

The Kiwi role model



COUNTRY CODE
RAHUL JACOB

After a white supremacist went on a shooting rampage in two Christchurch mosques last March that resulted in the death of more than 50 people, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern led from the front with compassion rather than hot-headed rhetoric. She visited mosques of course, but also pushed through a law disallowing the ownership of military assault weapons within a week of the attack. (The contrast with the US on this issue was stark.) Ardern famously refused to refer to the terrorist by name, arguing that he desired notoriety. "I implore you: Speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them," she said in a speech that was Shakespearean in its use of language as it was statesmanlike.

As majoritarian populism takes an enormous toll on the pillars of democracy everywhere, from Donald Trump's America to Boris Johnson's Britain to Narendra Modi's India, tiny New Zealand (population: 4.7 million) is an unlikely role model. It has problems, of course; housing prices have spiralled out of the reach of many. In a country much visited for its idyllic countryside, rural suicides are growing in the high teens. Yet, from climate change to dealing humanely with immigrants, New Zealand lives on the seismic faultlines of our zeitgeist. It is fashioning responses that do not evoke the anxiety attack that the once futuristic, even auspicious, year of 2020 has prompted from Washington DC to New Delhi. In our global dystopia, a country whose politics do not evoke unbridled pessimism seems a hopeful place. In neighbouring Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a staunch denialist of climate change, bumbled through the crisis of bush fires that by last weekend had claimed the lives of one billion native animals and more than 20 people.

One example of the Kiwi focus on the environment is the request to clean the soles of one's shoes as you walk on paths in reserves in order to save the magnificent kauri tree which risks extinction from dieback disease. On a mostly deserted beach on Barrier Island that looked an idealised, photo-shopped vision of a perfect beach, my host fretted that some young men horsing around were running too close to a cluster of birds that are endangered; the fright could cause permanent stress.

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The battle to preserve our environment — notably absent in the public consciousness in India on issues such as conserving water — is as urgent as the challenge of democracies managing diverse cultures. New Zealand is grappling with high net inflows of migrants of 1.5 per cent of the population annually, whereas most countries track well below 1 per cent. Every other Uber driver was from India and came to the country on a student visa, many studying at obscure technical institutes where diplomas became a track to citizenship. New Zealand's population will pass 5 million this year, a jump that has taken 14 years rather than the 30 years that increasing from 3 million in 1976 to 4 million in 2006 did. Inevitably, there is a debate starting on the levels of immigration but little of the harsh rhetoric that one has heard against "immigrants" from India's government over the past several months. While Australia herds illegal immigrants on a harsh, sweltering island that is expected to act as a deterrent to others, New Zealand has offered to give them shelter. The articulate cab driver taking me to Sydney airport Sunday said that while Aussies had patronisingly regarded New Zealand as "a kid brother", nowadays it seemed the other way round. New Zealand is also richly bicultural in respecting its original Maori inhabitants and Maori heritage in ways that, for example, the US and Australia fall short. I was at the gay wedding of a Kiwi friend this month where the wedding dinner abounded with moments made more beautiful — the presentation of a feathered cape to a son getting married by his mother — because they were distinctively Maori. Watching the funeral of a Kiwi friend's father a few years ago, I was struck by how many eulogies were in Maori.

Part of the country's charm is how laidback it remains. A mecca of fitness for fitness lovers worldwide is Les Mills, founded in Auckland, now a global group fitness phenomenon unlike any other with its patented high-intensity classes taught in 16,000 gyms worldwide. Last week, an exercise class was a minute from starting when the owner of the company, Phillip Mills, gave up his spin bike to a member who had just walked into the full class. I tried to imagine this happening in India, but couldn't. I have not only worked for a diverse Kiwi macroeconomic research firm, but am such a sycophant of Les Mills Kiwi instructors in Hong Kong that I retain a gym membership in a city I left six months ago. But the lessons from tiny New Zealand about mobilising to prevent an environment going up in flames around us and combating the feral WhatsApp politics of hatred are in many ways Gandhian — and global. We should all sign up.

About public service and private profit

The BJP's message is that since the past can't be checked, it must be reinvented as creatively as imagination allows



WHERE MONEY TALKS
SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

Since West Bengal's governor is a scholar with evidence of Ram's historical existence, he may also have heard of Oscar Wilde. He may even be aware of the Wildean bon mot, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" whose less-quoted conclusion is "that mediocrity can pay to greatness". Not that Jagdeep Dhankhar would dream of demeaning himself as "mediocrity". But, undoubtedly, he reveres Narendra Modi as "greatness" epitomised, and repeats — perhaps even tries to improve upon — the Prime Minister's brave assertions about the mythic achievements of ancient Hindus.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) loyalists are most stridently devoted in states that — high-decibel propaganda notwithstanding — they don't have a cat in hell's chance of capturing.

