



## A dangerous turn

The West Bengal government should urgently restore law and order in North 24 Parganas

Political violence is commonplace in West Bengal, where every level of elections is fiercely contested. Over the last three years, however, the escalating violence has entered more dangerous terrain, with a marked increase in communal tension and rioting. On July 2 in Basirhat, an inflammatory Facebook post, allegedly by a 17-year-old, provoked a round of wanton violence orchestrated by some radical Muslim outfits in the North 24 Parganas district. While the person was arrested quickly, the State government displayed a lack of resolve to immediately halt the protests that led to blocked roads, an attack on a police station, and vandalism of shops and houses in Basirhat and nearby areas. Paramilitary forces were finally deployed by July 4, returning a degree of calm but only after the damage had been done. Soon, accusations and recriminations followed as the BJP sought to make this a case of minority-led communalism while the ruling Trinamool Congress complained that the BJP was fanning communal tensions. The politics spilled over into a needless spat between Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi, attended by allegations and name-calling. Rather than personalise and politicise a meeting between constitutional functionaries to extract political mileage, Ms. Banerjee should have shown greater initiative to defuse the situation by tackling the violence firmly and bringing to book those responsible for the acts of arson. The incidents in Basirhat seem eerily similar to what transpired in Kaliachak in Malda district in January 2016. Then, too, the State government had not shown alacrity in ending the violence, or acting against those responsible for it.

Such communal violence is not common in West Bengal, which makes it all the more worrisome. The State had largely escaped the communal trouble that erupted in many parts of North India during the run-up to and in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. In terms of political discourse, the contestation between the Congress and the Left Front, and later with the TMC, was mainly on the basis of class politics or patronage. Ever since the Muslim peasantry, especially in southern Bengal, abandoned its support for the Left Front – a fallout of the anti-land acquisition agitations in Nandigram and Singur – the TMC has worked assiduously to consolidate its support among them. But it has done this by blatantly pandering to conservative and reactionary sections among Muslims, in the hope of earning the community's support. Such an approach is exactly what the BJP, which was once electorally irrelevant in the State, feeds on in order to frame its own polarising narrative. From all accounts this has worked, as the party has grown into something of a political force in the State. Some of West Bengal's districts have been hit particularly hard by the increasing hold of sectarian politics, which risks turning the State into a communal hot spot. Steps must be taken to urgently reverse this trend before further damage is done.

## Divided island

The UN must quickly pick up the pieces to restart talks on the reunification of Cyprus

The failure in Geneva last week of a round of talks on the reunification of Cyprus is by all measures a huge diplomatic setback. This is not the first time the United Nations-backed dialogue between the break-away Turkish-Cypriot state in the north and the Greek-Cypriot Republic of Cyprus has been deadlocked. Even so, the current stalemate is disappointing as the prospects for a final deal had been pinned on the two interlocutors – Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akinci, his counterpart in Northern Cyprus. Both represent a generation that regards the *status quo* as an everyday reminder of the memories of partition of the island, whose combined population is just about one and a half million. The split took place in 1974 when Turkey invaded the north after an Athens-backed coup in Cyprus aimed at annexing the island. Among the main challenges the two leaders face is the demand for restitution of the property rights of the Greek-Cypriots who had fled the north in the 1970s. The establishment of an institutional framework to secure the interests of both ethnic groups is another. Nicosia's assurances of a rotating presidency between Greek and Turkish-Cypriots in a future federal union have not soothed anxieties in the north. Another challenge is Turkey's refusal to guarantee the withdrawal of its troops stationed in the north. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan insists on an indefinite Turkish military presence on the island.

The record of stalled negotiations, in fact, is almost as old as the 1974 partition. An early test of the diplomatic and political resolve to reunite the region was the 2002 Kofi Annan plan for reconciliation. Its terms were rejected by Greek-Cypriots in a 2004 referendum, which coincided with Cyprus joining the European Union. Voters had counted on the increased leverage EU membership would allow them *vis-à-vis* the north. On the other hand, the Turkish-Cypriots had ratified the Annan plan overwhelmingly, sensing enhanced prospects for a reunited island inside the bloc. The potential for reconciliation might also have been boosted by Turkey's bid to join the EU, which was then high on the agenda in Brussels. More than a decade later, a reunion seems to be as elusive as ever. Yet, the economic incentives for reunification have, if anything, become more compelling. A united Cyprus would allow both parts of the island to realise their immense tourism potential. The prospect of exploitation of offshore gas reserves in the Mediterranean too is something the two sides could then realistically set their eyes on. But the imperative is not just economic – a successful settlement would allow Cyprus to be more in control of its affairs, without both the sides being so reliant on neighbouring powers.

