

Economics and good intentions



MARGINAL UTILITY

TCA SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Here's a problem: If economics is a science, then intentions, good or bad, must not be a part of it. If, on the other hand, and at the very least, good intentions simply must underlie it, it cannot be a science. Indeed, it ceases to be economics even.

This, to my mind, is the main problem with randomised controlled trials (RCT) in development economics — though not in the other branches of the subject like, say, mechanism design. In fact, I have never understood what development economics is other than being an atonement for a bad conscience.

As a result of it, many good economists have become preachers and many preachers have become bad economists. Some of them have arrived on Indian shores, in a manner reminiscent of the representatives of the Anglican Church after 1870.

Governments loved them then, and they love them now because they bring intellectual respectability to comforting ideas. So, it appears, do the World Bank and the Nobel Committee, not to mention many philanthropists.

There are two major questions that such economists refuse even to acknowledge. One, why is your good intention better than mine? Two, is the state the best institution to give effect to good intentions? Religious institutions do a far better job.

Such economists, I think, start with an inadequate understanding of what the state actually is — a collection of randomly chosen agents who can't reveal anything like a conscience while acting on behalf of their employer. Those that do become NGOs.

The economists then get very surprised when the state reveals its true colours. The phenomenon was best summed up by Arthur Koestler in his 1949 classic, *The God That Failed*.

What is not understandable, however, is how development economists deliberately ignore all the thought that has gone into preventing economics from becoming a vehicle for competitive politics. This willingness to be an intellectual fig leaf for sheer Robin Hoodism, with its forcible income transfers in return for votes, is what is so distressing, at least to me because unlike many of these guys, I pay taxes in India.

Not new

Sorry for that long preamble, but RCTs in development efforts are not new. It's just that no one thought of giving them that name.

Ask any IAS officer, of any batch, since 1948, who has held a district, and he or she will tell you how they have had to initiate or run such experiments. One of the first was in 1952 when the then minister for community development, Sudhir Ghosh, started his experiment in Faridabad. It didn't quite work.

V T Krishnamachari, the then deputy chairman of the now defunct Planning Commission, was blamed for it. But VTK foresaw the political dangers. Nehru agreed.

There have been thousands of other development experiments since then. Indeed, pretty much every single one of what governments call 'schemes' are RCTs. In fact, MNREGA is the mother of all such schemes: Give money to some on some arbitrary criterion and not to others and see if the beneficiaries vote for you in perpetuity. We know the answer now: They don't.

This suggests that the experimental method that works in science doesn't quite work in development economics. RCTs are useless beyond a point. Again, ask any IAS officer after he has left the district, and he or she will tell you how things went to pieces after his or her term. But it's got nothing to do with them. It's how it is if you rule out force and rely on incentives alone. People are not Pavlov's dogs.

The moral

Good intentions are best left to political parties, governments and religious establishments. Attempts to weave them into a formal way into economics helps neither the intentions nor the discipline. Both become suspect.

Let me end by quoting a much derided economist, P T Bauer of the LSE: "Those who propose replacing the market system by political decisions rarely address themselves to such crucial matters as the concentration of economic power in political hands, the implications of restriction of choice, the objectives of politicians and administrators, and the quality and extent of knowledge in a society and its methods of transmission."

He wrote that in 1982 but it was the essence of his life's work since 1955.

The series of Indian experiments since 1952 suggest Bauer should have got the Nobel long, long ago.

The intoxication of power

Sometimes, it pays to hear early warning signals



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Arrogancy, madam... *bahut* arrogance *aa gayi thi inme*," said an Uber driver belonging to Haryana as the results of the Assembly elections trickled in and it became clear that far from reaching the target of winning 75 seats out of 90 in the Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would have to seek an alliance partner to form a government in the state.

"Their arrogance will come before a fall," predicted Narendra Modi at a public meeting ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, about the Congress. He was right.

People don't forgive public humiliation

and slights easily, more so if they have placed their leaders on a pedestal by empowering them via an election. They see, they note, they file away in their mind. Here are some incidents that may have contributed, at different times, to a collective perception that the powerful are getting above themselves and need to be taken down a peg or two.

The Congress was in power and an external affairs minister, highly regarded by the party but famed for his short temper, was preparing to address a press conference. As is customary, a background brief was ready for circulation among reporters. The minister started speaking and his director (who had reached where he was by dint of getting in the top five percentile of an extremely tough examination and gruelling interview, not via rhetoric, intrigue and politicking) began circulating the brief. The rustle of the paper and the movement distracted the minister. "Who asked you to do that? You b****y fool!" he raged. The officer went white. The reporters watched: some with interests but most with sympathy as the officer moved as if to take back the papers and then just left the room.

The stories are a legion.

