

A thought for today
If the highest aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever
THOMAS AQUINAS

Future Overcast

What excuses MP, Karnataka and Rajasthan CMs will give farmers at the polls next year

Three years after Narendra Modi rode to Delhi on a forward-looking aspirational wave the national discourse is surprisingly feeling like a throwback to the 1980s, when rural distress and unemployment dominated the political narrative.

In MP, chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's assiduously built agri success story is looking ragged now. In Karnataka, Siddaramaiah, the custodian of Congress's last stronghold in the south, finds himself immersed in water shortage problems for sugarcane farmers...

Agriculture contributes about 17% of GDP but employs around 50% of the country's workforce. This is simply unsustainable. Playing the narrow politics of agitations and waivers neither the BJP nor Congress leadership is showing effective leadership on the national imperative to move a greater portion of the agri workforce into other industries...

The MP, Karnataka and Rajasthan chief ministers may be counting too much on the infighting in opposition ranks in their states. Chouhan and Raje may also draw strength from the continuing popularity of the prime minister, which would help them at the hustings next year...

Ray Of Hope

Quick resolution of top 12 stressed accounts can break bad loan gridlock indeed

The gridlock around India's bad loan problem has begun to dissipate. On Tuesday, Reserve Bank of India announced that it will direct banks to begin insolvency proceedings on 12 borrowers accounting for 25% of the total bad loans.

An internal committee of RBI chose a set of non-discretionary measures to identify bad loans for resolution under the new bankruptcy law. From a universe of top 500 bank exposures, the committee identified 12 non performing accounts for quick resolution.

Much work remains ahead. The bankruptcy law is of recent origin and hasn't really been tested. Even if the bankruptcy law is superior to the piecemeal legislations that existed earlier, its efficacy will rest on how different participants in the process such as tribunals deal with the work that lies ahead.

Behave Yourself

Why only Sanjay? Let's question the behaviour of others too

Bachi Karkaria

The Bombay High Court has asked the Maharashtra government to explain the basis on which Sanjay Dutt's 'behaviour' was assessed leading to his getting 256 days of his sentence knocked off for 'good conduct'.

Farmers have been harvesting a bumper crop of headlines, but last Tuesday's lead story revealed that some of them have been making hay while the sympathy shines.

The second big story was examination Boards behaving like wilful schoolboys, each adding marks according to its own whims and fancies. The HRD ministry may no longer be headed by School Marv No.1, but it has brought out its cane and a committee to bring a scientific method to the grace marks largesse instead of random humanities being showered on poor performers.

The other case of awry authority featured a couple of Mumbai cops who, instead of acting on a complaint of noise pollution, leaked the identity of the complainant to the offender who then proceeded to harass him - loudly, no doubt.

Alec Smart said: "The cow is truly 'a useful animal'. It's uniting people as much as dividing them."

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Goddess Of Big Things

In her latest 'big' novel, Arundhati Roy the polemicist trumps literature

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The philosopher John Gray famously spoke of how secularism, like chastity, is defined by what it denies. Something similar afflicts

Arundhati Roy, a passionate votary of all things small, perishable and precious but who somehow seems unable to write in sustained fashion about anything but the big, bad and ominous.

Twenty years of ranting against mammoth dams, nuclear bombs and the Leviathan Indian state would have, one assumed, cured her of polemic and, when finally news arrived that her second novel was on its way, it appeared to herald her return to that rare talent evidenced in her maiden novel.

The God of Small Things, whose sentences, like two-egg twins, combined childlike precociousness with adult presentiment was essentially a story about love and loss, the first forbidden, the second inevitable. It was a story about individuals, ordinary ones, and the war of loss and longing occasioned in their souls.

On the contrary, what we have with The Ministry of Utmost Happiness that just hit bookstores is an unabashed history lesson, where individuals are mere pawns in a larger-than-life plot. The story has beautiful, bleeding Kashmir at its centre and ugly India, imperial, impervious and with its "infrastructure of impunity", slowly worming its way through the fine gossamer web to devour what is left of it.

By the time the well-worn plot is exhumed, examined and laid back to rest, the pro-Kashmiris, so to speak, have chosen one of the only two options available to such freedom fighters, patriots who are not nationalists - they scorn Pakistan but end up in Qabristan. As for the Indian end of the troika of individuals who are at the heart of this episode, the minion of the state develops a conscience, enough of it to concede at the end to the martyrdom-inclined, "you



Chiracrowe

may be right but you will never win".