# Power games at the tri-junction

The current border stand-off suggests India is likely to become bolder in resisting the idea of power disparity



SHASHANK JOSHI

We should by now be accustomed to Sino-Indian summits occurring with the backdrop of border trouble, and Friday's G20 meeting between a smiling Prime Minister Narendra Modi and a less enthused Chinese President Xi Jinping was no exception. But the Doka La stand-off, at the southern tip of the Chumbi Valley where India, Bhutan, and China meet, is perhaps the most significant of all the border confrontations that have roiled the India-China relationship in recent years. This is not because of its size, dwarfed by the Sumdorong Chu crisis of 1986-87, or duration, still only a few days longer than the Daulat Beg Oldi stand-off of 2013. Rather, the importance of the incident is threefold.

### What it implies

One factor is the unique position of the Chumbi Valley, which is at once a dangerous conduit into the slender Siliguri Corridor and a dangerous choke point, exposed on both sides, for Chinese forces. A second factor is that this tussle is formally over the interests and rights of a third country, Bhutan, echoing the wider competition for influence in smaller countries – Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and elsewhere – across the Indo-Pacific region. Third, the stand-off comes in a period when it is clear that the wheels are coming off the India-China wagon, with Indian trust in Chinese intentions collapsing



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steadily and Beijing taking an ever-more strident tone.

At the military level, India has good reason to prevent Chinese road building near Doka La. Chinese activity has steadily increased in the area beneath Bhutan's claim-line, pushing the area under its de facto control about 5 km southwards, towards a crucial ridge-line. This has a number of implications. It would widen the area of Chinese control in an otherwise very narrow valley, from around 8-9 km (Batang La to the Amo Chu river) to 12-13 km (Gamochoen to the river), thereby easing the logistics of moving large numbers of troops. Control of the dominating ridgeline would also give China a strong position, by some accounts even domination, over Indian posts to the west, and Bhutanese ones to the south and east.

India is still well short of matching the impressive infrastructure development in Tibet over the past decade, with two-thirds of sanctioned roads on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) still un-built. But Chinese forces moving through the Chumbi Valley – 90 km from top to bottom – would have long, exposed flanks. India has a formidable set of forces arrayed to the

west, with mountain divisions in Gangtok (17th), Kalimpong (27th), and Binaguri (20th) further to the south, all of which are part of the Siliguri-based 33 Corps. Furthermore, the 59th division of 17 Corps, India's first mountain strike corps, raised for the purpose of offensive operations into Tibet, is headquartered in Panagarh and will reportedly be operational this year. It's worth noting that former National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon has argued, in his 2016 book *Choices*, that Beijing backed down in the 2013 Depsang incident "to a great extent because of India's improved capabilities, which left the Chinese in no doubt that India could embarrass them".

### The Bhutan advantage

Another of India's military advantages is its privileged relationship with Bhutan. This allows it to bring to bear large forces from the east. A sizeable Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) is permanently based in western Bhutan, while other units regularly cooperate with the Royal Bhutan Army. Bhutan's involvement highlights the way in which Sino-Indian competition is increasingly channelled through third countries, as China relentlessly expands into India's

periphery through strategic investments, trading relationships and arms sales. India's willingness to intervene forcefully in a bilateral Bhutan-China dispute is a reflection both of India's own vital interests in the Chumbi Valley and of its commanding position in Bhutan, which might otherwise have ceded the Doklam plateau to China in a territorial swap many years ago. The India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, though revised in 2007 to give Thimpu more autonomy, still notes that the two countries "shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests". In this sense, Bhutan is a special case. But in stepping across an international border and defying Chinese expectations, India has also signalled a degree of confidence that will resonate more widely. This in part explains the especially vituperative rhetoric that has seeped out of hyper-nationalist outlets like the *Global Times* in recent days, such as lurid promises to "liberate" Sikkim and Bhutan, as well as subtler steps such as this week's travel advisory for Chinese citizens in India.

There is a reasonable chance that this stand-off will end within weeks, with China quietly halting road construction and Indian troops returning westward to their posts. The risk of escalation appears low. More broadly, the thicket of border agreements accumulated over the past 30 years – in 1988, 1993, 1996, 2003, and 2013 – serve as an important cushion whose value is still not fully appreciated.

