

How to get a Congress-mukt economy



MARGINAL UTILITY
T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Until the current tsunami of mindless empiricism dislodged it, economics used to be dominated by mindless mathematics. This fetish had developed after the Second World War when, thanks to Paul Samuelson, economists started to think of their discipline as a once-removed cousin of physics.

They overlooked, however, the most important difference between maths and physics on the one hand, and economics on the other. The former, especially maths, recognises that some problems can't be solved.

You can see the very long list of these unsolvable or unsolved problems here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_unsolved_problems_in_mathematics

Economics, sadly, has a very short list. And employment is as good a problem as any to add to it because of its huge socio-political implications, mostly acquired after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. Before that no one really cared.

Indeed, it is the political implications that, in the second quarter of the 20th century, led Keynes to argue for government intervention in capitalist economies. The alternative was Communism — or so they all thought and got properly scared.

But now politicians even in non-capitalist, non-communist, hybrid economies like India's think they must intervene to create employment. The result — yes, you guessed it — is more unemployment. To see how, just imagine the counter-factual.

India is thus a shining example of this politico-economic folly.

Too many to employ

Compassion aside, the 21st century problem of unemployment is simply not solvable. It can't be done, period.

This is because, first, world population today is over seven billion whereas in 1900 it was around one billion and even then unemployment was a big problem; and, second, even if half the workforce of just China were to find factory employment there would be no factories left anywhere else in the world because China by itself would meet the manufacturing needs of everyone.

This has already happened in some measure. It is going to go on happening.

This means two things. One, some of the workforce in the rest of the world will move up the Kuznets sequence and start providing services. The developed countries are doing this already, as is India in some measure. Two, the rest of the world will remain mostly where it is in the Kuznets sequence, that is, in agriculture or near it somewhere.

India is firmly in the second camp, as are Latin America, Africa etc. No amount of government intervention is going to move 500 million Indians into industrial employment, even if such employment were to somehow come about.

And, can you even begin to imagine the level of investment that would be needed to make that happen? Not just money but also land and infrastructure?

This, in turn, means two things. One, base incomes will fall even further in real terms in the organised sector. And two, in the unorganised sector, they will go very close to zero, again in real terms.

Indeed, much of this has already happened since 2008 and it will go on happening. Another name for it is 'wage slavery'.

21st century question

Therefore the question we need to be asking in the first quarter of the 21st century is whether politicians and government can solve the problem; and if not, what can?

In the 1930s Keynes asked this question of the existing system and came up with an output stabilisation mechanism for preserving employment. It was heavily dependent on higher government spending. This legitimised higher taxes. But the time for that kind of policy orientation is now over for far too many reasons to enumerate here. Now the new orientation has to be the exact opposite of Keynes.

In fact, thanks to 50 years of overspending governments are anyway exhausted and therefore what I am suggesting is happening already without anyone deliberately trying. But be that as it may, politically we need to go back to the time when there was no support for government-mandated stabilisation, that is, back to the pre-Great Depression era.

This means that the government must withdraw from microeconomic activity which everyone agrees should be done. This in turn means the lowering of taxes, less government investment, and completely flexible markets. Nothing less will do if we want more jobs per rupee spent.

Sadly, the BJP is unlikely to choose the economic route of laissez-faire for achieving a Congress-mukt Bharat. It just doesn't have the political courage to do so.

Difficult shoes to fill

Vice-President Hamid Ansari will likely bow out as Vice-President of India and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha in August and India will be the poorer for it



PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

He has done his work quietly for 10 years, always speaking his mind but never in a way that it causes controversy: Hamid Ansari will likely bow out as Vice-President of India and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha in August and India will be the poorer for it.

Caste and other factors prevented Ansari's elevation as the Opposition candidate for the President of India. Not that he had a chance of winning: the decks are stacked overwhelmingly in the government's favour. Moreover, as Chairman of the Minorities Commission dur-

ing the Gujarat riots, Ansari had his own opinions about the way the Gujarat government under Narendra Modi had conducted itself. So there was never a chance of becoming a consensus candidate, either.

Although many had doubts about his ability to handle the Rajya Sabha when he was first named the Congress candidate for chairman, he conducted himself with aplomb: speaking plainly but also employing diplomacy that he learnt as a practitioner.

He spent his working life in Indian Foreign Service (IFS) rising to become India's Permanent Representative in the United Nations and India's ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan — all hot spots from India's point of view.

The years of the late 1990s was a period of great anxiety in India over the activities of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) where India was routinely bashed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on Kashmir. Ansari was the one who took an unpopular but accurate stand and forced a change in thinking. He argued that Kashmir was just a camouflage for serious power rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for the leadership of the Islamic world. He told New Delhi to ignore

OIC — and Saudi Arabia's — rant over Kashmir and counselled independent Indo-Saudi ties in a strategic manner, keeping in its sights two issues: remittances by Indians in Saudi Arabia from a country that has two of the holiest shrines for Muslims; and that Saudi Arabia was not just the US's most trusted strategic ally but also would continue to be the most significant petroleum producer in the years to come. There was much to learn from a country that had several social security schemes financed by wealth funds independent of oil income. With the Gulf states no longer central to the US, it is to India and China that these nations would look to in the future.

