



Cinema & censorship

Sadly, the battle for free expression is having to be fought so often these days

In a system that sets much store by retaining the power to censor films in the name of certifying them, random attempts by petitioners seeking cuts or even a ban often add to the pre-release anxieties of filmmakers. While rejecting the petition filed by a person claiming to be the daughter of the late Sanjay Gandhi to set aside the certificate granted to *Indu Sarkar*, a film directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, the Supreme Court has rightly banked on a well-established principle that freedom of expression cannot be curtailed without a valid reason. It has reiterated that the film is nothing but artistic expression within the parameters of law and that there is no warrant or justification to curtail it. Earlier, the Central Board of Film Certification, which under its present director, Pahlaj Nihalani, has not exactly distinguished itself, had granted a certificate to the film after suggesting 14 cuts. The Revision Committee had reduced the number of cuts, leaving nothing to be adjudicated as far as the suitability of the film for exhibition is concerned. Yet, a single individual managed to create some uncertainty over the release of the film by approaching the courts. The film relates to events set during the 1975-77 Emergency and, going by the director's disclaimer, its factual content is limited to 30%. Apart from the expression of concern by some Congress functionaries, there was little to suggest that anyone would take seriously the claim that the party's leaders may be convincingly shown "in a bad light".

Recent experience suggests that the CBFC does not always see itself as a certifying authority, but rather plays the censor quite merrily. In the case of *Uda Punjab* last year, it was seeking to be the guardian of Punjab's honour against the depiction of the high prevalence of drug addiction in the State. The Bombay High Court had to remind the CBFC that certification, and not censorship, is its primary role and that its power to order changes and cuts must be exercised in accordance with constitutional principles. More recently, the CBFC sought to play the moral censor with regard to *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, a film it thought was too "lady-oriented" to be given a certificate, presumably because it depicts their fantasies. The Film Certification Appellate Tribunal had to intervene to secure the release of the film, with an 'A' certificate. These instances demonstrate that challenges to freedom come from both within the systemic framework and outside. It is a matter of satisfaction that the courts prefer to protect the right to free expression rather than entertain excuses such as maintenance of law and order and public tranquillity, or someone's sense of hurt or the fear of someone being portrayed in a bad light. It is disconcerting, nonetheless, that the battle for free expression is having to be fought so often these days.

The state's domain

The proposal to allow the private sector to run district hospitals has its risks

The potential of India's district hospital system to dramatically expand access to quality secondary and tertiary health care has never really been realised. The majority of patients today use the facilities created mostly by for-profit urban hospitals. That asymmetry could potentially be offset, though only in small part, through the proposal of the NITI Aayog and the Union Health Ministry to allow private entities to use the premises of the district hospitals to provide treatment for cardiac and pulmonary diseases and cancer. Viewed in perspective, a quick scaling-up of care for such non-communicable diseases is possible under the arrangement, because there are 763 functional district hospitals, with just five States led by Uttar Pradesh accounting for over 42% of the facilities. Yet, contracting out services in a virtually unregulated and largely commercial private system is fraught with risks. One major concern in such an arrangement is to ensure that the bulk of health spending, whether from government funds, subsidy or private insurance, goes into actual care provision, and that administrative expenditure is capped under the contract. Moreover, in consonance with the goal to provide health for all under the National Health Policy, care should be universal, and free at the point of delivery. A market-driven approach to providing district hospital beds for only those with the means would defeat the objective.