When not using his professional suffix "Yogi", Ajay Singh Bisht or Ajay Mohan Bisht (Google records both unfamiliar names), aka Adityanath, might say outrageous things and do worse. But does he really shoot critics "like dogs" (are even dogs indiscriminately shot?) and "drag them away"? When Dilip Ghosh, West Bengal's BJP chief, says this is standard practice for BJP chief ministers, he is probably only fantasising about what he would like to do if ever his soaring ambition lands him in Writers' Building. Or, perhaps, he is savouring what should be done to "a female demon, a Lankini", as another BJP legislator, Surendra Singh, calls Mamata Banerjee. If Assam's chief minister, Sarbananda Sonowal, whom Mr Ghosh also mentioned, is guilty of such criminal murderousness, it must be attributed to his difficulty in reconciling the Citizenship (Amendment) Act with a lifetime of hostility to Bengalis, especially from East Bengal.

Little does Mr Ghosh realise that his reckless utterances confirm that with friends like him, the BJP needs no enemies in West Bengal. He has also warned the centre (inadvertently of course) that if it at all wishes to earn the country's respect for responsible governance and upholding the law, it must invoke Article 356 in Uttar Pradesh, Assam and wherever else saffron rule permits men and women to indulge

in such murderousness.

Indian politics being the art of the impossible, West Bengal's governor is heir to several such conflicting and contradictory traditions. He has travelled a long way, possibly longer than the road from the Vadnagar tea stall in Gujarat's Mehsana district to the newly-renamed 7 Lok Kalyan Marg. Starting out from Kithana village in Rajasthan, Mr Dhankhar finds himself in the grandeur of a palace built for British viceroys modelled on Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, stately seat of the Curzon family, where liveried lackeys disregard Jawaharlal Nehru's advice and call governors "Excellency" and their spouse "lady governor" or even "governess".

Anyone who scales such dizzy heights must keep eyes and ears open for every rustle of change in how the wind blows, trimming sails and turning coats accordingly. Mr Modi's announcement in Kolkata's Old Currency Building the other day that nation-building means "preserving" India's heritage and history sent aspiring listeners scuttling around to demonstrate their inventive zeal by renaming Calcutta Port Trust after the Jana Sangh founder and proclaiming Mr Modi the new Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

His further complaint that shallow post-Independence historians overlook important aspects of the past was a clear reminder that

it's not enough to be content with the stem-cells and plastic surgery to which he himself famously drew attention, ignoring the mirth of realists. The BJP's message is that since the past can't be checked, it must be reinvented as creatively as imagination allows. Rising manfully to the challenge, Mr Dhankhar first trotted out that ancient Hindus piloted their own *uran khatola* or flying machines. When listeners murmured this was old hat like Ganesh's transplanted head, he broke new ground (as he thought) with Arjun's nuclear-tipped arrows. That should earn Mr Modi's gratitude. He can now demand that instead of being harassed with NPTs and CTBTs, India, as the nuclear pioneer, should be the sole inter-galactic authority for licensing nuclear weapons.

Bengal grandees like Maharajahdiraja Bahadur Sir Bijay Chand Mahtab of Burdwan and Nawab Sir Khwaja Salimullah Bahadur of Dacca who sniffed that Marwari stood for "more-worry" would have been impressed by Mr Dhankhar's virtuosity. Having prostrated themselves before the British Crown to be appointed Knight Grand Commander of The Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire and Knight Commander of The Most Exalted Order of the Star of India they knew all about public service and private profit. Then as now, political life bristles with careerists who may start out to do good but stay on to do well.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ ABHA ADAMS | EDUCATIONIST

The unconventional

Abha Adams tells Anjali Bhargava how she unintentionally ended up becoming a brand

Abha Adams, 66, has an abiding memory of her own school days. Standing with her two thick plaits among a long line of cherubic girls as Mother Superior's voice looms loud: "Girls, I want you to be like limpid water in a crystalline vase". And she thinks to herself: "Wow, what wouldn't I give to be limpid water in a crystal vase", even though she didn't know what it really meant.

The strongly moralistic values and sense of duty that were ingrained in her through her convent school days in Delhi led her to envision her future as a nun. "I was a disgusting goody two shoes through most of my school years", she says, a quality she found hard to shed even in later life. So much so that when she first met Bill, who she would marry later, he asked her "what's with this should and ought", the only two words she appeared to have in her vocabulary. When he advised she should just "follow her heart", it sounded like blasphemy to her.

We are meeting for a hurriedly fixed lunch at The China Kitchen at Hyatt in New Delhi, with time at a premium for us both. She orders a stir-fried sole fish and Udon noodles and I opt for some stir-fried vegetables with fried rice that she agrees to try.

As we wait for our food, she tells me a bit about her childhood, a phase that many of former students and parents can't even imagine. "Abha was once a school girl! Can't even imagine that!" is how one reacted when I mention my meeting with her to a few people who know her. Most of them swear by her... her charm to be precise. In fact, many say she is "charm personified".

Adams learnt her p's and q's in a highly Anglicised atmosphere in her Kolkata home from one Mrs Robinson who used to turn up in her starched black dress with white cuffs and spent hours perfecting Adams' handwriting under her watchful gaze. Adams' mother — a school principal and a stoic nationalist who imbibed many British customs nonetheless — took the young girl regularly to the national library in Kolkata and let her loose, a delightful memory for the avid reader.

