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There's no grand conspiracy

Mamata Banerjee must review her pro-minority policies

As many as 11 incidents of communal flare-ups in 10 months do not cover any administrator in glory, and if it happens to be in West Bengal, a state which has been free of communal clashes in the past few decades, the questions become all the more important. While the administration is struggling to bring the violence under control in Basirhat that started on July 2, questions are bound to arise on whether some of chief minister Mamata Banerjee's decisions have contributed to preparing the ground for communal tension.

After the verdict in 2011 proved that Muslims decisively swung away from the Left in the favour of Trinamool Congress, the Bengal CM decided to woo representatives of the minority section with sops, a move which attracted criticism. She announced honorariums for imams and muezzins and homestead land for imams. The measures met with criticism not only from the saffron camp, but also from politicians, academics and the intelligentsia. They argued that such steps would disturb the delicate social balance between the two communities. In April 2012, less than a year after coming to power, the government announced a monthly allowance of ₹2,500 for imams. Later an amount of ₹1,000 was also announced for muezzins who deliver azaan. The court disapproved of it, describing the step as unconstitutional. In the past few years, the CM braved all criticism by being present in all religious gatherings. Her opponents accused her of being unduly soft towards the minorities. Impressions also gained ground that the administrative machinery was soft towards the Muslims.

This was utilised by her opponents to create the impression that she did not care for the majority religious sections. On Thursday, locals vandalised the house of the local Trinamool Congress MLA and a former popular footballer, Dipendu Biswas, in Basirhat, and also a ruling party office. Only a year ago, he won by 20,000 votes in the assembly polls. In North 24 Parganas district, the TMC trounced opponents in 27 out of 33 constituencies. In Bengal she has 211 MLAs in a house of 294. It is not difficult for the chief minister to understand where her magic failed. She should not blame everything on a class 11 student, or on 'conspiracies' against her government.

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SHREYAS NAVARE



Modi has laid the groundwork for businesses to engage with Israel

The PM's visit will give India's private sector the confidence to do work in the country and W Asia

PR
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How does one read the three-day visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel? Both before and during the visit there has been a running commentary in the media, which leaves little to interpretations and assessment. The announcement of direct flights and multiple visas for longer duration would help those who commute between the two countries. Modern India continues to remain an enigma to much of the Israeli public, and if structured properly, the cultural centre should take them closer to the contemporary landscape than the romanticised version of ancient Bharat.

Recognising the value of symbolising in their societies both Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu went out of their way to make one another comfortable and at ease. Though both the leaders have met in the past, this was their first working meeting. If Modi charmed the ordinary Israeli by taking the time to visit 11-year old Moshe Holtzberg (who survived the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai) and Netanyahu was with Modi throughout the time, overlooking some of the serious challenges facing his coalition.

This bonhomie was clearly reflected in the joint statement. Both are committed to raising the bilateral relations to 'strategic partnership' but avoided spelling out the details. Though food security, namely cooperation in agriculture, water, desalination, water management and cleaning the Ganga were referred, the details are missing. Out

of the seven agreements, five are Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) whose effectiveness would be tested when they are implemented on the ground. While terrorism figured prominently, both followed the traditional template. India has a qualitative edge over Israel in space technology, and this is reflected in the three MoUs signed on behalf of Isro.

Both countries are committed to the 'reinforcement and expansion' of existing cooperation in agriculture, and in practical terms, this would mean a quantitative change. For example, currently, Israel has established 17 centres of excellence in India and hoping to expand it to 25 within the next two-three years. This is a sizeable number for Israel but a drop in a bucket in the Indian context. The transformation has to be quantitative but cannot be carried out only by the government, but by private companies and parties.

The real impact of the visit has to be located elsewhere. Political hurdles and uneasiness marked the bilateral relations both before and after normalisation. There were no bilateral problems or disputes between the two countries but their different worldviews and India's desire to accommodate third parties, namely, Palestinians, Arabs, and Pakistan, in that order, has limited its ability to pursue an independent policy towards Israel.

Normalisation partly reduced this but it did not remove the political hesitation. This is more visible in the bilateral trade and reluctance of Indian business houses to engage with Israel even on a commercial basis. Many of the business 'giants' are concerned that their limited presence in West Asia would be hampered by the Israeli 'connections' and possible sanctions and boycotts. Their unfamiliarity with the complex and changing West Asian dynamics only make matters worse.