Ansari added a rider: if the Sunni Islamic world thought Saudi Arabia should be their unquestioned and unconditional leader, they should look at India. In his address at the Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco in 2016, on 'Accommodating Diversity in a Globalising World: The Indian Experience' Ansari flagged some fallacies. He said the terms "Arab" and "Islam" are used together or interchangeably. "But are the two synonymous? Is all Arab thought Islamic or visa versa? Above all, can all Islamic thinking be

attributed to Arabs?" Not at all, he said, India is an example of plurality where acceptance of diversity is a work in progress but more advanced than elsewhere. Against the background of sectarian attacks on Shias and other minorities in Pakistan, Egypt and other countries, this was a powerful and well-argued point.

On so-called Muslim issues, he told the community bluntly to stop relying on the government for handouts. "The syndrome of victim-hood does not help and there are lessons to be learnt from the experience of other minorities," he said in the Khuda Baksh Memorial Lecture in Patna.

At the golden jubilee of All India Majlis-E-Mushawarat, a deliberative body of Muslim organisations and institutions in 2015, Ansari voiced some home truths that attracted misplaced criticism from the Muslim community. "It is evident that significant sections of the community remain trapped in a vicious circle and in a culturally defensive posture that hinders self-advancement. Tradition is made sacrosanct but the rationale of tradition is all but forgotten. *Jadeediyat* or modernity has become a tainted expression. Such a mindset constrains critical thinking necessary both for the affirmation of faith and for the well-being of the community. The instrumentality of adaptation to change - *Ijtihad* - is frowned upon or glossed over."

It is to be fervently hoped that a person as rational and brilliant as Hamid Ansari will not be allowed to wilt and simply wither away.

DINNER WITH BS ► SANJEEV SANYAL, PRINCIPAL ECONOMIC ADVISOR

The 'chaos theory guy'

Sanyal speaks to Shyamal Majumdar and Arup Roychoudhury about why he thinks Prime Minister Modi can be India's Lee Kuan Yew and how India's entrenched elite is being tamed

Let us not bore ourselves with interest rate and macro-economy; there is so much else to talk about, Sanjeev Sanyal says as we settle down at The Potbelly in the capital's Bihar Niwas. Unlike our guest, who at 46 looks fighting fit courtesy his strict exercise regimen (his many accomplishments include paragliding and kayaking instructorship), we fail to appreciate the keen sense of humour of the person who named the restaurant. But Potbelly was Sanyal's second choice.

His first preference was Jakoi, the restaurant in Assam Bhawan — an unsurprising choice given that Sanyal's wife is an Assamese. But as we were on our way, Sanyal found out that Jakoi shut down a week ago and headed for Potbelly, famous for serving authentic Bihari food in a chic, casual dining space. Sanyal is clearly a foodie and orders *keema ghoogni* and sweet *Sattu* Coolers. For main course, we opt for Champaran mutton, *mitton khada masala*, *Ranchi ke pulao*, and lots of *pooris*. The first two come at lightning speed as the restaurant is sparsely populated at 8.30 pm on a weekday evening.

Sanyal's keenness to avoid discussions on interest rate, etc had come as a disappointment. But we try nevertheless. "I can only say that I fully support Arvind Subramanian's (chief economic advisor) views on the subject," he says. Subramanian had publicly disagreed with the Reserve Bank of India's decision to keep interest rates unchanged in the last monetary policy and suggested that softening inflation and slowing economic growth warranted a substantial monetary policy easing. He had also talked about large inflation forecast errors by the central bank.

Our guest, who is the principal economic advisor in the finance ministry, however, says "let's move on" when we ask him more on the tension between the finance ministry and the RBI.

He is in the midst of settling down in his New Moti Bagh government accommodation, which is a "very nice and spacious" flat, though he misses the eight-bedroom apartment he owns in Singapore. "All the windows open to beautiful lagoons," Sanyal, who was Deutsche Bank's global strategist and managing director till 2015, says, taking a deep sip of *Sattu* Coolers.

As the main course is served, Sanyal says he would wash his hands first, as "no self-respecting Indian should eat with anything but his

hands, and should not poke his food with metal instruments". We have no option but to ignore that observation as we had already put our spoon and fork to work.

So how did he find himself in a government job in India? Sanyal, who is obviously aware of the buzz over his proximity to the high and mighty in the Bharatiya Janata Party, chooses his words carefully. He admits his initial apprehensions but says the first three months of his three-year term have been "amazingly good" and the civil service has really made space for an outsider like him.

"If you think there was any grand plan to this move, you are wrong. I have never done anything with a plan," Sanyal says, adding he was sounded out for such a role by various members of the current government, but doesn't say who. "I am a chaos theory guy; I am against rigid planning anyway."

This adaptive and flexible approach to planning is obviously close to his heart and Sanyal holds forth on the subject for the next few minutes. There is nothing sacred about a 'master plan', he says, and gives the example of Singaporeans who, he says, take their plans less seriously. Their approach is based on the idea that the city is a living ecosystem. The focus should be on managing the changing process and constantly adapting rather than sticking to some pre-conceived ideal. Or, take Hinduism as an example of what he calls a 'complex adaptive system'. In most other religions, the terms 'religion', 'faith' and 'belief' are interchangeable. In Hinduism, they are not. While Hinduism, like other religions, is concerned with the meaning of life, ethics and so on, it does not give you one particular belief.