Providing 50 or 100 beds in a district hospital may expand access to care, but such arrangements do not offer a cure for the larger problem of the growing non-communicable disease burden. Lifestyle choices and social determinants, such as tobacco and alcohol use, and environmental pollution, are often linked to such diseases. Controlling the epidemic, therefore, requires other policy approaches too. Given the already high prevalence of cardiac and pulmonary conditions, some arising from diabetes and hypertension, and cancers, having more beds for treatment is a necessity. It is incongruous, however, to opt for contracts of 30 years, given the move towards achieving universal health coverage and, aspirationally, a single-payer government-led model that mainly relies on public facilities. Strong oversight is also necessary to ensure that ethical and rational treatment protocols are followed in the new facilities, and procurement and distribution of drugs are centralised to keep costs under control. Ultimately, the success of such systems depends on medical outcomes on the one hand, and community satisfaction on the other. Both dimensions must find place in a contract, and be assessed periodically. A provision for audits, penalties and cancellation of contracts is essential. Given the recourse to tax funds for viability gap funding and use of public infrastructure, the operations should be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The curious case of Nitish Kumar

As the opposition parties become empty and enervated, the BJP's majoritarianism sounds more authoritarian



SHIV VISVANATHAN

Jayaprakash Narayan must be turning in his proverbial grave wondering what is happening to Bihar and his beloved socialism. After the Emergency, socialism as a brand name got associated with two political figures who dominated the Bihar landscape. One was Lalu Prasad, who covered up the politics of corruption as the politics of cornucopia. The other was Nitish Kumar, who played the politics of resentment and responsibility, creating not music but the ritual of musical chairs as politics. Between the two, socialism degenerated to populism and post-Emergency hopes became a set of electoral gimmicks.

Mr. Prasad and Mr. Kumar have almost become folklore characters of Bihar politics, enacting out a Punch and Judy routine which seems unbelievable. They seemed doomed together but often built divorce as a part of a dynamic relationship. Mr. Prasad was always closer to the Congress, considering it another family party. Mr. Kumar, portrayed as single and singular, was more prone to flirt with other political possibilities. Despite their socialism, despite the populism, both loved power. It was the one aphrodisiac that kept them going. A party without power was subject to impotency. A party without power lacked patronage, and without patronage the multiplier effect of corruption wouldn't work.

There was a difference in style however. Mr. Prasad was more preoccupied with power to help him play welfare state to his ever expanding family. Sometimes with his association with the likes of



RANJEET KUMAR

Sadhu Yadav and other criminal elements, one wondered whether there was a clear line between crime and politics. The taint of corruption has always haunted Mr. Prasad as he turned politics into an act of conspicuous corruption. What redeemed him at least to some people was his commitment to secularism and identity, which the likes of himself and Mulayam Singh Yadav were like a halo in national politics.

Obsession with power

While Mr. Prasad's was a blatant politics of revelry, there was something calculated, almost repressed, with Mr. Kumar. He seemed obsessed with power, narcissistic about his image, paranoid about survival. It is almost as if every move of his was tactical, even fighting corruption. Apart from Narendra Modi, one cannot think of anyone more preoccupied with power and retaining power. He wanted to be a national leader, but Mr. Prasad was more effective as a vote-catcher. There was a sense of being second, even secondary, to Mr. Kumar's career in front of the likes of Mr. Prasad and Mr. Modi. They were more colourful personalities. His dreams of governance were no match for Mr. Modi's. His popularity lagged behind Mr. Prasad's. Psychologically all this must have rankled. In fact his curriculum

vite shows that this opportunistic politician was a master at playing the shifting sounds of politics. Mr. Prasad got it wrong when he complained that Mr. Kumar has slapped the nation. Rather than being "anti-national", he was loyal to himself and that seems the ultimate patriotism of electoral politics today.

His career of twist and turns is amazing. He appeared as a JP-ite socialist, an uneasy twin to Mr. Prasad, in the mid-1980s and switched towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a decade later. During the Vajpayee regime he was a cabinet minister, content to be second or even third fiddle. In 2005, he became the Chief Minister of Bihar with the BJP's support. In 2013 he broke his alliance with the BJP. In 2017 he has abandoned his dreams of a Mahagathbandhan and done another Ghar Wapsi, back to the BJP fold.

What opposition?

