

Opinion

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ON WEDNESDAY NIGHT, Venice suffered the worst flooding in half a century. Most of the time, 'Acqua Alta' comes across as local folklore: the piazza filled with water, the gleefully splashing kids and the amused tourists. You put on your rubber boots and go about your life. But recently there have been more and more soaring floods. At dinner-time, we received the text messages and heard the sirens with the four distinct tones announcing the highest-possible water levels.

And then the sirens sounded again — the last tone eerily prolonged — and we knew that something terrible was about to happen. Two violent winds — the warm southern sirocco and the cold northern bora — started howling together, and with the full moon, the rising tide and the torrential rain, the perfect storm was engulfing Venice.

The sirens start when the water rises to 110 centimetres (3 feet 6 inches) above sea level. Up to 140 centimetres (4 feet 5 inches) is considered manageable; shopkeepers know they have to elevate their merchandise and electrical appliances. Our social media was bursting with alarming reports: Water had risen to a calamitous 160 centimetres (5 feet 2 inches) above sea level. Then it rose to 170 centimetres (5 feet 5 inches) and then to 180 centimetres (5 feet 9 inches). Safe on a high second floor, we saw the plants in our inner courtyard floating on water. From our windows, hit hard by the wind, we observed the boundary between street and canal dissolve. Our anxiety was tempered only by the fact that our small son had already fallen asleep. We had one fateful measure in mind: the record-breaking 194 centimetres (6 feet 3 inches) that wreaked havoc on the city in 1966, causing the irreversible exodus of tens of thousands of people.

We called family and friends, shared information online and tried to separate the genuine accounts from the inescapable fake news. Water eventually stopped rising at 187 centimetres (6 feet 1 inch). We saw clips of streets turned into torrents; the sturdy ferries rocking like paper boats; 'vaporetto's (waterbuses) sunk and vaporetto's tossed on land; gondolas stacked on one another like a game of pickup sticks; the narrow street I walk every morning invaded by a water taxi; outer walls collapsed; trees uprooted.

In the morning, Venice came together to help friends and neighbours: the newspaper seller you pass by every morning whose booth has been washed away and everything lost; the father of five who works hard at his restaurant to provide the best therapies to his autistic son; the students living in the most vulnerable housing; the books turned into pulp at your favourite bookstores; and your beloved museums penetrated by the muddy liquids.

The St Mark's Basilica, a millenary religious and civic symbol, is inundated, and a 60-year-old board member asked if he could weep in public. A person has died in Pellestrina, one of the islands dividing the lagoon from the sea. Schools and universities are closed, and sanitation workers work night and day.

Fresh floods close over Venice

Rapacious investment in tourism will destroy the fabled city. Can the Mose project or an alternative technology solve the situation?



Water fills the interior of the Venetian renowned bookstore 'Acqua Alta' after flooding in Venice, Italy. Exceptionally high tidal waters returned to Venice, prompting the mayor to close the iconic St Mark's Square AP

The ultimate irony is that of Bangladeshi migrants, many of them climate refugees, who mop the floors of their shops and sell disposable boots to the ill-equipped passers-by.

We drew comfort from the countless people taking to the streets to help pick up the debris and succour the needy. I told my 75-year-old mother to stay home, but she ignored me and went to clean up our public clinic.

There is also rage and resentment. Everybody is talking about Mose, a project to build a barrier at sea to defend Venice from the relentless threat of high tides. The estimated \$6.1 billion project, whose construction started in 2003, remains unfinished and marred by corruption and cost overruns.

But we are not innocent victims of the elemental gods or the conniving politicians. Many fellow Venetians are perfectly happy to profit from the mindless economy that is making tourism the only game in town, despoiling Venice of its residents and students, and losing all the care and

expertise needed to preserve this fragile and wonderful place.

