

ht think!

REFLECTIONS

chanakya



STOP THIS NEW LOW FORM OF CORRUPTION

It was not so long ago, I remember, that we were queuing up at banks in order to withdraw very limited amounts of money per week, thanks to the sudden demonetisation. People actually died standing for hours in the long lines which stretched for miles. At the end of the day, what should have set off a cataclysmic rage against the government actually went in its favour powering it to election victory after victory. It was the simple fact that people were willing to forgive anything as long as it was seen to counter corruption, the bane of our existence. The rich were being made to pay by losing their ill-gotten wealth. Bribery would lessen, people thought. This government needs our support. And indeed, it seemed that there were less visible signs of corruption all around. I say 'visible' because I have no empirical evidence to prove that corruption actually lessened. But there did seem to be a concerted effort to root out the corruption which had become synonymous with UPA II. And if this attempt had continued however imperfectly, I would have no problem. But what we see today is other forms of corruption surfacing like the really appalling one being fostered by the anti-Romeo squads, the brainchild of the UP government. The other day, much to my shock, a television channel aired footage of a sting operation in

which the policemen who were in these squads were telling the reporter that for a sum, they could file false cases using their anti-Romeo squad powers to fix rivals. The rates ranged from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1.5 lakh. In the first place, why on earth did the government feel the need to set up the unfortunately named anti-Romeo squads? I am not diminishing the reality of crimes against women and the need to crack the whip against this. I am only questioning why a special squad needs to be deployed for this, over and above the normal police. Does this mean that the police were not giving this matter due attention in the past? That apart, how on earth does anyone determine who is a Romeo—to mangle the very meaning of the immortal hero in Shakespeare? I remember a case just after this horrible squad was set up of the police accosting a young man waiting outside his girlfriend's college to pick her up after classes. There was nothing untoward about his conduct but both were humiliated publicly and the man made to do sit-ups holding his ears, that peculiarly Indian form of punishment. I gathered later that the couple were let off but imagine the horror of being accosted in public for the sin of being in love and wanting to be together. This was clearly harassment and the anti-Romeo worthies



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

should have been arrested. But, of course, they went about their merry way to harass others. The gau-rakshak drive too has become a source of power and corruption for many. It is either pay up or we will haul you off to jail to face harsh penalties and imprisonment or we think you are a cattle smuggler and will now have to thrash you, even kill you. In the anti-Romeo squad corruption, the policeman concerned can even be heard giving the reporter tips on how the rival can be entrapped. Get him drunk and then call us and we will pick him up and lock him away for at least three months. What next? Money for advice on how to entrap rivals? I would not be too surprised.

I would like to know which part of our culture and tradition says that young people cannot fall in love with whoever they want. Or indeed that there is any moral arbiter who can decide how we will live our lives, or what we will eat, drink or wear. How superior we consider ourselves to our neighbour where all sorts of personal restrictions are put on people. And yet, we seem to be trying to sink below the lowest common South Asian denominator. These special squads and vigilante groups have come to assume some sort of special powers and I blame the government for this. It is no use saying every now and then—stop all this nonsense, you naughty lads. This is seen as nothing more than indulgent disapproval by

these lumpen elements, they will not stop their depredations. I also find it passing strange that these so-called squads and vigilantes seem to be all-pervasive, popping up to stop alleged cattle smugglers, couples and Romeos with such alarming frequency. I can only imagine that it is good business now. The NDA government came to power on much loftier ideas. This is a shabby and dangerous sideshow which can only sully India's image as we try to enlarge our footprint on the global stage. It is a terrible message to our young people, our minorities. Our message should be that we are modern, progressive, inclusive and politically cohesive. But at the same time, I see foreign media vehicles picking up stories of these thugs beating up innocent people, I see the cow as the priority over economic growth and inclusion and growing crime even as we ask people to come and Make in India. Tell me honestly, if you had money to spare and you saw all this, would you not think twice before coming and setting up shop here. I certainly would. But, I am ever the optimist. I still think it is not too late to pull back, put an end to this poisonous progression. It is quite simple, let the police do its work, disband these toxic squads, and let us get back to the real issues which so enthused people when this government came to power. I won't go into all of them because I think the government has already told us about them long and loud. We did not sign up for gau rakshaks, anti-Romeo squads, vigilantism of any sort, dietary or dress restrictions or most of all for new forms of corruption. India must rewind to 2014 and the atmosphere of hope that seemed to captivate the nation.