One thing is clear in the ensuing war of words. The old idea of opposition has been blown to smithereens. Nitish Kumar's chances of being elected as an opposition candidate seem over. All in all, it was like a B-grade movie with predictable lines and without the Bhojpuri cameos that would have at least provided musical or comic relief. Watching Mr. Kumar's

body language, both his desperation and his opportunism are obvious. The attention is back on him, and he is ready to script a new role for himself. One thing is clear, he hates being left out of power or history. Conscience, loyalty and patriotism are casualty words in this game of politics. He realises that he is condemned to being a medium-level Machiavelli in the age of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. He senses that his days creating an opposition Camelot are over, that no one takes the idea of the opposition seriously. He now understands it cannot be his next vehicle to national politics. He himself admits a reactive opposition is no opposition. It has neither vision, mission or even the makings of a strategy. At one level, one feels Mr. Kumar has added a sense of cynicism to politics. At another, one senses his hormonal need for power, his desperate need for centre stage. His current tactics have been exhausted. His desperation is the fable of the Opposition's desperation as the Modi juggernaut rolls across India. There is joy in the Modi camp as Mr. Kumar's decision becomes "the need of the hour". Somehow clichés and crises seem wedded together in India. It is obvious that elections are not around the corner. Mr. Kumar's alliance with the BJP will rule till new options become available.

The so-called Nitish Kumar saga has to be seen as a fable of the opposition letting down the people. As one watches the Opposition, one senses desperation. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam look outdated. M.K. Stalin appears like a local politician out of his depth. Sitaram Yechury looks tired, like the ideology he espouses. Mamata Banerjee is too worried about West Bengal and Gorkhaland to worry about a nation. The Congress's standard one-line remarks move between the cryptic and the un-

aware. It is almost as if the dissipation of the Congress has caught up with the opposition. One can sense the desperation of Mr. Kumar as he sees any viable future disappear before him. To survive, he chooses second-best. The BJP must be chuckling to itself wondering how Bihar or Tamil Nadu are falling into its basket like ripe mangoes. All it has to do is to continue behaving like a party whose time in every sense has come. Mr. Kumar's options are limited. He can stay in power but is beholden to a party which understands his only loyalty is to power.

The BJP juggernaut

Bihar today exemplifies the meaning of a word which is wonderfully appropriate to it. It was coined in the Second World War as an acronym by soldiers forced into futile errands. The word is SNAFU and it means Situation Normal, All Fouled Up. Bihar is a mess such that no one seems to be bothered. Nitish Kumar, Lalu Prasad, Tejashwi Yadav, all seem to be symptoms of the ailment we call electoral democracy. Each of them has decided that what is personally good for them is good for Bihar. The hypothecation of Bihar to greed, pomposity and ambition seems complete, and Mr. Modi, quick to exploit the situation, hails it as a patriotic act. It is almost as if the opposition died its numerous deaths this week, recognising the prospect of facing the BJP juggernaut is futile. As parties become empty and enervated, the BJP's majoritarianism sounds more and more authoritarian. The so-called Mahagathbandhan has destroyed the dreams of JP, content to be knee-jerk in its commitment to democracy. Musical chairs is the new ritual of electoral politics.

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Not just a question of weeks

Parliament needs to take up the long-pending bill on updating provisions for abortion



SATVIK VARMA

On Friday, the Supreme Court of India declined the abortion request of a 10-year-old rape survivor who was reportedly 32 weeks pregnant. Doctors who examined the adolescent opined that an abortion at this stage posed a risk to her life. Under the circumstances, the court could not have done much else. But this decision must be looked at in contrast to the recent landmark decision by the Supreme Court allowing an adult mother to abort her over-20 week foetus. The top court's decision was not the first time that it had made an exception from the existing law. Like always, it relied on a report of a medical board which said that the infant was likely to suffer from a severe mental injury or cardiac problems that would require multiple surgeries. As is evident, leniency is not always extended from the existing legislation.