But the wider context is one of relentlessly hardening attitudes, on both sides. Beijing is aggrieved by the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang in April, India's aggressive repudi-

ation of the Belt and Road Initiative in May, and India's forward-leaning posture in the South China Sea – the latter underscored by Vietnam's two-year extension of a 2006 oil concession to ONGC Videsh last week. India's complaints are too numerous and familiar to elaborate, but they span international institutions (membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group), terrorism (Masood Azhar), sovereignty (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) and, in a more inchoate way, questions of the basic security order in Asia.

### Relationship in a flux

"India-China relations are undergoing a change," wrote former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran on July 3. "China believes that India should acknowledge the power disparity between the two sides and show appropriate deference to China." India has always repudiated this idea. But it is likely to become bolder in doing so. This is evident in last month's U.S.-India joint statement, where China was unmentioned but all pervasive in areas from North Korea, to trade, to freedom of navigation. It is on display in the Bay of Bengal, where one of the largest-ever iterations of the Malabar exercise series is getting underway with aircraft carriers/helicopter carrier from India, the U.S., and Japan. We see it also in this weekend's news, reported in this newspaper, that the government is conducting a national security review of Chinese investment in South Asia. Perhaps, in the coming weeks, 17 Corps will suddenly find that the purse strings have become looser too.

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# Building solidarity beyond borders

While reactionary forces in Sri Lanka and the region are networking well, resistance remains isolated



MEERA SRINIVASAN

Since 2013, Sri Lanka has been witnessing a spike in targeted attacks on the Muslim and Christian minorities by hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist groups. It began with a fringe organisation's campaign against halal certification, forcing shops to stop selling meat labelled for Islamic guidelines. A series of attacks on mosques and shops owned by Muslims followed. Within a year, violent communal clashes erupted in the southern coastal town of Aluthgama, killing four people and injuring nearly 100.

At that time the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa regime remained silent, leading many to believe that it was passively backing the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Power Force), a hard-line Sinhala nationalist organisation linked to the attacks. After Mr. Rajapaksa was ousted in the January 2015 elections, many Sri Lankans hoped that the newly-elected government would end such impunity.

Apparently it has not. Since April this year, over 25 attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned establishments have been recorded. Unlike Mr. Rajapaksa, President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have publicly stated that there is no

place for religious intolerance in Sri Lanka. Mr. Sirisena ordered a police crackdown on violence against minorities while Mr. Wickremesinghe vowed tougher laws against religious hate crimes.

However, the BBS's firebrand monk-leader, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, notorious for his inciting speeches, including the one believed to have instigated the Aluthgama riots, remains virtually untouched. In late June, the monk, who had been "in hiding" for a month, finally surrendered to a court only to be granted bail the same day. The BBS continues airing its very provocative views on Muslims.

There is no denying that it was the long-drawn-out silence of Sri Lanka's national leaders that made the politics of the BBS less of the fringe and more mainstream in the first place.

### Political context

It is also important to consider that whether in India or Sri Lanka, the intolerance that manifests in hate attacks is not unrelated to the religious-nationalist agendas of political parties currently in power. Elements within both governments can get away with expressing extremist ideologies, shared by some of the hard-line groups directly engaging in brutal violence. Also, it is well-known that the national parties bank heavily on extreme right-wing forces for electoral support.

Less obvious is the spontaneous alignment of many of the right-wing religious fundamentalists in



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both countries. Apart from agreeing ideologically, these groups appear to be vigorously networking among themselves.

At the height of anti-Muslim attacks in Sri Lanka in 2013, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) National General Secretary Ram Madhav, who was then the national spokesman of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), wrote in its publication *Samvada* that "the issues raked up by the BBS are worthy of active and sympathetic consideration". In 2014, Gnanasara Thero said discussions were at the "highest level" with the RSS on a Buddhist-Hindu 'peace zone' in the region to combat a "growing threat of radical Islam". Confirming that informal discussions were held with "a couple of people" in the RSS, BBS Chief Executive Officer Dilanthe Witanage told *The Hindu* last week that it is "high time we worked closely with the BJP and RSS." The BBS has also formed an alliance with Myanmar's 969 movement, a militant Buddhist group linked to anti-Muslim riots there.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad

(VHP) invited Sri Lanka's Northern Province Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran for the World Hindu Congress in New Delhi in November 2014. Addressing the conclave, the Chief Minister said that the difficulties faced by the Hindu community in the island had not ended after the war. That the Chief Minister decided to foreground challenges of the Hindus alone raised eyebrows, given that the Northern Province is also home to war-affected Tamils following other faiths.

