

Opinion

SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2024



Stop calling India-Pak the biggest rivalry

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

WITH ALL THE frenzy and media hype around the India-Pakistan game at the T20 World Cup, one would think that the 'mother of all rivalries' would actually be a close one. The way TV channels went to town over the clash between the neighbours at Nassau County in New York, it felt as if cricket's breakthrough in the United States was dependent on just this game, regardless of what the home team achieves in the tournament. In reality, the match was a one-off event relying more on history and the volatile bilateral ties between the two countries for its intensity and appeal.

As far as the cricketing side goes, Pakistan has beaten India once in all World Cup cricket — over 50 overs and 20 — as has Bangladesh. Sri Lanka has had more success against their Big Brothers on the biggest stage. It's time to stop branding India-Pakistan as the biggest rivalry in cricket; they may be arch rivals, but not at par, judging by history in the 21st century. Australia, England, South Africa, and even New Zealand are more likely to test India thoroughly in all aspects of the game.

Gone are the days when the sight of Imran Khan, Wasim Akram or Javed Miandad used to fill Indian supporters with dread as they could seemingly swing a game according to their fancy, more often than not, against India. But the balance of power has shifted inexorably since they left the scene. India are not only stronger in personnel now, but also in mind, willing and able to seize the big moments, as was evident in their latest meeting. It was a rare instance when Pakistan had worked themselves into a more than decent position against India, only to implode characteristically at the first sight of crisis. The lack of Mohammad Rizwan attempted against Asif Ali Khattak, after being in no hurry to chase down the 120-run target, has been singled out for Pakistan's demise in that game and their eventual early ejection from the tournament, pipped by the part-timers representing the co-hosts.

But that shot was no more than a symptom of the nerves and lack of composure under pressure that Pakistan have displayed in recent times. Sometimes, talent masks these frailties, but the current lot isn't rich in that resource either.

Faltering under pressure

In their tournament opener, they were second-best for a lot of the game against the USA, who almost let it slip despite having the chase under control well past the halfway mark and needed a last-ball boundary to push the contest into a Super Over.

There, someone of Mohammad Amir's class and experience couldn't get his bearings and bowled multiple twiddles, which coupled with shoddy fielding and nonsensical over-throw, took the USA to a score that proved beyond Pakistan.

In the game against India, the clueless nature of the Pakistan middle and lower orders in sharp contrast to the vital runs added by the Indian tail that eventually won them the game. Even in the win over Canada, their lack of confidence was all too evident as they pattered around with the bat, in pursuit of a modest total, when improving their

net run rate was the need of the hour. The problem lies in the batting. Though Pakistan has had decent or better bowlers throughout their history — though the lack of a quality spinner in the current squad is galling — they have not had genuine world-beating batsmen since the days of Younis Khan and Mohammad Yousaf and Inzamam-ul-Haq before them; batsmen who could read situations, move up and down gears, having the ability to finish innings and games when the game was in the balance.

With proper batsmanship — which can thrive in all conditions and formats — on the decline in the country, it's players like Shahid Afridi — nothing more than a big hitter, though not a particularly consistent one — who have become looks as far as batting is concerned. Their only USP is hitting shots, and once the red mist takes over, they can't resist it or temper their obsession and take the match situation into consideration.

In the Indian context, Hardik Pandya could be considered a parallel study at the moment, but he too won't be deified like Virat Kohli or Rohit Sharma, bonafide batting royalty. But the current Pakistan lot doesn't even have someone of Afridi's calibre. If Kohli and Ahmed is no spring chicken but has hardly done much to make a name for himself on the biggest stage against quality opposition or when conditions are not entirely helpful for hitting the ball out of the ground, while Azam Khan hasn't translated his Pakistan Super League heroics at the international level, and is more ridiculed than assessed. Shadab Khan's all-rounder status has turned into an all-round disappointment.

Time to act is now

If history is anything to go by, there will be the usual round of recrimination, allegations of infighting, bad blood, and administrative and coaching instability once the team returns home. But truth be told, even if the group-stage outsiders is a bit of a surprise, they weren't expected to go very far in the competition. They may be on a weather in Florida, but they didn't help themselves in Texas and New York. It wasn't the first time they had to depend on India to stay alive in the competition for a day or two more.

Babar Azam has got a long rope as captain, but though he may come across as an uninspiring captain, he hasn't been helped by the cards at his disposal. And he has some way to go yet to be spoken of in the same breath as Kohli, as far as batting is concerned. His partnership with Rizwan at the top of the order has been steady at best, but any attempt to push the pace leaves the modest middle order exposed. There may be a change in personnel, but that's unlikely to result in a change in fortunes. If Pakistan can learn anything from the downfall of West Indies cricket, it's that clinging to the past is good only for nostalgia. One needs pragmatism to tide over a contemporary slump.

Pakistan didn't leave out any ready-made talents that may have helped their chances in the US. The country will host the next big ICC event, the Champions Trophy in early 2025, and they need a quick turnaround in their 50-over form as well. The next T20 World Cup is in 2026 in India and Sri Lanka, so corrective measures need to be taken now. The terms 'maverick', 'mercurial', 'unpredictable', and 'quidra ka nizam' can't be used in basic structural, coaching, and mindset flaws forever.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



Mr Narendra Modi got a **conditional** mandate to form the government but, as is his wont, he allowed hubris to cloud his judgment. After the initial shock, Mr Modi realised that there were no challengers to him in his party and no other party had the numbers to stake a claim...



When it comes to his core team in the Cabinet, PM Narendra Modi has chosen continuity over change

Not Modi 3.0 but Modi 2.1

The story of the new government, sworn in on June 9, 2024, can be summed up in ten words: *people voted for change, Mr Narendra Modi opted for continuity.*

The voters

The voters, blessed with common sense, got it right. They rejected the BJP's model of governance of the last ten years but were willing to give Mr Modi another opportunity if he made a major course correction. The BJP started with 303 seats and set a target of 370 for itself and a target of 400+ for the NDA. It fell woefully short of both targets. Ultimately, the BJP could manage only a miserable 240 for itself and a sub-par 292 for the NDA. The people's message to the BJP was clear: form a coalition government with important roles for the constituent parties, abandon divisive policies, acknowledge the reality of the economic situation, heal social divisions, avoid boastful claims, and take all Indians on the development path.

The voters also concluded that though the principal opposition party, the Congress, had made a determined effort to wrest power, it was perhaps not yet ready. It had to re-grow its roots in 9 states that account for 170 seats in the Lok Sabha.

The BJP

Mr Narendra Modi got a **conditional** mandate to form the government but, as is his wont, he allowed hubris to cloud his judgement. After the initial shock, Mr Modi realised that there were no challengers to him in his party and no other party had the numbers to stake a claim. He also concluded, correctly, that both Mr Chandrababu Naidu (TDP) and Mr Nitish Kumar (JDU) were transactional

The people wanted 'a change for the better' in their lives. The people voted for jobs, price stability, and peace and security. If the same ministers occupy the same offices and propagate the same policies, it will be a cruel mockery of the verdict of the people

leaders and more interested in protecting their hard-won turf in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, respectively, than play 'kingmaker' in Delhi. As it turned out, Mr Modi could easily satisfy them with private assurances of funds, schemes and some kind of 'special status' for their states.

Where Mr Modi erred was in repeating his core team, which I discuss below.

The Congress

The arithmetic stares in the face. Congress won 79 out of its 99 seats from only nine states. In nine other states that have 170 seats, Congress won only four (zero in five states and one each in four states). It will be useful to analyse what the Congress did right in the former nine states and what it did wrong in the latter nine states. Preparatory work was done by the party at its conclaves at Udaipur and Raipur but the preparation does not appear to have been taken forward to the desired conclusion. The bright sparks are Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand which will hold state Assembly elections in a few months. Going by the seats won in the 15-24 elections, Congress, together with its allies, has made a head start in the three states, and has an even chance of capturing power in the state

elections. Since the consequences of the elections in the three states go beyond those states, the BJP will certainly put up a stiff fight. The INDIA bloc must fight to win.

The government

When Mr Modi chose continuity over change, he shot himself in the foot. Several inferences can be drawn from the composition of Mr Modi's third government and the distribution of portfolios. *Firstly*, Mr Modi has spurned the warning of the electorate to change the course and style of his government. *Secondly*, he has stubbornly maintained that there was nothing wrong in the basic policies of his government, especially the policies concerning the economy, internal security and foreign policy. *Thirdly*, he has implicitly acknowledged that there was a serious talent deficit in his ranks. *Fourthly*, he has made it clear that there was place in his Cabinet only for those who accepted that his third government would be PMO-driven. *Lastly*, he is convinced that Mr Amit Shah and he have the resources to manage the allies well out according them a respectable role in the government.

None of the ministers has yet spoken on his/her priorities or policies. Ms Nirala Sitharaman may continue to assert that the Indian economy is growing at a clipping rate, that 240 million have been lifted out of poverty, that inflation is low, that jobs are being created, and that India will become a \$5 trillion economy on an indeterminate date. Mr Amit Shah may maintain that terrorism has been vanquished, that Manipur is being governed according to the Constitution, that CAA and UCC are on course, and that the three laws to replace the IPC, CrP

and the Evidence Act are the best things that have happened to India since Thomas Babington Macaulay. Mr Isha-hankar may bask in the glory of photo opportunities in the capitals of the world while China silently fortifies its self-declared border with India and builds new economic and military ties with Maldives, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Mr Rajnath Singh may believe that the job of a Defence Minister is done by visiting troops from time to time and leaving lesser matters to the NSA and CDS. Mr Piyush Goyal may continue to sell the idea that India's industry and foreign trade are flourishing while the trade deficit is likely to remain over \$200 billion a year (of which China alone accounts for \$85 billion). With the appointment of Mr PK Mishra as principal secretary and Mr Atul Doval as NSA, the *sameness* of the Modi government has been affirmed, signed and sealed.

It is certainly not Modi 3.0. It is Modi 2.1.

The people wanted 'a change for the better' in their lives. The people voted for jobs, price stability, and peace and security. If the same Ministers occupy the same offices and propagate the same policies, it will be a cruel mockery of the verdict of the people. At the first step — government formation — Mr Modi has faltered and failed the country. The people look forward to the second and third steps — President's address and Budget.

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INSIDE TRACK
COOMI KAPOOR


Modified Modi 3.0?

POLITICAL OBSERVERS are yet to assess whether the 2024 electoral setback will modify PM Narendra Modi's unilateral style of functioning. Modi stood firm with Ajit Pawar and Praful Patel in not allocating a Cabinet post for the NCP (Ajit Pawar). The PM is aware that the discredited Ajit needs the BJP more than he needs him. Sharad Pawar is in no mood to accept Ajit back.