An arbitrary cap

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act stipulates a cap of 20 weeks within which an abortion can be performed. While advising an abortion, medical practitioners are expected to evaluate whether continuing with the pregnancy

would involve a risk to the life of the mother or cause grave injury to her physical and mental health. Alternatively, the decision is based on whether there would be a substantial risk of the child being handicapped by physical or mental abnormalities. Notably, the Act also provides that if any of these medical eventualities is likely to arise, then the mother's actual or foreseeable environment must also be taken into consideration.

The 20-week cap is somewhat arbitrary and has drawn rightful criticism. Foetal impairments often get detected at the ultrasound done between 18 to 22 weeks, when the foetus is said to have "substantially developed". But in a country where a majority of expectant mothers still seek advice from midwives and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), ultrasounds are only done when something "unusual" is suspected. Perhaps taking note of this, the government, in 2016, launched the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan under which doctors at private and government facilities are required to provide free antenatal care on the ninth of every month. While ultrasounds are also covered, some ASHAs report that free ultrasounds are often not offered.

In fact, even before this programme, the government, in 2014, introduced the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill. A step forward, it proposed increasing the abortion ceiling limit



from 20 to 24 weeks. It introduced the concept of "substantial foetal abnormalities" - in which case the time period of pregnancy is irrelevant - and widened the scope of who could carry out the abortions by introducing the term "registered health care provider", which included recognised practitioners of Ayurveda, Unani and homoeopathy.

Unfortunately, the Bill is still awaiting approval. The Prime Minister's Office is reported to have returned the proposed amendments and called for stricter implementation of the law. It believes that amendments to the Act are likely to give rise to illegal sex selection and abortion rackets.

Downside to legal restrictions

In contrast, the World Health Organisation notes: "Legal restrictions on abortion do not result in fewer abortions nor do they result in significant increases in birth rates. Conversely, laws and policies

that facilitate access to safe abortion do not increase the rate or number of abortions. The principal effect is to shift previously clandestine, unsafe procedures to legal and safe ones. Restricting legal access to abortion does not decrease the need for abortion, but it is likely to increase the number of women seeking illegal and unsafe abortions, leading to increased morbidity and mortality. Legal restrictions also lead many women to seek services in other countries/states, which is costly, delays access and creates social inequities."

The WHO report also says that "laws and policies on abortion should protect women's health and their human rights. Regulatory, policy and programmatic barriers that hinder access to and timely provision of safe abortion care should be removed." While at present, petitions questioning the constitutional validity of the Act are pending before the Supreme Court in India, in the past, provisions of the Act have been held to be reasonable restrictions placed on the exercise of reproductive choices. The court has observed that in the case of pregnant women, there is also a "compelling state interest" in protecting the life of the prospective child. Therefore, the termination of a pregnancy is only permitted when the conditions specified are fulfilled.

But from a women's rights perspective, should not a pregnant mother have the right to decide

whether to go through full-term when there is even the slightest chance of a foetal infirmity and not "substantial foetal abnormalities"? It is fair to state that no woman who voluntarily chose to get pregnant is likely to seek an abortion unless there are compelling circumstances. Should not the wishes and desires of the person who will be the caretaker be considered?

Abortion the world over is a sensitive topic. Arguments cut both ways. Each country has its own time limit within which the pregnancy may be terminated, but in most cases it's more than 20 weeks. Given the advancements in medical science, a lot of abnormalities can be determined by an ultrasound midway through a pregnancy. Unfortunately, there appear to be no guidelines relating to the conduct of ultrasounds. As a starting point, we need uniformity in medical standards. Simultaneously, the long-pending Bill, which took into account some of the changed circumstances, needs to get passed. It would be helpful alongside to also lay down objective standards to be followed by health-care providers so that every case does not fall in the court's cradle. If the cord isn't cut, we will continue to rely on court-ordered termination of pregnancies, which, most times, is not the desired route for the delivery of justice in abortion cases.

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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.