We soon get a taste of why Sanyal is often referred as somebody who wears many hats — he is an economist, author of four books (the fifth is already half-written), columnist, environmentalist, urbanisation expert and a historian. The last avatar is clearly his favourite and Sanyal proceeds to tell us why most existing accounts of history should be taken with a pinch of salt. For example, his account of Ashoka: 'the not-so-great.' There is enough evidence to show how an enraged Ashoka had 18,000 Ajivikas in Bengal put to death even after the Kalinga war. This is the first known instance of large-scale religious persecution in Indian history. "There was nothing great



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

about Ashoka. He did not create the empire, he usurped it from the crown prince, and while he was alive, his empire collapsed," Sanyal says, adding he is surprised that his account of Ashoka in his book, *The Ocean of Churn*, was never contested by mainstream historians. "Maybe they ignored me", Sanyal says with a chuckle, before ordering another *Sattu* Cooler to wash down the Champaran mutton.

We order *makhana kheer* for dessert as the

steward says it has a pleasant taste of saffron and steer the conversation towards the aggressive brand of Hindutva that is taking attention away from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reform agenda. Sanyal says while he does not agree "with the brand of Hindutva that some people are trying to practise," he also dislikes those who say that it is illegal. "Let the discourse get shriller. As long as it does not lead to violence, let there be many views. Who are we to sit in judgment?"

Sanyal attributes the unhealthy discourse in civil society to the 'old elite' trying to hold on to the last vestiges of its power. He is beginning to sound more like Mr Modi now, we thought. But Sanyal is unstoppable. Many countries, he says, had powerful elites with outsized influence, but in India, dynastic elites controlled the top echelons in every sphere of public life. Every point of leverage — from government contracts and industrial licences — was used to maintain this ecosystem of power which was concentrated in central New Delhi, with a few pockets in Mumbai and a small presence in other parts of the country. Occasionally, new faces were admitted, but only if they did not interfere with the system's perpetuation.

At the other end of the spectrum, he says, India is seeing the emergence of many political leaders from relatively modest backgrounds. And a new middle class is making its way up the system. "Look at Mr Modi. He is a part of this new middle class. India has never before seen this kind of social mobility, certainly not since the medieval times. As a result, India's entrenched elite, which is a class of people with a strong sense of entitlement, is being tamed," Sanyal says.

He believes Mr Modi is inherently changing the way the country was governed earlier and compares him with Lee Kuan Yew, the man credited with turning Singapore from a crime-infested city-state to the financial powerhouse that it is today.

We ask him about demonetisation, and Sanyal says it was a "shock signal" to reset the system and to show everybody that Mr Modi is in charge. "A decade from now, that is how people will think of demonetisation. You can see the same with Yogi Adityanath in Uttar Pradesh. The anti-Romeo squads may have been misused in some cases, but at the street level, that's the chief minister's way of sending a message that random bad behavior towards women will not be tolerated. History tells us that is how strong leaders announce their arrival," Sanyal says.

It's over two-and-a-half hours into our dinner, but Sanyal is in no hurry. In India, he says, there was a generic sense till three years ago that nobody was in charge. But Mr Modi has changed that. The very fact that he is winning election after election shows that people are acknowledging this fact, Sanyal says.

That's something even the most articulate sympathisers of the current dispensation would find hard to beat.

The loneliness of liberalism



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
GEETANJALI KRISHNA

This Wednesday evening, I went to Jantar Mantar in Delhi with my children to protest against the recent spate of lynchings against supposed beefeaters. For once, the crowd milling about us seemed oddly comforting. It eased, if only for a fleeting moment, the growing sense of isolation I've experienced watching liberalism and nationalism migrate to the polar opposite ends of the political spectrum. The moment of comfort was short-lived, as such moments often are, ending with a couple of conversations I had during and after the protest. But first, let's back up to that moment when we walked around listening to beautiful, civilised poetry and song, raising placards that read, 'Not In My Name'. It felt so good to be surrounded by people like

me — proud to be labelled 'libertards', 'presstitudes' and all, who shared the same angry sadness over the growing polarisation of our social fabric. I recognised a couple of professors and students from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, journalists whose works I admire, theatre personalities and many more. I realised most were even dressed like me in handmade leather slippers and Fabindia kurtas. Some of them, with scant regard for their ethnic chic, plonked on the pavement and ordered rounds of chai to celebrate the cloudy weather.

A young fellow, probably the same age as the victim of the most recent lynching, Junaid Khan, brought them their tea. It was a good turnout, I commented to him by the way of a conversation starter. He agreed, then asked, "what is it for?" I explained briefly about cow vigilantes and the lynching of innocents suspected of being beefeaters. He was unimpressed. He saw such rallies every day, he said. "GM Mustard, Right to Information... the cause changes, but I feel the people protesting here look exactly the same, day after day..." Junaid was probably his age, I said. Didn't that resonate with him at all? He shifted uncomfortably, and said he had to go. He wanted to do as much business as he could before the rain started. "Anyway, when I look around, all I see are people like you and not people like me," he said. "People

like me worry about our next meal, not about what meat we eat... and we certainly don't have the luxury that you have, of holding vigils for faceless people we've never known." I watched him leave with a growing sense of disquiet.