But within his own party, Modi is now feeling the pressure from RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who has publicly called for consensus in taking decisions. Both Shriya Singh Chouhan and Nitin Gadkari are in senior posts in the Cabinet because of the RSS's insistence. Gadkari reportedly vetoed the suggestion that he be put in charge of the Maharashtra Assembly elections. An RSS functionary is believed to have conveyed that if Chouhan was not inducted into the Cabinet, he should be appointed party president, a move unacceptable to the Modi camp. At the swearing-in

ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the body language between Gadkari and Chouhan, and the PM's loyalist ministers seemed a little stiff and awkward. The PM's call to his supporters and party leaders to remove the suffix 'Modi ka Pariwar' from their social media handles is also viewed as a response to Bhagwat's call for team spirit and not individual self-aggrandisement.

Prognosis stable

Modi's government, at least for now, appears more stable than the Opposition would like to believe. One suspects that Amit Shah, the master of manoeuvres, has already secretly lined up Congress from additional MPs, so that the government cannot be blackmailed by one or two smaller parties. When a former MP pleaded with Nitish Kumar to insist that someone trustworthy from the JDU be appointed to a key Parliamentary post to ensure fair play, he replied cynically that his nominees to the BJP government had in the past been won over by the ruling party.

Remarkable recovery

After dismal results in 2014 and 2019, the Congress was virtually written off in this election in UP, Bihar and Maharashtra. Its allies were able to bully the party into accepting far fewer seats than the rightful share

claimed by the national party in state alliances. Ironically, the Congress's performance in 2024 was better than its allies in both Maharashtra (13 out of 17) and Bihar (three out of nine). Even in UP, it performed reasonably well (six out of 17). While its detractors claim it made impressive gains riding on the coat-tails of its allies, the party actually made an equally valuable contribution. Rahul Gandhi's strong criticism of Modi's communal remarks and the Congress's position as a national party were key factors for Muslim voters in UP and elsewhere to stay with the INDIA bloc and to not get split up by supporting stray candidates from their community fielded by other parties, like the BSP, as has often happened in the past. Even in Assam's Dhubi constituency, which has 70% Muslim electorate, formidable perfume king Badrudin Ajmal was defeated by Congress's Rakibul Hussain by a margin of over 10 lakh votes.

Blowing my trumpet

I feel slightly chuffed for predicting accurately in three consecutive Inside Track columns that the supposedly invincible Modi would have a tough time reaching the halfway mark on his own. If I have a better-than-average record of predicting poll results over the years, without the voluminous data and manpower utilised by exit

poll analysts who held forth on TV channels on June 1 evening, it suggests that something was wrong with either their methods or motives. They were certainly not thinking with an open mind.

This is one of the three valuable lessons I learnt as a cub reporter accompanying my boss to cover the 1971 Delhi Parliamentary polls. I watched silently as my senior made all the classic mistakes in poll coverage. He talked largely to so-called experts and party workers, and went into constituency caste breakdowns, voting trends, etc. Claiming to be a poll veteran, he brushed aside my timid murmurs that auto rickshaw drivers and the man on the street were certain that India Gandhi's candidates would win from Delhi, even if the sitting MPs were stalwarts from the Jana Sangh and Congress candidates were virtual lamp posts.

The three rules of the poll prediction game that have stood me in good stead ever since are: talk to the man on the street, don't let your own preferences cloud your judgement and never take anything for granted just because the majority says it must be so. There were enough indicators after phase 1 of the polls that the usually clued in BJP camp was rattled. Few stopped to question why RSS and BJP workers were less visible on the ground than in the previous polls.

ODD & EVEN

ROHINT PHORE



CHAKRA IN THE USA! JUST DON'T COME YOUR HOME RUNS YET

Hosting T20 World Cup in the land of American football, basketball and baseball is a big deal, and big money from the pockets of ABCDs — America-Based Cricket-Loving Desis

OFF THE BALL



JOY BHATTACHARJYA

In 1844, a good 33 years before that Australia-England encounter, USA and Canada played a cricket match in Manhattan. Canada won that game, regarded as the first ever international cricket match. 180 years later, the two teams faced each other in the first-ever cricket World Cup match on US soil on June 1. Cricket was finally making a serious attempt to penetrate the richest and most complex sports market in the world. So, why has it taken so long? And why is

this tournament being looked on as a possible inflection point? For one, the presence of a rising, and mostly affluent, desi population in the US (currently 54 m). Two, emergence of a 20-over format, which finished in around 3 hrs, could compete with baseball.

Test cricket — 5 days that could end in a draw — bewilder most Americans. Robin Williams summed it up for American audiences by describing cricket as 'baseball on valium'. But Robin had never seen Travis Head murdering attacks in IPL or Bumrah spearing in a yorker at 150 mph.

T20 cricket, since its appearance in 2005, has been the booster shot that cricket needed, and ICC, accepting all matches as full internationals, broke it away from the cosy club of nations who played Test or ODI cricket.

Last year, Major League Cricket (MLC) finally launched in the US, four years after USA Cricket formally accepted a bid for a \$1 bn investment by American Cricket Enterprises (ACE). The six teams in-

cluded blue-blooded IPL franchises like Mumbai Indians, Kolkata Knight Riders and Chennai Super Kings, and the likes of Satya Nadella and real estate developer Ross Perot Jr. After a successful first season, ICC has given it an A+ status, and anod for an expanded third season with more matches and teams.

The World Cup is the big event that Cricket USA saw as its opportunity to kickstart its growth. And to give the event centre stage, a pop-up stadium in Nassau County, New York, was chosen, rather than small-

er venues in Dallas or Fort Lauderdale in Florida. LA was also in consideration — before the need to broadcast in India South Asia during prime time meant that any match in LA would have to start at an unearthly hour of the morning.

As it turned out, plenty turned out for the India games at Eisenhower Park. Tickets started at \$300 and climbed steeply. But the demand remained huge, and black market rates went through the roof. And while the drop-in pitch made travelling difficult, the closeness of the needle match of the India-Pakistan

NYT India-Pak match report's '119-113' win for India shows how unfamiliar journalists are with cricket

an encounter ensured that most spectators went home happy.

The US team, an assortment of players mostly of Indian, Pakistani and West Indian origin, started with a bang, first chugging down an imposing Canadian total and then beating the Pakistanis in a match that went to super overs. And former US Indian cricketer, Oracle engineer, occasional ukelele player and fast bowler Saunabh Netravalkar was the toast of the cricket community, inspiring a deluge of memes about his all-round abilities.

Whatever happened after this US cricket team was hit. The only doubt is whether cricket managed to make a dent outside the South Asian diaspora. And while NYT dutifully reported the India-Pakistan match, its original description of a '119-113' win for India perhaps told us how unfamiliar even

sports journalists are with the sport. Cricket in the US is definitely there to stay. But let's not get too unrealistic about it conquering American hearts anytime soon.

In 1994, when the US hosted its first football World Cup, people thought the sport would soon sweep the US, given its rising Hispanic population, and the game's global appeal. Three decades later, football — or, rather 'soccer' — is finally achieving serious numbers, displacing ice hockey as the fourth most watched sport after American football, basketball and baseball. It took them that long — and a Lionel Messi to play in MLS — just to get to fourth place, something US cricket should bear in mind when it plans its growth strategy.

The writer is former director, Kolkata Knight Riders, and director, FIPA Under-17 World Cup

NO FILTER



RUCHIR JOSHI

Soaking Up the Discreet Charm of Hotel Laid Back

You can switch off with pleasure, yet manage to do everything minus stress

You've no idea where you've been put by the organisers who've invited you to give the talks. But you trust it will be okay. The two international flights bringing you to the western city are long but uneventful. The airport is as efficient as northern European airports tend to be, and the taxi driver nods as you show him the address.

Driving into the city, he slows down in the area near the big station and takes you to a parking action around big railway hubs, student backpackers, refugees, homeless people, run-down sex shops, beat-up cafes, cheap eateries purveying continental and East Asian foodstuffs and cheap mobile phone emporia. Arriving at the destination, the cabbie points to a non-descript but solid-looking door. You drag your suitcase to it and ring the bell.

A middle-aged woman lets you in and leads you to the reception desk. Inside the hotel is an entirely different world from the one just outside. The old wood panelling and early 20th-century furniture have been maintained. But there are also contemporary posters and original paintings on the walls.

The woman is friendly with her limited English as she explains the breakfast timings and takes you to the details. Around the corner is a modern lift that takes you up to the top floor and your room.

The room is spacious and well lit by windows and balconies. The furnishings are nothing too startling. But everything has been mindfully done in a quiet and — to a mind — tasteful way. There is a big double bed, a desk, several lamps and a decent small cupboard.

The balcony gives a view of the back of the hotel, with other adjacent older buildings foregrounding the big commercial towers poking up behind. You can't smoke in the room. But there is a small table and an ashtray on the balcony. Looking down, you can see an old hobo catching the sun as he sleeps on a bench.



INDRAJIT HAZRA

In another courtyard, there is a kind of private seating space where a man is comforting a woman who is clearly upset about something. In a third courtyard, two kids circle each other on foot-casters. Something there is that loves a good, small hotel. A place that's not too spare and rough, not too plastic and impersonal, and yet not too posh and with no trace of its glitz and money — a place where you can switch off pleasantly and without fuss, just the correct distance from the sun, so to speak.

Over the next three hours that I stayed in this hotel, I managed to do everything I needed to without any stress. I rested from the flight and time-zone change. I caught the election results back home and the detailed discussions around the polls. I worked on the talks I was there to deliver. And the gig was happy-making. I managed to walk around the city and also meet friends from India who were there for another conference.

A family runs the hotel with a couple of other staff. They are there 24x7, and it feels as though they will meet any reasonable request you make. Breakfast ends at 10.30, and there is no room service. But you can go down and get a proper hand-made cup of coffee at a nominal extra charge. Should you tire of your room, there is a little courtyard at the back with chairs and tables, and a small bar that the staff can start up anytime someone wants a drink.

The best thing about the place was that it was laid-back in the best sense of the word, with no trace of laziness or complacency in the service.

I was due back in the same city 10 days later for another presentation. While checking out, I realised I'd been booked into a different hotel for the next trip, and I asked the woman if any rooms were available for those dates. She smiled and shook her head. 'Now we get busy with the Euro football, so nothing open really till the end of July.'

I tried to imagine this quiet place filled with boisterous football fans. But the mind protested. Who knows? Perhaps there were some football supporters who also valued some quiet time between the raucous melees of the games.

WHEN A DESI GETS LOST IN McBRITAIN'S

If Chris Columbus could get confused about America being India, why not an Indian who finds the UK turned all US?

JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA

It seemed the pilot had made a wrong turn somewhere over the Atlantic, bringing us to the US instead of Britain, our destination.

Similar gaffes have occurred in the past. In the 15th century, Christopher Columbus landed in what he thought was India, but it was America. This case of mistaken identity caused the Italian navigator to call the local inhabitants 'Indios', Indians, an appellation that would be used for centuries to refer to indigenous Americans.