In a separate development, a group of Hindus in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority north launched 'Siva Senai' in October 2016, describing it as an organisation that sought to "protect Hindus from threats of other religious groups". The RSS, the VHP and the BJP were "very supportive" of the move, its Chief Organiser told *The Hindu* at the time.

Last month, when the Sri Lankan police were searching for Gnanasara Thero, an organisation called the Hindu Mahasabha Loktantrik wrote to the Indian Home Ministry asking the Government of India to provide security to the wanted monk. Reportedly a new Hindu nationalist party, the organisation might be on the margins of mainstream Hindutva politics. But it is hard to miss how these so-called fringe elements embolden each other and are ever-ready to join forces.

### Faint reactions

While the religious right wing in the region appears to be networking

well, resistance to these regressive elements has been, at best, isolated.

Among activists and the intelligentsia, the idea of 'South Asia' appears confined to the conference circuits or infrequent, one-off protests. Barring a fading and questionable sympathy in Tamil Nadu for Eelam Tamils there have been few expressions of solidarity between the neighbouring countries in the last decade. The left, liberal civil society and public intellectuals seem to have been preoccupied with domestic challenges to the extent that they are seldom heard condemning violence or repression right next door.

The region is fraught with divisive hate politics, as is the world at large. The need for progressive voices to consolidate their disparate struggles is clear and urgent. Such a broad movement must not only transcend borders but also factor in the key material concerns of the vast majority of people, on which reactionary forces feed. Just as it takes hate politics head on, such a movement must speak to the economic insecurities of millions, or hawkish right-wing forces are waiting in the wings to politically hijack the cause.

In the era of charged activism on social media, dissent is often accompanied by individual self-righteousness. It is not the shrillness of opposition that matters, but its breadth, depth and consistency that makes a difference.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Raids and politics

After the raids by the CBI at RJD chief Lalu Prasad's residence, a piquant situation has arisen in Bihar. Rather than follow the BJP's suggestion of breaking away from the RJD, it would be more prudent for Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to drop the Ministers from the cabinet till they prove their innocence. It is a testing time for Nitish Kumar who is known for his honesty and being an astute and capable leader. One cannot forget that he has stabilised the law and order situation in Bihar which collapsed under the RJD's misrule. The State has also made strides in various sectors under Mr. Kumar's leadership. If the electorate hadn't placed its faith in Mr. Kumar, one wouldn't have had the result we saw in the Bihar Assembly election. As Mr. Kumar has also desired a strong opposition to challenge the BJP in 2019, he should remain with the 17

Opposition parties and present a united front ("After raids, BJP awaits big crack in grand alliance", and Editorial – "The waiting game", both July 8).

JAYANT MUKHERJEE, Kolkata

### China's moves

With its deep pockets, China is leaving no stone unturned to bring smaller nations under its influence. Though countries invest in other nations for economic integration and development in today's globalised world, in the case of China it is a ploy to systematically develop hegemony over the region and intervene in internal policies to its benefit. India might not have such resources at its disposal as China but its democratic credentials are an advantage. Chinese investment in the South Asian region has less to do with development and is more about asserting its economic supremacy and

singling out India in the region ("PMO, NSA tracking impact of Chinese FDI in South Asia" (July 9).

GAGAN PRATAP SINGH, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### Falling off the map

Goyara Mugali in Uttar Pradesh's drought-prone Bundelkhand region is a symbol of the callous neglect of rural India by successive governments. That even its historical significance could not attract governmental attention to its backwardness is tragic. It is a metaphor for rural resilience – about how the development-deprived rural populations fall back upon their resourcefulness and ingenuity to cope with existential struggles. It also typifies the existence of untapped rural sporting talent. That a self-trained coach such as Aftab could produce volleyball stars points to the wastage of India's sporting potential on account of official apathy.