By then, a stirring performance by senior theatre artiste Maya Krishna Rao was underway. "Not in my name," she shouted, as we cheered. A young student broke down and was comforted by people around her. By now, however, my comfort at being surrounded by people who felt just like me, had been eroded by the young chaiwala's remarks. Was this simply a gathering of people like me, people like us? Would a protest meeting like this make even a ripple if it only preached to the pulpit? Was anyone else even listening?

The heavens suddenly opened up, drenching us instantly. It was time to leave. As I got into the car, the driver said that he'd seen a couple of my friends in the overcrowded parking lot. "Madam, everyone here looked so familiar. Was this event like Dastkar's Nature Bazaar?" he asked in all innocence. Wet and cold, I settled down into a gloomy silence as my social media pages erupted with stories of the protest, simultaneously held in over 12 Indian and a couple of foreign cities. Thousands had attended, but it was still not enough. All we were, I felt, was a bunch of lonely needles in a gigantic haystack.

Appearances can, indeed, be deceptive



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

Delfino's, in London, isn't cool or chichi the way some places become fashionable for a while. What it is, is terribly busy, serving the best pizzas in town — and, as we discovered, courtesy a frequent diner known for his magnanimity, that its spaghetti with bolognese meat sauce was the epitome of epicurean heaven. It is also a magnet for India's richest Londoners — whether residents or visitors. Our host, who regularly makes the rich list, was clearly well enough known — greeting the owner by name and shaking the hands of the waiters. He'd made a reservation ahead of our arrival, even so we were made to wait while the full pizzeria found us a place.

India's wealthy like to be seen entertaining — and being entertained — in afflu-

ent places. Yet, here we were, in a rough and ready and inexpensive Italian diner with a bottle of Merlot and bowls of chilli oil and chilli flakes that it wasn't sophisticated enough to refuse its sizeable Indian diners. One entire table was occupied by visitors from India who, back home, probably never set foot out of Lutyness tony New Delhi. Another group, London-based, comprised Britain's wealthiest businessmen who manage companies across industries, real estate and hospitality — here, casually dressed and comfortable in jeans and windcheaters. They chatted with our host, pulling his leg, asking him to settle their presumably modest bill, with him refusing in mirthful jest.

That it should be a laughing matter was ironic because, at that moment, the wealth in the room was incalculable — these were billionaires behaving like a bunch of schoolkids in a way they would probably never do in India, or, indeed, in a more sophisticated eatery. I'd been privileged on previous occasions to be invited to Michelin-starred restaurants where the maitre d' spoke flawless French and the waiters were more trendily dressed than the guests. The food was invariably excellent, sourced from its place of origin, the finest cuts of meat, rare truffles, fine wines and finer condiments. Yet, here was bonhomie that dared not trespass the threshold of these stylish establishments, a piz-

za easier to chew over than delicately arranged foie gras.

If there seemed a catch in the genial evening, it was in the apparent parsimony when it came to paying gratuity. Our host had insisted on plying us with "more, a little more", our appetites unable to keep up with the generosity of his hospitality. But the waiter's query of whether he wanted the change returned, and our host's surprising "Yes", was an unexpected response considering the amount did not exceed a minor percentage of the bill. Yes, there was a service charge included in the bill, but seeing his considerable clout in the pizzeria, it seemed frugal to deny the staff a couple of pounds and some loose coins.

But it was of a pattern. He'd urged us to pocket the fresh wipes and complimentary lozenges. Earlier, at an event we'd attended together, he'd insisted we take the complimentary bags. Were we staying at a hotel? "Be sure to carry away the toiletries," he counselled. But not for our use, as it turned out. "Give it to the staff," he directed, "share it with the driver, make the dhoti's children happy." And then he explained why he hadn't left behind more than the mandatory tip. "The restaurant staff has already been rewarded," he informed us, "I'll use the change for attendants in wash rooms, or to give to those who least expect it." Appearances can, indeed, be deceptive.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

China 5; India 1

The principal international challenge for India in the coming years has to be coping with China's rise and growing assertiveness. Beijing's reminder this past week of this country's 1962 military debacle is an over-the-top response to a relatively minor Sikkim border stand-off, quite apart from it failing to recognise India's current military capabilities. But if we are not tone deaf we should take note of the increasingly arrogant nature of China's public protests, which matches the message in private conversations. The Chinese have taken to telling their Indian interlocutors to bear in mind the 5:1 disparity in the sizes of the two economies. The message is clear: India should acknowledge superior Chinese power, and behave accordingly.