By his visit to Israel and de-hyphenating



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attend an Innovation Conference with Israeli and Indian CEOs, Tel Aviv, Israel, July 6

REUTERS

Palestine from India's West Asia policy, Modi has mowed the grass, as they say, and created a level playing field. Whether it is defence or cyber security, India's private sector will have to take the lead. The initial signal was the signing of deals worth \$4.3 billion in the first meeting of the CEO Forum. The size might look small, but it is worth noting that the total bilateral trade is just over \$5 billion and is dominated by the diamond trade.

While preparing to be a facilitator through visa, flight, and other economic opportunities, Modi puts the private sector as the prime force behind the bilateral relations. This is in line with the de-centralisation of the bilateral relations since the mid-1990s when much of the focus moved away from the national capital

to states and from political issues to economic development.

By 'normalising' Israel within India's West Asian interests and policy, Modi has done the political work and signalled a warmer political climate vis-à-vis Israel. He has used his charm offensive to reach out to the ordinary Israeli and the local media, which normally cover local and sensational issues. The result: Local media devoted considerable space to Modi's visit. The murmurs against Netanyahu spending the whole three days with Modi were also far limited by Israeli standards. Now it is up to the business communities of both the countries to take things forward.

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SUNNY HUNDAL



There's a lot going for a multi-cultural family

The British adoption agency should not have objected to a Sikh couple's desire to adopt a white child

Let me briefly tell you a story about a British Indian man from London. He can speak Hindi, watches Indian films and stays on top of news from the subcontinent. For most of his life he dated women of Indian origin and expected to marry one. Then one day he met a woman from Mexico, fell in love, and two years later they were married. As you have probably figured out, that man is me.

This column is not really about me, but there is a reason I brought that up. This column is actually about a Sikh couple in Britain that caused a national uproar last week. Sandeep and Reena Mander lived in a nice house just outside of London, with a stable income and good jobs. Like many other couples without children, they applied to adopt a child and give an orphan a home. That is when their problems started.

The local officials denied their application. "As only white children were in need, white British or European applicants would be given preference, meaning they were unlikely to be selected [as parents]," they told the media. In other words, the couple were too brown to adopt a white child.

From one perspective this makes sense.

Why shouldn't orphaned children go to a couple of the same background? That makes it easier for them to grow up while learning about their heritage and background.

But it also makes no sense. Isn't it better for an orphan to find a loving and stable home than wait for a couple of the same background? Is the child worse off being alone, or growing up in a different culture? Naturally, the Mander family is taking them to court.

But such kind of taboos against inter-cultural, inter-racial and inter-religious mixing are common in our society. The Hindustan Times reported last week that a hotel in Bengaluru had denied a room to a mixed-religion couple from Kerala. The hotel denies it, but we know this is not unlikely. Great Britain and America have laws against such discrimination because it was so common.

People are right to say that mixed-families are hard work. But they are also easier than most people assume. I had never met a Mexican person before my wife and knew very little about their culture. But it turns out they love eating spicy food, they love big families, they love dancing and they are quite religious. Sounds to me like a typical Indian family. We had a reception where the bride wore



Is the child worse off being alone, or growing up in a different culture?

SHUTTERSTOCK

a Punjabi lehnga, and a wedding party in Mexico where the grandfather of the bride danced to bhangra and the Indians ate tacos (basically, daal and chawal wrapped around in a roti).

It's not that I think culture and religion are irrelevant, neither do I judge anyone for marrying someone of the same background. Some traditions have a lot to teach us and our shared histories are indeed important. But the people who say it's important we preserve our traditions never truly explain why. As one of my favourite comedians, Vir Das,

PEOPLE SAY THE ONLY THING CERTAIN IN LIFE IS DEATH. BUT TO ME THAT'S ONLY A PART OF THE BIGGER PROCESS. THE ONLY THING CERTAIN IS THAT EVERYTHING WILL EVOLVE AND DIE, JUST AFTER PASSING ON ITS GENES TO SOMETHING NEW

likes to point out, sati was also part of Indian culture. Was it worth preserving that? Of course not. Culture changes, it evolves, it never remains the same. It's the same with religion. People say you can't pick the best bits of religion — you have to choose one or the other — but why not? Most of us already pick and mix the bits we like.