In the 1970s when she was 10, Adams moved from the rich, cultural ethos of Kolkata to Delhi that seemed like a "large, electrified village". After lapping up "duty, convention and morality" in the first few years at school, Adams began to find herself dabbling in the performing arts, expressing herself more freely and going on to become the head girl at Carmel Convent at some stage. The spirit imbued in her by Sister Candice,

one of the nuns at her school, began to come to the surface, much to the chagrin of her conventional-minded father.

The seeds of rebellion had been sown in the young girl, who would soon be attracted to most things forbidden and nun-hood would be jettisoned. Indeed, Adams has never been one to conform. Even today she attempts to be politically correct but prod her a bit and she spills the beans, laughing with gay abandon.

Real rebellion kicked in during college with her joining Barry John's Theater Action Group — that her father derisively referred to as "*nau-tanki*" — with the likes of Siddhartha Basu and Lilette Dubey. Much to her father's horror, she also experimented with radio and appeared in a television show, *Around the World*. At 21, she started teaching English at Lady Shri Ram College for Women in Delhi after securing her master's degree.

After she lost her father around that time, her mother's plans to arrange a match or her went haywire, thanks to the rebellious streak that had started raising its head. Young Adams had no intention of getting tied down at that stage but agreed to go out for a coffee with a prospective match. After she was seated comfortably, she asked the waiter for an ashtray and lit a cigarette. Needless to say, the wedding bells failed to ring.

After teaching for six years, Adams felt the need to move on and applied for a second master's degree in theatre arts from the University of Leeds, UK. Thereafter, she left on a scholarship for a year-long course in practical theatre, enrolling for an MPhil in the subject, one she never finished. Upon leaving the Indian shores, she felt the need to rediscover the "Indian" in her and started working on dance and theatre performances with the Indian community in the UK. She began working with artists and theatre personalities and doing ballets like *Ramayana*, operas like *Savitri* and productions like *Dularibai*.

There she also met Bill, her to-be-husband, who she found "radically different from the average Indian male" she had encountered. "He had no hang-ups, no ego and made me laugh." He could deal with her confidence, encouraged her to break every norm and live life to the fullest.

In 1984, she landed a job with the BBC, learned to broadcast from the best in the business, presented a prime time show in current affairs and became education producer for Broadcasting House, Leeds. She then joined the Great Britain Arts Council in London which was



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

setting up a development agency, Aditi, for South Asian performing arts. For two years, she worked to bring together dancers, artists and performers of South Asian origin and "learned like never before" while helping with advocacy, promotion and training.

In early 1992, when he was only 44, her husband developed a serious heart condition and was told he didn't have much longer to live (Bill is 73 today). The upshot of it all was a decision to return to India, something she fought at that time.

With the main course over, we order a chocolate brulee (a poor cousin of crême variety) and decide to share it.

Later the same year, Adams found herself back in India, unsure of what she was really qualified to do. Instead of looking for a job — nei-

ther had a job at that point — the two bought a 17-year old Ambassador car and drove across the Himalayas, discovering parts of the country they didn't know existed. The car died on them on the way back!

With all their savings spent, Adams first approached Doodardshan for a job since broadcasting was what she knew best. But it was like "entering Dante's Inferno without the fires burning" — put their "heart and soul" into what they saw as their "baby", several of them with no background in academics or education but "personalities" nonetheless. Fourteen years flew by, in a whirlwind of activity, led by Adam's own spontaneity and infectious energy. She gives full credit to Manju Bharat Ram — the founder of The Shri Ram School — who she describes as a true "visionary" in the education space. The Shri Ram School became a brand under the leadership of Adams and Ram.

After 14 years, it was time again to move on. After Adams resigned, she began to get calls from all and sundry asking her to lend her name to their new school ventures. Some offered to pay absurd sums of money for just her name, suggesting that she needn't even come to the school. That's when she realised she'd become a "brand" like TSRS! It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to earn a tonne of money for doing very little but her conscience didn't allow her to go ahead. Finally, it was Ritu Suri's offer to set up Step by Step in Noida in 2006 that resonated with her. That's where she spent the next 12 years of her life, building almost an equally formidable name in another part of the city.

At some stage, however, Adams felt her work there was done and she quit in 2018, deciding to end her affair with the high-end schools of the national capital region and spend more time on Ahvaan, a teacher training and mentoring NGO that works in the government schools space. She's writing a book on the (mainly) negative fallout of the increasingly digital- and social media-led world on today's children. Students in elite schools "are self-harming in large numbers", she tells me. She starts recounting some related stories when we realise we need to wrap up as time is running out.

On this somber note, Adams breezes out, leaving me to absorb the dull Abha-less environment. Try meeting her once and you'll understand why she's the brand that she is.

NPR anyone?



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
KEYA SARKAR

With not much to watch on television and there being only one movie hall in the whole of Santiniketan I find myself watching a lot of news. Of course, with the CAA and NRC protests my time in front of the screen has gone up in the recent past. In any case, for a long time now I have been a great watcher of news on TV. My friends often joke about my daily need for a "Mamata-fix" but I am a pretty serious follower of her daily public appearances.