The flooding is all but a natural catastrophe, caused by the indiscriminate tampering with an ecosystem nurtured by Venice for centuries, the impact of the cruise ships, threatening new intrusive excavations of the lagoon and the rapacious investment in tourism. The politicians are immediately making passionate pleas, invoking funds, tax cuts and the completion of the Mose, which might work but may end up saving only a simulacrum. We need to look beyond the logic of emergency and simple technical solutions. The cultural historian Salvatore Settis has called Venice "a thinking machine that allows us to ponder the very idea of the city," a place where people have a unique way of interacting to produce unparalleled beauty in a sustainable way. We tend to forget that Venice has been for centuries an exceptional technological and ecological achievement. To live up to that tradition, we need a new political vision.

—NYT



OUT OF MY MIND

MEGHNAD DESAI

Now, RSS turn to show magnanimity

IT IS EASY for the winner to say there is no winner and no loser. The loser is the one who has to be truly magnanimous, swallow the humiliation of the loss and not ask for a review of the verdict. It was said immediately after the Supreme Court verdict on the Ram Janmabhoomi case on November 9 that this will provide a closure. Maybe, as to legal proceedings, it might. But will the wounds heal?

That depends on the winners showing true magnanimity. So far there has been no sign. What would truly reverberate is for the VHP to say sorry for the destruction of the Babri Mosque. It did serve their purpose after all. They broke the law and won the site. Instead we learn that they demand of the government that the guilty *karsevaks* have their cases withdrawn. If the government complies, that would be an open invitation to them to start on Mathura and Kashi regardless of the Supreme Court citation of the Places of Worship Act, 1991. Having broken the law once and secured their aim, what would stop anyone from repeating the same? It would have to be for the BJP/RSS to lay down the law and stop any such possibility. In 1992, the Parivar was harbouring a sense of deprivation and exclusion. Now being in power, it should accept responsibility.

Legal judgments are binding pro tem. They are based on the legal myth that the rival parties stand on an equal footing. But they rarely do. This is why legal judgments never settle troublesome issues which arise from inequalities of power. How many decisions of the colonial courts are accepted by any of us?

The Supreme Court bench was

aware of the political minefield it was treading. Hence, the unanimity as well as the anonymity, both devices preserving the names of individual justices from appearing in public. But there have been attempts already to breach the defences. There is talk of different fonts having been used in different parts of the thousand-page judgment as a clue to who wrote what. Let us hope the secret is preserved.

Reading the many subsequent articles in half-a-dozen newspapers over the days since the judgement, it would appear that as each day passes, there are more conflicting opinions. Yet, they are not divided by obvious Hindu/Muslim binary. On both sides of the issue, members of both communities appear. That is a sign that gives one hope.

Imagine the alternative. The Supreme Court, the temple of Justice as Prime Minister Narendra Modi reminded us, could have pronounced that the destruction of the mosque — not to say the installation of the Ram Lalla in 1949, Rajiv Gandhi's unlocking of the doors and his permission of Shilanyas — being illegal, the government should establish a trust to rebuild the mosque. And that Ram Lalla Virajaman should get 5 acres in the neighbourhood to build the temple.

Could that judgment have been welcome with similar enthusiasm, not to say a sense of relief? Very unlikely. The beauty of the present judgment is that it accommodates the realities of power with requirements of legality in a way which bequeaths a legitimacy which is conducive to public peace if not harmony.

Let us face it. We may not be always so lucky.



Visitors look at stone slabs carved out for the construction of Ram Temple, at Ayodhya PT

Capital hazard

Delhi's noxious smog casts a pall on the Panasonic Open in Gurugram

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah



I HAVEN'T GONE to watch the Panasonic Open that, hopefully, will wrap up today. The Asian Tour event has already been truncated to 54 holes on account of play being curtailed due to bad visibility. Just in case, players can't finish up their final rounds today, then the organisers should probably just declare a winner based on count-back: I'd go as far as saying that players wouldn't mind drawing lots as long as it gets them off the course; most of the overseas players can't pack their bags quickly enough.

