India's dark road

TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

The past weeks have seen many Indians' worst fears about their country come true. It was almost as if the ruling dispensation was waiting for the first sign of resistance to reveal their real plans for India's future. Ayodhya, 370, lynchings all went by without any real murmurs of dissent. But the NRC/CAA/NPR imbroglio struck many people, of all faiths and none, as being an assault on the very nature of Indian-ness. In some places, protests were violent — though not as much as many other protests in the past. In most places, the protests have been peaceful.

The reaction, however, has been as if every peaceful crowd was an angry mob carrying Kalashnikovs. In one BJP-ruled state after another, the police have cracked down on the crowds using excessive force. But the real punishment — the "revenge", in the words of its chief minister — has been saved for Uttar Pradesh. The stories of mass arrest and torture that have emerged from that state, which is under lockdown and intermittent internet blackouts, are harrowing. Children are among those who speak of being beaten mercilessly. Videos show policemen indulging in vandalism, and it has been reported that entire neighbourhoods have been raided by violent police posses. What this revenge is for is not clear. Perhaps for a sense of majoritarian victimhood that will never be satisfied.

This is what UP Chief Minister Adityanath was selected to do. He rose to prominence in east UP's politics as the leader of the Hindu Yuva Vahini (HYV), a fundamentalist militia that focused on intimidation of and violence against Muslims. It has been tragically easy to turn the UP police into an extension of the HYV. Since the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013, ghettoisation in India's largest state has accelerated. Ever more distinct boundaries have formed between Muslim and Hindu areas in even small towns; and so the police can go into the kasbas and do what they like with impunity, safe in the knowledge that no Hindu is being inconvenienced. The media will not report it — in one chilling video that has emerged, you can hear one member of the media tell another, "turn off the cameras, they [the police] are loading their guns". The UP police have claimed hundreds of country-made shells have been recovered from "protest sites". They are yet to tell us how many of those were fired, and how many rounds they fired in response.

In many parts of north India, this scourging of Muslim neighbourhoods is likely to be extremely popular. The reaction on social media to the Huffington Post's reporting of the alleged torture of children in the Nagina area of Bijnor in UP was revealing of this new India. Many responded with congratulations to the UP police for showing Muslims their place. The rhetoric developed for Kashmiris being blinded by pellet guns — they are all stone-pelters, they deserve what they get — is now being deployed against the Muslim children of UP.

The public, political and media culture in much of north India has rotted away. The media responds to public bloodthirstiness by exaggerating the violence of protests; politicians send the police in against the defenceless. It is important to understand the narrative that is being created, and not to live in denial about what it is or where it will lead. It runs as follows: Muslims, even the youngest, are dangerous and violent, each one of them a potential rioter. They are not to be trusted, and must be penned into ghettoes that are regularly scourged. Economic blockades and boycotts of these troublemakers are moral acts. Restraint is folly, and human rights are a Western construct. Any act of resistance is seditious. Collective punishment is acceptable.

It is futile to say that this is not the India many of us grew up in, or one we recognise, or that such a narrative has no place in a liberal democracy. Things have gone too far from that. All those who made excuses for the current dispensation, who created the narrative in 2013-14 that brought them to power, who believed that liberal institutions would constrain its actions, who argued that there was no alternative, or who drew false equivalences between various political parties have blood on their hands.

The question is what can be done now. The first step is to recognise the danger that India is in. The product of these actions is inevitable. It is further ghettoisation and stigmatisation of India's largest religious minority. It is increasing radicalisation within these communities. It is the crowded, poor Muslim enclaves deprived of civic amenities or market access in large parts of north India, which will become convenient punching bags for politicians and eventually incubators of violence, crime and extremism. Once we accept that this is the road we have chosen to walk down, we can then consider how it is we could turn around.

Who is Chandrashekhar Azad?

The agitation against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizenship has raised his profile. It would be interesting to see what he – and other parties – do with it

PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

For one, the man who played footsie with the police when Delhi was raging against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizenship (NRC). Chandrashekhar or Ravan, the name he has given to himself, is fighting everyone. He was born in Saharanpur, in the Dhadkauli village, in a Chamar family, studied at a Thakur-owned and run college in nearby Chhutmalpur, saw the discrimination against Dalit students and vowed to fight it. Being an Ambedkarite and an admirer of Kanshi Ram (but not of Mayawati) he tried to follow the same principles of organising the Dalits as Kanshi Ram: via education, through the bureaucracy and in self defence. He founded the Bhim Army and set up 400 Bhim Army schools in Saharanpur district which provides free-of-cost primary education to children irrespective of caste and gender. He started self defence classes and led bike rides through villages — including upper caste Thakur villages — as symbolic self assertion.

This is important. Uma Bharti, a sadhvi from the Lodh caste who rose to become a union minister, once recalled how, in her village Tikampur, others from her caste could not cycle past the homes of Thakur families. They had to dismount and walk past on foot -- because the Thakurs saw this assertion as an affront. That was 25 years ago. Nothing has changed.

The Bhim Army asks Dalits over 18 to join them. Most of the members belong to the Chamar community or its sub-caste Jatav. But the Bhim Army also welcomes Muslims. It lacks a formal structure and is an unregistered body, but claims to have over 20,000 members in and around Saharanpur in western Uttar Pradesh. Its stress is on direct action based on confrontation to preserve, protect or restore the dignity of Dalits. "Through the Bhim Army, the Dalit youth become aware that they can struggle for their constitutional rights and they will no longer tolerate oppression. The Bhim Army is not to scare off anybody but for the security of Dalits," Azad said in a recent interview.