In the last BJP government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a minister came to the prime minister, asking him to change his portfolio

because his officers were not 'cooperating'. Vajpayee told the minister disapprovingly: "One should not fight with the tools one uses". A minister in the Modi government's first tenure could have done with that advice. In the presence of guests, she peeked out of her fourth floor office window, looked at the secretary of her department — a highly experienced but extremely stubborn IAS officer with whom she was engaged in an incessant war of attrition, and said, half playfully: "What do you think will happen if I eject you out of the window? Will it make news?" The officer struggled to stay courteous and murmured something. She then put the same question to her guests: "What do you say? Shall I throw him out?" They shifted uncomfortably and changed the subject as the officer left the room.

The current government has its share of such stories too. A minister took charge of his new assignment and summoned a meeting with officials, who filed in eager to make the acquaintance of their new boss. He began by saying: "If I say I think imports are really bad for India and should not be permitted, is there anyone who will disagree with this?" One misguided individual felt he needed to make his position clear and raised his hand to explain how all imports were not bad and you could value-add and make money for

India etc, etc. The minister fixed a gimlet eye on him and asked him his name and designation. Then he told him: "My frank opinion is, you've been working here too long. You need to go on a long, long leave. Take a holiday or something... and try not to come back here". He then carried on as others present wined. Many more such stories are available for those who want to hear them.

The video of Haryana Chief Minister ML Khattar that went viral midway through the Assembly election may have had something to do with the BJP's sub-par performance. Khattar is known for his incorruptibility but not necessarily his accessibility. In the video, a BJP supporter who was also a member of the outgoing government's Staff Selection Board, is seen trying to place a silver crown on Khattar's head as he stands before a crowd of people, waving a farsa (axe) gifted to him. Khattar is clearly audible on the microphones as he twists to tell the supporter: "What are you doing? I'm going to slit your throat with this axe if you don't stop". Later, Khattar explained, somewhat sheepishly, that he reacted because silver crowns belonged to the Congress culture of politics and the worker had served the BJP for years, so he would not mind Khattar's reprimand. All that the worker was trying to do was raise Khattar's prestige.

At the end of the day, an election is an election. The BJP could argue that it has, after all, been returned to power in both the states where it was in government. But sometimes, it pays to hear early warning signals.

COFFEE WITH BS ▶ PATANJALI 'PATU' KESWANI | FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN, LEMON TREE HOTELS

A recipe for growth

The fast-talking Keswani tells Pavan Lall what he learnt from former boss Russi Mody, how he was let down by a private equity investor and why he launched an upscale hotel in Udaipur

Walk into Patanjali "Patu" Keswani's house in Delhi's Vasant Vihar and you'll be greeted by a very big five-year old yellow Labrador with a bark to match. He's called... what else... Lemo and despite the bark, I'm told, he's harmless.

Inside, I'm led into an entertainment room of sorts that features an outside library, flat panel TVs and a recliner where I wait for my host. Around 10 minutes later, Keswani, dressed in a Polo T-shirt and blue jeans, bounds across to see me. Now 60-years-old and sans his trademark pony-tail, the one-time GM of Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, has retained the friendliness that's second nature to hoteliers. I'm greeted with a "Hey bro!"; Lemo is dispatched to another room; Keswani lights up a Benson & Hedges; and off we go.

A former IIM-Calcutta graduate who cut his teeth at the Taj Group of Hotels before becoming its COO, Keswani has done what only one other executive managed to do: jump out of the group and start a listed company. (The other one is Vishambar Saran of Tata Steel who later started the Visa Group). Measuring his words carefully, Keswani says that he "loved the Tatas and loved the culture there" but by the time he was 40, he had decided that he wanted to work for himself. What he is unabashed about is whom he admired the most.

A waiter comes to check what we would like to have and I'm offered a drink but opt for coffee. My host goes for the same. It was from Tata Steel Chairman Russi Mody, for whom he worked as an executive assistant for about a year, that he learnt some "valuable corporate lessons for winners". "Two young Tisco employees had said they had traveled by first class train but had gone by third class and pocketed the difference," Keswani tells me. When Mody found out he called to sack them. The hapless employees said losing their jobs would hurt their upcoming marriages. Mody's retort was, "Russi's heart bleeds for you but Mr Mody can't change his decision". The point: Keep the personal and professional separate.

The other thing he learned from Mody was to know his employees by their names. "Mody could actually walk into a meeting room and mug up the names of a few dozen people in the space of an hour. It changed how people treated him and I learned that everyone likes the personal touch — especially from a leader," Keswani says.

Our coffees arrive, served with a flaky Rajasthani biscuit called the *mathri*. Unusual but a house favourite, I suspect.

It hasn't all been a cakewalk for Keswani. "Not many chairmen of hotels would have been a bell-boy picking up luggage. I did that for a while," he tells me adding that an IIM batch-mate didn't recognise him when he picked up his luggage, which hurt. Didn't Keswani also own a private jet at one point, a ₹50 crore Cessna Citation? He laughs and explains that he did because it felt like a practical idea around a decade ago. Eighty per cent of it was financed and after a while he realised he was only averaging five hours of flying time. "Then use it more often," said his partner who was a billionaire. "I want to but every time I think of doing so, it is being used by you," Keswani told his friend. That was that, and he got out the deal.