Not that I agree with all that she or her party prescribes but I am totally in awe of her personal stamina. From district level meetings where she pulls up officials to her presence in the control room in times of natural disasters, the way she charms protesting university

students to her ability to out-walk her security and her party men in her by now famous protest walks, all point to a level of energy which I admire.

I had been observing of late that in all her meetings to protest the CAA and NRC she has been advising all those who come for the rallies to do her one favour: "Please update your voter card," she says repeatedly. "You must do me this favour," and "I will protect you with my life," she promises.

Having heard this many times on television I urged my husband to check our details on the National Voters' Service Portal. He was reluctant to make an effort. Primarily because my existing voter card was fine and secondly because only recently a surveyor had come home to update our details for the voter card. Since this was a few months before the NCR/NPR debate there was no reason to view him with suspicion. And as it happens in small places everyone knows everyone else.

So Somenath who we knew (from a nearby village) fed in our data and confirmed that our details were correct. He stayed on for tea and apprised us of how many people had died in our area since the last elections and how the number of voters had shrunk.

So reposing immense faith in Somenath, my husband thought the need to check the voters list quite superfluous. However he

must have had a rethink. One day just as we were going to sit down for dinner he announced that he had checked the list. "Mine is fine," he said but your name has been changed. "To what?" I asked in alarm. To "Keya Nilmoni", he said. "It is fine in Bengali. It reads Keya Sarkar. But in English it is Keya Nilmoni. Your father's name is also Amiya Kumar Nilmoni," he said with what I thought was a hint of glee.

I would have laughed too if I wasn't concerned about having it corrected. Thankfully we had Somenath's number. We called him and asked how this could have happened. He, of course, blamed it on "technical error". An error which he said had changed all "Sarkars" of the locality to "Nilmoni". Since I know no other Sarkar in the neighbourhood I had to take his word for it.

He helpfully informed us that we could correct the error online. While I sent in a request for the change online my husband and I were wondering how any data input person could create such a strange mistake. Our logical minds were trying to find a plausible explanation. And then it struck us. Actually before we had been introduced to Somenath who used to teach in a school for tribal children run by some friends of ours we used to know his father. He was called Nilmoni!

NPR anyone?

An ode to marmalade



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

Thirty-four years, one month and nine days after we were married, my wife finally made a vat of orange marmalade at home. It was not at my persuasion, dear reader, the illusion that she would pander to my tastes having being shattered 12,449 days ago. Having a fondness for bitter rinds in the conserve, and finding local brands in the stores sickeningly sweet, I might have expressed the hope that tiny mandarins from the garden be turned into confiture. My wife wasn't one for such ministrations. "If you want homemade marmalade," she told me in no uncertain terms, "you can ask your mother to make it — or your sister," and just to make sure no family members were left out, added, "or sister-in-law."

I'm not one to complain, but in those years of socialist austerity when fewer things were available at the neighbourhood grocer's, each of us guarded our hoard of imported goodies with selfish zeal — whether chocolates, cheeses, or jams and jellies. Given my wife's sweet tooth, you'd expect her to raid the fridge for puddings, but she took a liking for marmalade instead, slathering her toast from edge to edge with greed rather than good sense. She might not make it at home, but she could certainly eat it. Waging battle over a jar of marmalade seemed petty beyond belief so I simply lost my craving for the preserve.

Not that my wife was averse to cooking up a storm in the kitchen when she chose. Two years and a few odd days after our marriage, she decided to make tomato sauce in somewhat alarming quantities. Kilos of tomatoes were deseeded, pulped, cooked and poured into empty bottles purloined from friends — but, alas, she'd forgotten to add sodium benzoate, resulting in the spoilage of 39 bottles of homemade ketchup. Over the years, that list grew — 18 miscellaneous sized jars of chilli pickle, a few dozen pitchers of guava jam, 21 (or was it 22?) pots of mango chutney, failed attempts at baking our own bread and making our own ice-

cream. Through it all, my wife was only resolute in one thing — she would not make marmalade.

Over time that expectation faded. I now bought back armloads of marmalade from my travels, soaked in whisky in Scotland, steeply priced from Fortnum & Mason, artisanal varieties from Switzerland, in jars large and small — so many that they remained untasted past their use-by dates. By now I'd renounced my morning toast in pursuit of a diet, so it was my wife who ate her way through the stock, generous dollops over her now market-bought bread and croissants.

So it was a surprise to see her stirring up a treacly mix from a recipe borrowed from a friend's friend's mother, coaxing me to "just taste it" and waiting for the pronouncement. "It's perfect," I assured her, "just as it ought to be — sweet enough, but bitter too. I love it." The enthusiasm wasn't feigned though it might have been better to moderate it because my wife decided that sharing was her way of caring. "I might give some to my kitchen garden ladies," she announced. More portions were packaged into handy containers and sent off to acquaintances. This morning, when we sat down to our 12.45th breakfast together, she suggested toast with orange marmalade — store bought, naturally.