Fission in Bihar

The various comments by Central and State leaders of the now defunct 'grand alliance' in Bihar, though diametrically opposing, have one thing in common. Namely, they all interpret the same 'mandate of the people' and politicians' commitment to the State. These, by all means, are in tune with our corrupted and criminalised politics of the day. Ideally, whatever people voted for, a split in pre-election alliance, whether ruling or Opposition, indicates a loss of the mandate or the need for a fresh mandate for the particular combine. Creating post-election political groups for power-sharing does not have voter consent. The absence of purposeful laws to ensure adherence to the above will of the people is a challenge to the common man. The continued public demand

for legislating on a 'recall of elected representatives' is being ignored by political leaders and parties. Perhaps, only the Election Commission and/or the Supreme Court can save the situation.

P.R.V. RAJA, Pandalam, Kerala

The drama enacted by Nitish Kumar and the BJP is not the first instance of its kind that has tarnished the fundamentals of Indian democracy. In a coalition, there are bound to be internal troubles. When the Mahagathbandhan was formed, Mr. Kumar would surely have been aware of the corruption charges haunting Lalu Prasad. And the people of Bihar voted for an anti-BJP alliance. We have not forgotten that it was the same Mr. Kumar who led the Janata Dal (United) away from the BJP as he had problems with Narendra

Modi being the prime ministerial candidate and the party's communal slant. If Mr. Kumar was deeply dissatisfied with his coalition partners, he should have dissolved the State Assembly and gone to the people for a fresh vote. His act now shows that his "resolve" to ensure a corruption-free State and his commitment to secularism are just matters of convenience.

S.K. KHOSLA, Chandigarh

The sudden turn once again impels us to question the suitability of coalition politics in India. That the coalition between the JD(U) and the RJD - which seemed to be a cordial alliance till yesterday - suddenly becoming an alliance of discomfort for the JD(U), demands a clear explanation. The new former Deputy CM of Bihar

was never asked to resign by Mr. Kumar despite allegations of corruption against Tejashwi Yadav. In such circumstances, it becomes difficult to believe that the CM had to resign only because of hardships faced in working with a corrupt coalition partner and waging a war against corruption. At the same time, it drives home the perception that the new coalition in place is more of convenience than one of honest politics. Despite the RJD having more seats in the Bihar Assembly, it was the JD(U) which was allowed to lead the government. Though not written explicitly in the Constitution, such interpretation of the Governor's discretion in selecting the CM needs a relook. However, this debate is not unique to Bihar. If the new alliance was formed to keep the public's trust in the

government intact and serve the people better, there were other means to do so, one of them being the former Deputy CM's resignation. After all, isn't changing political partners frequently by a ruling party in itself a betrayal of the trust of the public? We need a conclusive solution to this problem before it starts getting replicated elsewhere.

NIKITA GOYAL, New Delhi

State of the Railways

The CAG report's findings on the state of the Indian Railways are no surprise to frequent travellers. Making ideal regulations on paper without strict monitoring on the ground are as good as

having none. Due to the substandard quality of food supplied, passengers are compelled to buy food from unauthorised vendors. However, looking at the report as a guide to improve will do little good. Making trains free of illegal passengers itself will cut the burden of railways by a large amount. Help centres at each station where complaints can be registered regarding any substandard service, while on board and their immediate rectification, could be a step in this direction.

KIRAN BABASAHEB RANSING, New Delhi

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: The graphic titled "BJP - growing gains" (July 28, 2017) erroneously included Himachal Pradesh among the States where the BJP is in power.

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The making of American diplomacy

The Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. State Department trains the largest contingent of diplomats in the world. Varghese K. George spends a day with U.S. diplomats preparing to take up positions in India, and their trainers

Over the last three months, Phuong Nguyen has learned a lot of Tamil, a thing or two about Dravidian politics and has figured out why Kattappa killed Baahubali. She has watched the multi-language blockbuster *Baahubali 2* thrice. This afternoon, she and three other U.S. Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) learning Tamil at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) before deployment to Chennai are discussing the weather there, aided by a video clip of a weather report from a Tamil news channel. "Enakku veppam pidikkum (I like the heat)," says Greg Bauer, an Iowan who had earlier worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Cambodia. "In Chennai it is 105° (Fahrenheit) today," the instructor told him, in a promising tone, last week.