What I was wondering on the long ride from the airport to the city was where the Dickens I'd landed. Because London was great transformed by some wave of a Hogwarts wand into an ersatz America.

The sedate rows of semi-detached homes, like queues waiting in patient order, lined at bus stops for red double-deckers, had given way to a Manhattan mannequin, a gossamer of steel-and-glass and concrete.

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to a mangled masquerade of a mid-town Chicago on the Thames. It was like a city gentrified in a black out with pinpoints of red trousers tucked into spurling-jungles cowboy boots, his bowler hat replaced by a 10-gallon Stetson.

I went to my favourite pub in Camden Town, which I remembered as a bastion of Britishness, like the Changing of the Guard. A blonde waitress greeted me, 'Hiya, watch can I getcha? Cockney suppressed by Karsass Twang. Slow-cooked barbecue spare ribs. Corn.

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an isolationist Uncle Sam could fight the good fight against fascism, by proxy.

Thank you to British luck, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, dragging a reluctant America into the war and bringing US servicemen to Britain (Overpaid, overworked, and over here, as the emus locals begrudged their presence) and to British colonies, including India.

The returning troops took back with them a taste for IPA, which found favour in the US, from where it got re-exported to Britain as a product as authentic as American as Mom's apple pie.

Over 30 years later, in a valiant attempt to reprise the Churchill-Roosevelt partnership, Tony Blair playing Sancho to George W Bush's Quixote, joined battle against Saddam Hussein's ill-fated weapons of mass destruction — or weapons of mass destruction, as critics lampooned him, in a double act evocative of the comic duo like Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy than of the Trans-Atlantic two-

some who put paid to Hitler. With its overvalued insularity swamped by the tides of multiculturalism, Britain could seek solace in America's salad bowl of inclusiveness — or should that be USness?

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LET'S TALK ABOUT...



Sunscreen Smoothie

Granted the summers are unbearable, but we are also eating sunbombs now?

It isn't far-fetched given the times. But Sunscreen Smoothie is a special drink created by Erewon Market, an upscale specialty supermarket chain in Los Angeles, in partnership with Vaccation, a sunscreen brand. And no, it doesn't contain any chemical UV blockers.



Thank the lord! So what does it contain? It is primarily made from coconut and also, giving it a tropical, summery bite. The ingredients mirror the coconut oil, also vera, and banana extract used in Vaccation's classic lotion scent.

And what's the deal with Vaccation? Does the brand do such marketing gimmicks often

Oppn can learn from Patnaik's bipartisan ways

RIGHT & WRONG

SWAPAN DASGUPTA



It is rare, though not entirely unprecedented, for an election loser to be feted as a national hero. Winston Churchill's reputation as a British lion outlived his devastating defeat in the 1945 election.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 2004 defeat too came as a surprise. But even as he walked away into the sunset, his reputation as an affable politician with a bipartisan appeal became legendary. Even now, open combative BJP politicians are sometimes gently reminded of Vajpayee's guiding principle: *'Bade kaam ke liye bada man chahiye'* (big endeavours demand a big heart!).

Any bitterly fought general election is calculated to generate polemical excesses, and the just- concluded poll was no different. Yet, it is reassuring that amid the bitterness that will take time to be erased, one politician came away with his reputation not only intact but embellished in defeat.

In the normal course, the defeat of a leader who was at the helm for the past 24 years would have occasioned riotous celebrations—recall the jubilation in Kolkata in 2011 after the Bid For Peace was stormed by Mamata Banerjee after 34 years. No such jubilation followed the defeat of Naveen Patnaik, the unlikely of politicians, who was thrust into the hurly-burly of public life after the death of his father Biju Patnaik in 1997. Maybe the people of Odisha had grown tired of the tranquillity that Naveen had brought to public life and sought the excitement that the Modi wave promised. Maybe they reacted sharply against a perceived political usurper who had taken control of Naveen Niyas. Whatever the assessment of the poll outcome, Patnaik's defeat didn't arise from any outpouring of hate. For all his purported shortcomings and quirks, the Biju Janata Dal leader was always perceived as an epitome of grace and dignity.

The all-round respect he commanded was apparent when he attended the swearing-in ceremony of his successor Mohan Charan Majhi, the first BJP chief minister of Odisha. From the Prime Minister and Union home minister downwards, almost everyone at the swearing-in at Bhubaneswar last Wednesday saw the outgoing leader not as an adversary but as Odisha's elder statesman. What facilitated this elevated status that Naveen had understood the limits of partisanship.

In office, he realised that the development of a state also depended on cooperation and coordination with the Centre, regardless of which party ruled in Delhi. This bipartisan approach—in which was added his characteristic sense of understatement—paid huge dividends for Odisha and enabled this hitherto backward state to be regarded as the Jewel of the East, ahead of neighbouring West Bengal. It may assault Bengali pride but a very large chunk of the students who sustain



WALK THE LINE: The former Odisha CM knew how to put national interest before party politics, an approach that could serve netas well in these polarised times

Bhubaneswar as an education hub comes from Bengal. Naveen Babu is the leader of a regional party which, after its exit from the NDA in 2009, never formally aligned with any national formation. This strategic autonomy was modelled by an acute awareness of national interest. Whether it was the extra steps to revive hockey as a national sport or cooperating with BJP on the GST legislation and abrogation of Article 370, he instinctively knew where party politics ended and national interest began. This created a special space for him in public life.

As India enters a new phase of competitive politics, Naveen Babu's political approach offers valuable lessons. In the recent past, many of India's institutions have come under attack from various entities. The integrity of India's democracy, including the election outcome, was sought to be questioned. This wasn't because the West has a fanciful interest in upholding liberty and freedom, but because it was wanted to use the so-called democracy deficit to lower India's global standing.

It is shameful that the western agenda was fuelled by political parties and others who wanted a stick to beat the Modi govt with. It was scandalous that the leader of a principal opposition party appealed to the West to intervene and salvage Indian democracy.

The inability to distinguish between domestic politics and national interest has also led to Indian businesses being undermined. In the past two decades, many Indian corporates have become significant players on the international stage. Predictably, their rise has generated rivalries, including from the dragon in the east. It is the obligation of the govt in Delhi to extend legitimate Indian businesses a facilitating hand overseas and defend them against motivated attacks. Promoting Indian enterprise must be a national consensus among all parties that treasure national sovereignty.

Yet, in a bid to target Modi, there were politicians and their associates who gleefully joined in the motivated attacks by, say, the tendentious Hindenburg report on the Adani group—on allegations that didn't stop even after the Supreme Court ruled that the report was misleading. Now, in a bid to target Indian business further, wild charges are being proffered of a stock market scam involving exit polls. The logic behind these attacks on national institutions is that of scorched earth warfare—destroy the country's financial backbone to destroy the ruling party.

Naveen Patnaik functioned as an independent chief minister in these difficult times. He was mindful that to improve Odisha, he also had to keep the Tricolour flying high. That is a lesson for those who take endless turns in politics but never seem to learn. ■

A dystopic world of heat waves and dust storms already a reality in many ways

Bengaluru-based **Lavanya Lakshminarayan** is the second Indian after Amitav Ghosh to be shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award for science fiction. The game designer-turned-author speaks to Shruti Sonal about climate catastrophes and inequalities

■ **The Bengaluru that you've written about in your debut novel, 'The Ten Percent Thief', is ravaged by climate catastrophes such as heat waves, and dust storms. Was that prompted by the changes you've seen in city over the years?**

Growing up in Bengaluru in the nineties, I witnessed first-hand the massive transformation it went through as it became the country's IT hub. There was unchecked development in many parts, with existing infrastructure struggling to catch up and environment taking a hit. The city already has high summer temperatures; the cover has shrunk rapidly; traffic jams are common coupled with air and noise pollution. I should only envision a bleak future.

■ **Do you see any resemblance in the ongoing heat waves, and the world of your book?**

The book is set in the wake of the climate apocalypse, where most cities in the world have collapsed and Bengaluru, one of the few remaining ones, reinvents itself as Apex City. There are sustainable buildings with a lot of green cover built into the buildings themselves. There's a lot of shade cover, and water harvesting techniques being used to maximise water content from rain and atmosphere. But they've implemented all of this only for the privileged. So if you are the elite, you have access to green spaces. But if you are poor, where you are privileged, you are living through heat waves and dust storms in tent-like structures in conditions that resemble a desert. I see a reality that is terrifying. The reality that we could be heading towards, where the solution that we develop will be inevitably skewed towards the privileged. That's already a reality in many ways. As temperatures touch 50 degrees C in some parts of the coun-

try, for instance, only a privileged few have access to ACs, or even clean water.

■ **At the heart of your novel is the critique of a society that's based on 'meritocratic technocracy'. Can you elaborate?**

It's a concern that almost runs parallel with the climate catastrophe. We live in these little bubbles of privilege where you see only bell curves, targets and profits while the wider world is kept at arm's length. The notion of merit is very common in tech spaces. But most of these people

themselves come from privilege, and the technologies they make are for other privileged users. The apples of the world are creating aspirational things that make rich people feel richer. If we were to take that capability and spend time with communities that aren't just urban centres, and address their needs, we could create so much parity and empowerment with technology. That drove me to create this extremely productivity-driven world that prizes merit because merit is a great lie, but it's a very popular lie.

■ **Whether it's the pandemic or extreme climate events, reality sometimes outpaces dystopia. Is that what drew you to the genre?**

How do you make sense of a world that is already so disturbing? Even after I wrote this book, I certainly haven't made a peace with any of it. The pandemic was extra horrifying because so much of the social isolation and tech disparity that I had written about had become a reality. We had people with the privilege of working from home, while migrant workers were walking back home. That's what drew me to it. As a saying in science fiction goes, everyone's dystopia is someone's utopia.

■ **The book is set in a gamified world, where only a privileged few can touch the trees. Did that come from your work as a game designer?**

Building games is like a massive social experiment to monitor how people behave in simulated conditions. It made me start looking into the kind of structures we live with, and how we are always incentivised with external rewards—status, money, power—and you'll get the promotion, move into a bigger apartment, or buy a fancy car. Constant FOMO (fear of missing out) in a game is light-hearted, but not so much in real life. In the book, I wanted to show more explicit with a mathematical point system judging your value in society. Needing a certain number of points to touch a tree, for instance, is present in most urban spaces in India. We have gated communities with highrises and beautiful gardens, with cramped slums next door where all the household workers live with high walls separating them.

■ **Have Indian sci-fi novels come of age?**

Growing up, everybody in space was John or everybody in a fantasy world was Lucy. The only Indian voice I read in speculative fiction was Samit Basu, one of a handful of writers at that time. But now, many more writers from India are writing in science fiction and fantasy spaces. We are still far removed from UK and US, the epicentres of science fiction and fantasy, but it's exciting to have people in India writing in these spaces. I can't say if it's coming of age yet. There's more publisher support than before, but I think there's room to grow.