Earlier, during a pre-midlife crisis phase, he and a couple colleagues had gone out to a Taj lodge, got drunk on single malt and had planned an early retirement. "We figured we needed around ₹50 lakh a year to live well for which we needed a capital base of around ₹5 crore. That would give us that number if we invested them in 10 per cent return RBI bonds." One friend said he had ₹2.5 crore and another said he had ₹3 crore. Keswani had ₹70 lakh, his wife had ₹30 lakh and a house in Delhi, and he thought growing the entire amount seven times was doable. So, in 1999 he put it all in equities. By the end of it, he had lost ₹97 lakh. His broker apologised and explained that the market couldn't be timed and gave him a Cartier watch as consolation money. Later he discovered that not only was the broker churning



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

and burning and getting 2 per cent commission on each trade, the Cartier that had stopped working after six months was a fake. The lesson: Don't bet everything you have.

The Taj Hotels stint lasted a decade with Keswani befriending a host of corporate big-wigs, politicians and assorted celebrities. He also took a sabbatical in between and worked for AT Kearney for 18 months to make up for the losses in the stock market. When he returned, the plan for Lemon Tree had crys-

tallised in his head and he kicked off his venture.

In 2005, an investor wanted to buy 25 per cent of his company. Another PE player was also showing interest but he was already committed to the first. Then, on the Saturday before he was going to get the money, he got a call from the investor. "We need to meet," he was told. Instinctively, he called the second potential investor and said he wanted to reopen talks. "Why? Has that recent failed IPO derailed your investor's plans?" Keswani wasn't aware of that fact but proceeded to meet up with his investor in his office the following day.

The PE firm's managing partner investor walked in, gave him a weak smile and handed him a letter from an associate that said that based on the disastrous results of the IPO investment all further deals would need greater scrutiny. "Do you want to revise your offer downward?" Keswani stood up, shook the investor's hand, and said, "thank you... the deal is off, and I never want to deal with you ever again", and walked out the door. "Always have a Plan B, Plan C and a Plan D," Keswani says.

Keswani lights another cigarette and fields a call for which he apologises as he explains that he is off to Udaipur the next day to launch an upscale hotel. It's going to be called Aurika and has ex-Oberoi hands working there. "Really?" I look at the *mathri* and ask how would that tie in with his whole cheap and cheerful model. He already has 58 such hotels, with over 600 rooms and as many employees. Won't that cause some dissonance? Keswani flinches for a second and says, "Lemon Tree isn't cheap, it's good value", and that Aurika will be in line with that by offering premium services and F&B at hard-to-beat prices. Keswani started with 3-star hotels, then moved to 4-star with Lemon Tree Premiere, then to 2-star with Red Fox and is now moving upscale with the belief he can do better at lower price points.

Is Keswani perturbed by the constant disruption in his sector? He admits that it's something he spends a lot of time pondering over. It's the Googles and the Amazons that he is now observing to see how they could potentially impact his business in the future. Beyond work, how does he occupy himself? The answer is simple. "I read, I play with my dog, and have a girlfriend."

The teacher from Dombautiya



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

Before the last Assembly elections, a report by a team of public health experts from Harvard University and Tata Trusts placed Singhbhum, the predominantly tribal region in Jharkhand, at the bottom of all Indian constituencies when it came to child nutrition indicators. It estimated that a huge chunk of Singhbhum's underfed children are likely to die young; the ones who survive are likely to have impaired physical and cognitive development and reduced performance levels at school. "This is exactly what I've experienced growing up," said 19-year-old Sarathi Tudu from village Dombautiya in Singhbhum. "Boys my age drop out to

work, girls to get married at 14 or 15."

Young Tudu somehow turned out to be different, although coming from a poor, single-parent family, her home situation was less than stable. "I've always seen my mother work hard as an agricultural labourer to support my younger brother and me," she said. "From a young age, I've felt that perhaps if she'd been to school, she'd have been able to earn better wages without working so hard." Two years ago, the young girl joined a local NGO Nav Bharat Jagriti Kendra as a peer educator. "My role was to motivate my peers to continue their schooling," she said. "My family found it peculiar that I would go door to door and even address public functions — but I didn't pay attention to them!"

Tudu's efforts have had quite an impact on her village. She's been able to convince three dropouts to return to school. Her free tuition classes are sought after (she has 45 students who come to her every day to study). A vocal proponent of gender equality, she spends much of her time counselling parents to invest in their daughters' education. At her behest, two families have sent their daughters to private school. Tudu also volunteers as a substitute teacher in the local government school. Seeing her enthusiasm, other young people here have also joined the effort. Today, there

are hardly any instances of child marriage and even child labour in Dombautiya. "Often I ask my students what they'll do when I'm not here," she says. "They tell me they'll carry on the work I'm doing and that makes me feel so good."