The whole tone of the book is that of a Cassandra call, which declares that fascism is already here in India, that it is not a drill, that it is not alarmist to say such things but is merely true. Of course, these sections are very well-written, where scrupulous reportage melds with deadpan machismo, a world where Pankaj Mishra (investigating the alleged Chittisinghpura massacres) meets Frederick Forsyth (plotting The Dogs of War).

But, where, you might well ask, since this is a literary novel, is Amos Oz, an Israeli who surely knows quite a bit about wars within? Amos Oz, who unforgettably said that it is the task of any serious writer who enters the No Man's Land of conflicts, within and without, to always differentiate "the bad from the worse from the worst". Nuance, in plain English. Something that The Ministry sadly lacks, determined as it is to deal only in big bromides and simplistic black and white.

A left-liberal autodidact, Roy behaves here more like a red diaper baby, conjuring, in the absence of a real political programme, possible prosthetic-proletariats who might overthrow the existing order

There is Aftab-turned-Anjum, of course, with whom the book begins, who periodically resurfaces and is adroitly there at the finale to tie up the loose ends, proof that even in an unfortunately expository work like this Roy's novelistic instincts do survive. Anjum is finely wrought, initially like her friend Razia, "a man who wanted to remain a man but be a woman in all other respects", but is eventually reconciled to her new self after reconstruction surgeries coarsen

her voice, with its peculiar rasping quality, like two voices quarrelling with one another.

This 'in-betweeness', roiling ambiguity or hybridity if you will, is the real terrain of fiction and where Roy was so at home in Small Things. In The Ministry her perfect pitch is spoiled by abundant false notes, and in the final analysis it merits a verdict that mirrors what Orwell remarked about Dickens, that he "had rotten architecture but great gargoyles", in other words, a floundering novel with flashes of brilliance.

In The Ministry, the politically unexamined life of the liberal, who is sure that she is right about everything, has trumped the novelist, a trap Roy could have avoided if only she had heeded her mentor John Berger's exhortation to convert self-pity to anger but also to beware of looking too far ahead, in fact, "a refusal to look ahead". But Roy insists on looking too far ahead, always after a new Camelot - if it was Paradise pickled and preserved in Small Things it is Jannat, "guesthouse in the graveyard" in The Ministry. Instead of rubbing history against the grain and questioning received notions, including her own, Roy toys with 'revolution'.

A left-liberal autodidact, Roy behaves here more like a red diaper baby, conjuring, in the absence of a real political programme, possible prosthetic-proletariats who might overthrow the existing order. "Lal Salaam Aleikum", as Anjum intones at Maoist comrade Masse Revathy's funeral, and intoned in turn by Saddam Hussain, her sidekick and local cheat, who changes his name from Dayachand to that of the late Iraqi despot's because, "it would give me the courage to do what I had to do and face the consequences, like him".

All so moving, if it was not all so contrived. The noted critic James Wood pertinently asked, "Which way will the ambitious contemporary novel go? Will it dare a picture of life, or just shout a spectacle?" We all looked up to Roy, back from the wilderness after 20 years, to redress the balance. God, hasn't she disappointed us!

Of machines and men: The long arc of our complex relationship is bending towards convergence

Santanu Paul



The public and press have found a new bogeyman in artificial intelligence, or AI. Recent layoffs, of less than 2% of the workforce, in India's bellwether IT sector have opened the floodgates of anxiety.

For some years now, a worry-laden global narrative about AI induced job displacements has been brewing. Its unfolding script can undermine what college-educated knowledge professionals consider an inalienable right: trading the intelligent output of our minds in exchange for a good lifestyle. The fear is rising - if machines can do our work smarter and faster and cheaper - who will need us?

The first narrative that a tidal wave of bots is imminent, and it will wash away many current livelihoods, does have its passionate proponents. In this version of the story, humans and AI are competing for the same work. In his brilliant book The Rise of the Robots, writer Martin Ford presents a vision of the future where the economy is strong, unemployment is the norm,

and government pays a living wage to its citizens.

In a mind-bending YouTube video Humans Need Not Apply, futurist CGP Grey illustrates how 70 million transportation sector jobs around the world will be at risk when self-driving cars hit the roads with lower operating costs and superior safety records. If our IT sector is experiencing some pain, spare a prayer for those in the transportation sector.

Computer scientist David Levy makes the case that love and marriage with robots will be both legal and common by 2050

Fortunately, our evolving relationship with AI has a second narrative that is a lot more optimistic. In this storyline AI is our active collaborator and trusted ally, shaping and saving our lives by filling critical gaps in our skills, knowledge, and experience. This benign persona of AI appeals to the consumer within each of us.