India has refused so far to overtly acknowledge any power imbalance, or it would not have stayed away from the Belt and Road conference recently. But however much India's global profile has been helped in the most recent decades by improved economic performance and success in the infotech services business, buttressed by the older soft power attributes of a values-based democracy, the fact is that India suffers from a growing power imbalance with China. This imbalance has become increasingly evident in trade, capital flows, technological capabilities, military power, academic wattage, and access to resources. It is evident also in the diplomatic heft that comes with initiatives like the Belt and Road, the softening posture that Donald Trump displays to Beijing, and China's success in converting rocks in the South China Sea into military bases — new facts on the ground that no one dares challenge.

The popular narrative just now is that India's international profile has improved because of Narendra Modi's personalised style of diplomacy. That is as it may be, but it does not take away from the hopeless imbalance in bilateral trade with China, the colonial structure of such trade (export raw materials, import finished goods), the inroads that Chinese companies have made into Indian markets, the international transport linkages that China has built to gain access to resources like Central Asian gas, the trends in currency values, and China's geographical outreach into the Indian Ocean. In military terms, the last five years have seen the Indian navy add all of eight major combatant ships, while four older ones have been decommissioned. China, in contrast, has added more than 30 such ships, of which about a third or more are with its southern fleet. India still imports most of its air force planes while China is developing its own fifth-generation fighter. In Tibet, China's building of railway lines and roads has dramatically improved its capabilities for rapid military mobilisation and mobility; Indian catch-up efforts are as slow and patchy as ever. While India's defensive posture on the land border is still credible enough to be a deterrent, the vulnerabilities exist. Meanwhile, all of India's larger neighbours have stronger trade and also military ties with China than with India. Few things can be more galling than China building a highway and pipeline through Indian territory in Jammu and Kashmir. All of these underline India's lack of relative power.

The standard response for a country faced with such power imbalance is to seek partners or allies. But countries acting in concert (as India and the US are doing to track Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean) rarely manage a credible response to the assertion of raw power. If one recognises that India's most recent economic record has put an end to hopes of game-changing action, it is all but certain that the inequalities vis-à-vis China in technological and institutional capabilities will become ever more manifest. At some point, the perception of India as a counterpoise to China will lose credence. New Delhi's strategists should either accept that eventuality, with all that it implies, or up the game through real change and not just bombast or posturing.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

**A case for dehyphenated liberalism**

Liberal on society and economy, uncompromising on national security.
Downside: Will be trolled by both, Left and Right

Canada's young prime minister and global liberal star, Justin Trudeau, first made the term "hyphenated liberal" popular, even if he was using it in a limited way to rally together his party men, divided among many factions, each linked to a leader whose ideas it followed, notably Jean Chretien and Paul Martin. I am, therefore, claiming authorship, at least in our domestic context, to the idea of dehyphenated liberalism. If liberalism means viewing ideas, issues, people with an open mind, can it survive being qualified with a hyphenated allegiance?

Left and Right will only be the two broadest choices, with "centre" thrown in for the lazy and indecisive. In India, it could also be a liberalism drawn from the gentler socialism of Nehru, deeper pink of Indira, a kind of saffron pink (yes, such a thing exists today) of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya.

Or you can pick one of a hundred choices. Start on the left: From widely respected social scientist Partha Chatterjee, who found Gen. Rawat "echoing" Gen. Dyer, and then put our liberal commitment to a higher test by insisting that the tribal states of the northeast and Kashmir were India's colonial possessions — the northeast, a bequest from the British; and Kashmir, a conquest of our own — never mind how the Constitution defines the republic (republic as in the nation, not the TV channel that claims to speak for it).

Or swing all the way to the right, and join Tarun Vijay of the RSS, who fights for Dalit equality in temples, and wants the Delhi Golf Club de-licensed and converted into a cultural centre for the northeast because of its racist insult of a Meghalaya tribal. Never mind again that his own ideology is engaged in a brutal campaign to deny the same ethnicities their normal food (beef for northeast tribals) and the same Dalits their living, leather, and shoe-making. More contemporarily, you could also be judged depending on whether or not you went to the Jantar Mantar protest, or used the hashtag #NotInMyName. Both of which tests this writer fails.

Labels are chips on our shoulders. The heavier the label, the greater the burden, and it makes it that much tougher to keep open minds, or, if you do, answer searching questions. "Why do you keep switching sides? Can't you decide which side you are on? Why are you being a weathercock, or, more apt and contemptuous in Hindi, a *thaali ka baingan*" (shifting sides like a baseless brinjal on a plate)? You can hear it from the Left when you praise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reformist move in selling off Air India, after attacking him and his ideology over beef-lynching. Then, from the Right, when you condemn an Army major's use of a human shield after a track record of muscularly backing India's case on Kashmir with few ifs-and-buts. How can you be with India and not the Indian Army? Or questioned by even the Centre, when you call that Rawat/Dyer comparison a flaky clickbait. How dare you, when you know the scholar's reputation?

There are simple answers to all three sets of questions. First, just as two wrongs don't make a right, a dozen wrongs do not so erase a right so you can't refuse to accept it exists. Second, supporting your country and its Army doesn't mean you unthinkingly back the constitutionally illegal and militarily immoral action of one of its officers out of tens of thousands who would never do such a thing. And third, what has reputation got to do with facts? And if an intellectual's reputation was to justify shutting the rest (ok, the lesser ones) out of the debate, it isn't liberal. You might still insist that it is, but find a hyphen to fit your definition.