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sundaysentiments



KARAN THAPAR

HOPE DELHI'S TAJ MAHAL HOTEL STAYS THE SAME

I'm not writing to bid adieu—because I hope it won't come to that—but to recall the many happy moments I've spent at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Delhi. The thought it might pass out of the hands of the Tata Group depresses me. I can't believe it will thereafter be the same. New owners will inevitably create a different place. I first got to know the Taj when I was in my early twenties. We lived in Chhattarpur and the Taj was a convenient and well-located resting point on trips to Delhi. 'CP' was still the place to visit but, in those days of non-air conditioned cars, it could be a hellish journey in summer. The Machan or The Emperor's Lounge were irresistible halts for cold coffee and ice cream. If you were hungry, there was the House of Ming and Captain's Cabin. Late at night The Machan would

transform into a meeting-point for twenty-year-olds, gossiping, lingering, literally measuring their lives with coffee spoons! We would spend very little but stay for hours. Not once did the restaurant complain. Across the lobby was the Khazana, a treasure-trove. From dress-gowns to French hunting prints, from silver bowls to Kolhapuri chappals, it offered a bewildering but beautiful collection of products I found irresistible. In the '80s it was one of the few places where you could buy British newspapers. That was my excuse for visiting! Down in the basement is the Barber's shop I've visited every single month since 1978. My problem is I have the worst hair in the world, frizzy, dry and unruly. Pritam was the first to tame it. "Keep it short", he said, "and it will look straight." He



I first got to know the Taj when I was in my early twenties

was right. I've had short hair ever since. When Pritam retired Govind took over and now, waiting in the wings, is young Rajesh Kumar Singh. One of the reasons I look forward to my monthly visits is the opportunity to natter. They help me judge politicians and assess the popular mood. They also correct my biases. Bernard Levin once wrote that amongst the wisest men he knew was his barber. Pritam, Govind and Rajesh are proof that's true for

me as well. In the 1980s, when I was a television journalist in London and would visit Delhi on work with finicky TV crews, we would unfailingly stay at the Taj. The first time was June 1984, days after the army siege of the Golden Temple. It was an uncertain period and to be safe I invited our interviewees to the hotel. Thank God I did because it was the efficiency of the Taj switchboard operator that salvaged our biggest interview. That was Prakash Singh Badal. He'd agreed to come to Delhi but around 5 in the morning he was suddenly arrested and surreptitiously rang to tell me with the police waiting in the next room. I'm not sure how the operator realised the importance of this call but she insistently buzzed till I answered thus enabling me to do the interview on the phone and tell the world the story of Mr. Badal's arrest. Paradoxically, after returning to Delhi my visits to the Taj became less frequent. Perhaps that's because I take the place for granted but even that link will snap if it changes hands. And if that happens my memories will be no better than granddad's tales of a forgotten past. Only if the Tatas retain control might they stay relevant!

The views expressed are personal

WHY MODI MUST LISTEN TO SPICMACAY'S BEATS



MARK TULLY

Student politics these days centres on nationalism which divides campuses provoking battles, police intervention, and even allegations of sedition. On Monday I heard the prime minister Narendra Modi speaking by video-conferencing to student nationalists on strengthening the unity of India by spreading knowledge and indeed love of Indian culture. They were the 1,200 students attending the 5th Five Day International Conference of SPICMACAY, The Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth. The Prime Minister told these students music and culture could be a big step towards ending divisions and playing a vital role in connecting India. Because we journalists are obsessed with controversies Modi speaking on an occasion no one could object to got little notice on TV or in the papers. In my view SPICMACAY has never had the notice it deserves for its remarkable achievements. It has 850 chapters spread all over India, and over the last three years they have organised some 1,500 events, mainly concerts. Most events are held in schools. SPICMACAY provides an opportunity for thousands of volunteers to work for the promotion of Indian culture. There are only three paid employees. Perhaps the low profile of SPICMACAY has something to do with the low profile its founder Kiran Seth adopts. While reading mechanical engineering at Columbia University in America he was dragged reluctantly to hear a concert given by Aminuddin Dagar. He emerged walking on air. When he returned to teach at IIT Delhi 40 years ago he determined to convey his new found passion to others. But only five students turned up for the first concert he arranged and three of those walked out before the end. Undeterred Kiran persevered, building SPICMACAY

quietly, shunning publicity for himself, an example of nishkaam seva as the Prime Minister pointed out. It's sad but not surprising that a good news story centred on a man as modest as Kiran escapes the notice of the press. But it's shameful that it's been virtually ignored by the government. SPICMACAY doesn't have an annual grant. Its volunteers have to do go down on their knees to extract a comparatively meagre sum each year. They depend mainly on donations from the Norwegian government and the generosity of the artists who perform for a pittance. The Santoor player Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma always hands back his cheque and wherever Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia goes for a public concert he finds time to play in a school. The renowned flautist has been performing for SPICMACAY since its beginning. The culture the Prime Minister was talking about when he praised SPICMACAY encouraged the realisation that we are one with nature, the understanding that material needs are important but are only part of a fulfilling life. The students attending the SPICMACAY convention lived the way Modi would have them live. They started their days at 4 am with three hours of yoga. That was followed by shramdaan, cleaning the venue. Then students interacted with renowned artists and heard performances. What more does a prime minister who established World Yoga Day and launched a campaign to clean India want to persuade him this is a venture worth supporting? What more did the press need to attract them to the opening night of the SPICMACAY convention than the opportunity to hear Girja Devi, the Queen of Thumri, sing. She was followed by violinist Vidwan TN Krishnan and his daughter Smt Krishnan playing together as though they knew exactly what was going on in each other's minds. The musicians did connect North and South India. Girja Devi belongs to the Banaras Gharana and the Krishnans are from the Carnatic, or South Indian musical tradition.