Ravan's troubles started in 2015 when he put up a board outside his village which proclaimed: "The Great Chamars of Dhadkauli Welcome You". In a village that also had Thakurs, how could this be tolerated? The Thakurs defaced this with black ink. This began a phase of direct confrontation that peaked when the BJP took out a "Shobha Yatra" in Saharanpur without permission through communally sensitive areas.

Dalit-Thakur clashes broke out a few weeks later in the same district on the birth anniversary of Rajput king Maharana Pratap. The state government held the Bhim Army responsible for inciting violence. Ravan claimed that the government was targeting it to malign the movement and shield upper caste offenders. The state administration arrested Ravan. The matter went to court and the High Court acquitted him. But within hours, the Adityanath government ordered his re-arrest under the National Security Act. He was incarcerated amid massive protests from civil rights groups and was released partially as a result of that pressure.

Priyanka Gandhi called on him when he was in jail (and hospital). Thence began a dalliance with the Congress...

Saharanpur is well-known for Dalit mobilisation and the unity among Muslims and Dalits. This project has been endorsed by many activists. According to Chandra Bhan Prasad, noted writer and Dalit thinker: "There are around 400 Lok Sabha constituencies where Dalits and Muslims combined constitute 30 per cent of the electorate. Also bear in mind, that 90-95 per cent of Dalits and Muslims go out and vote. So, if they are able to come together, they become significant electorally. And I feel that there is a great desire among Dalits and Muslims — particularly the youth — to come together." Ravan has emerged as a face of this unity, even though he is not that well known in the rest of India.

At a time when the Bahujan Samaj Party has lost ground electorally and the BJP has begun mobilising Dalits, the Bhim Army is a symbol of resistance from within the Dalit society. Noted Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde writes that its emergence "may be likened to the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in 1972, which in turn was the by-product of the bankrupt politics of the erstwhile Republican Party of India."

Little wonder then that Mayawati and others scowl when his name is mentioned. The current agitation has raised Ravan's profile. The question is what he — and other parties — do with it.

LUNCH WITH BS ▸ MALABIKA SARKAR | VICE-CHANCELLOR | ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

Liberal and loving it

Over lunch, **Sarkar** talks to **Geetanjali Krishna** about critical differences between the pedagogies followed by older universities and Ashoka and what it is like to be at the vanguard of an academic revolution

As 2019 comes to a close, observers are defining it as the Year of the Indian Student. At a time when university campuses across the country are coming out to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, students have come to be seen as the bravest and most vocal defenders of democracy, speaking truth to power. Which is why I'm particularly looking forward to meeting my guest, Prof Malabika Sarkar, Vice-Chancellor of Ashoka, the university credited with making the Liberal Arts both fashionable and saleable in India. Prior to joining Ashoka, Sarkar has served as Vice-Chancellor of Presidency and Jadavpur universities (both in Kolkata).

Associated with Ashoka University since 2015, Sarkar has helped develop its curriculum, expand its faculty and create several multi-disciplinary centres of learning and research. She was appointed its Vice-Chancellor in August 2019. I am looking forward to a free-wheeling conversation on what it takes to develop a private university and on helming a Liberal Arts campus in these illiberal times.

Just then, Sarkar bustles in, immaculately turned out in a silk sari. We are at Threesixty restaurant at The Oberoi, New Delhi. She's spent the weekend in the city to catch some rare moments with her husband, a corporate lawyer who shuttles between Mumbai and Delhi. Ashoka's Sonepat campus where she lives, isn't exactly on the way. "We do try and meet every weekend in Kolkata," she says.

Life on campus is thrill-a-minute. "Being a new university that's expanding so fast, there's so much to do," she says. Since she joined, the student community has grown from 560 in 2015 to 2,000 today, while the faculty has increased from 17 to 111 (plus 28 visiting lecturers) today.

Having a lot of money must help, I comment, as we pore over the menu. Having experienced the relative penury of government institutions earlier, Sarkar agrees wholeheartedly. "The easy availability of funds has enabled us to not only hire the best faculty," she says, "but has also made it possible for us to retain them with the best possible infrastructure — labs, grants etc." This is in sharp contrast to her stint at Presidency during its centenary year, when there weren't enough funds to, say, repair the crumbling ceiling in the laboratory. "We had no option but to install nets below the ceiling to protect students from the falling plaster," she reminisces. We pore over the menu, discover a shared fondness for fish and I realise that Sarkar has tried every fishy dish on the menu already. We decide to share some Thai-style Kolkata *betki* steamed with chilly, garlic and lemon and grilled sea bass wrapped in a banana leaf.

The food arrives on the table, the steamed fish fragrant in a light broth. Sarkar pauses to taste it and talks about the critical differences between the pedagogies followed by older universities and Ashoka. "In Jadavpur and Presidency the teaching was unidirectional, she says. "The professor would lecture and the students would listen. Students often discussed issues with professors, but rarely in the classroom..." In contrast, 50 per cent of the classroom time in Ashoka is devoted to discussion and students are incentivised to participate by being awarded marks for class participation. This is why freedom of speech — a pejorative term for some and such an acutely precious commodity to the liberals — is an integral aspect of Ashoka's ethos.