■ **AI, a recurring theme in sci-fi novels long before it became real, was usually in a terrifying avatar. What's your view?**

AI is a very powerful tool, and I would like to see a future where it's more positive. But currently, AI is so unethical and so reflective of human biases across history that it's problematic. Right now, the source material that tech is being trained on has been taken from so many writers and artists without their consent. All these copyright infringements enable AI to become a tool that can be used for people to take a lot of shortcuts, make bad decisions, and that is not fair to people who spend an entire lifetime honing skills. The need is to put ethical safeguards in place, and hire more diverse and representative teams.

NEET controversy: Three ways India can reimagine admission tests

BY INVITATION

V RAMGOPAL RAO



One of the immediate challenges before the new govt is the ongoing NEET fiasco. Inflated marks, an unusually high number of perfect scores, allegations of paper leak, and a retest have created stress for students, parents, and even the govt. This is not an isolated incident and, regrettably, will not be the last. Conducting such a massive exam for over 25 million students in 13 languages across 40 states and 14 countries abroad is a Herculean task. Similar challenges plague the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for undergraduate admissions, and the JEE Mains for postgraduate admissions, over a million students. These exams have now become behemoths that need better handling.

Currently, gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 28%. The goal is to increase this to over 50% in the next decade, which implies that the number of candidates appearing for entrance exams will double. This raises two critical questions. First, it is necessary to have such

single-exams, which are nearly impossible to administer on such a large scale? Second, if these exams are indeed necessary, can we adopt better practices from countries like the US and China, which have successfully navigated similar challenges by evolving systems that suit their needs?

Given that admissions to govt institutions in India rely heavily on a single test score, these exams bear an immense burden to accurately assess a student's overall scholastic aptitude. One significant downside of standardising school education through uniform national boards and common entrance exams is the homogenisation of higher education intake, which can stifle creativity and diversity of thought. Additionally, this standardisation inadvertently fuels the coaching industry.

Therefore, the design of these exams must prioritise transparency, accessibility, and availability of language options. Here are three possible steps that can create a more equitable and effective exam system. 1. **Learn from the world:** The US, known for its top-ranking institutions, follows a diversified admissions model. SAT and ACT are the primary standardised tests for college admissions, taken by around 2 million students each year. In con-



SAT EXAMPLE: US model of multiple test dates can ease pressure on students

trast, China's 'gaokao' is one of the largest exams globally in terms of participation, with a record 14.4 million students taking it. It is a high-stakes, highly standardised exam lasting approximately nine hours over two to three days, depending on the provincial administrative regions. It's also a very secure process with teachers being secluded and armed guards escorting the vehicles transporting exam papers.

The US model is potentially more suitable for India as it offers flexibility with multiple test

dates throughout the year. It reduces stress by spreading the risk over an extended period rather than concentrating it in a single event.

In India, private players now offer the IT and physical infrastructure to conduct secure online computer-based tests for over 200,000 candidates at a time. Establishing a large question bank with questions of varying difficulty levels, randomly picked by an algorithm for each candidate, along with real-time adaptation and immediate provision of raw scores after the test, could effectively address the challenges of scaling up exams. This approach could combine the flexibility and efficiency of the US model with the rigorous standards similar to the UPSC. Adopting the UPSC structure, with leading academics managing the exam process, and involving top institutions in the conduct of exams, can enhance credibility. The primary reason for the smooth conduct of JEE Advanced and GATE exams year after year is because of the significant involvement of IIT faculty at every stage of the exam. Whether it's NEET, JEE Mains or CUET, it's important to in-

volve a set of our top institutions in the conduct of these exams jointly with NTA.

3. **Holistic admission policies:** While inclusive and holistic admission policies work well in some private institutions in India and many leading institutions abroad, India needs to explore implementing such metrics for admission in govt-run institutions. There is a fear of external influences derailing the process. Diversity in admissions can, however, be managed by giving seats to central and board-managed institutions, while others are talent and produces the best professionals for the future. Exams like GATE and JEE Advanced conducted by IITs are globally unique for their quality and credibility. By leveraging IIT companies and startups, and following global best practices, India can internationalise these exams, allowing other countries to use them for admissions and certification purposes. This approach could elevate India to its much-desired visarug status.

Prof Rao is vice-chancellor of BITS Pilani group of institutions and former director, IIT Delhi

Konnichiwa. Seven things 'polite' Japanese could teach Indians

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHAA DE



Japan gently slips under your skin, and stays there like a poignant haiku chronicling an old love. Beyond the mystique of a nation often described as inward-looking and deeply introverted lies another Japan—the personal one. After spending a fortnight travelling around this intriguing country of roughly 122 million, one comes away filled with wonder and unbridled admiration.

Japan's rich history and deep respect for heritage is the foremost legacy that instinctively connects our two countries. Indians feel at home in Japan, even though language remains a barrier. English is barely spoken or understood, which inhibits easy communication. Most signage in public places is in Japanese. Despite this major handicap, the innate graciousness of locals and smartphone translation apps make both navigation and social interactions not just easy, but also very sweet. Which brings me to the first lesson...

Not rude or crude: Since we are not a stone-deaf nation, what makes us shout non-stop? We are incurably rude and raise our voices without reason or provocation. Nobody does that in Japan. Children don't scream to demand attention, while adults keep decibel levels low and extend courtesy to one and all, regardless of age or social status. The frequent bowing is based on seniority, but the respect is authentic, especially towards the elderly or physically disadvantaged.

Discipline: This trait that has seen the Japanese through countless calamities. Nobody jingles queues. No one shoves and pushes to get into an elevator, train, or bus. The orderly and calm manner in which citizens respond during crises is a testament to the pride and value they place on adhering to civic rules. Nobody litters. Even the largest fish markets are scrupulously clean.

Pride in one's job: From the lowest in the pecking order to the highest echelons, everyone is led by a sense of honour in their chosen occupation. The no-tipping rule stems from this awareness—you are paid for the work you do, there's no need to seek a handout or 'extra' services. Accepting a tip is seen as an insult to your profession, which leads to a loss of face, possibly the biggest shame in Japan.

Humility and respect: The Indian habit of chest-thumping is so widespread that we hardly notice brags or discourage them. The Japanese deem such behaviour vulgar and are visibly embarrassed when



BITTERSWEET IMPERMANENCE: The appeal of the cherry blossoms lies in its transience. It's a pity Indians don't cherish nature's bounty the same way

flashy tourists start showing off. Grace is cherished and on display in the briefest of interactions. People will leave their busy kiosks, walk a hundred paces to point you in the right direction. In India, the first response is generally 'chal bhai' (move aside), especially in our metros.

Appreciation of beauty: The Japanese worship the importance of beauty. And for them, the sakura flower is a perfect symbol of the transience of beauty. For seven short days, while the cherry blossoms bloom in all their glory, Japan pauses to pay homage to the delicate flower before it falls to the ground. Families organise elaborate picnics for viewing the stunning visual treat, appreciating the eloquence of the moment before it vanishes. Such a thing that we don't respect nature's bounty in the same way and think nothing of brutally destroying forests, mangroves, gardens which deserve reverence, not abuse.

Teamwork: Walk into any large store to appreciate Japanese teamwork. There's simply no room for ego or ego game. No problem. The salesperson will scurry away and return with three colleagues eager to offer help. Despite their efforts, if you still cannot find what you are looking for, a senior manager will be located. The entire team will be sincerely involved in the search. At each point, the customer will be assured with smiles and deep bows that a solution is available. Patience! Contrast that with indifferent, brusque salespeople in India who are happy to hand you a product and get on.

National pride: National pride is a prominent badge proudly worn by every single Japanese person. Letting the country down even through the smallest slip is a matter of national shame. There's simply no room for ego or ego game. No problem. The salesperson will scurry away and return with three colleagues eager to offer help. Despite their efforts, if you still cannot find what you are looking for, a senior manager will be located. The entire team will be sincerely involved in the search. At each point, the customer will be assured with smiles and deep bows that a solution is available. Patience! Contrast that with indifferent, brusque salespeople in India who are happy to hand you a product and get on.

This, above all, is what we need to emulate. When the heart is in the right place, the mind listens. And a nation smiles. ■

INBOX

PM Modi's litmus test has begun

Appros of 'Ab ki baar...' (ATM, June 9), the biggest lesson from this election's results is that the voter is king and can never be taken for granted. BJP's reduced seats could be attributed to many things, including poor ticket distribution and accommodating turncoats. Candidates took Brand Modi for granted while forgetting that every brand has a shelf life. PM Modi has never run a coalition government, and it will be a litmus test for his leadership style to adopt a consultative and deliberative approach.

— **Bal Govind, Noida**

Caste remains key

This refers to 'How did BJP' (ATM, June 9). The results show caste retains prominence in North Indian politics. The dominant castes continue to strongly prefer BJP, while lower castes have shifted to regional OBC-led parties. Dalits continue to be split between the incumbent at the Centre and regional parties. Just as Hindutva worked for BJP, a new socialism rooted in caste and class brought success for SP.

— **Sanjay Chopra, Mohali**

Entrepreneurial push

'Elite mindset...' (ATM, June 9) fails to recognise that entrepreneurship is an individualistic mindset and cannot be accelerated via a top-down government scheme.

— **H S Bhattacharya, Navi Mumbai**

Email your letters to the editor at sundaytimes@timesgroup.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

It's time to burst liberal bubble: Modi 3.0 won't be very different

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AYIAR



Liberal rejoicing over BJP's setback in the Lok Sabha elections was warranted perhaps for one week. After that, it must face up to the dictum, 'Jo jasta, wo jasta' (What is, is). They appear to have no ideological qualms, only self-interest.

Today, would either gain from defecting to the INDIA bloc? Unlikely, and even if that were to happen, INDIA bloc would still be short of a majority. Even if it could scrape together some more seats from minor parties, such a coalition would be very fragile and easy to break. BJP is adept at securing defections and cobbling majorities together again.

Look at its past record. In the 2018 Karnataka state election, it fell short of a majority and a BJP-congress government assumed office. But BJP 'persuaded' ruling coalition legislators to resign, became the largest party, and took office. There was talk at the time of big money being at play.

A similar thing happened in Maharashtra after the 2019 assembly election. Shiv Sena unexpectedly left the BJP fold to form a government with Congress and NCP. But BJP then 'persuaded' the vast majority of Shiv Sena legislators to defect. Some Hurliani may get a boost from the dropping of charges that they were facing.

Will the fact that BJP lost some seats change its political style? Much less than liberals would

wish. After all, the BJP machine is in full operation. Non-bailable laws like UAPA, which the opposition and civil society claimed were being weaponised, can still be used.

Do not expect Nitish Kumar or Naidu to object to such methods against their local opponents.

