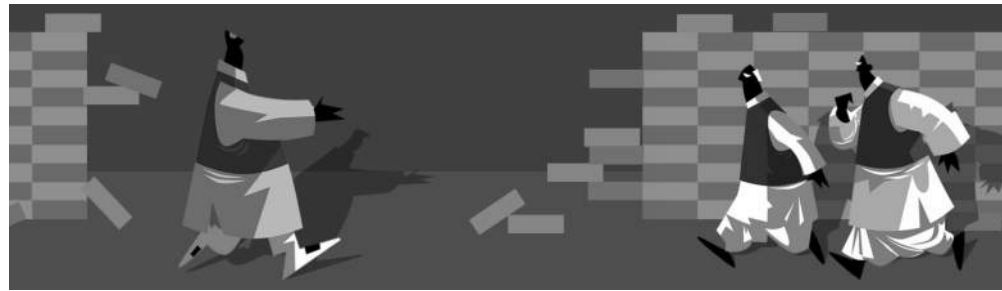
It was the year 2000 when Lara Dutta, Priyanka Chopra and Dia Mirza won the top three positions in the Miss India contest, paving the way for their respective Miss Universe, Miss World and Miss Asia Pacific crowns. What very few people would remem-

ber today is that almost 20 years ago, the title sponsor of that eventful Miss India contest was a brand called Palmolive, from the House of Colgate. Palmolive was then a significant player in the shampoo business. But Colgate was at that time under extreme stress from Hindustan Lever's Pepsodent and Close-Up brands that were pummeling its mainstay, Colgate toothpaste, in India. Jay Jayaraman, the chief executive officer of Colgate-Palmolive took a momentous decision: To exit the shampoo business, so as to concentrate all company resources on the toothpaste line. Palmolive exited the India market.

Much before Bharti Airtel was born, the Mittal brothers used to make POTS (plain old telephone sets) under the Beetel brand name in the late 1980s and early 1990s out of Ludhiana. They were undisputed market leaders. Then came Airtel, a mobile service, first launched in Delhi in 1995. A service that belied all estimates and predictions, zooming to a subscriber base of nearly 180 million by 2010. In 15 years since its launch, Airtel subscribers had bought at least 1 billion handsets. Despite that stupendous number of mobiles having been activated and disposed off by its customers, the Mittals strangely never decided to enter the handset market. They partnered, and bundled, Nokia, Siemens, Ericsson and others to new Airtel subscribers but never introduced a brand of their own.

Raymond has been the preferred suitings & shirtings brand of *The Complete Man* for

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Clutching at a saffron straw

If the BJP and the Left didn't hesitate to align against a common enemy in the past, why can't the Congress now? It doesn't have much to lose anyway

In politics, or war by any other means, the oldest principle is: The enemy's enemy is your friend. And what do you do when you are so down in the dumps that you aren't even in the fight? Then conventional rules no longer suffice. Once you get desperate enough you venture out to even reverse it: What if the enemy's best friend then becomes your friend? If there is the minutest crack visible in their relationship, why not probe it with a finely sharpened hatchet?

That is exactly the game the Congress and its ally, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), are playing in Maharashtra. A deal isn't sealed as this column is written, but the mere fact that they've announced willingness to share power with the Shiv Sena tells us what a change this is in Indian politics. The two, committed "secular" allies for decades are reaching out formally to a party they have condemned as a Right-wing Hindutva and communal party all this while. This is India's premier secular combination crossing an ideological Lakshman Rekha.

It is even more striking for the Congress. Sharad Pawar's NCP is still a party known for its deft political footwork now and then, back-room deal-cutting. As I have written earlier, Mr Pawar has been India's best-networked politician for three decades now. And, in the true sense of old-fashioned Indian politics, he never treats anybody as an enemy. He has always fought with the BJP and Shiv Sena, both have routinely called him a "crook", and the Modi government's Enforcement Directorate also named him in some scam on the eve of this state election.

Do also note that the same Modi government had honoured him with the Padma Vibhushan, an award next only to Bharat Ratna. Mr Pawar and the Thackerays too have had a business-like political relationship sometimes.

The Congress, on the other hand, has never gone anywhere in that direction. Committed critics of the Congress would contest this, mentioning the party's deals with the Indian Union Muslim League and Kerala Congress (Christian), and sometimes with Asaduddin Owaisi's MIM in Hyderabad. Those deals are still marginal, localised, and, more importantly, with small groups riding minority politics. This is the Congress' first embrace of a genuine, fried-in-disghee Hindutva party since Independence.