The contingent is relishing their Tamil films and can't wait to be in Chennai to test their language skills and smell the filter coffee. "He has even started teaching us lessons from the *Thirukkural*," Nguyen says of Pandiyaraju Arumugan, the Tamil instructor. "I have really enjoyed learning about Dravidian language, culture, and history," adds the fresh FSO recruit who came to the U.S. from Vietnam as a five-year-old. It helps that Arumugan, from Madurai, Tamil Nadu, has shrunk his Dravidian identity to 'Raju', in a concession to the American tongue. "Raju is wonderful and very open in sharing his wisdom and culture," says Nguyen.

Readying for the role

The FSI trains the world's biggest contingent of diplomats in a sprawling 74-acre campus in the suburbs of the U.S. capital, before they are deployed to the country's 270 missions around the world. There are 14,029 FSOs under the Department of State and thousands of others are drawn from other U.S. Departments such as aviation and agriculture for postings at diplomatic missions. The deployment of defence personnel attached to U.S. missions adds to it. The State Department does not release country-wise staffing details, but an official said "the U.S. Mission to India is one of our largest diplomatic missions in the world". The four officers in the Tamil class are new recruits, and by early next year, they will start working at the U.S. consulate in Chennai.

A few rooms apart, Michael Rosenthal is polishing his Hindi skills, aided by Pushpa Patel, the most senior Hindi instructor at the FSI's language school. Rosenthal will be heading to New Delhi next month as First Secretary Political at the U.S. Embassy. He needs a proficiency level that will equip him to converse with Indian politicians and parliamentarians. "Political officers need to not merely converse, but also have to understand the cultural universe," says Sandhya Thapar, another Hindi instructor. Visa officers learn the local language with a more functional perspective. Patel has trained dozens of American diplomats in Hindi since 1992 at the institute and at least four of them have risen to become U.S. ambassadors — among them, the current U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Atul Keshap.

Rosenthal has travelled to India once to attend a friend's marriage — growing up in Los Angeles, he made several Indian-American friends — and spent time in a houseboat in Kerala backwaters, but this will be his first posting in India. A fluent Russian and Polish speaker, he is amused by the similarities he is discovering between Hindi and European languages. More amused is he by the number of people that attend an Indian marriage. And he is yet to see them at the political rallies in India.

'Digital India ke Angute Chhap' — digital India's illiterates — is a Hindi news feature clip that he is discussing with instructor Patel this morning. India has more Internet users than the entire population of the U.S. but a large majority of them are barely literate in computer usage, he explains in Hindi after watching the clip.

India 101 and more

Comprehending Indian paradoxes such as these could be a lifelong exercise for anyone, but diplomats need to pick up some soft skills quickly before they hit the Indian road. Among them, how to wrap a six-metre piece of cloth called saree around your body; how to mouth a *golgappa* without creating a diplomatic crisis of sorts by splashing it all over at a social gathering. Eating with the hand, most of them master soon enough, but breaking a tandoori *roti* using only one hand is a steep climb for most, says Neeti Ahluwalia, another Hindi instructor. "That takes some teaching and learning," she giggles.

Instructors organise a *desi* cooking session at one of their homes during the course. "They go shopping for *desi* grocery, and each one makes a dish," says Vinod Kumar, instructor. Some develop a special interest in Indian cuisines. Matt Williger, now posted in the Mumbai consulate, supplied flasks of masala *chai* every day during the course to instructors and classmates. "He made the perfect masala tea... with ginger, cardamom and all the rest," recalls Kumar, an English postgraduate from Lucknow who now teaches Hindi.

Pictures of Chola Bronzes and Indian landmarks adorn the walls in language classrooms. "Those are too hard for



Diplomacy at work: "The FSI trains the diplomats in a sprawling campus in the suburbs of Washington before they are deployed to missions around the world." ■SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



them at the beginning," Thapar says of the *Panchatantra Kahaniyan* on the shelf. "Learning begins with simple words — *kalam* (pen), *kitab* (book), etc."