Presently pursuing a Diploma in Computer Application, Tudu somehow manages to balance her volunteer teaching work and studies. Her faculty has already offered her a teaching position after she completes the course and she's confident that she'll be able to continue her activities even after she starts working. "Eventually, I'd like to become a school teacher," she said. "For in an underdeveloped region like Singhbhum, education is the only key for us to unlock the doors to success." Some of her students pay her what they can, and with these earnings, Tudu now supports her younger brother's schooling. She still nurses the dream of earning enough money so that her mother can stop working.

Being a peer educator has changed her life, she said. In town to receive the Plan India Youth Champion Award, she was raring to go back and resume her good work. "I've made it my mission to ensure that all my peers finish school so that they can have a shot at better careers," she told me. "In the process, perhaps I will become successful too."

In search of the unfamiliar



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

There are several places in India that used to appear exotic and unfamiliar, but they are now shrinking. Thanks to the ugly weekend traveller, Bollywood and the pervasive demand for *tandoori* chicken, most parts of India now feel like an extension of the grungier parts of one's own city. There is an increasing homogeneity in the way people dress across regions — and tourists look the same everywhere. The quiet of small Himalayan towns is routinely shattered by offsite or incentive groups who demand a bonfire and DJ and, fuelled by alcohol, trade the quiet for an al fresco disco.

Other than the physical characteristics of a hill station, beach resort or historic town, one turns to food as a differentiator, but to expect to discover Kumaoni or Garhwali cooking or Himachali cuisine in the mountains is an illusion. In our childhood, all we could hope to find were *samosas* and *kachoris* as a nod to visitors, later replaced by the ubiquitous butter chicken. With the advent of more sophisticated travellers, you can now expect quaint tea shops that serve the sort of pizzas, grilled sandwiches and indifferent desserts that you find in bakeries round the corner from your own house. Local fare? What's that?

There are parts of India that stoutly hold their own against this cultural hegemony, but it is anyone's guess how long that will last. Gorgeous Goa is under onslaught, Bengaluru is just Gurugram with better weather, and all that marks the south from the north is language. The north-east used to be a region that felt thrillingly different, but the spread of "development" has cast its long shadow on the Seven Sisters. To experience its charm, one has to move away from the tourist-attracting capitals of Gangtok, Kohima, Imphal or Shillong — but that is true of most places. There is the Manali of tourist lore, for instance — and then there is a Manali away from its fringes where

one can still stop by an unpolluted stream running through a dense forest with just a scattering of homes which, if you're lucky, you can lease as your escape from the big, bad city. I know friends who book these homes as annual rentals, but it's a matter of time before they show up on an app.

If there's one place I'm ambivalent about, it is Kashmir. I used to travel there often — mostly on work, admittedly — but that ceased nearly three decades ago. Having also lived and toured in the north-east, the idea of being an "Indian" outsider was something that was familiar — but rarely threatening. Not till one afternoon in Srinagar when, cutting through the Sher-i-Kashmir International Convention Centre to the adjoining Centaur Hotel to which it was connected, I was ordered to take the longer route around because I was "Indian". I knew the gentleman who was refraining me from taking what was a legitimate option. He was an assistant to a senior official and he and I had a nodding acquaintance. He had never appeared intimidating — not, that is, till now. "I can file a complaint," he said ominously, "I will say you were threatening the security of the complex. You," he added, "will disappear." I experienced fear then. I've been absent from Kashmir ever since. Perhaps it is time to go back, for the wound to heal.

Low for long

ROBERTO AZEVEDO

At last week's meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, I repeatedly heard the same dismal view: The global economy is in for low growth and historically low interest rates for a long time. "Low for long" isn't even the worst of it. In the event of a new recession, governments have limited monetary and fiscal firepower to stoke demand. The economic and political fallout of a serious downturn could get ugly. Does it have to be this way? Certainly not, if governments address the causes of the current slowdown. Most of the finance ministers, central bankers and officials gathered in Washington had no trouble naming the biggest single factor: Trade tensions, they believe, are now the main thing holding growth back. Economists at the World Trade Organization agree. They estimate that global merchandise trade will grow by only 1.2 per cent in 2019. As recently as April, their projection was 2.6 per cent. This is a dramatic deceleration.

Two conclusions emerge from the data. First, uncertainty about access to markets and inputs is causing businesses to postpone investment. This means less output and job creation. Rising trade protection also means that capital and labour get deployed less efficiently. Underinvestment and misallocated resources in turn weaken productivity, leading to further losses in output and trade. Weak investment might already be holding trade back: New data suggest it will grow only half as fast as output this year. Second, slower growth in output and trade appears to be synchronised across regions. It's the dangerous obverse of a coordinated recovery, in which demand in one region supports growth in another. Today, no single region or major economy is growing strongly enough to pull the world out of the ditch.