Could it be, I ask, that Ashoka is raising a generation of liberal and free thinkers at a time when these are not exactly the most desirable qualities? Sarkar disagrees. "I see my students not merely as critics but as change-makers equipped with the right skills to positively impact their environment," she says. "Free thought and criticism have to go hand in hand with a sense of responsibility." She comes across as a true administrator. Unsurprising because private universities are as, if not more, hamstrung as government universities these days. She tells me about the Good Governance Associates programme (CMGGA) that Ashoka runs in partnership with the Haryana government. In this, selected students from Ashoka are trained intensively to work with the district administrations in

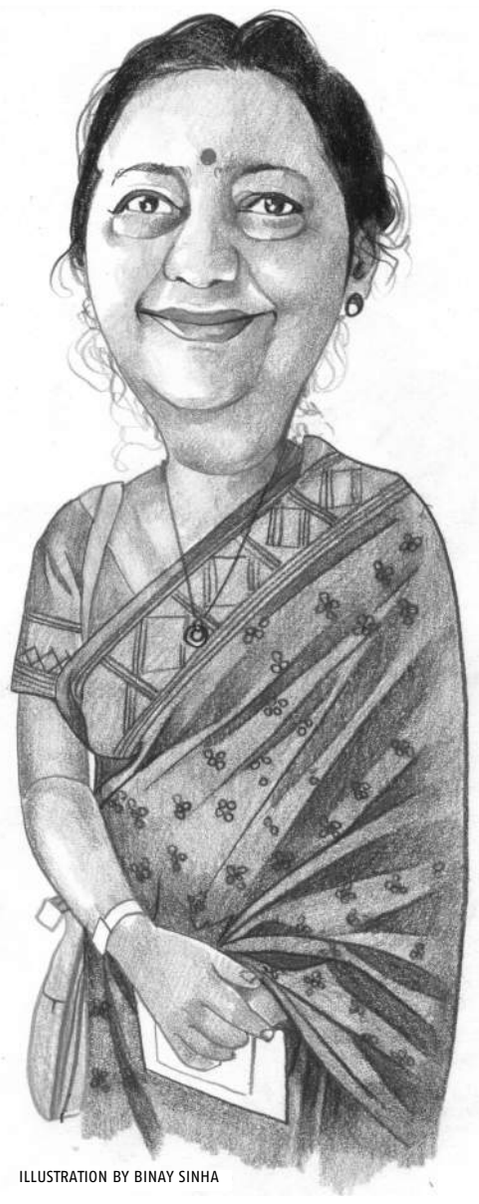

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Haryana as representatives of the Chief Minister of the state. "Through the programme, our students learn to not only critique administrative functioning but also find solutions to make it more efficient," she says. Attesting to this is the fact that the number of companies conducting campus recruitments at Ashoka has crossed 150 this year, and includes McKinsey, AT Kearney, Deloitte, Microsoft, and *Business Standard* among others.

Meanwhile, the banana leaf parcels emit enticing aromas when we unwrap them. We pause to taste them before moving on to another of her pet subjects. In spite of the availability of funds at Ashoka, Sarkar says, no university in India can ever match the resources of a Harvard or Yale. "What we do have in ample measure are intellectual resources," she says. The need of the hour, she says, is greater collaboration between institutions in India. For instance, Ashoka students often intern at Bangalore's National Centre for Biological Sciences. "I'd like to collaborate with more such institutions for student and well as faculty exchange programmes," she says. Another way of developing world-class intellectual resources is the active creation of multi-disciplinary centres of learning and teaching. For example, Ashoka's Trivedi Centre for Political Data in partnership with the University of Michigan analyses authoritative political data and disburses knowledge on India's political life through an open access platform. The Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality at Ashoka is the first in India to conduct research into both gender and sexuality. "I believe that such multi-disciplinary centres will take our intellectual resources to the next level," she says. "I'd like to develop many more such centres in the years ahead."

Sarkar chooses to end lunch with coffee while I opt for a raspberry and rose sorbet. I ask her about her fabled work ethic and what keeps her going at such a punishing pace. "My days are so full that I've no time to think about it," she laughs. She starts at 10 am, often working past midnight. "I make up by flying to Kolkata every weekend," she smiles. But it turns out that there too, she has her work cut out. As president of the Women's Coordinating Council, West Bengal, the apex women's organisation in the state with representatives from more than 74 social welfare organisations, she spends much of her weekends fundraising. Although she rues not having enough time for her academic work (she's a professor of English literature and last published Cosmos and Character in Paradise Lost on John Milton's poetry in 2012), the feisty 71-year-old won't have it any other way. After all, one can never be too old to be at the vanguard of an academic revolution and Professor Malabika Sarkar is living proof of that.

The invisible young heroes of 2019

PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

In what has been the coldest December in several years in North India, my heart is warmed by the young students helming the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Video grabs of these brave young women and fearless young men have filled my social media feeds. I have watched them all. For the older I get, the more I find myself focusing on the young. The math is simple: young changemakers have more time than their older counterparts to make a difference. Perhaps that's why this year, this column has featured so many stories of invisible young heroes. Here's a recap.

My favourite is of 16-year-old Sachin Gupta from a Lucknow village. He'd wonder why his four beloved sisters became so withdrawn during certain days of the month until he learnt about menstruation. He designed and built a sanitary napkin incinerator for his sisters and trained as a peer educator on hygiene in his village. Today, the menstrual taboo broken, the atmosphere in his home has transformed.