If you understand the essential politics of the Congress, especially under Sonia Gandhi over the past two decades, it has looked at the Hindutva parties as its prime ideological rivals and designed its entire politics in opposition to them. In an interview with me on NDTV's *Walk The Talk* show in 2003, L K Advani had complained that Sonia treated his party not just as a rival but "enemy". Once it defined its politics this way, the Congress was now willing to align with just about anyone to fight the BJP and its essential allies. We define two parties, Shiromani Akali Dal and Shiv Sena, as its essential allies.

The Congress has aligned with the Left multiple times, beginning with outside support to H D Deve Gowda and I K Gujral's United Front governments merely to keep the "communal forces" out, and to also place the party back in power at the head of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), after the unlikely general election result in 2004.

In the coalition era, it has, at some point or the other, made deals with those who've also aligned with the BJP. These include Mamata Banerjee, Chandrababu Naidu, and Nitish Kumar, but never with a Hindutva ally, or the Akalis. There had to be a "progressive force" cover always. Sonia's Congress, if anything, leaned even more towards minorityism, first by agreeing to repeal the



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

By special arrangement with *ThePrint*

Choking to death, for many millennia

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHEK

As I write this piece, people are gasping for clean air under a thick smog blanket in Delhi and several parts of north India. Hopefully, the sun will shine out there when you read it.

We all, but those brought up in a metropolis, remember the days when the air was at least breathable. But even those days of the past weren't pristine.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in Europe sometime in the late 1700s, is squarely blamed for the beginning of the deterioration of air quality throughout the globe. But the history of air pollution is even longer and darker — probably starting when our ancestors first ignited the wood fire (the effects of which have been found in mummified lung tissues from ancient Egypt, Peru, and Britain).

Humans have released greenhouse gases on a large scale for at least 2,000 years, according to research conducted by Celia Sapart of Utrecht University in the Netherlands. A record of the air trapped in Greenland's ice found methane levels rose about 2,000 years ago and remained at that higher level for almost two centuries — the glory days of the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty.

Methane was probably released during deforestation for farming and from the use of charcoal as fuel to smelt metal to make weapons, Sapart was quoted as saying by *Reuters*. "Per capita, they were already emitting quite a lot in the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty."

In 61AD, Seneca the Younger, philosopher and statesman, wrote about the pollution in Rome: "No sooner had I left behind the oppressive atmosphere of the city and that reek of smoking cookers which pour out, along with clouds of ashes, all the poisonous fumes they've accumulated in their interiors whenever they're started up, than I noticed the change in my condition." Romans, according to *Smithsonian.com*, called their city's smoky air *gravioris caeli* (heavy heaven) and *infamis aer* (infamous air).

In addition, in the then capital city of the Roman Empire, Constantinople, air pollution became such a major concern that emperor Justinian I instituted the first recognised clean air Act in 535 AD and proclaimed clean air as a birthright. "By the law of nature, these things are common to mankind — the air, running water, the sea."

Earlier, Babylonian and Assyrians laws dealt with similar issues, and in around 200 AD, the Hebrew *Mishnah* sought to control sources of air pollution in Jerusalem (*The Basic Environmental History*, edited by Mauro Agnoletti and Simone Neri Serneri).

Traces of massive air pollution were also found in Peru's Quelccaya Ice Cap — the second-largest glaciated area in the tropics. According to Paolo Gabrielli, who led a team of researchers from the Ohio State University, "When the Spanish conquered South America in the 16th century, they took over the Incas' mines and soon began to pump clouds of lead dust over the Andes. The silver the conquistadors sent back home made them wealthy. It also made them the world's first industrial-scale toxic metal air polluters. (weforum.org)"

In the late 13th century, in a futile effort to reduce air pollution in London, England's King Edward I threatened residents with harsh penalties if they did not stop burning coal. Similar efforts later failed, too (somehow odd-even, halting construction activities, etc, popped up in my mind).

But the worst was yet to come — the Industrial Revolution, when coal fuelled human ambitions, and lessons from which we've never learned.

We are currently in the midst of a definite low level in the human history of air pollution. Hopefully, if future humans, in thousands of years from now, were to learn about the Anthropocene period, the proposed geological epoch dating from the start of significant human influence on the geology and ecosystems of the planet, they view it as the time when our species reached great heights, and not as the period when in our own success we choked to death.