Not the obvious solutions

One of the lessons which the Modi government has yet to learn is that the solutions to economic problems can be counter-intuitive. In other words, not the first thing that strikes your mind. As we saw with demonetisation, the solution to black money is not necessarily to attack cash holdings, since most of the old notes came back to the Reserve Bank. Similarly, the solution to a tax shortfall is not necessarily to raise tax rates—a suggestion aired briefly in the context of the goods and services tax—any more than the solution to a trade deficit is to put up the shutters to imports. As the 1991 experience showed, the solution to a large trade deficit may be to open up the economy, not putting up protective walls; and encouraging exports could be done more effectively by scrapping export subsidies and adjusting the external value of the rupee instead.

These and similar lessons don't seem to have been learnt, if recent experience is anything to go by. Thus, the response to pharmaceutical price increases has been to impose price ceilings, just as the response last September to a domestic shortage of onions was to impose an export ban. As critics of Donald Trump's trade policies have pointed out, imposing additional import duties on goods from China has raised the cost of supplies domestically (JP Morgan calculates the impact on a family budget to be \$1,000 in a year). Someone should do a similar exercise in India to work out the cumulative costs of the additional duties imposed on steel imports, the cost of tariff hikes and export subsidies on offer in the effort to make India a manufacturing hub for things like mobile phones, the potential impact of additional duties on imports in the "others" category, the likely cost to the consumer of banning palm oil imports from Malaysia and petroleum from Turkey, and so on.

Then we have the snarky response to Jeff Bezos and Amazon. Given how much of world trade is intra-firm, and how important it is to become a part of global supply chains, Mr Bezos's promise of additional exports of \$10 billion should have encouraged the government to welcome the announcement, or at least to hold its peace. Instead, the response was far from friendly—influenced, no doubt, by the fact that Mr Bezos owns a newspaper that is critical of the Modi government, and by lobby pressure from small traders who fear unfair competition from a company with deep pockets. But the Competition Commission was created to deal with such problems, even if it does not always move when it should (such as in the Jio case). The larger point is that small store owners do not have the ability to create large supply chains that feed into international markets, nor to create a manufacturing base that generates quality jobs. Once again, the tactical response has been the wrong one.

A particularly striking example is offered by Jharkhand, which gives employers a subsidy of ₹5,000 per month for every employee taken on board in the garment industry. Surely, this is a measure of the lack of competitiveness of the country's garment industry—bear in mind that labour cost cannot be the most important reason for lack of competitiveness because China is by far the world's leading garment exporter despite having much higher labour costs. Although the subsidy seems to be generating a positive response from industry, there has to be doubt about whether this really is a "good news" story.

Any industry will invest if it is given a large enough incentive, but there may be better ways of using the taxpayer's money if the underlying reasons for lack of competitiveness were to be addressed—like a bloated currency that prices India out of world markets. It might be argued that sometimes the best can be the enemy of the good, especially if the former is hard to deliver. But too many such lazy compromises are what create a high-cost economy of the kind that we have lived with for long, and from which we had been moving away until recently.

Return of the Bharatiya 'Baniya' Party

BJP under Modi-Shah is returning to its trader mindset with a vengeance, underlining that strong, full majority governments can also be more risk-averse

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal has been quick to clarify his remark on Amazon founder Jeff Bezos not doing India a favour by investing here. He now says all investment is welcome as long as it complies with India's regulations. You can't argue with that.

Although, if read with the fact that the monopoly watchdog Competition Commission of India had hauled up Amazon earlier this week for "unfair" trade practices, a move hailed breathlessly by Swadeshi Jagaran Manch and trader/retailers' associations, you wouldn't make such a benign interpretation. It won't be some diabolical conspiracy either. It's only pure politics. It will underline the BJP's inevitable return to its basic instinct: Mercantilism.

This needs explanation. For decades, until the Congress-Left, post-Rajiv Gandhi, began describing the BJP as a Hindu party, Indira Gandhi had avoided doing precisely that. In an earlier National Interest, I had quoted from a conversation with Seshadri Chari, former editor of RSS mouthpiece Organiser, that she only described the BJP as a *baniya* (trader caste) party. The BJP has shown signs lately of proving Indira Gandhi right and returning to its trader mindset.

This is where the philosophical impulse of swadeshi also comes from. If someone has to profit from trade and entrepreneurship, it had better be one of our own. And even if we let an outsider come and do so, he'd better be grateful to us rather than the other way around. Several strong emotions get meshed in this: Nationalism, protectionism, mercantilism, and arrogance. Who the hell are you to walk all over my market, out-compete my native businessmen, and then expect me to say thank-you?

Foreign direct investment (FDI) had first started becoming fashionable in 1990-91, just as the Cold War ended. It was also a time when a deep economic crisis was building up in India. Madhu Dandavate was finance minister in V P Singh government.

Addressing one of those industry chamber gatherings, he famously — or infamously — said something like, "I am not against FDI. But I won't go looking for it." Since he was a dyed-in-the-red old socialist, even this reluctant acceptance of FDI was

seen as something to celebrate. But no foreign investor was impressed.