But what about the kids? Well that's easy. They can learn about two cultures instead of one. They can learn Spanish as well as English and Hindi. No one loses out if an Indian orphan is raised by white parents, or some Sikh parents raise a white child to learn Punjabi. All that matters is they provided a loving home.

People say the only thing certain in life is death. But to me that's only a part of the bigger process. The only thing certain is that everything will evolve and die, just after passing on its genes to something new. Something more beautiful than before. So why are we fighting against inter-mixing when it's the basis on which humanity has thrived?

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The views expressed are personal

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ANIRUDH BHATTACHARYYA



It's time Donald Trump went on a digital detox

By the time you read this, the American President has probably set up another tweetstorm in a covfefe cup.

Hello buttons, meet the twitchy fingers of the President of the United States. With every new tweet, he uses the medium to either massage his own ego or as missiles against the media and other assorted enemies, including many, who in previously traditional times, may have fallen in the friends and allies category.

You'll rarely get a mundane tweet from the latest occupant of the Oval Office. As Canada celebrated the 150th year of its confederation on July 1 (and in keeping with the national ethos, marked it with apologies), Trump wished, "Happy Canada Day to all of the great people of Canada and to your Prime Minister and my new found friend @JustinTrudeau." Trudeau, who shared little with Trump barring the first three letters of their names, responded on America's Independence Day, with, "Wishing

@POTUS and all Americans a happy Independence Day! #happy4th." The younger leader may be expected to be more comfortable with social media, but his official feeds often read like distilled press releases. Somewhat like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's, Trump uses the platform to brandish his blandishments. Modi's posts, meanwhile, are bland, often reading like a veritable timetable to anniversaries — births, deaths, independence days; it's like he put his calendar on autopost.

Like it or not, Trump captures (more fittingly, perhaps, holds hostage) the essence of this medium, as it has evolved during its existence, as it hits the 11 year mark next Saturday. Agents provocateur prevail; snark replaces substance. It reflects our times, as dialogue has given way to diatribe.

The media is among Trump's favourite targets, obviously and that attitude appears to be reaching overseas, as French President Emmanuel Macron opts to skip a traditional Bastille Day press conference as apparently his "complex thought process lends itself badly to the game of question-and-answer with journalists."

But Trump is at a different level of invective. A creature of the media, he knows how to play it, by inflaming it. Twitter is Trump's weapon of mass distraction, its range amplified by the incensed. I don't follow him on Twitter but haven't missed a single manifestation of this incendiary device he has used to deflect attention from matters a little more pertinent like the wrangling within the ranks over healthcare or tax cuts. My hunch is Trump is using this mode for tactical strikes.

That interplay has added to the acid rain of angst that already makes for a wasteland, where courteous conversations rarely bloom. It isn't just Trump alone: Perfectly reasonable people, in person at least, turn into trolls.

A digital detox is necessary to get all that bile out. But under the MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL system (Trump's capitals, not mine), cleansing the body politic of the collected toxicity won't get on the schedule any time soon.

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The views expressed are personal

Yoga and meditation can help us make the right choices in life

innervoice



Sarbari Sen

Every human being aspires to establish herself and be successful. The struggle lies in the definition of the word success, and the confusion within is to understand the real meaning of being successful.

Definition of success varies with each individual. Many perceive it as the glitter and glamour of wealth, while some think it is inner gratification. The dilemma begins when an individual fails to synergise her own feelings of contentment and happiness with the generalised social per-

ceptions of success. Then begins the rat race to acquire, hoard, prove and sustain. This leads to inner conflicts. The mind becomes perturbed and unhappy.

However, positive thinking is easier said than done. Life will give us obstacles and failures. We have to understand that life is a mix of good and bad. Positivity means to think right and to act right.

Positivity comes through practice. Yoga and meditation aids positive thoughts and guides us towards right actions. This results in happiness. If all human beings follow their conscience, there will be no place for hatred, jealousy and crime. Every individual will dwell in peace and bliss. This planet of ours will be a far better place to live in.

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