The rural poor are still paying the price for the urban-centric developmental paradigm started by our rulers which modelled itself on the Soviet-style centralised planning that was ill-suited to a predominantly rural economy like India's. That was why Gandhiji advocated decentralised development with the village at its core. India's urbanisation may be irreversible, but it is worth remembering that the distress-driven rural to urban migration would not happen if even a fraction of the funds allotted for smart cities is utilised for providing basic amenities in the villages and for reviving area-specific economic activities ("Ground Zero" page – "A spike in the footprints of time", July 8).

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram

### Employees' rights

The unceremonious removal of an unidentified

IT employee at a leading IT firm major – and an incident which is doing the rounds on social media – is a grim reminder of the initial days of the industrial era. Have we progressed from the days of slavery and ruthless exploitation? Employees in the private sector seem to be devoid of any form of job security and appear to be vulnerable. Given these circumstances, why are managers resisting unionisation among employees to protect themselves from being exploited?

DR. D.V.G. SANKARARAO, Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

### 'Cut' practice

The practice of cuts and commission in the medical field has been reported for decades and we now have it confirmed ("Being" page – "Sordid practice, willing actors", July 9). There is also a possibility that the medical profession feeds unaccounted money into

the system, knowingly or unknowingly. Years ago, when I went to a specialist at his private clinic, I observed that he saw around 60 patients a day, charging each ₹300. Bills were provided only on request. While the working class is taxed at source, the system provides ample opportunities for some professions not to report their full income. In their defence, doctors may say that they have spent a number of years studying to become full-fledged doctors. Some may have even spent even astronomical amounts as capitation fees. If this is true, then the government is perhaps duty-bound to mitigate their grievances. However, the noble image of the profession shouldn't be sullied because of a few transgressions on their part.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

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BOOK EXTRACT

# Corruption in the era of liberalisation

With its tentacles spreading to every branch of the state, corruption's salience has never been higher



N. RAM

In 1987-1988, without much forewarning, we at The Hindu found ourselves in the deep end, investigating grand corruption of a kind that India had not seen before," writes N. Ram, chairman of Kasturi & Sons Ltd., and former editor-in-chief of The Hindu and Frontline, in his new book, *Why Scams Are Here to Stay: Understanding Political Corruption in India*. Drawing on the experience of investigating Bofors, modern India's defining corruption scandal, he throws a spotlight on the intractability of corruption – in its pervasiveness, omnipresence, and multifariousness – under the prevailing circumstances in India, which is to say that without making deep-going and radical changes to India's political economy it will not be possible to prevent and eliminate corruption. Yet, he argues counter-intuitively, combating corruption is decidedly a challenge of the here and now. An excerpt:



DEEPAK HARCHANDAN



**Why Scams Are Here to Stay: Understanding Political Corruption in India**  
N. Ram  
Aleph  
₹395

Gunnar Myrdal even came up with a 'sketch' of a theory of corruption in South Asia by offering some 'reasonable, though quite tentative' questions to be explored and hypotheses to be tested. These questions and hypotheses attempted to relate corruption in South Asian countries to general socio-economic conditions, to the stage of development, and especially to institutional and attitudinal problems. But Myrdal's sketch of a theory of corruption in South Asia was ahistorical in one critical respect: it failed to acknowledge the extent to which the colonial power had participated in and nurtured the corruption, and the conditions engendering corruption, that free India inherited. Interestingly, while Myrdal saw the presence of corruption in South Asian countries in somewhat static terms, as a legacy from pre-capitalist, traditional society, he related the increase in corruption to the processes of dynamic change in the social system, offering the insight that many of the changes that had occurred afforded 'greater incentives as well as greater opportunities for corruption'. Most significantly, he called attention to the active role of the business world in promoting corruption among

politicians and administrators. Socio-economically and politically, India is a very different country from the one Myrdal encountered during the decade he researched and wrote *Asian Drama* (1968). But his observation that many of the dynamic changes in the social system had enabled corruption on a bigger scale proved prophetic for the post-1991 era of economic liberalization and accelerated pursuit of neo-liberal policies. It is now well established that the facts of corruption, that is, its magnitude, spread, and effects in the polity and society, have increased exponentially over the past quarter century. While the folklore has kept in step, the anti-corruption arrangements and actions have been limping a long way behind. The problem in India, where moralistic approaches to corruption are common and often dominate public discourse, is that the gap between what the anti-corruption campaigners, many of them 'Gandhians', demand and what the polity and the legal system are willing and able to do is enormous. When corruption is not conceptualized soundly, in relation to socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, but is presented in overly simplified moral terms, analysis of its causes and effects tends to