The reform of 1991 changed things. But attitudes deep down didn't. India had already had four decades of "socialist, protectionist, swadeshi, import-substitution; exports are good/imports bad" toxicification across the political spectrum. The only force of the economic Right, the once-powerful Swatantra Party, had been destroyed and entombed under Indira Gandhi's populism. Even the Jana Sangh by this time was singing the same socialist song, only fortified by its own economic nationalism. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the only truly reformist BJP leader in a modern free-market sense, ran with the baton of reform. He had too little time.

Old ideologies, and we say this in a purely non-partisan sense (as in Left or Right, Congress or BJP), are extremely obstinate. Like the proverbial dog's tail, you can't straighten or bend these even in a dozen years. Some individual leaders can make a difference: P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh for the Congress, Vajpayee for the BJP. Under others, the "tail" goes back to the way it always was.

Over the past five and a half years, we have seen the protectionist, anti-MNC, technophobic old notions return with a vengeance. This government now gives a 20 per cent advantage to capital goods made in India over imports, signalling a return to the old regime.

All it meant was that now a foreign company could ship its kits to India and assemble, for example, metro coaches in a "joint venture" with an Indian minority partner or, even directly, and sell the same coach at a price much higher than an import. In Budget after Budget, we've seen tariffs go up, sectoral protections extended — steel is only the most visible example — and all kinds of government agencies, from regulators to quasi-policing organisations, go after foreign investors, especially in retail. After the last Budget and the BJP discourse around it, that happily forgotten old, Indira-esque expression "import substitution" staged a comeback.

That is the reason global business has seen its romance with Narendra Modi's India fade. No one would say so in public, especially those that already



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

have investments in India or employees and other interests. Who wants "panga" with a strong government? Even the mighty Vodafone CEO has to retreat after saying in agony that he will have to leave India, although he still might do that, after writing off a couple of tens of billions because of regulatory and taxation shocks and unpredictability.

Want more evidence? See how Jeff Bezos's previous visit to India went in 2014, when he was feted by Mr Modi and others, and his peremptory dismissal now. The explanation also sounds like Dandavate of 1990: I am not against FDI but...

You still want to know where this sentiment or push comes from? Play back the part of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's Dussehra speech last year, when he lays out his economic doctrine. We can describe it in one word out of these: Protectionist, xenophobic, swadeshi. Or, it could also be stated as, "We are not against FDI, but only in sectors where we need it, as long as it doesn't hurt Indian business, and control remains with Indians".

The most fascinating aspect of Mr Modi in his sixth year with a big majority is how compliant his government has been with Nagpur. It has delivered on all of its big concerns: Cow, Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act, triple talaq, anti-Pakistanism, and so on. Yet, it has reversed two decades of reform on trade, FDI in retail, and technology to harmonise itself with the RSS, not defy it like Vajpayee did.

In 2014, and again in 2019, India elected a "strong" government and prime minister because it was fed up with a "weak" one for a decade under Dr Singh. It has been stronger and more decisive in many areas, from retaliation for terror attacks to Article 370 to anti-corruption activism. But not on the economy. Besides goods and services tax, however flawed, and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, it is difficult to find one big, bold reform although I recently listed 10 bits of good news even in gloomy times for the economy.

Think about it. A government as weak as Dr Singh's had the courage to deliver the India-US nuclear deal, thereby fundamentally shifting India's geopolitical posture. Mr Modi's strong government, meanwhile, is struggling even to seal a tiny, partial trade deal with the US, even as it celebrates this "strategic partnership" co-founded by Dr Singh and George Bush/Barack Obama. Vajpayee's weak government ushered in the cotton revolution by permitting genetically modified seeds. Mr Modi's strong government is pussyfooting about on agricultural biotechnology, more respectful of Swadeshi Luddites than a Vajpayee would bother to be.

This takes us to our old argument: Are strong, full-majority governments necessarily good, or do they have a problem? More to lose, no excuses to put off ideological demands and compulsions, and a constant need to save face? Are weak governments actually more decisive and less risk-averse because they have greater flexibility and humility? It is a particularly contrarian and provocative point, which, indeed, is what it was intended to be.

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Moral considerations and profit maximisation



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

In March 1971, about a 100 employees of Polaroid demonstrated in front of their corporate headquarters. They ceremonially burnt several cameras. This group called itself the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement (PRWM). It was led by two black American employees. The PRWM had a three point agenda: It wanted Polaroid to exit South Africa completely; it wanted the company to issue a statement that condemned apartheid; it wanted Polaroid's profits from its South African operations to be donated to support African liberation movements.

At that point of time, the

American multinational corporation (MNC) possessed cutting edge photographic technology that made it a world leader. Its technology was integral to the South African Passbook system. The Passbook was an internal passport that every non-white had to carry. It carried all sorts of details about the individual, which had to be endorsed by the police and his or her employer. Anybody caught without a Passbook risked a jail sentence and was subjected to brutal interrogation at the minimum. Anybody in a whites only area, carrying a Passbook which did not authorise him or her to be that place was also liable to a jail sentence.