Seventeen-year-old Shikoh Zaidi of Hardoi district in UP has a similar story. A student of a residential school for meritorious underprivileged students, she realised while working on a school project that in her community, girls tended to drop out of school because of the lack of safe menstrual hygiene practices. The teenager, with the staunch support of her father, started organising meetings where, using animation videos downloaded from the internet, she'd initiate discussions on menstrual hygiene and the need to break the silence enshrouding periods. Many were shocked, others laughed at her. But thanks to her efforts, Zaidi's community is coming around to the idea of allowing their daughters greater freedom when they're menstruating. Meanwhile, she's lobbying with the health department to make low cost sanitary napkins available with the ASHA health worker in her village.

Education is another field where the young are making an impact. Prafull Sawant, a 24-year-old son of an auto driver father and domestic worker mother, in Mumbai has successfully run a free learning centre in his slum in Powai since February 2016. He's taught over 400 students and mentored innumerable others to apply to college and appear for competitive exams. Similarly, when 19-year-old Sarathi Tudu from Singhbhum, Jharkhand grew up to find her peers dropping out to work and get married, she started free tuition classes in her village. Forty five students come to her every day to study today.

Mumbai rapper Shaikhspeare AKA Aamir Shaikh of Bombay Lokal is enabling the youth in Mumbai's slums to find their voices through hip hop. Kanpur's young "water doctors" Divya, Ekta, Shikha, Alam and Mani Kumar are going door-to-door testing drinking water to convince their neighbours about the importance of water hygiene. Twenty-four-year-old Pooja Itodiya, ASHA worker at Aalri village in Madhya Pradesh, has tested water sources in her village to identify the ones with potable water.

Few know these young and celebrate their work. To me, however, they're a source of renewed hope for the change they effect will ensure that 2020 and beyond could be better than the years gone by.

How I'll spend my New Year's Eve

PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

I remember a time when the New Year party was a standard feature of our home. We'd ask our friends over, there were seldom any dropouts, most brought other friends along, some carried bottles of booze for the bar, and if there was dense fog they slept over in whatever bed or sofa was unoccupied. Food was plentiful, but incidental; music was important — and the louder, the better; complaints by neighbours were dealt with friendly indifference; and visits by the force were handled by those who knew how to deal with such incursions. They were egalitarian times, and nobody minded high spirits and a little drunkenness.

Then came liberalisation. Friends began to travel on NY breaks — to Goa, to Thailand, to places and parties more exotic than ours. We dwindled to a few regulars who'd sip mulled wine, sit around a bonfire and recollect times when it was difficult to find elbow room in the house. Stories and incidents about New Year parties past occupied us more than the New Year party present. The music was softer, we ate more than we drank, and bedtime was soon past midnight rather than post-breakfast in the morning.

This was a time when the kids abandoned us. They didn't want to play bartender at our parties, or manage the music, or hang around with those of our generation, and made their horror of asking their friends over evident. We used to laugh at people who went out on New Year's to party amidst strangers and had often wondered who these persons were — now we know they include our children.

When a few days ago, I heard the children making plans, and booking reservations, I offered, once more, to host them to a New Year's at home — but incentives of free alcohol, hot food and music of their choice fell on deaf ears. I suggested a bonfire and barbecue, to all of which they shrugged indifferently, having done it all before. Reluctant to spend another evening reminiscing of times past, I suggested to the children that we accompany them, but the response has been less than encouraging — they're not sure yet of where they will be; they might party-hop; there won't be other parents around; we'll get bored, or drunk, or worse, and embarrass them; why can't we just stay home like other oldies and let them be?

Which is why, dear reader, I plan to spend the last hours of 2019 in the countryside, watching 2020 come in not with a crescendo of music, hugs and smooches, but quietly, almost discreetly. I plan on having a drink by my side, a book to read, feet tucked under a blanket. I might take a brief moment to thank for the gift of family — so what if they chose to abandon me on the occasion — and a hope that the madness of governments and societies be of the past. The witching hour that marks the passing of a year, and a decade, holds a magical wish that things might yet be better. I hope to wake to a breakfast I can pluck off the vegetable patch, with milk directly from a buffalo — while the rest of the family, and the world, nurses hangovers. I'm not saying I'll like it; I'm saying I'll do it.

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WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

A real Budget, please

Among the first things that a finance minister has to do when framing the Budget is determine the likely growth rate for the economy in the year to come. The revenue, deficit, and other numbers depend on getting this foundational number right. In the current year, for instance, some of the serious errors in estimating revenue could have been avoided if nominal GDP growth (i.e. real growth plus inflation) had been correctly estimated. What of next year?

Correct forecasting depends on an accurate reading of past trends. The decade till 2020 will have seen the economy more or less double in size — implying annual average growth of about 7 per cent. But the middle years of the decade saw the economy benefit from the growth spurt triggered by an oil price collapse — something that will not repeat. Besides, the current global economic situation is not encouraging; there are too many things to set right in the domestic economy, not least in the financial sector; exports are stagnant; and there is little scope for either fiscal or monetary policy initiatives. Bearing in mind that the non-government part of the economy grew by no more than 3 per cent in the last quarter, a realistic growth rate for the economy next year should be something like 5 per cent, give or take half a percentage point.