go all over the place; and without accurate, theoretically sound and empirically backed analysis, prescription tends to be seriously flawed. The result is that anti-corruption institutional arrangements and actions habitually miss the mark; and mass campaigns against corruption, fuelled largely by moral outrage, make their contribution by raising the level of public awareness but are unable to sustain themselves beyond a point and fail to meet the lofty objectives they set themselves. The anti-corruption movements spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s and by Anna Hazare in 2011-2012 make the case strongly for the last point. The past decade-and-a-half has seen a spectacular outbreak of corruption scandals, big-ticket, medium-sized, and relatively small. With its tentacles spreading to virtually every branch of the Indian state and to key sectors of the economy, and to the news media, corruption's salience in India's political economy and public policy discourse has never been higher. **28 scams and counting** For the period 2000-2013, Sandip Sukhtankar and Milan Vaishnav, researchers in political economy, have come up with a shortlist of twenty-eight scams, involving hundreds of billions of dollars, from the lists compiled by five news outlets. They calculate that for this list of early twenty-first century corruption scandals, 'the mean scam "value" was Rs. 36,000 crore, and the median Rs. 12,000 crore. A major omission from this shortlist is Vyapam, the mega-

scam in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh. There was a time when the stock explanation for corruption in India was the 'permit-licence-quota raj' – virtually everything could be attributed to it. The prediction offered by a legion of neo-liberal economists and political theorists was that deregulation and liberalization would lead to the prevention, containment, and eventual elimination of corruption. Precisely the opposite has happened: liberalization has ushered in corruption in a much greater variety of forms and on an unimaginably greater scale than anything seen under the so-called licence raj. The interesting question is why and various answers have been put forward by scholars and policy-makers. The essential neo-liberal answer is that many vestiges of the licence raj remain, enforcement capacity is still weak, and the reform process needs to be given more time to bring down the level of corruption. The evidence clearly and decisively goes against such ideologically led reasoning that often sounds like casuistry. The real explanation for the exponential increase in corruption in the era of liberalization and high economic growth must necessarily be complex and nuanced and, as we will see, it is to be found deep in the heart and entrails of India's political economy as it has evolved over the past quarter century. The short answer to the question is that with deregulation and liberalization, the state has played a different kind of role to the one it played earlier, providing access to scarce public resources as part of a process of promoting private sector-led growth at any cost and supporting without inhibition the omnipresence and play of private interests within the public sphere; and there is plenty of evidence to show that corruption tends to be greater when pro-business strategies of governments bring on or facilitate crony capitalism and 'when there is a state-engineered redistribution of wealth in favour of a few and at the explicit or implicit expense of the many'. A political reckoning over burgeoning levels of corruption was due and it took place with a certain inevitability. Given the unprecedented levels of corruption witnessed over the previous decade, it was no surprise that the issue figured prominently in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and was responsible, in no small measure, for the rout of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance.

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

# Is artificial intelligence fuelling natural stupidity?

We are at a stage where the genial news environment committed to truth and public interest is under pressure



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

In 2012, there was an air of innocence when I took over as the Readers' Editor of this newspaper. Terms such as 'accuracy', 'fairness', 'authentic sources', and 'verification', and C.P. Scott's dictum "Comment is free, but facts are sacred" did possess a striking potential to keep journalism on the straight and narrow path. Algorithm was a part of mathematics and technology and it had hardly revealed its stranglehold on the information ecology. Artificial intelligence was a footnote. Albert Einstein's wry remark, "Artificial intelligence is no match for natural stupidity," was invoked sometimes to prove a point. However, the march of technology with its myriad participatory platforms, aided by people's desire to believe what they want to believe, has made the task of a news ombudsman difficult. Fake news, doctored videos, unsubstantiated inflammatory news content that further divide and polarise our society are increasing by the day. I am forced to think constantly of what new skills a news ombudsman must acquire to uphold the principles of journalism. While it is relatively easy to deal with the rancour that flows from ideological positions, it is an uphill task to address anxious questions from concerned readers who struggle to distinguish social media rumours from real news. **The ease of faking a news item** Two recent reports increased my apprehensions. "Slowdown in Software Central: Indian-Americans in the Silicon Valley" (Ground Zero, July 1, 2017) by Varghese K. George in this newspaper was an in-depth report on how automation threatens to alter the dynamics for all times to come. The article gave sufficient clues about the changing nature of the forces that control the information flow, and hence, the future of journalism as well. *The Economist's* report, "Fake news: you ain't seen nothing yet", published on the same day, was chilling. It was about how technology aids in generating fake audio and video reports that are convincing. The report was about the generative adversarial network (GAN), a type of artificial learning algorithm, which is used to create a fake clip without fiddling with editing or any other manipulations. It explained how fake audio creation

