

New product vitality index



AMBI M G PARAMESWARAN

Here is a quick question. What percentage of sales of your company comes from products [and let me allow you the freedom of including even SKUs] that have been launched by your company in the last five years?

You have your answer ready. Well, there is no perfectly correct answer. But 3M, which developed the concept of New Product Vitality Index [NPVI], claims that they average 30 per cent. That is, 30 per cent of the total sales of 3M in any year comes from new products that are less than five years old. Remember, 3M probably has well over 50,000 products in its armoury. And to hit this 30 per cent figure year after year, you can imagine the new product engine they have running.

Reports say that NPVI is one of the top three metrics used to measure research and development productivity in large corporations; it follows research and development (R&D) spends and R&D staffing. Almost 62 per cent of the companies measure Vitality Index, says the report.

In the book *Creative Confidence*, Tom Kelly and David Kelly speak about how design thinking can help companies fire up their new product engine. They should know. As the founders of IDEO, one of the world's most respected new product design consulting firms, they have played midwife to numerous new product concepts over the last two decades.

One of the fundamental ideas they speak about is the "Launch to Learn" concept. They suggest that instead of getting into endless debates and mind-numbing market research, companies should consider rapid prototyping, a quick launch and adapt from the learning. And most importantly, be ready for "fast failure". They say a "fast failure" is often better than a slow, energy-sapping death.

I suspect there is a hidden fear in this rapid launch process. A large packaged goods company, which was rated as one of the most successful new product machines, was also loudly criticised by experts for adopting the attitude of "launch it and leave it". Herein comes the question: If you rapidly launch it, how long should you wait for results? And when is it too early to pull the plug? And when is it too late? The answer is never simple and may not be applicable across industries and product categories.

Even the legendary new product behemoth Apple has had failures; the oft quoted example is their first handheld device, the Apple Newton. Did they kill it too fast? Would it have survived with some more love and care?

The process of new product development and vitality index measurement is somewhat better documented in the technology space. Does it apply the same way to the packaged goods sector? Or to services?

If you look at the phenomenal growth of Ramdev's Patanjali range of products, you can see the principle of "Launch to Learn" in practice. I am given to understand that Patanjali is capable of launching a new product, from concept to product in the market, in the span of a two months.

Compare this with the average time taken by a large multinational packaged goods company, and I suspect large, well-managed Indian companies may not be much faster, barring a few exceptions such as Amul and ITC.

R S Sodhi of Amul has gone on record to say that his organisation can hit the market with a new product just weeks after the idea is presented to the management.

Why is it so hard to rapidly "Launch and Learn"? First, there are manuals and complex processes laid down by most companies. How a new concept needs to go through various stages of testing and market research [the funnel, the stage-gate process etc]. This process itself could take six to nine months. After this is over, you get into the various product launch phases, design of packaging, marketing communication, sales force training etc. And you are already 12 months into the cycle. Finally, there is the problem of setting budgets for a new product. The give and take. The endless series of meetings. The fear of failure that permeates all departments that deal with new product development and launch.

How to change this negative psychology? Is a blind adoption of NPVI the magic wand? My humble submission is that it will backfire. Unless the overall organisational ecosystem is calibrated to encourage rapid launch, you may cause unnecessary mayhem. A few things can help — taking small bets, but many of them. This is one way of de-risking the company. Another idea is to reduce the stages of the new product research process. Why spend three months in doing this, if the end result is anyway subject to real market vagaries? Simplifying the packaging design and marketing communication is yet another step that can take a few months out of the launch cycle. Finally, organisations have to reward new product launches and not just successes. Having worked as a product manager for several years, I have seen how something that can be done in a few days becomes a month-long search. If the reward is for the launch, and not only for the success, you may actually start seeing a lot of new products hitting the shelves in rapid succession.

Yes, NPVI is a great measure. But you need to bring in vitality to product development and management first. Then start measuring the index.