Much has been written and debated on these issues globally. The rise of Trump, Brexit and the fear of Le Pen, and the further radicalisation of the counter, as in Bernie Sanders' Democrats and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour also find a parallel in the Modi-Shah BJP shifting to harder saffron nationalism and its rivals to sharper, hyper-liberalism. One side, therefore, will lock up JNU students allegedly shouting "*Bharat tere tukde*" slogans with



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

sedition charge, while the other would land up on their campus in their defence. The result: The former wins. The loser is the liberal Indian, who believes in individual freedoms, to shout slogans as much as to disagree with them. Also, that these freedoms are best protected if my republic and its Constitution remain intact. Further, that use of force to protect both is legitimate and also a moral responsibility of a duly established constitutional state. Annihilating a Maoist hideout (as in Odisha last year) would therefore be applauded, as the killing of Burhan Wani, but use of a non-combatant Kashmiri as human shield would be contested, as use of sedition law against slogans.

Significant works have emerged lately bemoaning the end of the liberal era. Fareed Zakaria foresaw the shift ("The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*) and another name we are familiar with, *The Financial Times'* former India correspondent Edward Luce (*The Retreat of Western Liberalism*) analysed what fuelled it, beginning with the failure of nearly two dozen democracies since the end of the Cold War, led by Russia. Turkey is headed there. American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff (*Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*) told us it was all attributable to the impatience of our times when attention spans are shorter, conventional narratives with beginning, middle and end are collapsing and we are all living in the present, though not in the way our meditation gurus would want us to. We are trapped in a continuous churn, having lost our ability to question or make choices. In such a frantic fix, it is tempting to pick the box that makes you most comfortable, and keep trading fire with those in the opposite box. The result, as with all trench warfare, is wide open space in the middle.

The landslide of Emmanuel Macron demonstrates how useful this open space can be, if you have the audacity to move out. At a time when *The Guardian*, that final defender of left-liberalism, is breathlessly celebrating the small gains of Jeremy Corbyn as having ended the Blairite notion that you had to move to the centre to win an election, Macron's rise, Trump's falling ratings, Angela Merkel's consolidation and regret over Brexit all prove that too much middle-ground has been abandoned, too lazily.

The Macron phenomenon has, therefore, added to our vocabulary: Radical Centre, muscular middle, and so on. Since Indian intellectuals traditionally borrow from the West, especially Europe, it will be tempting to limit the new debate to these new boxes, made of the same ideological ticky tacky, and the choices will still all look just the same.

Wisdom is sometimes found in unusual places. Like the mind of the copywriter who wrote e-Commerce brand Snapdeal's tagline: Unbox Zindagi. We Indian liberals need to unbox. To build an idea that's liberal on society, liberal on economy, uncompromising on constitutional sanctity and national security, accepting no "root-causes" excuse for terrorism or Maoist violence. Then you won't need to go to Jantar Mantar or promote hashtags to prove anything, to either side. May I suggest a mission statement for this dehyphenated liberal: The Left thinks I am Right, the Right thinks I am Left, so I get trolled by both.

Twitter: @ShekharGupta

The complicity in murder

AL FRESCO

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Exactly as predicted by the weather office, the monsoon hit the capital on Wednesday afternoon. What was entirely unexpected was the crowd that descended on Jantar Mantar to join the "Not In My Name" protests in response to Facebook posts by documentary filmmaker Saba Dewan. As the clouds opportunely rolled back for a while people kept pouring in, my phone buzzed with social media alerts and messages from colleagues, friends, and neighbours on their way.

The gathering was neither politically orchestrated nor pro-

pelled by fury. The numbers were not as many as the city saw during Anna Hazare's anti-corruption campaign or the Nirbhaya gang rape but even a few thousand was large for spontaneous word-of-mouth outreach. There were some well-known lawyers, activists, and performers on stage but not, as some cynically suggested, more journalists present than protestors. I encountered people of all age groups and backgrounds. Arogyan Kumar, a middle-aged office worker, came by Metro from Gurgaon, "*kyonki daftar mein do din se is meeting ki charcha hai*" (there has been much talk about this meeting in my office for two days). Mohd. Vakil, a college student, confidently sporting his skull cap, came all the way from Modinagar with classmates. "*Sif Junaid ki yaad mein*," he said simply (we're only here in Junaid's memory).

Unlike Mohd. Akhlaq's lynching in Dadri or Pehlu Khan's in Alwar on false allegations of storing beef or trading cattle for slaughter, the 16-year-old Junaid Khan was brutally stabbed in full public view, in

front of his siblings on a train, for no other reason than he went shopping for Eid. That the cold-blooded murder took place on the outskirts of Delhi was made more horrifying by the complicity of two Delhi government officials who egged on his killer.

Ms Dewan, who organised the Jantar Mantar meeting, is not a street agitator, she says. "The tipping point came with the lynching of Junaid...[he] was just a child....and got killed by a mob near Delhi, my city. You become complicit in this violence by keeping quiet. I didn't want to be complicit in this. We can't wait for an eternity to protest."