That is not flattering for an economy that has clocked 7 per cent in the previous decade, and even faster growth in the decade before that. But one of the things that acceptance of a modest growth figure necessarily forces on you is hard choices. One can't assume a return to mean, and assume revenue based on an economy growing at 7 per cent. If the money is not going to be there, it's better to face reality — especially the reality of the Budget, in which the deficit is massively understated by about 2 percentage points of GDP. All Budgets face resource restraints, but the coming one will have to confront them in their full severity.

Looking beyond the Budget, the medium-term outlook looks decidedly cloudy if growth takes time to return to the desirable 7 per cent. The finance minister in her Budget speech should spell out how exactly she intends to get back to the 7 per cent track, and the hard decisions she intends to take in order to adjust to the realities of a slowing economy until growth momentum returns. Predictability in government actions is a virtue in itself.

Insofar as revenues fall short, the axe will have to come down on expenditure — even though this is not what economists might advise in the midst of a slowdown. It is important that budgetary discipline be seen to be operating. And so outlays will have to be pruned, or kept at current levels. Unspent moneys should lapse. The sectors that have absorbed so much of public investment should be asked to show results — as railway revenues, highway tolls, higher power tariffs, and so on (internal and extra-budgetary resources, as they used to be called in Planning's heyday). If the finance minister looks hard enough, she should be able to find scope for more non-tax revenue measures. For instance, fresh capital for the government-owned banks should come from the revenue garnered by privatising one or two of them — the taxpayer should not be saddled with the burden.

Above all, the time has come to modernise budgeting. Chiefly, that should mean moving from cash accounting to accrual accounting so that bills that are due but not yet paid are accounted for. Similarly, the government should put out information on off-balance sheet issues that are not there in the Budget. This will prevent further reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General pointing out hidden items of expenditure — like public sector companies borrowing money from banks to pay the food subsidy bills, or taking advance payment from railway entities to avoid showing a loss in railway accounts. A more credible set of numbers will be a good thing in and of itself, it will also help make government functioning more transparent.

Back to the inglorious past

History is repeating itself and there is a back-to-1974 feeling. But India is living in totally different circumstances for Modi to emulate Indira Gandhi all the way

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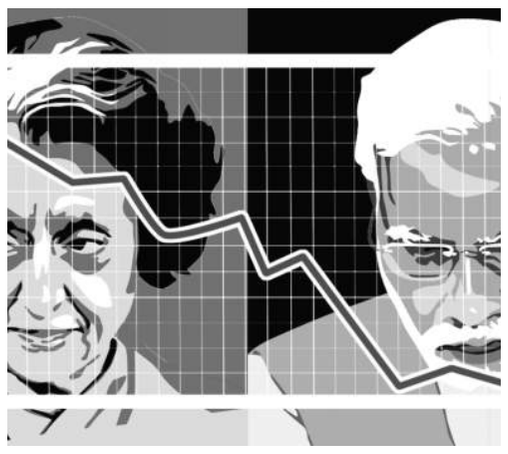

NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

In the non-stop hail of worsening economic indicators, one stands out. That the unemployment levels today are the worst they've been in 45 years. It takes us right back to 1974.

Indira Gandhi was still popular but some disillusionment was building up. Yet, even disappointed voters were still caught in a There Is No Alternative (TINA) trap. All economic indicators were in free fall, inflation was at almost 35 per cent and yet nationalism was still rampant and high.

Sounds familiar? Barring inflation, much else looks, sounds, and feels more than a bit like 1974. A phenomenally popular leader, with a party of unquestioning followers, a broken opposition, a nationalist high and never mind an economy in free fall, crippling joblessness. India isn't just a land of paradoxes, it is capable of producing the same mega paradox twice within a generation, under radically different ideologies.

Let's explore a little backwards, to 1971. Early in the year, Mrs Gandhi had won a famous election, defeating the formidable old guard of the Congress she had just broken up, in spite of the fact that all opposition parties had joined hands against her.

In early 1971, she was riding the "*Garibi Hatao*" pink populism. By the end of the year, she was "Maa Durga" incarnate, having defeated and dismembered Pakistan. She could walk on water.

The twin-engine populism of socialism and nationalism, however, was masking the harsher realities of India. The economy was already collapsing under the weight of her maniacal nationalisations; entrepreneurs were fleeing an invasive licence-quota raj; super-high taxation (97.5 per cent ultimately) created the black economy that still hasn't been defeated; and the expense of the war didn't help. But, remember, political fortunes are determined not by statistics, but the mood or what we call the "*hawa*".

It was in 1971 that poet-lyricist Gulzar made his first film, *Mere Apne*. It was built around Meena Kumari, a poor and abandoned old woman in a city who becomes a central figure of affection and refuge for a bunch of young men played by some who'd become big names later. They have degrees, aspirations, but no jobs and nothing to do except while away time in desperate hopelessness, play some pranks, or get into street fights.

But they could laugh at themselves and Gulzar wrote for them the anthem for those years of decline: "*Haal chaal theek thaak hai…*" Play it, listen to the lyrics. Almost every line would make you pause and figure out why I take you back there.

Sample: "*BA kiya hai, MA kiya, lagta hai woh bhi aiwein kiya/kaam nahin hai varna yahan, aapki dua se baaki theek-thaak hai…*" (We've got our BA/MA degrees, looks like it was all a waste/there's no job, nothing to do, yet, with your benevolence all's well with the world.) Gulzar might as well have written it for 2019. Or he can re-release it and pretend he just wrote it. You wouldn't know.