has become simple already and creating a fake video is well on the way to becoming child's play. While some experts feel that the day of fake YouTube videos is not very far, some feel it may take time. According to *The Economist*, it is only a question of "when", not "if". "We think that AI is going to change the kinds of evidence that we can trust," was the observation of one of the researchers interviewed by the magazine. There are multiple reasons to be alarmed by this spectre. We are already witnessing party spokespersons falling prey to fake news and displaying their ignorance during prime time debates on our television channels. Dubious forwards using social networking platforms like WhatsApp are on the rise. There is an exponential increase in the number of people who believe what is forwarded from their immediate circle of friends, relatives and colleagues. There are no trustworthy mechanisms to check every fake news, false catastrophe and phantom chicanery. *The Sunday Magazine* story, "On the origin of specious news" (July 2), profiled the fledgling fact-checking Indian website, 'Alt News', and brought out the multiple difficulties in checking the authenticity of viral videos. It read: "Tracing the origins of a widely circulated hoax can often be complicated. An image or video may not have been manipulated: rather, an entirely authentic piece of footage may be circulated under false contexts." The act of verification is central to journalism. But, what happens when that process is subverted by technology? Is journalism alone a victim of this subversion? What is the social cost? In his novel, *Murder and Walking Spirits*, Robertson Davies observed: "Always in history there are those who are impelled, by reasons they think sufficient, to ruin, in so far as they can, what patient, indefatigable warriors of civilization and culture have built up, because they value other things and worship other gods." We are at a similar cusp where the genial news environment that is committed to truth and public interest is under pressure. We need to acquire both the tenacity and the competence to confront the threat from artificial intelligence to retain the space for journalism as a common good. readerseditor@thehindu.co.in



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# Regulatory overreach

The European Union's fear of Google's market power is baseless

PRASHANTH PERUMAL



PIXABAY

The European Union (EU) last month slapped a record \$2.7 billion fine on search-engine giant Google for abusing its position of dominance in the market. It was found guilty of favouring products listed on its own price-comparison website 'Google Shopping', over those on competing websites. While the decision has gained the support of many who fear

Google's market dominance, the fine is still unwarranted. Downplaying products from rival websites does not sound pretty, but that is not enough reason to punish Google. All businesses enjoy control over how they make use of their resources, which in turn gives them the opportunity to discriminate against rival products often. Even local supermarkets, for instance, can decide to prominently showcase their own products over those of their rivals. The question is whether there is any economic case for regulators to set this practice right. The answer is 'no' for various reasons. One, businesses often have a valid economic reason to showcase certain products more prominently than others. Google, for instance, prominently lists products for which it receives money from advertisers. Advertisers are better targeted, so it helps consumers to find what they want sooner. Two, discrimination can often end up costing a business if there is no valid economic reason behind it. Google, for instance, would lose users to better search engines if its search results simply flaunt its own – but inferior – products instead of meeting the demands of users. In fact, Google in its defence has said that user experience is the reason it lists products from 'Google Shopping' at the top of its results page – as they require fewer clicks from users. **Not a legal monopoly** At this point, critics say Google is too big compared to its rivals, which in turn justifies corrective action by regulators. Google, with well over 80% of the market share in Europe's search engine market, is indeed huge. But it is not a legal monopoly, as anybody is free to compete against it. Barriers to entry in the technology market are usually low, so all it takes to challenge Google is the ability to offer a better product that consumers want. Some say that's an impossible task, but history proves that a free market can topple market leaders often. Microsoft, Yahoo, and even Google's own social networking site Orkut are notable big victims of competition. This is not to deny that dominant businesses can, at times, get away with their misdeeds temporarily. It could take time for substitutes to arise. But these costs are tiny compared to the perils of government regulation influenced by special interest groups. After all, it is well-documented that EU regulators are not apolitical. They have been under pressure from Google's competitors, as well as protectionist politicians who fear domination by American companies. EU's regulatory overreach is thus bad for innovation and consumers.