As the "Not In My Name" call spread to other cities via the simple and speedy tool of social media, devices that the prime minister and his government relentlessly use for puff jobs and self-promotion, their complicity in the humiliation, intimidation and targeted killing of Muslims gets darker by the day.

It has been the gloomiest Eid in memory. In official circles the festival is marked by a series of *iftaar* dinners, with political

leaders competing to outdo one another by hosting lavish feasts to break the day's fast. Far from doing so, not a single member of the Union cabinet attended the President's *iftaar*. In Lucknow, the saffron-robed Muslim-baiting Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath broke from precedent and followed his leader Narendra Modi by failing to host one; he also pointedly skipped the governor's *iftaar*. "He should have been courteous to attend it. It has been a long-standing tradition," the imam of Lucknow's *idgah* remarked. In the city that epitomises an embedded syncretic culture of *Ganga-Jumna tezheeb*, the omission was a deliberate insult.

A repudiation of the most important Muslim festival is one thing but the terrifying roster of hate crimes against Muslims another — their numbers have soared since Mr Modi came to power and growing in BJP-ruled states. In a recent piece on the shape of India's political landscape to come, the historian Ramachandra Guha says that though the BJP juggernaut may be unstoppable, "it has not been able to suppress either reasoned debate or independent documentation and analysis ... In

society at large, tens of millions of Indians remain committed to an idea of constitutional patriotism that is steadfastly opposed to Hindutva. These Indians do not want their country to become a Hindu Pakistan. They do not want to be told what to eat, how to dress, whom to love and whom to vilify. Seventy years of independence and of life under the Constitution have led to the inculcation of mores and habits that run against the grain of authoritarianism and majoritarianism".

The crowds collecting in cities this week in stunned sympathy for an innocent teenager's killing could snowball; a trickle could become a flood that the BJP's masterful managers might find hard to contain.

Mindful of this Mr Modi took to invoking the Mahatma, spinning the *charkha* at Sabarmati ashram and denouncing cow protectors that Mr Guha calls "*gau gundas*".

But before the country's saffron-tinted map becomes a taint, Mr Modi has to demonstrably prove that he means what he says, and that his cohorts in New Delhi and party faithful in the states are not complicit in foul murders.

Sangh ideologue Rakesh Sinha, whose repeated nightly appearances on various news channels are one of the abiding mysteries of our times, claimed that the protests were a Pakistani ISI-created effort to defame India; Rajya Sabha member Swapna Dasgupta suggested that it was a case of sour grapes because the protestors no longer enjoy the fruits of Congress power. I know I'm supposed to use words, but I think an eye-roll each will do.

A *Huffington Post* editor wrote that focusing on beef and Muslims only helps Hindutva, to which I'd respond that it is possible to be so over-clever and over-tactical that you can lose sight of certain simple truths. In this case: Killing people and terrorising minorities are illegal, anti-Constitutional, and morally maggoty, and this country's government has been complicit in its silence, its inaction, and its rhetoric.

I hope there will be many more such citizen protests, most of all by rejecting hate and sticking up for each other's constitutional rights in our daily lives. It matters, when Constitutional values face marginalisation, not to let volume and numbers make you second-guess your true North. Because that is how a country loses itself.

Walk the talk, Mr Modi

INTER ALIA

MITALI SARAN

On Wednesday evening, thousands of ordinary Indians put on their shoes, maybe grabbed an umbrella against monsoon rain, and walked out of their houses, carrying placards and wearing black armbands. In a dozen cities and towns across the country, they peacefully protested against murderous mob hate, and the government's silence.

On Thursday morning the Prime Minister finally found it in him to comment on cow terrorists, after nearly a year and two dozen lynchings. He said that the violence saddened him, and that killing people in the name of *gau*

bhakti was unacceptable.

Coincidence? Maybe, maybe not. But while the perceived causal link might gratify #NotInMyName protesters, we would do well to put the PM's reaction in perspective.

First, Mr Modi's single past admonition to *gau rakshaks* had no discernible impact. Either he doesn't have the clout everyone thinks he has, or he hasn't really meant it. Talk is cheap, meaningful action quite another thing. Second, Mr Modi is more likely to be eyeing Dalit voters in the upcoming Gujarat elections, than a few thousand marginal libertards. Third, his popularity has largely withstood domestic criticism, so the protests may not have moved him — though the government is tetchy about international press, so it could be that merciless coverage of his silence in *The New York Times*, the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, the *Washington Post* have stung him into speaking.

And what did he actually say? I am unconvinced by what many are calling a firm, sincere speech. He said that the Mahatma wouldn't approve of the killings, and also that nobody talked more about

cow protection than the Mahatma, which strikes me as conveniently fork-tongued. He didn't mention the lynching victims, not even 16-year-old Junaid, whose recent murder galvanised the protests. He wondered what we have become, but let the question hang. (The answer is: A society where hate and violence can proceed with impunity, because they are constantly excused and justified in the fraudulent name of public sentiment.)

He played the angry philosopher, not the steely administrator. It was *deja vu* all over again — and there was, of course, the supreme irony of beholding the ideology that backslaps Nathuram Godse, shooting from Mahatma Gandhi's shoulder. As various Twitter wags have pointed out, the Mahatma might have shot back — "not in my name".