Before we discuss how we got here from the world-conquering optimism of 2014, it is instructive to see how India and Indira Gandhi reached the collapse of 1974 from the high of 1971. That March 1971 landslide and the destruction of all opposition was so heady, she and her deeply ideological (of the chic Left) advisors kept sinking ever deeper into toxic socialism.

Then, when India's economy was at its most vulnerable, two Black Swan events struck. One — the Yom Kippur war (October 1973) and the resulting oil shock — was beyond her control. The second, nationalisation of the wholesale wheat trade, she wrought upon herself. Her Communist cabal said, if it works in the Soviet Union, it shall work here. It didn't.

A disaster followed, with wheat prices rising, farmers furious, traders and private rural middlemen jobless. It could have become her equivalent of Mao's war on the sparrows of China. Alarmed, she reversed it, but too late. By the last quarter of 1974, India's inflation peaked at 34.7 per cent and Mrs Gandhi's popularity had declined deeply. Protests, *Navnirman Andolan*, all essentially comprising jobless youth and angry students, broke out nationwide. Sounds familiar and a bit more current?

Pushed to the wall, Mrs Gandhi fell back on her tested old ploy: Nationalism. First came the Pokhran-1 nuclear test (May 1974). That euphoria lasted only a few weeks as people by now were hurting deep down. The last throw of the dice was the integration of Sikkim, in May 1975. But angry people were not willing to go back from the pickets. A month later, we ended up with the Emergency.

Once again, because you need to qualify and idiot-proof everything these days, I am not suggesting or predicting we will end up that way again. My point is minimal for now: That once people have suffered joblessness and economic stall for a length of time, nationalism will no longer calm their anger.

At which point we take you back to the movies again because we well know that our film-makers can sniff the popular mood, their market, before any of us pundits can. After *Mere Apne* came the era of films like *Shor, Roti, Kapda aur Makaan*, and others woven around the theme of poverty, exploitation, price rise (*baaki kuchh bacha toh mehengai maar gayi* was a mega hit), and the jobless underdog as protagonist. Again, this later dovetailed neatly into the "Angry Young Man" phase. But I am not going there at this point.

Where do you think did this repeat of history begin? Some of you might think it was the victory in the latest general elections that made the Modi government smug, despite a declining economy. If people vote for us despite the messed-up economy, it means all they need is a constant socio-nationalist high. You can fortify it further with religion. So, rather than go all-hands-on-the-deck with the economy, unleash Article 370, the Temple, the Citizenship Amendment Act. Never mind that economic data is looking worse by the quarter.

Would you consider, instead, putting this calendar back somewhere early in Narendra Modi's first term and the twin blow of "*suit-boot ki Sarkar*" and defeat over that too-early-in-the-day land acquisition law?

Mr Modi immediately shifted direction to more nationalism and deep socio-populism, and to being a corruption fighter. Demonetisation was the first of his self-wrought Black Swan events. This CAA-NRC-NPR jumble looks like his second. One, because it divides the country as nothing else did in decades. Second, because it has drawn total global disappointment if not direct criticism and you can't just toss it now. We live in a globalised world where India's stakes are different from those in 1974. And third, because unlike Mrs Gandhi's heyday, India is now governed federally. You can't order chief ministers around. Or fire them using Article 356.

Where do we go from this back-to-1974 feel now? We know where Mrs Gandhi took us by the summer of 1975. The choice lies with Mr Modi. Just that, even if he's more popular and powerful than Mrs Gandhi then, it is a very different world — and India — than in 1975.

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A rapid reader for 2019

AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

In his coruscating slim volume *The Uncommon Reader* the British playwright and screenwriter Alan Bennett describes what happens when the Queen of England suddenly, and unaccountably, becomes a voracious reader. This habit is met with alarm by her staff and consternation by loyal subjects on her walkabouts. Instead of exchanging polite nothings Her Majesty starts quizzing the public on what they read and discussing the merits of Trollope, Dickens, and Virginia Woolf. A few misguided folk mention Harry Potter — "but to this the Queen (who had no time for fantasy) invariably said briskly, 'Yes. One is saving that for a rainy day,' and passed swiftly on."

Whether you love or love to hate Harry Potter, Keshava Guha's debut novel *Accidental Magic* (HarperCollins; ₹599) is not just for rainy days. It's the pick of the crop in a strong year for fiction — a hugely inventive and entertaining foray into the intricate, interlinked virtual world of Potter fandom. Kannan, the Bangalore boy's initiation into American college life and the Yahoo! group HP4BK (Harry Potter for Big Kids), is an escape, an intellectual quiz, and an emotional link to diverse milieus and relationships. Vividly observed and articulated, it is a classic bildungsroman of our time.

Madhuri Vijay's prize-winning *The Far Field* (Fourth Estate; ₹599), deservedly praised novel, is a young daughter's unsettling requiem for a lost mother, a brittle, high-strung woman who forged a relationship with a Kashmiri salesman. Her search takes her to the Valley, with the torments of an unresolved past intensifying turbulent lives stained by violence and fear. Fiction can plunge us into those dark recesses that no amount of reportage can; and Ms Vijay's dense narrative is remarkable for its evocation of a fractured land. *The City and the Sea* (Penguin; ₹499) by Raj Kamal Jha is also about a disappearing mother who fails to return home from work. Partly inspired by the Delhi gang rape of 2012, the book's episodic, intercut structure weaves imagined, often dream-like realities in experimental form.