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deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

DARK CLOUDS OVER POWER-SURPLUS INDIA

In the three years that it has been in office, the NDA government believes it has done a good job in managing the country's power sector. The rural electrification network has expanded rapidly, ensuring three-quarters of the 18,000-odd villages that had no access to electricity now do. Coal supplies have been streamlined and made more efficient. The Centre's success in getting state governments to take over some of the debt of the power distributors in their respective territories has helped many discoms turn financially viable for now. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push for widespread adoption of LED bulbs and solar power has been a big help in energy conservation. These are no mean achievements, for which credit must go to Union power minister Piyush Goyal. Perhaps, that's the reason he was the master of many ceremonies held over the past weeks to celebrate the three years of

the Modi government. Underneath these achievements, however, lie many challenges—the biggest of which relates to India's newly acquired tag of being a power-surplus country that now exports electricity to its neighbours. Having surplus power doesn't mean India produces more power than it needs. It means the country's capacity to generate power is now more than what is demanded. Demand is in turn determined by access to electricity and the ability to pay for it. If access is limited and the price of electricity is prohibiting, then you could end up with surplus power even though the need is more than what is generated, or can be generated. How did this happen? Through the past three years, the capacity to generate power increased 8.6% annually, while demand for power grew just 4.4% every year. During the 10 years of the UPA government, demand for power had grown at an

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annual pace of 6%. The impressive growth in capacity additions came on the back of expectations that the demand for electricity will grow faster as the economy does better and the NDA government comes good on its "power for all" promise. Neither of the expectations has so far come true. While the village coverage numbers under the rural electrification programme—Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY)—look impressive, data on household access tells a different story. Of the 45 million households that the government plans to provide with access to electricity by December 2018, only 0.7 million—or just about 2%—have been covered so far. And for those who already have access to electricity, in villages as well as cities, 24x7 power availability is still a distant reality. Commercial demand for power has been subdued because the economy hasn't truly taken off. Making it worse, distribution companies across states have had to battle a huge burden of debt—created by the

gap between what they pay to procure electricity from power producers and what they recover from end users. The former is often determined by the costs of what goes into producing power, while the latter is often guided by political compulsions. The UDAY (Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana) scheme has helped address only the symptom of this problem, which now threatens to undo much of the progress the power sector has made over the past decade. In the absence of an adequate resolution of issues around tariff compensation, long-term power purchase agreements and clear regulatory guidelines, the power sector is actually slipping into a crisis. Most power producers posted net losses through the quarter-ended March 31; several of them have cut production or shut down plants; some have retrenched employees or are unable to pay their salaries on time. To escape the burden of huge debt and stressed assets, some of them want to sell out, but aren't finding buyers. There is no one who wants to invest in India's conventional energy sector today. And that is not good news. Because when the economy turns around, when village coverage extends to electricity reaching every household and when people have enough money to pay for the electricity they want, there may not be enough power generated in the country. For a fuller version, go to <http://read.ht/B004> Follow the author on Twitter @rajeshmahapatra

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JUNE 15: Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda (Right) and Mrs Kaunda (Left) with President Zakir Husain and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at Palam airport in New Delhi



NEWS OF THE WEEK

INDIA
2 CHINESE DIPLOMATS ORDERED TO QUIT
JUNE 15: The Government of India ordered the immediate deportation of the First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy, Mr Chen Lu-chi, who was yesterday charged with spying and stripped of his diplomatic status.

WORLD
UN CALLS FOR TROOP WITHDRAWALS
JUNE 13: The Security Council, sitting through its third night meeting in as many days, demanded that all parties in the Arab-Israeli war should observe ceasefire and there should be no forward movements from June 10.

JUNE 11-JUNE 17, 1967 >>FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

sundayletters

WHY HAVE WE BECOME SO OBSESSED WITH THE COW?
I agree with Ramachandra Guha's analysis in his column 'Of gau gundagiri and the closing of the Hindu mind' (Past & Present, June 4). Hindu liberalism has been besieged by bigots and reactionaries. People must sincerely reflect on the tenets of Hinduism. Many Hindu texts have several references to slaughter and consumption of bovine species. The vigilante killings in the name of the cow are entirely against the tenets of Hindu dharma, which preaches peace and love. Hindus must try and educate those who think that food habits can undermine this great religion. SUJJATA RAMAKRISHNAN MUMBAI

Soldiers can be called martyrs
Karan Thapar in his column 'A soldier killed in action isn't a martyr' (Sunday Sentiments, June 4) makes the point that the word 'martyr' is only applicable to religious warriors defending their faith. But in a modern day democracy, isn't the constitution and the country itself akin to a religion for our armed forces? I disagree with Mr. Thapar that all martyrs seek to die. They are willing to die, but that's different from suicide. DEVINDER SINGH CHANDIGARH

The economy has us all worried
In Rajesh Mahapatra's column 'Indian economy: Latest GDP estimates show the worst is not over' (Deep Cut, June 4), he says that the economy is likely to get much worse. I am worried that this might come true with the rolling out of GST without adequate planning. After a disaster like demonetisation, will India be able to handle this? KEVIN LAL NOIDA
Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com