Instructors warn India-bound diplomats that at times, even a minor mix-up in pronunciation could turn a polite intent into unintended addition of spice into the talk; and that for some words and phrases, English would serve better than Hindi or Tamil.

The institute has four schools — language studies, professional and area studies, applied information technology and leadership and management. Depending on a particular diplomat's forthcoming posting, they undertake a bouquet of courses picked from multiple schools. For instance, the group headed to Chennai has already spent a few weeks learning about South and Central Asia in the School of Professional and Area Studies, before they moved to the School of Language Studies. They will also undergo some training specific to their next role — for instance, those who are taking up a consular job which involves visa interviews get that training. Between two postings diplomats come back to the FSI — to learn a new language, a region or both. For someone like Rosenthal, who is prepping for his fifth tour in foreign service, and having worked on the India desk at the State Department, only language training is required. This is his third long-term stint at the FSI since 2007, learning Hindi for the last nine

months. "The concept is to provide training continuously. We try to keep a balance between high academic standards and professional training," says Kiran Pervez, South and Central Asia (SCA) Studies Course Chair. India comes in the SCA region.

Offering a 'lived experience'

"Bahut achha (Very good)," says Rosenthal of his learning progress. "Lekin shikshak nahin maanti (But the teacher does not agree)," he adds quickly, pausing for Patel's response. But she doesn't take the bait. With the non-committal Indian streak that Rosenthal will encounter at closer quarters in the coming months, Patel declares: "Next month is his exam." Yes, they do take a language test to ensure the required level of proficiency for the next role.

Stereotypes are an entry point to discussions on India and South Asia, and Pervez makes it a point to have a session with a South Asian-American stand-up comedian for each batch. "Visa jokes and wife-and-husband jokes from the region often provide insights into South Asian societal make-up," she says. "To begin with, some are very surprised to learn that all Indians are not vegetarians. The range of knowledge of those who attend these courses vary. Some know very little, some like Mr. Rosenthal know much more than us," says Ahluwalia.

Area studies and language classes both run with the objective of familiarising India and the region as a "lived experience". Strategic issues related to the region are introduced through talks by outside experts, some of them talking to the officers through Skype from the region, and also through interactions with State Department's own desk officers dealing with a particular region. Pervez

invites South Asian film-makers and writers to talk to South Asia-bound diplomats, and stories of the Partition make a lasting impact on most trainees. Pervez shows part of an Indian film during lunch break every day, finishing one over several days. Diplomats clamoured for an uninterrupted viewing of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, a poignant 2015 film set against the backdrop of India-Pakistan rivalry.

Language instructors relate learning to American cultural context. Erica Cover, the lone student at entry level, is into her fourth session of Hindi, preparing for an administrative job at the U.S. embassy in New Delhi. Her instructor Kashfa Nagameiea is excited about the strides that Cover has made already — letters, numbers up to 10 and days of the week, all in four sessions. Nagameiea, who came to the U.S. in 2004 from Mumbai, has devised unique memory techniques that are helping Cover. Budhvar (Wednesday) is associated with Buddha — the most famous Indian for many Americans, certainly before Narendra Modi. What follows is Guruvar (Thursday) — as Buddha became a guru later, and guru is very much an English word. "Shukravar is Friday. *Shukriya* means thanks. So, remember TGI Fridays," she tells Cover, who is Nagameiea's fifth student since she started teaching at the FSI last year. "Hindi letters are very similar to one another and trying to distinguish each one is not easy," says Cover. She has just returned from Azerbaijan, and is excited

Visa jokes and wife-and-husband jokes from the region often provide insights into South Asian societal make-up.

KIRAN PERVEZ, South and Central Asia (SCA) Studies Course Chair



Future face: Helaena White is learning Urdu. She knows Tamil and Hindi. She will be the first full time Hindi-Urdu spokesperson of the U.S. State Department.

about being in New Delhi.