The surest way out would be for governments to work together, while moving to bolster growth at home. Reducing trade-related uncertainty would be valuable in its own right and would boost the efficacy of whatever monetary and fiscal headroom countries still have. But there's little sign of such cooperation. On the face of it, the new trade restrictions don't amount to much: So far, they account for less than 5 per cent of world merchandise trade. But this is to understate their impact. The real damage to growth arises from uncertainty over future market access for all goods and services. Before committing resources to a new project, businesses want to understand the risks. If new tariffs might wipe out profits, investors will pause, regardless of how cheap capital might be. In this way, trade uncertainty increases the danger that low interest rates will drive funds into riskier, higher-yielding financial assets. That kind of investment doesn't add to capacity or improve productivity. Instead, it exacerbates financial volatility and fragility.

Failure to cooperate on trade also makes fiscal stimulus less effective. Increased public spending may come with calls to prevent demand from being met by foreign suppliers, reducing the benefits of a coordinated fiscal push. A decade ago, coordinated fiscal stimulus and a commitment to avoid protectionism helped countries bounce back from the worst of the 2008-09 crisis faster than would otherwise have been possible. That's a far more promising approach. To restore confidence to the global economy, rolling back the trade restrictions introduced over the past two years would be an important start — but only a start. Ending the most conspicuous "trade wars" and making progress on bilateral trade agreements can yield fast results, but the gains aren't secure. Growth built on strong structural foundations requires a broader approach, involving more governments and firmer multilateral commitments. Governments have an excellent opportunity to make progress of that kind and send a signal that they are ready to break the cycle of underinvestment and slow growth. They can commit to complementing ongoing bilateral processes with wider engagement — at the Group of 20, the World Trade Organization and other multilateral forums — to restore order to global trade. "Low for long" is eminently avoidable — if policy makers resolve to end the uncertainty that is now threatening to become entrenched. If they fail, and let impediments to trade persist or get worse, their citizens had better brace themselves for what lies ahead.

The writer is director-general of the World Trade Organization. © Bloomberg
Weekend Ruminations will resume next week

Flag-bearers of hyper-nationalism

India is now far too strong for anyone to push it around. That should've made us more secure, not get caught in old fears and insecurities

Google tells me that the real Napoleon Bonaparte used somewhat more vivid imagery to rhetorically raise and dismiss the question, what's a throne? For my limited purpose this week, I'm content to use what Rod Steiger, playing him in the 1970 classic *Waterloo*, said. Something like, what's a throne? It's an overpriced piece of furniture.

This was still the early 19th century, a throne still mattered. In most of the modern world, it doesn't even exist. Nationalism has crept back pan-nationally to some extent lately, yet the symbols of the nation-state — thrones, crowns, anthems, flags — have generally faded from our consciousness.

They haven't gone away, though. Sportspeople take these very seriously at championships, for example. It is just that the modern nation-state is more stable and secure and the value of such symbols has become commemorative, less existential.

We can, therefore, follow up this argument with a rhetorical, but relevant question of our own: What is a flag? Would today's Napoleon have said, hah, an over-rated piece of cloth? Probably not. But his lancers would not have gone to fight Wellington at Waterloo today, holding the great banner aloft. Times change, people change, and symbols change.

The reason we bring in an apparently far-out question like "what's a flag" is because that is the issue still holding up the long-drawn-out process to finally end India's oldest, and bloodiest, insurgency, Nagaland.

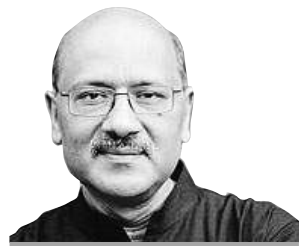
Both, the Indian state and the Nagas, accept they have done terrible things to each other, that violence no longer works. The Nagas still want a flag of their own, to share the Kohima skyline with the national tricolour. The Modi government isn't willing to concede that. Negotiations have now reached a level where the government says you can have a flag for cultural and ethnic occasions. The Nagas say, that will be a bit like an NGO having its own flag.

Banking leader K V Kamath has a brilliant line on the art of negotiation. The best negotiation, he says, is where both sides leave the table just a little unhappy. Translated, it means, each one concedes something they would've preferred not to.

For Muivah's Nagas, to sign up without the consolation of a flag is humiliation. For the Modi government, the choice is equally tough. Just this Thursday, October 31, it celebrated taking down the flag of Jammu and Kashmir and presented the idea as a tribute to Sardar Patel, whose birth anniversary it coincided with. How do they concede to a tribal state of just about 3 million people

what they have taken away from one much bigger as a statement of rejuvenated Indian nationalism?

The idea of symbolism for the BJP government of Narendra Modi is a far cry from Vajpayee's. Asked how Kashmiri separatists would negotiate if India insisted that it be within the framework of its Constitution, Vajpayee had disarmingly replied, we will talk within the parameters of humanity (*insaniyat*).



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Modi's BJP has moved back to harder, inflexible, and, if I may add with some caution, more abrasive nationalism. Such nationalism can't be "cool" about its symbols. That's why the lowering of one state's flag is celebrated, another one demanding it is resisted and a third one (Karnataka) still having one of its own reluctantly tolerated.