Both have their own agendas that go against the BJP grain, and some anti-BJP forces may be tempted to their falling out with BJP. Nitish wants a national caste census to ensure reservations for extremely backward castes, which the BJP opposes. In Andhra Pradesh, Naidu had earlier enacted a law giving a 4% quota in government jobs to backward Muslims. This goes against the belief system of BJP, which opposes reservations based on Islam or any other religion.

Will this cause a rift? Again, unlikely. BJP is not averse to ideological rigidity and is fixated on Hindutva as some like to point it to be. It can be opportunistic and flexible when necessary. On something as dear to Hindutva as banning cow slaughter, BJP avoided such action on coming to office in Goa and some north-eastern states with a substantial Christian, Buddhist and Hindu population. The reason given was that voters would be unhappy with a ban on beef supplies, which is as non-ideological a reason as any. In a recent column, I wrote about how the Yogi Govt had reined in cow vigilantes in UP and got buffalo meat exports back on track.

As for differences with Nitish Kumar, he has already held a caste census in his state and decried reservations for extremely backward castes, supported by the local BJP. Naidu has teamed up with BJP despite differences, and will be allowed to keep his 4% Muslim quota. These issues pose no danger to the BJP-led alliance.

So, expect the BJP-led NDA government to last a future five years unless Modi or Naidu somehow know it was misled on its popularity by fanning media singing hosannas. Expect occasional stirring of the communal pot. Politics will not really change much. ■

PRAGMATIC PAIR: What will Naidu do to get back together with BJP after losing the 2019 assembly election? If NDA scraped a coalition

backyard castes, supported by the local BJP. Naidu has teamed up with BJP despite differences, and will be allowed to keep his 4% Muslim quota. These issues pose no danger to the BJP-led alliance.

So, expect the BJP-led NDA government to last a future five years unless Modi or Naidu somehow know it was misled on its popularity by fanning media singing hosannas. Expect occasional stirring of the communal pot. Politics will not really change much. ■

BOOKS

Nawab's surrender, Begum's rebellion

SALIL MISRA

THE British rule in India was like the plague. Though uneven in time and space, it nonetheless cast its shadow on all regions and all people. The Indian responses to it ranged from abject surrender, fierce resistance, violent rebellion and, eventually, a prolonged, systematic non-violent struggle. The book under review tells the story of some of these responses to the British rule, from Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh and his Begum Hazrat Mahal. The king succumbed to the British but the queen fought on heroically.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Awadh during 1847-56, did not belong to the times he lived in. The notion that a crown has to be captured by force and held by force was completely alien to him. He earnestly believed that the crown belonged to him as a natural right. He could not imagine stooping to the level of violence and warfare to retain it. He was an aristocrat and a noble, not a warrior. He loved music and poetry and abhorred war when the British questioned his legitimate right to the throne of Awadh, he simply gave in. He would rather perish than fight the Darwinian battle in which only the 'fittest' could survive.

He surrendered his empire and also restrained the people from taking to the

path of rebellion. The queen, however, was different. She fought the British on the battlefield. She also succeeded in liberating Lucknow from British hands for a brief period before losing the battle for control over Awadh.

Awadh was a prosperous region of North India and it was only a matter of time before the predatory gaze of the British fell upon it. The British had occupied most of India with the help of guns and treaties. Wajid Ali Shah became the ruler of Awadh in 1847 after the death of his father, Amjad Ali. A formal treaty signed in 1857 had given the British the right to occupy Awadh if it was found that the region was not being governed properly. And sure enough, the British found many instances of poor governance in judicial, revenue and religious matters. The king was also accused of maintaining the army in spite of the fact that it was the responsibility of the British to protect the territory. Wajid Ali Shah was given two years to improve the administration.

Responding to these allegations, Wajid Ali Shah did try to bring about administrative reforms. But clearly, the administration of Awadh was not the main issue. It was simply an excuse for the British to take over. The annexation of different parts of India had accelerated with the arrival of Dalhousie, the new Governor General. He coveted Awadh and looked upon it as "a cherry which will



A NAWAB AND A BEGUM
by Sujata Mitra.
Rupa.
Pages 235.
₹295

drop into our mouths someday. It has long been ripening". It might not require a gun to conquer Awadh; the implementation of the treaty of 1857 was all that was needed. Consequently, Wajid Ali Shah was given the option to surrender and retain some symbolic privileges. If he did not, Awadh would be completely annexed by the British. It was clearly a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. What was he to do?

The confrontation between Wajid Ali Shah and the British was not simply between two political forces. Essentially, they represented two entirely different civilisational systems. The British represented a modern European civilisation — entrepreneurial,

efficient, instrumentalist, committed to expansion, brutal and ruthless. Wajid Ali Shah, on the other hand, was a slow-paced medieval ruler, committed to a good life, inclined towards art, music and poetry, generous and completely unfamiliar with the ways of the modern, commercial, predatory civilisation emerging from the West.

Predictably enough, Wajid Ali Shah vacated his throne and crown for the British and migrated to Calcutta. However, once in Calcutta, he decided to plead his case with the Governor General. Fully convinced that he had been thrown out unjustly, he still believed, quite naively, in the fairness of the British rule. After his case was overruled, he appealed to Queen Victoria in England to restore his right to the throne of Awadh. His mother, Aliya Begum, sailed to England to appeal for justice. The case of her son went to the Board of Directors of the East India Company, the British Parliament and finally to the Queen of England. His claim to the throne was, however, not recognised and he died as a refugee in Calcutta in 1887, far away from his beloved Lucknow.

Hazrat Mahal, one of the queens of Wajid Ali Shah who stayed behind in Lucknow, fought the battle for Awadh very differently. Unlike Wajid Ali Shah, she had no misgivings about the British and decided to fight them on the battlefield.

With the help of *talagars*, local chieftains

and the people of Awadh, she launched a rebellion and put up a great fight for the liberation of Awadh. For a brief period between September and November 1857, the rebels, led by Hazrat Mahal, succeeded in freeing Lucknow from the British. In the end, the mighty forces of the British succeeded in suppressing the rebellion in Awadh and in the rest of the country. Not able to reconcile with the defeat, Hazrat Mahal left for Nepal where she died in 1879.

The book has told the story of two entirely different responses to the British rule from Wajid Ali Shah, the Nawab of Awadh, and Hazrat Mahal, his queen. Wajid Ali Shah pursued what would be considered a legal and constitutional battle for his rights over his land. He believed in the fairness and goodness of the British, Hazrat Mahal, on the other hand, resolved to fight the British with the might of the people and decided to wrest it from the British. In the end, both lost.

The narrative of the book proceeds at three levels. It is the story of the Nawab, his Begum and their lives, lived together but mostly separately. It is also the story of the Rebellion of 1857 as it played out in Awadh and Calcutta. Above all, the story is also a micro-reflection of the many strands of Britain-India encounters, of British intrigues and a wide range of Indian responses to it.

How London shaped Ambedkar

RANBIR SINGH

EDITED by William Gould, Santosh Dass and Christophe Jaffreot, 'Ambedkar in London' is a contextual exploration of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's experiences in the British capital, utilising a refreshing interdisciplinary approach. Merging the methodologies of history, urban studies, archival research and political thought, the book sheds new light on the profound impact of Ambedkar's London sojourn on his anti-caste ideology and activism.

One of the most striking contributions of the book lies in its innovative methodology, especially with regard to the scholarship on Ambedkar. Rather than simply recounting his biography, the editors delve into a previously underutilised resource: the archive. This archival focus is particularly evident in Part One, which meticulously reconstructs Ambedkar's student life in London. Chapters by Gould, Donnelly and Payne, and Gassowitz utilise unpublished archival sources, including Ambedkar's student file at the London School of Economics (LSE), to paint a vivid picture of his academic journey and potential intellectual networks. These details allow the book to move beyond the well-trodden biographical terrain, revealing the formative influence of specific courses, professors and fellow students on Ambedkar's evolving political ideas.

This focus on the archive extends beyond academic life. Dass, in Chapter 6, utilises letters, emails and media narratives to offer a first-hand account of the campaign to establish the Ambedkar House Museum at 10

KHR, his former residence. This detailed reconstruction not only illuminates the challenges and triumphs of preserving Ambedkar's legacy in London, but also showcases the relevance of his work.

The book's engagement with the archive is not merely about recovering the past. By delving into unpublished materials and personal correspondence, the editors demonstrate a crucial link between Ambedkar's London experiences and the enduring struggles against caste discrimination. For instance, Chapter 7 by Dass, drawing on her own experiences as a founding member of CasteWatchUK, connects Ambedkar's pioneering legal battles in London to the contemporary fight for anti-caste legislation in Britain. This approach underscores the enduring global impact of Ambedkar's work.

Furthermore, the book breaks new ground in its exploration of "spatiality", moving beyond the confines of rural India. It examines how the urban environment of London shaped Ambedkar's understanding of caste. This lens, as highlighted in the introduction, reveals the stark contrast between the oppressive realities of village life for Dalits and the potential for a measure of social mobility within the city.

This focus on urban studies and geography offers valuable insights into Dalit politics and the ways in which archival traces can illuminate the spatial dimensions of social movements.

'Ambedkar in London' is more than just a critical addition to writings on Ambedkar. The editors' personal connection to Ambedkar's legacy, evident in their involvement with the Ambedkar House Museum campaign, infuses the narrative with a sense of immediacy.

By researching through the path of archival sources, the book is a time capsule of Ambedkar's London years, which shaped his intellectual and political trajectory in the years to come. This innovative approach, combined with its interdisciplinary lens and focus on spatiality, sheds new light on a pivotal figure in the fight against the caste system.



AMBEDKAR IN LONDON
Edited by William Gould, Santosh Dass and Christophe Jaffreot.
Rupa.
Pages 352.
₹995

Rich life in cloistered coalfield

SANDEEP SINHA

THE collieries in eastern India abound in mineral wealth and equally rich are the lives of people who reside and work there with their tapestry of emotions. Through the eyes of two young boys, Sameer and Vipul, whose father is the manager of a colliery, the author has beautifully portrayed a life that many would instantly identify with.

The family originally hails from Barnala in Punjab from Vipul's father's side and Delhi from his mother's side. It is their father's job as a mining engineer that has taken the two boys there and they fall in love with the decrepit place. The narrative, set in the 1970s, is easily identifiable — arrival of house guests and the way they are treated; the dilemmas and pain that schoolchildren suffer, mundane stuff for the grown-ups but what means a world to the kids. Stroll by the Damodar river in Khajoori, dinner at sweeper Thapa's place, watching Ramilla and the performance of Naiki with her ritual songs and gestures — that's what life is in a place like Khajoori.

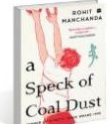
The *maalis* help with the school task in art and craft, much to the consternation of the teacher, who wants the students to make their own efforts. There are accounts of encounters with Vipul's teachers, like Father William Clarence Rocquelforte, a Lithuanian Jew-turned-Catholic, who tells Vipul that the best way to get a feel of spoken English in the coalfields might be to listen to BBC programmes.