Several of the year's best non-fiction titles such as *Early Indians* by Tony Joseph were reviewed here ("A bibliophile's summer reading", June 15, 2019) but here are some notable recent arrivals.

Shanta Gokhale, the novelist, prolific translator from Marathi, theatre archivist, and critic has written a memoir, *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told through the Body* (Speaking Tiger; ₹399) that can hardly be bettered. As a *femme de lettres* her British counterpart would perhaps be the celebrated Diana Athill, who died this year at the age of 101. Ms Gokhale's unusual education in middle-class Mumbai and London neighbourhoods, her two broken marriages, earning a living, and bringing up a family are sustained by passionate intellectual rigour. It is the rewinding of life illuminated by candour, insight, humour, and brevity. On the perils of being a bilingual writer, she quotes Arun Kolatkar, "the quintessential Bombay poet" who said, "Well you see, I have a pencil with two points."

Indeed, if life is being dealt an unpredictable hand of cards, then the most engaging memoirs are those able to shape it into a series of surprising sequences. Fiji-born Bhaichand Patel had many avatars — as journalist, barrister, and UN diplomat — and habitats — Delhi, London, Bombay, New York, and Manila — before coming to roost in the capital as bon vivant and raconteur par excellence. He has the talent of treating the weightiest of subjects weightlessly and making you laugh out loud. *I Am a Stranger Here Myself: An Unreliable Memoir* (HarperCollins; ₹699) is a pleasure.

Two musical journeys added immeasurably to my year's reading list. Those who admire Shubha Mudgal as a diva of commanding power and range may be unaware that both her parents taught English Literature at Allahabad University and she has a natural gift for storytelling and comic timing. Looking for *Miss Sargam* (Speaking Tiger; ₹499) is her fictionalised encounters with characters and situations in the madcap musical whirl: Cut-throat producers, ambitious ustads, conniving accompanists et al. It's a delicious concoction. Despite its genealogical sprawl, documentary filmmaker Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (Context; ₹899), a fly-on-the-wall account of the kinship of courtesans and dancing girls in the geographically small Purvanchal region of Banaras and Bhabua is unique for its historical and social investigation. Among many things, it details, how male progeny are sidelined as second-class offspring in a matriarchal community that prizes girl children as bread-winners and keepers of musical tradition.

It's been a fruitful year for scholars. A couple of works of history stand out: Kim A Wagner's *Jallianwala Bagh: An Empire of Fear* and *the Making of the Amritsar Massacre* (Penguin; ₹599) unveils new research on the city as religious centre and commercial trading post. In sinewy prose it traces the roots of the 1919 tragedy from 1857 and the unravelling of the Raj. And for a history buff's bedtime reading, Manu S Pillai's *The Courtesan, the Mahatma & the Italian Brahmin* (Context; ₹599) is the ideal companion — more than 50 tales familiar and unfamiliar.

Happy New Year!

The universal language

EYE CULTURE

SUHIT K SEN

Recent research has validated the old saying, articulated, among others, by H.W. Longfellow, that music is a universal language that knows no barriers of, well, language, ethnicity, creed, colour or faith. The research project was conducted by a number of US universities, including Harvard University and Pennsylvania State University. The findings were published in the US academic journal *Science*.

The research findings are significant because musicologists and scholars in related disciplines have questioned Longfellow's view, expressed 184 years ago, that "music is the universal language of mankind".

The research team studied 118 songs from 86 cultures, which were classified into four groups: Dance songs, healing songs, love songs and lullabies. The team consisted of Manvir Singh, a researcher in evolutionary biology at Harvard, Luke Glowacki, a professor of anthropology at Pennsylvania State University and Samuel Mehr, also of Harvard. They created a database and loaded ethnographic and music-related information into it from 315 societies across 60 cultures and 30 geographical regions, but compared 118 songs, as mentioned.

The researchers found significant intra-category similarities. A Marathi lullaby was found to have structural similarities with lullabies sung by people in the Scottish Highlands and the Nahua indigenous people of Central America. A Garo dance song was similar to a Yaqui dance song from northern Mexico and a Tlingit dance song from the Pacific Northwest coast of the United States. The database of 118 songs had lullabies from India, Central Africa, Northern Australia, North America and other places. Healing songs came from Uttar Pradesh, Central America, Africa and North America. And dance songs and love songs came from similarly diverse cultures and regions.

Overall, lullabies were slow and soothing, their sounds were gentle and fluid; dance songs were universally fast, lively and rhythmic; love songs tended to build and release tension with a broader range of pitches than lullabies; and healing songs had shorter notes than love songs and varied more in rhythm than dance songs. "What our study shows is that when we as humans of a particular culture make music, while the sounds may sound unique, they actually reflect deep features of human psychology coupled with social processes," Glowacki said to *The Telegraph*.

The export of Anglo-American culture has meant that certain forms of music have become global from the second half of the past century. Rock'n'roll music and other forms of popular Anglo-American music — like disco, hip-hop, rhythm and blues and rap — are lionised throughout the world. The youth, especially in non-English-speaking Europe, including the continent, as it were; Africa; Asia; and south and central America are all hooked to genres of music originating in the United States and Britain. Even an older set of people, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s listen avidly to early rock'n'roll, blues, jazz, folk rock and country music.

But that's not all. These genres have profoundly influenced popular music across the world, including India. Rap has been adapted across India. And popular music, whether used in films or not, have borrowed rhythms, structures and instruments from popular Western music.