Polaroid sacked the two employees. It also sent a mixed race team to investigate the South Africa situation. It issued a statement saying it abhorred apartheid. It made a partial pull out, stating that it would stop servicing government contracts, but it would continue to operate in South Africa. It committed to equalising salaries and supporting various organisations working for people of colour. Much later, it was learnt that Polaroid equipment was

still being sold to the South African government through various local distribution channels.

Ambiguous or wholly evil? Many corporates have done much worse. Polaroid was, as it happens, the first major multinational to exit South Africa. Most stayed right in there for sound economic reasons.

White South Africa was first world in terms of per capita income, and it had a vast pool of skilled, cheap, coloured labour. The profit margins were approximately twice

that of other First World countries as a result of these factors.

By the mid-1980s, moral pressure had built up on corporates operating there. Although Margaret Thatcher chortled that really "teeny sanctions" were being imposed (her son Mark had business interests), corporates had started feeling the heat. Oddly enough, it was

another camera company, Eastman Kodak, which genuinely exited. Kodak quit South Africa cold, refusing to allow its products to be sold there. Other MNCs tried the effect of official pulling out while allowing the

distribution of their products. McKinsey pulled out of South Africa when an up and coming Rajat Gupta stated he felt uncomfortable with that nation's colour bar.

Corporates tend to stay with undemocratic regimes and to enable them if there's profit to be made. Polaroid that

enabled the South African colour bar with its technology. In an earlier era, IBM helped Hitler set up the enumeration system in concentration camps. Once America ended up at war with the Axis Powers, Big Blue doubled up by using its punch card technology to set up the internment camps for Japanese American citizens. Larsen &

Toubro built the notorious bridge on the River Kwai using prisoners of war. Siemens used slave labour sourced from German concentration camps during the war.

There are countless other examples of corporates supporting horrible regimes. United Fruit, Shell, Rio Tinto are some of the better known cases. In recent times, there's Cambridge Analytica and, arguably, Facebook. Then there are all the companies working in face recognition, AI-driven autonomous weaponry and other technologies that enable evil regimes.

Corporates are supposed to maximise profits. But how far will they go in that endeavour? It's a question Indian corporates need to ask themselves. Starting with Aadhaar, there's a raftload of government schemes, which will generate profits, if moral considerations are ignored. Construction companies will make money building detention centres. Information technology companies will make money on the enumeration of the CAA, NRC and NPR. Being evil pays. Does it pay enough?

gets an insight into what sort of research the RBI is encouraging.

This publication is also something that Dr Patra needs to take in hand and raise it to international standards. The objective must be to make non-RBI researchers also vie to publish in it.

There's so much ferment out there which we are not capturing on an institutional basis. Much of this has now been relegated to the scatter-shot mercies of the twitterati. In particular, I would urge him to associate economists from the Indian Economic Service (IES) in the effort. They may not have PhDs from foreign universities but they understand the Indian economy's dynamics better.

Over the years, the IES has become a sort of a subordinate service which gets virtually no encouragement, not least because their head, the chief economic adviser, has no time for it. Kaushik Basu was the sole exception to this tendency.

I am sure Dr Patra will get the fullest cooperation from the finance minister, who needs workhorses, not prima donnas constantly looking to improve their CVs.

Le Carré's moral compass

EYE CULTURE

SUHIK K. SEN

In 2011, one of the most formidable living novelists in the English language was nominated for the Man Booker International Prize, awarded every two years for lifetime contribution to fiction. John Le Carré, whose real name is David Cornwell, issued a statement saying, "I am enormously flattered to be named as a finalist of the 2011 Man Booker International prize. However, I do not compete for literary prizes and have therefore asked for my name to be withdrawn."

But Le Carré's finally got his award. He's been given the Olof Palme Prize, instituted in 1987, which is given for outstanding achievements "in any of the areas of anti-racism, human rights, international understanding, peace and common security". Le Carré is the 33rd recipient of the award, but only the fourth writer to get it. The three writers to get the award before him were playwright and political dissident Václav Havel (1989), who went on to become president of Czechoslovakia, Danish novelist Carsten Jensen (2009) and the Italian journalist and author of Gomorrah, Roberto Saviano (2011).

That Le Carré is one of the greatest living British novelists ought not to be in doubt. Over a writing career spanning almost four decades, he has written 25 novels, beginning with *A Call for the Dead* (1961) and running up to *Agent Running in the Field* (2019). In between, he's written short stories and non-fiction collections, the latest of which is *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life* (2016). Almost all of Le Carré's novels are in the espionage fiction genre, save his second novel, *A Murder of Quality* (1962), which was a crime novel, and his sixth, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover* (1971), which defies classification.

If you're looking to pigeonhole, Le Carré was primarily an espionage novelist. He made his reputation with his third novel, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963). Le Carré's early novels were set against the backdrop of the Cold War — from *Call for the Dead* to *The Secret Pilgrim* (1990), his 13th novel. If anyone had even remotely feared that with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War, Le Carré would run out of themes and issues to engage him, they could not have been more in error. Le Carré began his post-Cold War career with a stunning debut, *The Night Manager* (1993), the story of an undercover intelligence agent infiltrating the inner circle of an arms dealer to eventually destroy him.