For example, when our surgeon tells us that she plans to take help from Da Vinci, a



surgical robot, to carry out an ultra-precise and painless operation upon our body, we don't feel threatened by the idea of automation. Instead, we applaud her surgical skills and praise her ability to reduce our pain and suffering via automation.

There is also a third narrative with regard to our complex relationship with AI, and it takes us into uncharted waters. How up close and personal can things get? Will machines become our social companions? Can they become life companions? Will the definition of family expand to include AI?

These are radical questions, but they must be asked and answered. Consider the case of

ElliQ. It is a social companion bot that combats loneliness among senior citizens by keeping them physically active, mentally engaged and socially connected.

After teaching itself the preferences of its owner, ElliQ can engage in contextual and meaningful conversation, read out stories and news, set up video calls with friends and family, schedule walks and activities, and even play games with the owner. How is this bot any less than a family member?

What lies beyond social companionship? In an interview with Scientific American, computer scientist David Levy makes the case that love and marriage with robots will be

both legal and common by 2050.

Ex Machina, an Academy Award winning science fiction thriller, makes the same point. It explores the story of Ava, an intelligent, humanoid robot caught up in a love-hate relationship with a human programmer.

And if all that is not enough to make our heads spin, consider what Elon Musk has recently said. The revered tech prophet of our generation has gone on record that with the advent of deep AI, the human species will have no future unless we elect to merge ourselves with machines. In effect, carbon must converge with silicon. As they say, if you can't beat them, join them.

Rudyard Kipling had famously said, speaking of the East and the West: never the twain shall meet. If he had witnessed firsthand the complex matters of Machines and Men, and decided to proclaim upon this realm, he probably would have said the exact opposite. From competition to collaboration to convergence, the trajectory of the relationship between humans and AI appears predestined and foreseeable. Ever the twain shall meet. Need we say more?

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Ramzan Fasting Rejuvenates Body, Mind & Spirit

M Aslam

Fasting, during the month of Ramzan, not only serves as annual training for body and soul - which helps in renewal of life and encourages the spirit of sharing and giving - it also enables the promotion of spirituality and human excellence.

The basic objective of this month-long annual process is to alter the behaviour and pattern of life of its practitioners in such a way that they turn out to be ideal human beings. It implies that a person observing fast will not only observe abstinence from eating and drinking but will get into a sublime state of mind in order to develop positive feelings. It essentially means restraining oneself from listening, speaking, hearing or thinking negatively about others. The expectation is that if one passes through this process of self-purification for a period of one

month, its impact will last at least for the remaining eleven months.

I have practically observed that fasting instils moral courage and guides the heart. Fasting leads to tranquillity and calmness in the face of adversity, and helps one cultivate patience.

We are creatures of acquired habits. Some of these are good habits and some are bad, like smoking. Fasting provides the observer an opportunity to change his habit, as smoking is prohibited during this period. I was a chain smoker 12 years ago and it was fasting which created in me the necessary level of determination that enabled me to give up the bad habit.

Ramzan fasting can help us guard against obesity and blood pressure, provided the faster follows the strict dietary rule: Eat at the designated time

when you break your fast and avoid over-eating. "Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not wasters." (Al-Quran, 7:31)

Charitable acts recommended during Ramzan help us bond with the less privileged. And as the family comes together to break the fast at Iftar, and eat together at least twice a day for a month, and pray together, ties deepen and members of the family draw closer to each other.

Tajuddin B Shuaib, in 'Essentials of Ramadan, The Fasting Month', summarises the essence of fasting as a tool for reconstruction of our spiritual faculties: "The institution of fasting is a unique form of worship prescribed as part of an overall system of Islam. Its uniqueness mirrors the uniqueness of the human being, a creature of physical and spiritual parts

whose excellence depends on the right proportion of these two parts. Too much of the physical material will ruin man, and too much of the spiritual will too. Fasting orients the observer to the art of balancing the spiritual essentials with physical needs, a vivid proof that there is in all of us the will power, a pivotal element that controls our actions.

"This will be needed to help us curb the animalistic tendencies originating from the stomach, in full. It awakens the mind and kindles clear thinking and consciousness of Allah. Fasting is the sobering of a mind and reconstruction of our spiritual faculties."

Only pray that our spiritual faculties get awakened during this month of fasting and we are able to balance spiritual essentials with our physical needs to receive God's blessings and protection, which we all need so desperately in these turbulent times. Post your comments at speakingtree.in

Sacredspace

To Eternity

The longest day must have its close - the gloomiest night will wear on to a morning. An eternal, inexorable lapse of moments is ever hurrying the day of the evil to an eternal night, and the night of the just to an eternal day.

Harriet B Stowe