Closest home for this writer, ever since Kabir Suman, as he is known now, launched what later came to be known as "*jibanmukhi gaan*" (life-focused music), Bengali popular music has not only started sounding much more like "Western" music, it also uses lyrics that echo concerns that share more ground with popular music in the West as compared to earlier popular Bengali songs. "Bangla bands" have proliferated. A significant proportion of members of these bands are young people who have grown up on rock and other forms of Western music — Beatles onwards.

The research we have referred to uncovers musical similarities across cultures that are deep-seated and have existed for a long time. But the export of Anglo-American culture, in music and other cultural fields, and its global proliferation, before the age of globalisation and, especially, in that age, raise interesting questions, some not easy to answer. Why has there been a tendency towards a flattening of cultures? And does this kind of growing uniformity betoken large-scale changes in sensibility.

Some technological developments have no doubt made cultural "miscegenation" easier. The ubiquity of the Internet on computers and mobile phones has made cross-cultural consumption substantially easy. Similarly, the spread of satellite television, say, in urban India, has had a similar effect. Exposure through these technologies and devices has perhaps made people more receptive to other cultures.

But does that mean sensibilities are changing? The research alluded to clearly hypothesises that the similarities in types of music stem from deep-seated and shared psychological traits coupled with social or societal traits. And these similarities have been around for a long time. But it is doubtful whether the cultural flattening typical of the post-World War II period and more especially the era of globalisation has created a similar change in sensibilities.

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

In advertising, to err is human

YES, BUT…

SANDEEP GOYAL

There was a lot of hullabaloo earlier this month about an Uber ad that had mistakes in the headline and spelling errors in body copy. Lots of nasty remarks were posted on social media. First Ogilvy, the Uber agency, was targeted. And roasted. When they issued a denial saying the ad was not theirs, the mud-slinging kind of eased somewhat. So now, with Ogilvy out of the frame, it looked as if the client had done the creatives in-house (or done them through a small agency/freelancer) and managed a self-goal.

After 35 years in the business, I sat back, and thought to myself: "Why so much criticism? Why such self-flagellation? Why such nasty remarks about peers? Aren't we all human? Anyone can make a mistake. Sure the mistake has costs, and maybe has repercussions. But is an inadvertent mistake, an honest error, enough to trigger an avalanche of such nastiness and negativity? Does the advertising industry over-react?"

Back to Uber. The taxi-hailing company ran ads in Delhi and Mumbai (perhaps other cities) too. The headline in Delhi ran something like this … "Planning to head out of the Delhi?" The mistake of adding a 'the' before Delhi got Twitter heated up, and in knots, in no time. Also, in the body copy "anywhere" and "anytime" were written as single words. While the singular/combined usage in "anywhere" was debatable, the "anytime" should have been two separate words for sure. In the Mumbai ad, the name of a destination was wrongly spelt. An extra 'i' was added to Bhimashankar, one of the destinations. Hell broke loose on social media.

My personal opinion is that the original Delhi headline perhaps was meant to say, "Planning to head out of the Delhi smog?" or may be Delhi pollution. Somebody senior at the client end must have felt that the use of words like "smog" or "pollution" may not be politically incorrect. A last minute chopping of the undesirable word must have been ordered. In the haste to catch the newspaper deadline, the offending "the" which too should have been removed, was not deleted. Sh*t happens!

I have seen worse. Almost 25 years ago, I ran a new help-line number ad for Lufthansa in Mumbai. Front page solus. Big bold telephone number upfront. And, we managed to get the number wrong! Don't ask me how. The client had seen the artwork; the copywriter had checked and signed the material. Yet somehow the mistake happened. The wrong number was incessantly ringing at the home of an old Parsi lady, driving her nuts. It was an MTNL number, and it took us half a day to get it disconnected. Another half day to double check the originally allotted number. Getting space…that too front page solus…in the newspaper the next day was another nightmare. In all this, the client did not once fly off the handle. Nor was there any social media those days to deride us or mock us. I just went the next day to the Parsi lady's home with a box of chocolates, and apologised. She was most gracious, and understanding. Period.

Way back in the early 1990s when Star TV used to uplink from Hong Kong, we had a new packaging change commercial running during Christmas-New Year for Fujifilm. That was also the time of the year when Star would shut all commercial operations and the uplinking would be on auto. Well, our "new" commercial went on air but somehow it was the wrong tape that was getting broadcast! And as I said, Star was all but shut for holidays. It took us three days of fire-fighting across the globe to get the right material to run. In all the chaos, the client in Japan maintained a stoic silence, and in fact sent me a "thank-you" message once the error had been rectified.

The advertising business, methinks, needs to tone down a bit. Take control of itself, and its emotions. Controversy on every small little issue signals an industry either unsure of itself, or a fraternity that is needlessly uptight and too self-righteous. A good laugh, some good-natured banter on the Uber ad was all that was merited. Not the ugly, derisive comments that flooded the social media after the headline debacle.

If advertising practitioners and pundits do need to get themselves into a rage in 2020, there are a lot more pertinent issues than inadvertent mistakes that ought to get them worked up…puffery, plagiarism, puerility…perennial problems that advertising has faced, but never really confronted. Or addressed. Or solved.

The lessons to be learnt from the Uber debacle are simply that (1) To err is human (2) No one is infallible. Tomorrow it could be you (3) Grin and bear it. Forgive and forget (4) Tomorrow is another day.

The writer is an advertising and media veteran