The family goes on its annual long vacation from Khajoori to Delhi. It was still a generation for whom vacations were meant to be spent with family, as Balam Mamaji tells the butcher with pride, "My sisters have come home for vacations." There is fun and merriment and a host of meetings with all kinds of relatives, in Delhi, Barnala and Jalandhar.

As time wears on, Vipul longs to be back in Khajoori. He feels cramped in staying in houses without gardens or playgrounds around. Along with experiences of a hemmed-in existence, he feels the charm of sharing the same square yards with several other claimants, though there is still the annoyance of not being able to find a place or a period of unchecked peace. At the end of it all, the youngster feels he has exhausted the possibilities that the ancestral places offer. Change being the only constant in life, Vipul gets surprises on his return. Their pet Rover has mysteriously died. An even bigger surprise is in store. His father is transferred to West Bengal, and coal mines are nationalised. The bungalows will subsequently make way for flats to meet the housing needs of the workers.

The book surprises with its simplicity, sensitivity and elegance of prose. The events are non-realistic and depict the pulsating life in the cloistered existence of a coalfield, home to an immensely skilled workforce that keeps the wheels of the economy rotating.

Rohit Manchanda's first book, 'In the Light of the Black Sun', won a Betty Task Award in 1995. The publishers have brought out this forgotten classic, under a new name, after a long gap.

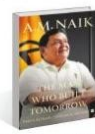


A SPECK OF COAL DUST
by Rohit Manchanda.
HarperCollins.
Pages 230.
₹399



1990, ARAMGANI
by Rakesh Kayaasth. Translated by Varsha Tiwary, Westland.
Pages 264, ₹699

LK Advani's Rath Yatra would soon be arriving at Mohalla Aramgani, changing social equations. Tailor Ashiq Miyan, who is the only Muslim to have a shop at Aramgani Chowk, finds himself caught in a web of politics and communal tension and this forms the ominous climax to this story by Hindi writer Rakesh Kayaasth.



THE MAN WHO BUILT TOMORROW
by AM Naik. HarperCollins.
Pages 225, ₹699

When AM Naik joined L&T, his colleagues had realised that this man was different — an engineer who had his feet on the ground and didn't mind getting his hands smeared with grease. This book tells his remarkable journey, from a junior engineer in 1964 to group chairman in 2017.

The cop who never quit in the face of daunting challenges

VN RAI

THE theatre of professional challenges enacted by the author would be well known to any informed reader. "Moving from the troubled terrain of Nagaland to the tumultuous landscapes of Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir; this book unravels the relentless battles against insurgency and the delicate dance between law enforcement and political interests," reads the blurb.

Prakash Singh has been regularly writing on Naxal issues and police reforms. He also headed inquiries into the attack on Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu in October 2003, and the breakdown of law and order during the Jat reservation agitation in Haryana in February 2016. In addition to recalling these defining moments in the book, he has highlighted the frustrating efforts against corruption in public life, calling it the common factor in all major problems.

For those who have followed Prakash Singh's passionate writings, mirroring his daunting police leadership career, it is no

surprise that his memoirs portray him as a no-nonsense defender of the policing space in the governance matrix. It became his *karma* and sacred duty, and, as emphasised repeatedly in the book, the way he knew to serve the people. Being resigned to relentless, both during his professional career as well as post retirement, he has dedicated 'Unforgettable Chapters' to the spiritual facet of Ma Durga: "A man who is in the middle of fire, is surrounded by enemies in the battlefield, finds himself in deep trouble, would come out unscathed if he surrenders unto Goddess Durga."

The author has a variety of hair-raising narratives in his kitty. From facing insurgency in Nagaland as a young IB officer to dealing with terrorism in Kashmir and militancy in Punjab, both at their peak, as a senior BSF officer, his tales of personal courage and professional initiatives are inspiring. Equally fascinating are the candid confrontations as the state DGP with the respective Chief Ministers of Assam and UP, while thwarting the ULFA's election disruption strategy under the Hiteshwar Saikia regime and Babri demolition build-up under the Kalyan Singh regime.



UNFORGETTABLE CHAPTERS: MEMOIRS OF A TOP COP
by Prakash Singh.
Rupa.
Pages 208.
₹395

On both occasions, he had to quit unconsciously. He, however, proved to be a winner in both, being entrusted with more challenging assignments in the aftermath.

In the book, the biggest contradiction to his own 'rule of law' approach is his singular adulation for the cavalier law and order building by UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. The author's listing of 'caste bias' in the police force as one of the major reasons for inaction during the Jat reserva-

tion stir in Haryana came as another surprise, carrying a different experience on this count from my own service days in the state.

Though the chapter is titled 'Anti-Corruption Efforts', it only chronicles an exceptional campaign against the corrupt in the top bureaucracy, the likes of which was never heard before. It was to identify the most corrupt in the IAS/IPS in UP and make them accountable before the law by setting up CBI/Vigilance inquiries/investigations. They repeatedly approached the concerned at the top level in Delhi and Lucknow but could draw, as Prakash Singh writes, 'not a ripple even'. Such a random personalised approach against a deeply-rooted institutional ill, howsoever bold it might look, was bound to create no more than ripples. While holding the charge of UP DGP, Prakash Singh ruled in a meeting of senior officers of the department the difficulty in finding even six IG-level officers of unimpeachable integrity for posting in zones. But, how many of those could be referred for the CBI/Vigilance scrutiny, and with what outcome?

The book is replete with instances of interference by politicians in power with

the rule of law and lawful administration, but without linking the practice with their core politics as such. This is most glaring in the tense narrative inching to the Babri mosque demolition. One notable exception is when the author deals with the Naxalite challenges. He himself has written an acclaimed book on the subject and draws from the Government of India's expert group, of which he was a member, on 'development issues to deal with causes of discontent, unrest and extremism'. It held the development paradigm, social disparities and economic inequalities accountable too.

This great policeman's dream and commitment to rule of law is best reflected in his life mission project, and that is police reforms. His vision can be summarised in his own words: "There can be no genuine democracy or accelerated economic progress without the police becoming an instrument of service and transforms itself from the ruler's police to the people's police." It is obvious that many more dimensions will need to be added, beyond the present authority/autonomy/accountability matrix, to the idea of police reforms.

REFLECTIONS

Cricketers as *marasis*GOOD SPORT
ROHIT MAHAJAN

THERE'S self-deprecating humour, and then there's other-deprecating humour. The former may lay bare deep insecurities, but it's deemed acceptable because it hurts none; other-deprecating humour, however, can and will cause hurt and anger, especially if done in public.

Marasis — Punjab's rustic comedians — indulge in other-deprecating humour; they make fun of people's facial features, body shape, handicaps.

Where does humour lie? In prose and on the stage, it's often found in exaggregation; in the world of *marasis*, humour lies in lampooning and denuding and mocking others, and often the frailties that they can't do anything about — such as short stature or a limp or crooked teeth.

Kamran Akmal, the former Pakistan cricketer, was in the role of a *marasi* when he cracked a 12 o'clock joke about Arshdeep Singh, the India and Punjab pace bowler, when India played Pakistan in the T20 World Cup in New York.

Now, we've all heard such jokes — Sikh friends have related these with relish, too. There is no one rule that fits all situations of humour; but such jokes are often alright among friends in a private sphere; but in public, and coming from a stranger, such jokes become offensive — an other-deprecating turn likely to cause anger.

Cricketers learn to grow a thick skin, for

they've heard all sorts of abuse from their opponents. Such harsh and cruel words, though, are often spoken in the heat of the moment, on the field of play. When a cricketer-analyst passes inappropriate jokes on live television, it's nothing but crass jeering, betraying a lack of sensitivity and good taste.

But then, in a region — including India and Pakistan — where an amputee could be referred to as *tunda*, a man with a squint called *bhainga* to his face, and a dark-skinned person nicknamed *kali*, it would be too much to expect a man like Akmal to be oversensitive. Add to it the state-sponsored hate for the minorities in Pakistani schoolbooks, and you can well believe that Akmal is a victim, too, and what he said about Arshdeep was quite inevitable.

Maybe it's because we in Punjab have similar *marasi* (comedian) culture, our own Navjot Singh Sidhu, humour king on TV, can laugh at people's appearance on reality shows. A few years ago, he had this to say about the Bangladeshi team: "*Jo kangal, behal Bangladesh tha, woh khushhaal aur maalmaal...*" This caused resentment in Bangladesh, as did his comment likening the team to "cockroaches" that can't fly. Sidhu's coarse humour may have raised some laughs, but such humour is clearly offensive and inappropriate. Between crass humour and extreme political correctness, there's much territory on which humour can flourish — nrid

When a cricketer-analyst passes inappropriate jokes on live television, it's nothing but crass jeering

die ground that Akmal and Sidhu can occupy, removing their *marasi* hats. Giving up boorishness isn't a bad idea.

PANDYA'S STORY

When Hardik met Natasha, sparks flew; he liked her face, she liked his style, and love blossomed. It was 2018, and in 2020, they were married — cricketer Hardik Pandya and Natasha Stanlovic, an actress and model from Serbia.

But in between was 2019, too, when Pandya put his foot in the mouth in a big way — in a TV interview, he boasted about his adventures with multiple women, saying this about his method of picking them up: "At a party, my parents asked me, 'Achele teri uske (women) koun sa hai,' so I said, 'Yeh, yeh, yeh (pointing out women)... And they were like 'vach, proud of you beta!'"

"I like to watch and observe how they move," Pandya said, adding that he paid particular attention to "the backside". Pandya and KL Rahul — also part of the interview, but much more restrained — were criticised for being misogynists. It could be argued that Pandya didn't bring forth his misogyny — dislike for women; it was philogyny — love for women, instead. But it was peppered with deep contempt for them — due to their easy availability, added to his upbringing in a patriarchal society.

Anyone who has covered cricket tours would testify that hundreds of young women practically throw themselves on cricketers all the time; during the IPL parties in Lalit Modi's era, stories of casual after-match trysts were legion. If the young Pandya, among others, succumbed to temptation, how much can he be blamed?

As for him and Natasha, love seems to have soured; she got married to him despite his crassness. Speculation now centres round how much of his wealth she would be entitled to if they get divorced — a sordid end to love.

Do remember, you are mortal



RAAJA BHASIN

THE formidable Joseph Campbell's immense body of work covered mythology, religion and belief systems. His writings provided substantial insights into the human experience and its behaviour. He once wrote, "Every myth is psychologically symbolic. Its narratives and images are to be read, therefore, not literally, but as metaphors."