And really, who can blame them: at the time this column was written, the pollution index in Gurugram on Thursday and Friday had breached the 'severe' mark. Your columnist decided to eschew the opportunity of catching some action, not only out of concern for the possible adverse effects on his own health, but, also from a practical standpoint. I mean the whole idea is watching

these players hit the ball. And considering I can't see the other side of the road from my house, there seems to be no real point in watching shots disappear into the smog. It's really quite a tragic situation: for the players, for the Asian Tour, most of all for Panasonic, that gallantly continues to support Indian golf. I thought long and hard about some positives to write about, but unfortunately, there are none. Walking outdoors in Delhi on days like these poses a significant health risk; playing golf is just ridiculous.

More than missing the event per se, what I'm most unhappy about is missing an opportunity to catch the original trio—Jeev Milka Singh, Jyoti Randhawa, and Arjun Atwal—in action. Younger players have no idea what watching these three trailblazers make a name for themselves on the world stage when playing pro golf for a living was considered a pipe-dream, meant for us. Appropriately, it's one of the rising stars on the scene—Khalin Joshi—who is defending his title at the Panasonic Open this year. "The win is still very fresh on my mind. I putted and drove the ball really well that week. There are positive signs now as I'm getting those



Players don masks at the Panasonic Open that has been truncated to 54 holes on account of play being curtailed due to bad visibility

similar feelings like last year. I just got to just block out unnecessary thoughts like I'm the defending champion and just play my own game," Khalin mused

on the eve of the event.

As things stand now, the second round is underway on Saturday; Thai golfer Itthipat Buranatanayarat who

phenomenal eight-under-64 is the leader. Amongst the Indian squad, hopes are pinned on veteran Shiv Kapur who's currently lying three shots adrift after shooting a five-under 67. Kapur had a resurgence last week and very nearly won the Thailand Open, eventually losing in a playoff. Also in the mix is India's highest-ranked golfer, Shubhankar Sharma who's been quietly getting it back together: Sharma got his best finish on the European Tour this season, a tied-seventh place at the Turkish Open, earlier this month.

The Classic Golf & Country Club is hosting the Panasonic Open for the first time after the event was moved from the Delhi Golf Club—the venue for last eight editions. The layout is the centrepiece for golf in national capital region that has a preponderance of courses—more than any other city in the country. It's unfortunate that the occasion should be blighted by the smog conditions which have consistently stolen the headlines this year. The layout typifies why people like your columnist choose to live here: to be able to play different world-class courses. This will sound inscrutable to non-golfers but that's how important golf is to those who play the game; it plays a central role in how we judge the quality of our lives.

This year I've turned into a cynic when it comes to golf in Delhi. All we had was the winter months that provided a welcome respite from the debil-

itating summer heat; in those months it would be hard to get a tee-off time without an inordinate wait at the first tee, because everyone wanted to get out and play. Because the crisp breeze mingled with the winter sun, and felt so good that it didn't matter if your game was going to pieces. These were the days golfers in the city lived for.

If this sounds like a eulogy, then perhaps it is. Writing about it, clarifies to me, in my own mind, just how miserable I feel about how things have come to such a pass. If we can't breathe in a city, then how can we play golf here? On a side note, it's the first time I've realised that there are degrees of crazy when it comes to golfers. Sample this note I received from someone I play with every now and then, who I'll refrain from naming here. "Bud, you're not going to believe how empty the course is! On a weekend that too! I'm going to play 36 holes. Join me in the afternoon?" The note was accompanied by an image of him, mask et al, standing on a raised tee, that for someone who doesn't know the course, appears to be the brink of a foggy precipice.

That's too close to the edge bud. I think I'll just take a flight to Bengaluru and play at KGA this week. Maybe rent a place while I'm there. Actually, I think I'll just stay there all winter. See you next year.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game