Jeshwan

CONCEPTUAL  
**Gambler's fallacy**

PSYCHOLOGY

A cognitive bias where an individual believes that an outcome is unlikely to happen because it has already happened a number of times in the past. It is considered a fallacy because the chances that a random event will occur in the future does not in any way depend on the frequency of its occurrence in the past. For example, a flipped coin landing "heads" up for 10 times in a row does not increase the chances of it landing "tails" up when it is flipped the next time. The probability of the coin landing either "heads" up or "tails" up is still 50-50.

MORE ON  
**THE WEB**

Ahmedabad has been declared a World Heritage City. A look at some of its famous monuments: <http://bit.ly/AhmedabadUNESCO>

SHELF HELP

# The unlikely auteurs

Blockbusters in which writers outshine everyone else

**HARI NARAYAN** What connects *Pyaasa* and *Sholay*, two films that would find a place in the must-watch list of any Hindi cinephile? One point where the two films converge is in the heterodox nature of their auteurships, a term we usually associate with a director with a unique personal vision. While for *Pyaasa*, a film considered the brainchild of Guru Dutt, the soul behind the film was its lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi, for *Sholay* it was the writer duo Salim-Javed. Sahir, Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar have been pioneers in their respective crafts, and this was not only because their aesthetic high-points; it was also because of the unique imprint they've left on the films. Nowhere does it become more apparent than in the *Pyaasa* chapter of Akshay Manwani's *Sahir Ludhianvi: The People's Poet* and the *Sholay* chapter of Dipakirti Chaudhuri's *Written by Salim-Javed*. The former,

titled 'The Lyrical Platinum Standard', illustrates how the character of the disillusioned poet Vijay is a screen representation of Sahir's own inner self. Vijay, a poetic chronicler of poverty, much like Sahir himself, is berated by his prospective publisher for not being romantic in his verse. Sahir's anti-war poem, *Parchaiyaan*, is recited by one of the characters. Almost every scene where Vijay appears is infused with Sahir's poetry. Two of the film's best songs – *Jinhe naaz hai* and *Ye duniya* – were written before the music was composed, a trademark in many of Sahir's films. The first was borrowed from a poetry collection called *Talkhiyaan*. However, unlike the lead character Vijay, Sahir found full recognition following the film's release, his name being used to promote the film even ahead of those of the lead actors and S.D. Burman, the music director.

Manwani calls it a victory not only for Sahir, but also for those who value "words in a song" more than "melody". **By the dialogues** The *Sholay* chapter of Chaudhuri's book begins with the movie's incubation – the writer duo selling their four-line plot to the Sippy for ₹1,50,000. It describes their involvement in every stage of the film's making, from ideation to casting to publicity to release to post-release management. The one point that's enough to highlight their calibre is that they made the lead villain, Gabbar Singh, the most indispensable character of the film. Another selling point for *Sholay*, much after its release, remained its dialogues. Polydor, the audio label, packaged them in 15 different records, making them a bigger money-spinner than even R.D. Burman's soundtrack.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 10, 1967

# No agreed formula on Assam yet

The two-day session of the all-party conference on the reorganisation of Assam State ended here [Nedw Delhi] to-day [July 9] without arriving at any agreed formula. The 12-member committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Asoka Mehta, set up by the conference which met again this morning [July 9] reported to the conference its failure to evolve an agreed solution on the basis of the discussions yesterday [July 8] at the conference. It was resolved that the committee should continue its deliberations and report by the end of August to the Government.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 10, 1917

# Mr. Gandhi and his dress.

Mr. M.K. Gandhi writes to the "Pioneer" as follows: I have hitherto successfully resisted the temptation of either answering your or Mr. Irwin's criticism of the humble work I am doing in Champaran. Nor am I going to succumb now except with regard to a matter which Mr. Irwin has thought fit to dwell upon and about which he has not even taken the trouble of being correctly informed. I refer to his remarks on my manner of dressing. My "familiarity with the minor amenities of western civilisation" has taught me to respect my national costume, and it may interest Mr. Irwin to know that the dress I wear in Champaran is the dress I have always worn in India except that for a very short period in India I fell an easy prey in common with the rest of my countrymen to the wearing of semi-European dress.

DATA POINT

**Steady prices** Retail petrol and diesel prices in the four metropolitan cities have held steady after an initial drop between mid and late June, when the daily dynamic pricing system was extended to the whole country