Of the many books bought by my parents when I was young was the obligatory *Tales from Akbar and Birbal*. Akbar and his trusted courtier Birbal would thrust and parry, and in doing so created some wonderful stories and parables. Some may be fiction, some may be fantasy and some may be outright lies. Be it so. They, however, are simply delightful. In one story, Akbar packs Birbal off to search for the most beautiful child in the kingdom. Birbal returns and asks the Emperor to accompany him. Hiding behind a bush, they see a small child come out of a hut. Akbar angrily whispers in his ear: "You have brought me to see this? This must be the ugliest child in my kingdom."

"No sire, wait," says Birbal. In moments, the child's mother appears and lovingly clasps the child to her chest. She calls him the 'most precious jewel in the world', her 'piece of the moon' and a dozen other endearments. Akbar watches and listens silently. Then Birbal says, "Now you know why he is the most beautiful child in Hindustan? It is because his mother thinks so."

This lack of or the presence of the beauty of the child may be transferred to other situations, to other places and to other people. This metaphor can become the prism to look at those that have ruled us, and to those that shall. Each turn of history has had its beautiful, as well as its ugly, children sitting at the helm of affairs. With either, it is a question of perception. My saint may be your sinner — and the other way round. The scales that decide which is which, is what we call 'humanity and civilisation'.

One of the most polarising politicians of post-World War-II England was Enoch Powell. He called for an end to migration from the Commonwealth countries to Great Britain. In 1968, Powell made his deeply disturbing 'Rivers of Blood' speech which was, supposedly, the result of the Race Relations Act introduced by the Labour Government. The legislation would prohibit discrimination on grounds of race in certain

aspects of British life, especially by persons or councils denying non-whites places of residence. The press lashed back and *The Times* called it an "evil speech".

Edward Heath, as leader of the Opposition, sacked Powell from his Shadow Cabinet and Powell did not hold a political post again.

However, just a year later, a Gallup poll placed Powell as the most 'admired person' in public opinion. In later years, based on various polls, Powell's popularity remained and there is a school of

Our lives will pass, and if there is a statue or a road named after that passing, it has no relevance to mortal life. Humanity does

thought that he would have won had he contested for political leadership. While there are several other issues and standpoints involved, echoes of Powell's stance continue to the present day; for example, Nigel Farage of the UKIP considers Powell to be his political hero.

Somewhere parked at the back of my head, along with other pointless clutter, is an image of ancient Rome. I know precious little of modern Rome, far less the ancient. But this image, which has roots in Europe's broader tradition, if not in reality, appears repeatedly in art and elsewhere. In my image, a triumphant General is returning in glory. Whoever he was sent out to sort, has been sorted. The enemy, real or imagined, has been conquered. Crushed. Decimated. Rome is as triumphant as ever. The victor's chariot is drawn by the finest horses. The crowds cheer him and flower petals come as thick and fast as the arrows he fended in battle.

Standing behind the victor on the chariot is a slave. Amidst the din of adulation, he has just one task. He holds a crown over the victor's head and constantly whispers in his ear, "Respite post te. *Hominem te esse memento. Memento mori*." From Latin, this roughly translates as, 'Look after yourself. Remember you're a man. Remember you will die.'

If we would like to call ourselves civilised, or wish to hold a candle to basic humanity, there is the essence of that phrase, '*Memento mori*' (Remember you are mortal). Our lives will pass, and if there is a statue or a road named after that passing, it has no relevance to mortal life. Humanity does. This is valid for whichever side one is cheering for — the left, the right, the pink, the blue or, the sweet old lady, who before one steps into it, clears her dog's litter in the park.

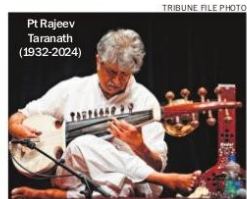
A tranquil note from the Deccan

SREEVALSAN THIYAYDI

AROUND the time when TS Eliot died, Rajeev Taranath happened to return to Mysuru where he had done his doctoral research on the American poet. That was in 1965, when an educational institution offered him a job. By then, a decade had passed since Rajeev first met Hindustani virtuoso Ali Akbar Khan, whom he made his *guru*. Lessons from the maestro at Calcutta had made the youngest a promising *sarod* player. The resonant slides he generated on the fretless instrument gave audiences the impression that Rajeev could visualise the raga he rendered unerringly. This feature appeared like an extension of his PhD thesis on the image in Eliot's modernism.

True, Rajeev had a love for literature and music right from childhood. Yet, *sarod* was not on his mind. Its weighty plucks fell hard like staccato notes on the ears of the boy growing up in Bangalore. Already initiated into the *tabla* under his multifaceted father, Pandit Taranath, he looked set to emerge as a decent singer. Titans Panchakshara Gawai and Venkatarao Ramdurgkar were grooming the teenager in vocals after the boy unexpectedly lost the family's heir. If he stood brave, that was also because of his spunky mother, G Sumati, a Pundicherry woman close to freedom fighter Sarojini Naidu.

Rajeev, nearing 20, sang increasingly well, but was unsure of his preferences — until a titan served him an "epiphany". In 1962, the



Pt Rajeev Taranath (1932-2024)

young saw Ali Akbar perform in Bangalore.

The reverberations from the fingers of the *Mahar gharana* exponent caught his fancy. It grew into an obsession with the passing of weeks. So much so, in a couple of years, Rajeev travelled 2,000 km north-eastward to the Bengal capital. Ali Akbar's immediate response was guarded, but when Rajeev repeated the act months later by knocking at the door, the *sarod* was warmer and accepting. Eventually the *gharana* groomed by Alauddin Khan (1862-1972) in central India (to where he moved from Chittagong region of present-day Bangladesh) got an acolyte from down the peninsula. Rajeev, for all his admiration for Ali Akbar, didn't lose interest in literature. The passion made him an academic; he became an English professor at the Regional Engineering College in Trichy. Then happened another decisive turn.

Aged 51 and a divorcee, Rajeev was prompted to become a full-fledged musician by another of Baba Alauddin's disciples, Sitar celebrity Ravi Shankar's advice to learn regular

ties with Ali Akbar, who was by then a resident of the US. That overseas tutelage spanned a quarter century — till Ali Akbar's death in 2009. Rajeev sustained his learning spirit, waking up in pre-dawn hours for practice even as he gave classes, including online. This went on till last month, when a fall fractured his leg. The Padma awarded died in Mysuru on June 11, four months short of completing 92.

The *sarod* lost a practitioner of both bold and delicate strokes, notes sitarist-percussionist Nayan Ghosh. To him, Rajeev's glides were sometimes indistinguishable from his *guru*'s, epitomising the high level of mastery. Musicologist Indudhar Nirody used to laud Rajeev's *rishis*, where the three-beat *bol* would perfectly hit the *sara*, the first beat of the rhythmic cycle. Yet, as Rajeev's pupil Sachin Hempe notes, the *guru* may occasionally miss it, too, during practice sessions: "He'd work till he fixed it."

For Rajeev, who taught at Aden University in Florida for a decade, music was a pursuit for excellence: "It's about how well you develop a note to express a lofty idea. Many know more *ragas* than I do; they play faster too." At group tuition, he seldom let the acolytes play together. In effect, they were one-on-one. Minimalism ruled his music; he often quoted a confession of Ali Akbar: "My earnest attempt is to move from a clean 'sa' to an equally neat 'sa'. I've managed it four or five times in my entire life." Rajeev was into cinema briefly. For two decades till the early 1990s, he directed the music in nine southern films. "Such a challenge requires (AR) Rahman, not Rajeev," he'd sum up, self-deprecatingly. Even so, "instrumental music is a good bridge between cultures".

Sighting King Cobra and addressing the fear factor

SURENDER SINGH

SOME three years back, in June 2021, a video was trending on Facebook, in which one could hear a person yelling (and surprisingly in a western accent) at his pet dog to return. The dog was barking nervously at a giant snake that was otherwise slithering into the forest. The caption of the video ran something like "... incidence of King Cobra presence in Dhaulakuan, Paonta Sahib". The video gained a lot of publicity. Surprised at this unusual record, my first reaction was to dismiss it as a fake post. In fact, I remember my rather sarcastic comment, "Two coincidences at the same time — presence of King Cobra in the valley and a sudden change of Sirmour accent to western." The sarcasm was ultimately found to be unwarranted; the video was real and the gentleman turned out to be an NRI from Paonta Sahib. This was my first memory of King Cobra (KC) from Himachal Pradesh and remains its first recorded evidence from the state.

King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) is the largest venomous snake of the world which is endemic to South and South-east

Asia. KC (female) is the only snake which makes nests and shows parental instincts, caring for its next housing the eggs. Venom injected in one bite of KC is sufficient to kill 10 adult persons. Despite this, they are not programmed naturally to attack or prey on human beings. However, they do bear enough courage and speed to fight back, if threatened. King Cobras are very principled fighters. To guard their territories (which can extend to around 8 sq km) from other males and to win females, they often indulge in fights that involve hood-hitting and body-force. However, they refrain from injecting venom into their competitor which would instantly kill it. The defeated individual humbly cedes the territory and any claim to the female. As wars rage on in the human world, the human kings have much to learn from these 'principled' kings!

The natural habitat of KC comprises the broad-leaved rainforests, and in India, it is the Western Ghats that have the highest population. The village of Agumbe in Karnataka is known as the King Cobra capital of India, having its highest density. In north-western India, the hitherto known upper limit of the KC has been thought to be in Uttarakhand.

The first videographic evidence of KC's



Team members measuring the length of the King Cobra that was seen on video.

As wars rage on in the human world, the human kings have much to learn from these 'principled' kings

presence in Paonta valley may not really be very surprising to ophiologists as the biogeographic conditions of Uttarakhand

and Himachal are almost the same. The specimen found in HP and Uttarakhand has the same morphology as well. Had the King Cobra's presence in Paonta Valley not been conclusively established by subsequent records (till date, five such records have been made), the first record would have been taken as the rarest of the rare incidences; a fluke, perhaps. However, one of the subsequent records confirmed a juvenile KC and the two other records proved the existence of a mature specimen, measuring about 10 feet. This latter record is from October 7, 2023, and attributed to a villager, who was nervously surprised to find the King lay across the length of the road that he would otherwise routinely traverse to and from his village, Janglot in Paonta valley.

Having a keen personal interest in snakes and serving in the Wildlife Wing of the HP Forest Department, it was both a personal calling and a professional duty to conduct a thorough follow-up of every record that I came across. The evidence from the autumn of 2023 had not yet flashed on our mobile screens that my team and I, along with my superior — an IFS officer — launched a search operation to film the King. Our hours of hard work notwithstanding, the King eluded us, and

we ended up in sweat, clothes pierced by thorns, and shoes covered in mud. However, the search concluded with a campaign in the nearby village of Janglot so that awareness about snakes is raised, the overpowering fear of these otherwise harmless creatures is addressed, and the snake-human conflict can be reduced. I also proposed the name of the person who filmed the snake for an honorary certificate so that people could be encouraged to shoot snakes with a camera and not with the gun! King Cobra is called the king of all snakes — one of the oldest inhabitants of Planet Earth. Having a first claim to the land, they certainly deserve their share of respect and rights alongside us. Snakes neither have limbs nor eyelids, not even a proper hearing mechanism. Imagine yourself in that situation. To top that, they do not even have a well-developed brain and thus, survival for them is no easy task, surrounded by predators (both natural and irrational, read humans) as they are at every step.