No cinema hall dares to stop playing the National Anthem even after the Supreme Court withdrew its own order. People are harassed if they refuse to stand up in movie halls. It's as if the new generation of Indians have to prove to each other once again that they aren't just patriots but nationalists.

This BJP is much closer to its ideological founding fathers' vision of *ek vidhan, ek nishan, ek pradhan* (one Constitution, one symbol, and one leader) for all of India. To that extent India has moved several steps back into its mindset of the paranoid 1960s.

If you, like me, are a child of the 1960s, and step back into that decade, imagining the India of today would be an impossibility. We had four full wars and several small ones between 1961 (Goa) and 1971 (Bangladesh). Would our generation have imagined that 1971 was the last real war India would fight for the next five decades? Would we have imagined that by this time India would have subsumed all its insurgencies and separatist political movements?

Respected scholars, most notably American Selig Harrison, were talking about an inevitable break-up of India in that "dangerous decade". India proved them wrong, and today, it stands at the most secure juncture in its history, politically, strategically, militarily and economically, never mind the recent trouble.

I must underline that this hasn't happened after 2014. I go back to around 2003, post Op Parakram and India's use of coercive diplomacy as this turning point. So, this virtuous epoch of a secure India has matured over more than 15 years now. You cannot see this reversing easily. Not externally. Nor internally, unless our politics mess-

es up our social cohesion.

India is now far too strong and important for anyone to push it around, or grab any territory. This is when we Indians should have also felt that sense of security and enjoyed this well-earned comfort. On the contrary, we have brought back some familiar old insecurities again.

You will find the reason in the politics of the Modi-Shah BJP. See it this way. The critics of this government charge it, with some Schadenfreude, with having internationalised the Kashmir issue. This is a fact. But today India is strong enough to take this degree of internationalisation in its stride.

Until today, three months after the August 5 changes, no nation other than the three usual suspects has asked India to reverse them. The rest pretty much concede this — if mostly in silence — as India's internal affair.

Of course, it cannot go on like this forever. Kashmir has to see much greater normalcy much faster, its politicians and prominent people can't remain detained for too long and the communication denial has to end. Or international pressure will rise and even friendly governments, like Trump's, for example, will find it difficult to stay aloof. And if normalcy returned, would Kashmir continue to play so strongly in the national consciousness? Or, more bluntly, will it still feed mass insecurity and thereby hyper-nationalism?

The challenge with the new situation in Kashmir isn't that it's been internationalised, but that it's been internalised as never before. Trouble in Kashmir means threat from

Pakistan, radical Islam, a fifth column, jihadi terror, and so. It is a straight and unbroken thread of national insecurity. With the economy declining and job losses, the need to not just retain but strengthen this hyper-nationalist push is even stronger. From that vantage point, there isn't much electoral percentage in saying we are so wonderfully secure. Because then, how do you run your politics without the fear of the "other"?

In the decades between 1972 and 2014, Indian nationalism had evolved into a more relaxed, secure, and comfortable state of mind. We

are being dragged back from those times, into fighting once again the fears we thought we had defeated 50 years ago. It is fascinating that it is precisely in this mood that two contrary games are playing out: Where the denial of a flag to one is a national celebration, and conceding one to the other looms as an inconvenient compulsion.

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Time for Olympics in India



SHASHANK MANI TRIPATHI

As preparations for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 pick up pace, a billion-plus Indians silently believe our time to host the Olympics has come. The rule of thumb is that the \$8,000 per capita (purchasing power parity-adjusted) gross domestic product (GDP) of a country signals a bid. That would place us in a good position to make an attempt for the 2032 Olympics, the process for which kicks off next year. In addition to enhancing its sporting stature, India should see the Olympics as an opportunity to change its approach to sport by shifting its geography and creating a new sporting mindset associated with fitness and health.

Hosting the Olympic Games not only announces the arrival of a nation, it can create a shift in its approach to sports. Beijing got transformed in 2008 and garnered the highest number of gold medals for China, and East London was given a makeover in

2012 and enhanced Great Britain's medal tally. Rio, despite political turmoil in Brazil, was given a facelift and for them a football gold is in itself a priceless reward. But international sporting events, much like Commonwealth Games, also demonstrate the pitfalls of a poorly planned and organised international sporting event.

Enter Mumbai and Pune: Mumbai, the enterprise capital of the country; Pune, the hidden heartbeat of nationalism. This is where leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak nurtured the petri-dish of Independence, which MK Gandhi took to the grassroots. These two cities are growing towards each other, reaching out like two sisters recognising they complement the other. That handshake is looking likely to be cemented with a Hyperloop connection. The enterprise culture of Mumbai, mixed with the nation-building ethos of Pune, has the power to change how we organise purposeful Olympics. A new message of sporting excellence linked to enterprise and nation building can originate here by hosting the Indian Olympics in these twin cities.