From Icelandic to Arabic, the school teaches 70 languages, among them Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bangla and Urdu. Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are the most sought-after languages. "Adult learners of a new language experience peaks and valleys. After the initial honeymoon, they hit a plateau. But then they motivate themselves," says Ann Keller-Lally, School of Language Studies Division Director. There are 700 language learners at the school currently, and the number goes up to 1,600 during February and March, the busy months.

Helaena White is learning Urdu — she already knows Hindi and Tamil — before taking over as the first full-time Hindi-Urdu spokesperson of the U.S. State Department. White will be based in London, and she will give interviews in Hindi and Urdu. Her job will be to "amplify the podium of the State Department spokesperson," she says. So, she won't be speaking only on South Asia, but on American policy anywhere for a South Asian audience. "It is not that Hindi or Urdu media platforms cannot translate what we say in English. It demonstrates the value that the U.S. puts in these relationships, particularly with India," says White. She has done a posting each in New Delhi and Colombo, and lived in Rajasthan as a Hindi student.

Selection and postings

Americans diplomats are drawn from diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds. Medical doctors, military veterans, lawyers and pharmacists apply for roughly 80 posts in each batch of FSOs. The selection could take place more than once a year. Around 20,000 aspirants compete through a written exam and face-to-face interviews before making the final cut. Some like Ashlie Menard — the third Tamil student — might have already worked for the State Department before being selected an FSO. Rosenthal worked in U.S. Congress and was a Fulbright Scholar in Russia before he joined the foreign service. He

has a master's from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC.

While filling in the form, aspirants tick their preferred streams — political, economic, public diplomacy, administration and management or consular. Most part of their diplomatic life will be spent in their chosen field.

Rosenthal is a political officer, but he spent one tour in Kyrgyzstan, the first former Soviet republic where the U.S. set up a military base, as a public diplomacy officer, often talking to students who shouted slogans against "American imperialism". He also worked on the NATO desk at the State Department.

All the new recruits spend the first six weeks at the FSI doing a common programme. At the end of six weeks, on a designated day, they get to know their first posting — which involves a lot of drama and excitement. First the names of the countries will be announced, to be followed by the names of diplomats assigned there. They will be handed over a flag of the country they are headed to. At times fiancées could end up oceans apart, at times one would be trying to hide their excitement about going to Afghanistan or Iraq from a spouse or a lover. Some don't share with their loved ones the preferences they have filled in for posting, apprehending pushback. "That day is intense," says Rosenthal. "Some are always looking for adventure, some are always nervous. So on that day, you might see someone who has just got Kabul all very excited, and someone who got Mumbai all very tense," says Pervez. Those who get English-speaking countries will leave within six months, while those who require language training will take up to a year before heading to their first post.

Subsequent postings for a diplomat are based on a match between available posts and the particular diplomat's inclination. Of the nearly 500 jobs available across the world this year, Rosenthal chose New Delhi. "So you are looking at different jobs and the embassy is looking at different people. It is mostly the diplomat's choice, but the embassy has to agree," he says.

The area studies classes usually end with a presentation by each of the outgoing diplomats. "Each one chooses the topic. Someone did one on Diwali releases in Bollywood last year, someone could do one on GST for instance," says Pervez. Holi, Diwali and Id celebrations have become a part of life in FSI. They learn about South Asia's unique notion of secularism, and about the religion of cricket, and gods such as Sachin Tendulkar. South Asia-bound diplomats also play some cricket on the manicured grounds of the FSI, not much appreciated by the estate manager who acquires flower plants from all over the world and nurtures them here with a lot of passion. "A diplomat is a diplomat 24 hours a day, all day of the year. So the training is aimed to equip them negotiate with a foreign culture with ease and comfort," says Pervez.



Putting her through her paces: "Shukravar is Friday. *Shukriya* means thanks....," instructor Kashfa Nagameiea tells Erica Cover.