Is it difficult to understand that all the species have an equal right to life? One species' pursuit of pleasure cannot and should not be a death trap for others. A common thread of life binds us all.

— The writer is Range Forest Officer at Col Sher Jung National Park in Sirmour

ARJIT TANDON

NAVEEN PATNAIK'S rare public appearance at the oath-taking ceremony of Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi of the BJP hit the headlines last week, garnering as much, if not more, attention as the change of guard in the eastern state after over two decades. This was the first time in years that the 77-year-old Biju Janata Dal chief was seen engaging with people, striking conversations with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP brass without VK Pandian, a former aide, by his side.

Until June 12, when Patnaik made that exceptional visit to the swearing-in event of the newly elected BJP government, a common belief across Odisha was that he could not move even a yard without Pandian's help. The belief was cemented when Pandian, widely seen in Odisha as Patnaik's shadow, began holding microphones every time his boss appeared on stage to make an election speech.

These actions triggered suspicions around Patnaik's health, provoking Prime Minister Modi to ask whether the formidable regional satrap, who ruled Odisha uninterrupted for 24 years, was actually so ill or was his illness merely a projection, a conspiracy by forces ruling Odisha in Naveen's name. Political observers in Odisha know only too well that the incredible tales and images mirroring Patnaik's absolute dependence on Pandian, the controversial bureaucrat-turned-politician, for everything personal to political, was long feared to become the BJD chief's nemesis one day.

That day was June 4.

After 24 years of Patnaik's reign, BJD was decimated in Odisha, down to 51 in the 145-member Assembly and wiped out from 21 Lok Sabha seats of which the BJP swept 20 and the Congress took one.

NAVEEN AND PANDIAN

Old-timers recall the fortuitous arrival of IAS officer VK Pandian in Naveen Patnaik's CMO 12 years ago in 2012. This was exactly around the time of a bitter parting between Patnaik and his former powerful adviser, Pyarimohan Mohapatra, who attempted a BJD coup in the CM's absence and fell from grace forever.

"Before Pandian came on the scene, Naveen Patnaik depended on Mohapatra, another bureaucrat-turned-politician, for advice and support. Until the two fell out in May of 2012, it was Mohapatra, more than Naveen, who was turning the levers of power in Odisha, much like Pandian was doing in the post-Mohapatra era," notes journalist Kuldeep Singh, with long years of experience in covering Odisha.

Singh says Patnaik, a political greenhorn at the time of his entry into politics in 1997, trusted bureaucrats, primarily Mohapatra, who was principal secretary to his father Biju Patnaik, the CM from 1980 to 1995.

Senior BJD leaders also often speak of Patnaik as an astute politician who won elections but did not want intimate involvement with the day-to-day affairs of governance. It was only a matter of time before Patnaik's trust quotient shifted from Mohapatra to Pandian.

After Mohapatra's exit, Pandian took complete control of BJD, even distributing election tickets. BJD sources point to the 2019 poll cycle when several top leaders were denied nominations by Pandian and had been unable to petition Patnaik because Pandian would not let them meet the CM.

Interestingly, Pandian, a 2000-batch IAS officer, was originally from the Punjab cadre but opted for Odisha after his marriage to Sujata Raut, a bureaucrat from the Odisha cadre.

He moved quickly to earn the trust of his master and in no time was controlling both Naveen Patnaik's CMO and the BJD.

"The BJD lost the 2024 elections — state and Lok Sabha — because of Pandian, who isolated Patnaik from the party and the people. The day Naveen Babu lost, three of my domestic helpers cried bitterly, reflecting the deep affection and sympathies people still have for the BJD chief. Dependence on Pandian did Naveen Patnaik in," says Odisha-based political commentator Rabi Das, whose government accommodation was cancelled by the Pandian-controlled BJD government after he wrote an article calling the former bureaucrat a "super Chief Minister". Das is fighting the case in court.

As for Pandian, the former private secretary to Patnaik took voluntary retirement from service (VRS) in November 2023 to join the BJD full-time and soon became the sole source of information to Patnaik, who remained incommunicado at his Bhubaneswar residence Naveen Niwas, while BJD leaders wandered around in a political vacuum.

"Pandian brought Naveen Babu to believe that the BJD was winning elections, come what may. He kept proclaiming publicly that he would quit active politics should Naveen Patnaik lose. The BJD did not fight the election. There was no effective counter to the BJP's campaign push led by PM Modi. Union Home Minister Amit Shah and a host of leaders. It was almost as if the BJD was consciously ceding space to the BJP in the state. After Pandian recently announced retirement from politics, apologising to the BJD *parivar* for any hurt he may

A 5-term CM gets a drubbing in Assembly and LS polls, his powerful aide who quit IAS to join politics leaves that arena too, BJP pulls off a surprise with its CM pick — Odisha's taking a new *disha*, made even more interesting by Naveen Patnaik's rare appearance at oath-taking

AN ENDING & NEW BEGINNINGS



Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi (right) greets predecessor Naveen Patnaik at Naveen Niwas in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

RSS STAMP ON ODISHA CM PICK

The choice of a watchman's son and a senior Santhal tribe leader, Mohan Charan Majhi, as the first BJP Chief Minister of Odisha fits a pattern and bears the stamp of RSS, the ruling party's ideological mentor. Majhi, 52, grew up in Keonjhar Sadar region's Raikala, pursued law and taught at the RSS-run Saraswati Shishu Vidya Mandir before entering politics. A four-term Keonjhar MLA, he eventually outpaced Odisha BJP

heavyweights — state BJP chief Manmohan Samal and Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan — in the CM race. Earlier, the BJP had turned a new leaf by resting state stalwarts in favour of grassroots workers with RSS roots in three states — Bhajan Lal Sharma, Mohan Yadav and Vishnu Deo Sai as CMs of Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh. They have all cut their teeth in RSS institutions before they became full-time BJP workers.

WHO IS TO BLAME

Conspiracy theories apart, many BJD old-timers hold Patnaik responsible for the 2024 poll outcome. A former BJD leader who recently joined the BJP said Odisha

BJP. These talks, however, fell through.

has rejected a regional party and opted for a national party after 24 years.

"The blame for what happened cannot be attributed to individuals alone. It is the result of the BJD losing its path. The BJD was formed to fight the Congress misrule, corruption and nepotism, but today it has

become synonymous with all these negativities," a former BJD leader says.

To paint the contrast in the BJD's functioning then and now, this leader recalls the year 2001 when Naveen Patnaik as CM sacked three Cabinet ministers within minutes, noting that "a shadow of corruption had fallen on them." In 2024, the BJD gave tickets to those charged with murder. "The BJD has come to be viewed as a protector of the corrupt," the ex-BJD MP says.

PATNAIK STILL A FORCE?

Even after the power centre in Odisha shifts to the BJP and Majhi, locals are not writing off Naveen Patnaik just yet, even though he faces a succession challenge with no inheritor in sight and age not on his side. Many swear by the command Patnaik has on the popular Odia imagination and his once-legendary connection with the masses, which has been frayed in recent times, especially after Covid-19 when he began a period of complete reliability on Pandian, barely moving out of home.

Since the BJD's rout on June 4, Patnaik has been regrouping and meeting party leaders — defeated and victorious both — to chalk the way forward. BJD sources say Patnaik is likely to assume the role of Leader of Opposition in the state Assembly and may form a committee to run the party affairs until a successor emerges.

Patnaik, conscious of the fact that his family may not throw up a successor again, has already said the people of the state will choose his political inheritor. In 1997, too, he had entered politics only after his two elder siblings — Prem Patnaik and Gita Mehta — had declined. Gita is no more. Prem Patnaik lives in Delhi and has a son.

"Times are not the same as in 1997 when Naveen Patnaik reluctantly took the political plunge to fill a void left in Odia politics by the



VK Pandian, who is being largely blamed for the BJD's defeat.

demise of his father Biju Patnaik, Naveen Patnaik won his first LS bypoll from his father's Akshat seat and was re-elected to the Lok Sabha in 1998 and 1999," Akash Kumar, a Cuttack-based political observer, says.

In 1998, Patnaik became a Union minister in the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led NDA government. He remained a minister when Vajpayee took oath as PM again in 1999. Meanwhile, Patnaik had founded the Biju Janata Dal which, in alliance with the BJP, went on to rule Odisha till 2008.

In 2008, the allies parted ways following the 2008 anti-Christian Kandhamal riots after Mohapatra convinced Patnaik that the BJP was a liability. Post 2009, Patnaik, a five-term CM, ruled by himself, becoming the second longest serving Chief Minister after Sikkim's Pawan Kumar Chamling.

A RECLUSE

Those who followed Naveen Patnaik in his early years describe him as a remarkable phenomenon. Author Ruben Banerjee, who wrote Patnaik's biography, says unlike other politicians, who love to corner headlines, the non-Odia-speaking Patnaik is rarely seen on prime time TV and heard even less.

"Naveen Patnaik is perhaps the quietest politician in present-day India, never raising his voice and creating the least din... And unlike his father's roller-coaster ride, Patnaik's political journey has only seen an upward trajectory," Banerjee writes.

He recalls Patnaik's spectacular journey from the Doon School days, where the BJD chief was Sanjay Gandhi's classmate, to being a permanent fixture in Delhi's most exclusive party circuits, where he routinely rubbed shoulders with the well-heeled and powerful. Naveen, in his younger days, lived in his father's New Delhi residence on Aurangzeb Road, now APJ Abdul Kalam Marg. He authored three coffee table books ('A Second Paradise' on the Indian country life from 1890 to 1947; 'Desert Kingdom' on the Rajputs of Bikaner and 'The Garden of Life', a compendium of medicinal plants and species). He even ran a boutique called Psychedelhi from the premises of Delhi's Oberoi Hotel and his clientele included the faded Beatles, says Banerjee.

On the former Odisha CM's political acumen, his biographer says the key to Patnaik's success is that even though he has indulged in political machinations and subterfuge, he has largely come out of it unblemished, skilfully sidestepping scrutiny. "Patnaik is still viewed by many as innocent and incapable of the violence of an ordinary politician. And when something goes horribly wrong in the state, there is always someone else who shoulders the blame, sparing Naveen any taint," says Banerjee.

This time, VK Pandian has become the fall guy. Signing off from active politics the other day Pandian apologised for causing hurt to anyone. "I am sorry if the campaign narrative against me has had a part to play in the BJD's loss," said the former Patnaik aide, leaving his mentor's side after 12 years.