The Olympic games hosted by Mumbai and Pune, driven by private enterprise, should be modelled on the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, curated by Peter Ueberroth, and the first Olympics to generate a surplus. It should be preceded by creating a grassroots-level sports movement over the coming decade across the country linked to fitness

and health benefits. With entrepreneurship as a key attribute of Brand India, the Olympic Games can be seen as our can-do moment to demonstrate this strength. It will also help position Mumbai and Pune as a new centre of gravity for sporting regeneration, which will complement the traditional influence of Delhi. Between Mumbai and Pune, the nation collects significant amount of taxes. However, when it comes to infrastructure, both cities are woefully inadequate. An Olympic event would use the estimated expenditure of approximately \$10 billion to create a sporting and entrepreneurial legacy. The infrastructure can be creatively designed to host conventions and seminars and provide mentorship facilities for entrepreneurs, alongside sporting facilities. This entrepreneurial legacy will create a longer-term surplus of enterprise by helping attract investors to set up shop.

A grassroots-driven, decade-long sporting effort has to preface the event, focusing on our large youth population, which will continue to swell over the coming two decades. This should start immediately by creating district-level sporting clubs that bring out athletes not just from elite schools and colleges but from across the country. A new romance with the outdoor and sports has to be created. The return on investment in sports through physical and spiritual growth of our youth is high. This district-level sporting infrastructure should

keep women participants at its centre, generating additional social benefits by breaking gender stereotypes and fostering women equality.

No doubt Delhi has a national role in promoting sports and it should help with a Mumbai-Pune Olympic bid. The Asian Games and Commonwealth Games allowed it to build infrastructure rapidly. Let a new area of the country — Mumbai and Pune — be given a chance to show that India, with entrepreneurial effort and citizen participation, can deliver this international event with ease. As the largest democracy in the world, India can position the Mumbai-Pune Olympics in sharp contrast to the Beijing Olympics, which were a spectacle of state strength; here entrepreneurial citizens with a cultural focus on environment awareness should lead. Such Olympics will pose less strain on the taxpayer while creating a national sporting network.

The Mumbai-Pune Olympics will help shift the country's gaze to a region that denotes a new formula for sports, enterprise, and nation building. If the Olympic torch is lit in Mumbai 12 years from now, it will create a new sporting centre of gravity for India, while improving the physical and later enterprise infrastructure of these twin cities. It will also shine a light on a much-needed shift in the way the largest democracy of the world can mix enterprise and sports to take the country to new Olympian heights.

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A long journey

EYE CULTURE

UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

In late 2010, a controversy rocked the verdant campus of the University of Mumbai. A student demanded that a novel — Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, published in 1991 and nominated for the Booker Prize — be removed from the syllabus. Students demanding less reading material is a constant in any university in the world. What is less common is the university accepting such a demand as the University of Mumbai did. Using special powers vested in him, the then vice-chancellor, Rajan Yelluvar, removed the book from the syllabus. After all, this was not just any other student, he was the scion of the Thackeray family, Aditya.

Demanding high is an old practice of Mr Thackeray. When he had asked for the ban on Mr Mistry's novel, the book was not even in his syllabus. It was an optional text for those studying for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English. Mr Thackeray was a history student at St Xavier's College. Justifying it later in a "Tea with *Business Standard*" interview, he said: "The book is utterly racist and conveys unwarranted opinions. You can criticise a policy, that's fine. But abusive language and things put out of context are things that cannot remain on a curriculum." Mr Mistry's novel had been critical of Bal Thackeray's methods, which have not always been peaceful.

The removal of the book from the University of Mumbai syllabus had been greeted with widespread protests by intellectuals and academics. Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, who had documented the Shiv Sena's involvement in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 in his documentary *Ram Ke Naam* (1992), told the *Guardian*, "We are headed towards a fascist ethos where someone decides what others think."

Mr Mistry had said, "As for the grandson of the Shiv Sena leader, what can — what should — one feel about him? Pity, disappointment, compassion? Twenty years old, the beneficiary of a good education, he is about to embark down the Sena's well-trodden path, to appeal, like those before him, to all that is worst in human nature."

In 2010, one might have hazarded some compassion for Mr Thackeray. A campaign launched by his party against the release of Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *My Name is Khan* had failed to

attract much traction. In an article, *The Guardian* had speculated the agitation against Mr Mistry's novel was a launch pad for the scion of the Sena. Nearly a decade later, there is neither any need nor option for compassion.

He is now an aspirant to the chief minister's (CM's) chair in Maharashtra. His party, Shiv Sena — founded by his grandfather Bal Thackeray in 1966 — is an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and won 56 seats in the Assembly elections. It has demanded that the 29-year-old be first appointed deputy chief minister (CM) of the state, and then CM in two-and-a-half years. The larger partner of the alliance, the BJP, has won only 105 seats — the only hope it has of forming a stable government is with the help of the Shiv Sena, which refuses to play easy.