Unless the BJP seriously follows up on law enforcement — no small task — and on a rhetorical makeover, this will just be an instance of making the right noise to pacify critics while winking at the hate-mongers.

I hope for, but don't expect, any change in BJP politics. Just hours

before Mr Modi's speech another man was lynched near Ranchi, and there will no doubt be more killings because, as *The Telegraph's* Friday front page so eloquently showed, we aren't supposed to kill in Gandhi's India, but then we live in Mr Modi's India. We have to hope that the PM means business this time, but until we see a serious systemic effort to curb violence, Mr Modi is not walking the talk.

What is important, and heartening, about the #NotInMyName protests, is that finally citizens stepped up to fill a shameful moral vacuum. They found their moral compass and stuck to it, despite a truly stupid effort — predictably from the Right, but also from many others — to scorn and discredit the protest. What's to scorn — the assertion that lynching is horrifying and must stop? The refusal to accept or ignore tides of blood? Does the fact that only a few thousand people protested make the protest ridiculous, or is it an ugly comment on our society? What does it say about India that a protest against murder is controversial?

Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Emergence of post-apocalypse TV

EYE CULTURE

VIKRAM JOHRI

I must have something to do with the ground-shifting changes being witnessed in Western politics, for what else can explain the sudden rise of post-apocalypse TV? From 3% and *The 100* (both on Netflix) to *Incorporated*, now running on AXN, content writers on television are taking the idea of a ravaged world and what becomes of it very seriously. (Maybe the thumping victory of French President Emmanuel Macron in the parliamentary polls will give them pause.)

In *Incorporated*, climate change has destroyed the world, rendering large parts underwater or unlivable. What is left has been divided, in a common enough conceit of this genre, into the Green Zone, where a tiny minority of the rich and the lucky lives in a bubble of extreme luxury, and the Red Zone, where numerous others are forced to eke out a meagre existence.

Ben Larson (Sean Teale) is a fast-rising executive at Spiga, the kind of multinational corporation that, Google-like, preaches no evil but whose size and scale bestows on it absolute powers. A thoroughgoing resident of the Green Zone, Ben is married to Laura (Allison Miller), a plastic surgeon whose profession allows the show's writers to meld the search for physical beauty with that society's classist heart. Laura has a strained relationship with her mother, Elizabeth (Julia Ormond) who, as Spiga's head, happens to be Ben's boss.

In most series of this kind, the central character, by dint of hard work or ingenuity, overcomes his straitened circumstances and rises to the top only to find that he hasn't truly escaped his past. Ben, born and raised in the Red Zone, witnessed his father's suicide, but was saved by a mercenary who spotted the boy's talent for manoeuvring the latest technology with ease.

But Ben's past is more tangible than a mere backdrop to his present: He is haunted by dreams of Elena (Denyse Tontz), his childhood love who is now a sex worker at the Executive Club, where the top bosses of Spiga let their hair down.

This premise set, *Incorporated* gets its main characters to effect a series of actions and reactions that they hope will get them what they want. For Ben, that means rescuing Elena, even if that risks playing havoc with his marriage and career. Teale (who you may remember from *Skins*) is fantastic as the conniving, often ruthless strategist whom you nonetheless root for, given his backstory. His willingness to sacrifice his supe-

rrior is matched by his tenderness towards Theo (Eddie Ramos). Elena's kid brother who struggles to make ends meet in the Red Zone.

Villainy is never exciting unless it is layered. Ormond is slick as the corporate honcho whose ability to swat professional irritants sits nicely with her concern for her daughter who has untreated trauma that the series has thus far only alluded to. The cat-and-mouse game between her and Ben, ably choreographed by Spiga's security head Julian Morse (Dennis Haysbert), will get viewers to keep tuning in.

While it perfunctorily warns us the ill effects of climate change, *Incorporated* points to that other rolling issue of contemporary society: Corporate control. The public-spirited organisation exemplified by Silicon valley has transformed into something less peachy. Antitrust authorities are back in the news as Amazon continues its plans to dominate every aspect of retail. Edward Snowden may have become a distant memory but there remains little clarity on how much information tech giants are willing to pass to government.

Furthermore, events at Uber have raised concerns about workplace culture and whether the new-age organisation, founded on brilliance and rolling in money, might lack the checks and balances that an older, slower system had in place.

Incorporated brings all of these doubts to light. Spiga is not just an MNC with great power; it has replaced government altogether. Together with its competitors, it controls the few resources still available to be sold to the highest bidder. Absent all regulation, it is the beneficiary of a libertarian paradise that today's Silicon Valley stalwarts hanker for.

Worse, its transformational reach is built on a tech nirvana whose blinding brilliance hides a dark secret. Every aspect of its employees' lives is tracked, including their dreams, but what is more surprising, if not entirely unexpected, is that the participants are more than happy to oblige because the alternative is the dank Red Zone.

It is in precisely portraying how bad and, at the same time, how inescapable the situation is that *Incorporated* succeeds. Spiga may be despicable but it is also essential, providing an ideal worth striving towards. The show is set in 2074 but some of Spiga's messaging is instantly recognisable: It offers itself as the inevitable solution to a problem it played no small part in creating.

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