Since then Le Carré has taken on the pharmaceutical industry in *The Constant Gardener* (2001); the devastation of the Congo by big finance in *The Mission Song* (2006); the war against and destruction of Chechnya in *Our Game* (1995); and the horrors of the "War on Terror" in *A Most Wanted*

Man (2008). In all, Le Carré has written 12 novels since the end of the Cold War, though he returns to that era in 24th novel, *A Legacy of Spies* (2017).

Many concerns and engagements interweave in Le Carré's work. Two of the important concerns are exploring moral ambiguities using espionage almost as a metaphor. These moral ambiguities play out in arenas ranging from patriotism, an individual's relationship with the imagined community we call a "people", or "nation", to an individual's relationship with other individuals. This concern is embedded in a search, I believe, for a bedrock of humanism in which to anchor human existence.

The character Le Carré has chosen to be the vessel of both these themes is George Smiley, the master spy who is unlike any spy in popular imagining or fiction — a seemingly lost, utterly nondescript and donnish man. But Smiley, the protagonist of the classic Smiley trilogy — *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Honourable Schoolboy*; and *Smiley's People* — has a moral compass that rarely betrays him even as he goes about his business without compunction.

The perfect metaphor for the moral ambiguities that Le Carré explores is caught in Smiley's relationship with his wife, Lady Anne, who is serially adulterous, leaving him often and returning equally often, though fleetingly. But Lady Anne's adulterous betrayals never shake Smiley's belief in her, not even when she has a relationship with his colleague Bill Haydon, who, as part of a coterie within the "Circus", the British Secret Service, works towards and succeeds in supplanting Smiley as number two in the service.

It is during Haydon's time in charge that the service discovers it has been infiltrated by a "mole" — a double agent. Smiley, out of favour by then, nevertheless relentlessly pursues the mole, who turns out to be Haydon himself. Just as Smiley refuses to judge his wife, he refuses to judge the flamboyant Haydon, at one time a close friend, though he spares no effort to run him down to earth. Le Carré's superimposition of these two betrayals and Smiley's reaction to them seem to betoken the author's own refusal to be drawn too easily into judgments.

In his Cold War novels, especially, Le Carré gestures at moral equivalences between the East and West in terms of betrayals and belonging that make it difficult for us to hold on to conventional positions predicated on ideas of patriotism and us-and-them identities. It is here, perhaps, that he has contributed immeasurably to "international understanding, peace and common security".

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

An agenda for Dr Patra



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

For several decades, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) used to publish the comprehensive "Report on Currency and Finance" (RCF). It was an excellent report, both as current reading on the Indian economy and as archival material.

In its first avatar it used to have two parts like the Economic Survey — one for analysis, the other for data. Then around 2001 came the annual RBI Handbook of Statistics. So Volume 2 of the RCF was discontinued. After that it became a theme-based publication which came out once in two years.

But after 2013, it suddenly stopped publication. The last edition was in 2013. No explanation was given by Raghuram Rajan, who was then RBI governor, and Urjit Patel, who was deputy governor, for their decision.

Actually, even D Subbarao, who was governor from 2008 to 2013, needed to explain why the five years after 2008 were combined in a single report when, in fact, two were needed. Those were the crucial stimulus years after the Lehman collapse. Towards the end of his term Dr Subbarao kept complaining about irresponsible fiscal policy.

These gripes did come out eventually in the last RCF of 2013 in a well-argued and properly supervised set of essays on fiscal-monetary interface.

Next, Dr Rajan and Dr Patel needed to explain why they quietly junked the RCF. After all, having started the whole full disclosure of non-performing assets and the prompt that it became a theme-based publication which came out once in two years.

a proper account of the state of finance in the next RCF was fully warranted.

In fact, Dr Rajan also needed to explain his decision to adopt the Basel III norms. He must have had good reasons but what were they? Was there a proper debate? The RCF would have been the best place to do it. We would all have understood, as would have the writers of RBI history who will toil without access to the files.

My complaint is that if Dr Rajan and Dr Patel thought the RCF was redundant to requirements, they could have explained why they thought so. If they thought it was poorly written, they could have improved it. Instead they behaved exactly like the vice-chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) behaves — arbitrarily. In the absence of an explanation, that's how it appears.

As an aside, let me ask what the reaction would have been if this had happened after Narendra Modi had taken over. But in 2013 no one said a thing. The UPA was in its death

throes and no one in government even noticed.

Reviving RBI research

But now that Michael Patra is deputy governor who has to supervise the research department, the RBI should revive the report. After all, Dr Patra would have surely worked on it at some point in his long career at the RBI and is in a better position to appreciate its value than were the outsiders.

Moreover, the seven-year break provides a great opportunity to focus on new developments in monetary theory and global practices. The Indian bits can be woven in.

This is not the only thing on Dr Patra's plate. The RBI also brings out a publication called "Occasional Papers". This contains research by its staff. The last issue came out in July. It comes out once in six months.

One problem with it is that it has become something of a vanity publication and the quality is highly variable. Nevertheless, it serves a useful purpose inasmuch as one