Mr Thackeray is not your regular bigot, claiming that people turn into cannibals by eating eggs or that caressing cows can cure cancer. In 2007, he published his debut book of poems, *My Thoughts in White and Black*. The next year, he turned lyricist, releasing an album, where Suresh Wadkar, Shankar Mahadevan, Kailash Kher, and Sunidhi Chauhan lent their voice to his words. At the stunning launch party, Amitabh Bachchan was the special guest — more perhaps due to the influence of his grandfather than Mr Thackeray's skills. He also has an interest in photography, but unlike his father

and current Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray, Mr Thackeray prefers, "abstract (photography)... light and shadow and different things that one normally doesn't notice."

As a writer, Mr Thackeray has some sympathy for the vagaries of the vocation: "I can't remember my poems. I store them in my phone. If I lose my phone, I'm finished."

One would have perhaps expected him to be a little more tolerant towards *Such a Long Journey*. In 2010, its removal from the syllabus had sparked protests; now — in undeniably more intolerant times — it would perhaps not even make headlines.

Yet, one is hopeful that if he becomes CM, Mr Thackeray will not be as trigger happy in calling for bans or encouraging outrage. He has shown some affiliation to the democratic process in the country by contesting elections. One hopes he extends it to matters of letters as well, though it would be such a long journey.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport

It is the script not the star, stupid!



YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

Everybody and anybody that you speak to in the communications business invariably tells you, "content is king". If content is actually king, why is so little attention being focused onto its creation? How come there are no real big ideas in advertising these days? No great campaigns everywhere is talking about? No long-form digital ads that charm and engage? No social media memes that have us chuckling? No television serials that are becoming an addiction? No over-the-top (OTT) content everyone is raving about?

Instead, the formula to instant success seems to be to hire a

famous film-star or cricketer; assemble a collage of pictures or string together some slice-of-life situations; overlay a liberal dose of "evocative" poetry or a song; have the star say a few inane dialogues or better still dance. And you have a lazy quick-fix. Virat Kohli currently features in 25 such campaigns, Ranveer Singh in 24, Akshay Kumar in 22, Deepika Padukone in 20, Ranbir Kapoor in 13, MS Dhoni in 12, Amitabh Bachchan in 12, Alia Bhatt in 11... but not one celebrity campaign in media today is a sizzler. Why? Because we in the communications business have conveniently forgotten that it is the script that makes great advertising, not just the presence of a star. In the script versus star trade-off (if one is possible), the script wins every time, in fact time after time.

There are some basic lessons agencies and clients need to learn about script-writing, simple rules that need to be adhered to whether you are writing an ad or creating content, including branded content — the Five Ss — (1) story, (2) storytelling (3) structure (4) sequences, (5) spine. Sometimes a sixth S — spin.

First to the story. A progression of events is called a plot. How the main character or the hero/heroine encounters this progression of events, supporting-negating-challenging his/her ability to overcome the odds and achieve goals — the internal triumph and the external struggle — is what essentially constitutes a story.

Storytelling is how the story is told. This is more a process, less a formula. Storytelling hinges on first deciding what is the story about; where does it begin; what is the genre; and who is narrating the story.

The structure is simply the form. The set-up, which is telling everyone who the main character is, and the dramatic situation is the first building block. Then, the primary story of the protagonist versus the antagonist; then the antagonist gaining an upper hand; the protagonist slipping to the lowest ebb. Finally, the protagonist overcoming fear and failure, and defeating the antagonist.

Now to the importance of the sequence. Each scene is made up of a series of shots. Each sequence is made up of a series of scenes. Each

sequence builds upon the next sequence to create story progression. Story progression occurs when story sequences build upon one another in a logical way, moving the story forward through character conflict.

Spine is about creating a unifying depth within the story, character by character, action by action, sequence by sequence, layer upon layer. Last but not least, spin is the proverbial twist in the tale.

If one were to use this classical model of script-writing as a benchmark, 95 per cent of all creatives being done today would fail the test. So, one shouldn't be surprised that most ads or other content ends up being listless and uninteresting. Wherever the basics of script-writing have been understood by, and adhered to, by the creative person, the communication output has rarely fallen short of expectations. Take the *Holi Ke Rang* Surf Excel ad. The story is all about the young girl overcoming the odds and achieving her goal of getting her friend in whites to the mosque. The storytelling is linear and well articulated. The structure of protagonist ver-

sus antagonists is clearly established. The sequence of events again has clarity and is easy to comprehend. The spine comes from giving the *daag* a positive spin. A story well told in short format.

In contrast, look at the recent Oppo Ranbir-Katrina-Badshah ad. The ad has no story, three protagonists, no antagonist, no structure, no sequence, and surely no spine. It is just a feature driven narrative with exuberant star-power. No amount of media muscle can make such an advertising message work, or succeed.

The biggest problem with *Sacred Games*, the Netflix series, was that its sequencing of events was highly warped. Characters and events kept criss-crossing in time meandering into back-stories, then suddenly jerking back to the current times. That singly killed the narrative. In contrast, epic stories like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* strictly adhere to the classical script-writing approach. Clear characterisation; linear storytelling; well-defined structure; and a solid spine. Which is why they are evergreen in appeal.

Before brands invest more and more in star-power, they need to learn the basics of story-telling. It would make for a good return on investment.