The writer is an independent brand strategist, author and founder, Brand-Building.com, a brand advisory. The views are personal

When myth merges with reality

In trying to glorify India's past, the govt doesn't seem ready to address disturbing truths



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

My email inbox showed a message on the eve of Independence Day reading "Feel strongly about an issue? Have ideas & suggestions, which you believe have transformative impact? Share your inputs with the Prime Minister! Your inputs may find their way to PM Modi's Independence Day Speech!" I wonder how many of the millions of Indians who received that casual invitation — if it can be called such — bothered to respond. Or how much that was belted out from the ramparts of the Red Fort had been public contribution. A friend to whom I mentioned thinks

hordes of recipients would be immensely flattered. The invitation is shrewdly aimed, he said, at the level of intellect that is convinced Ram was of flesh and blood, born where the Babri Masjid once stood; that ancient *rishis*, who were skilled plastic surgeons, grafted an elephant's head on Ganesh's tubby body in some superbly equipped laboratory tucked away in the Tapovan forest; and that Karna, the tragic hero of the *Mahabharata*, had emerged from Kunti's ear. Surya had arranged this miraculous conception so that she remained a virgin.

Coming to our times, my friend cited a common acquaintance, who had taken part in a radio discussion. Since AIR contracts mention the President of India, rather in the style of passports, the man was convinced Pranab Mukherjee (this was before the present incumbency) had personally invited him.

Ours is such an intensely ignorant society that myth, legend and rumour become indistinguishable from reality. I remember a time in my pre-decimal currency boyhood when our neighbourhood was buzzing with servants' gossip that the rupee would soon have 20 instead of 16 annas. It had been announced in the papers, said our *mali* with utter conviction. My mother asked to see the

paper, which was promptly brought. The mystery was soon cleared. They had all been taken in by an advertisement, which promised 20 annas worth of satisfaction for every rupee spent on that particular product.

Such innocents are understandably excited when a message out of the blue tells them that Narendra Modi had said in his *Mann Ki Baat* programme, "On August 15, I get an opportunity to communicate with the country from the ramparts of the Red Fort. I am merely an instrument. It is not one single person who makes that address, but it is the collective voice of 1.25 billion of my countrymen that resounds from the Red Fort." This was followed with the injunction "Write to PM Modi through Narendra Modi App or MyGov & share your ideas with him now!"

"Why not?" I can hear recipients murmuring to themselves. "The PM wants your opinion *yaar!* He might even quote you!" Everyone likes flattery. Even astute statesmen can be taken in by gimmicks. Singapore's late Lee Kuan Yew told me that Jet Airways was one of the world's best because when he sat down in his seat on the Bangalore-New Delhi flight, he found the latest issue of *The Straits Times*, Singapore's national newspaper, neatly folded in front

LUNCH WITH BS ► VIJAY RUPANI, CHIEF MINISTER OF GUJARAT

Colleagues' envy, boss' pride

Very much the person next door, Rupani tells Aditi Phadnis why the 2018 Gujarat Assembly polls would be a cakewalk for the BJP and how the looming shadow of Modi is a blessing

If one were to be scrupulously honest, the encounter with Chief Minister of Gujarat Vijay Rupani is over a glass of water. Possibly due to a gap in communication, he disappears for lunch with party and ministerial colleagues and BS has lunch with his assistant. The lunch is tasty, very Gujarati, and interesting for the insights it gives into the CM's personality.

Chatting with Rupani is equally riveting — and entirely different from conversations I had with his predecessors. As chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi had explained with rare articulation over dosas, what his beef with the Planning Commission really was. Anandiben Patel's preoccupation (over tea loaded with sugar) was to outline her priority as chief minister (empowerment of women in Gujarat). Both are intense personalities and the intensity communicated itself.

By contrast, Rupani is laid-back and very much the guy next door, something his assistant endorses over lunch. Rupani has inherited his assistant from Bharatiya Janata Party President Amit Shah. Are Shah and Rupani very different in their working styles, I ask diffidently. The assistant guffaws as if to say "what a stupid question", nods vigorously and then realising he might say too much, clams up.

How lightly power sits on Rupani I have already found out. As we settle down to a conversation, I notice from the corner of my eye, a number of people entering the room. One is the youthful Jitu Vaghani, the chief of the Gujarat unit of the BJP. He positions himself behind the CM and from time to time, sends him chits as our interview progresses, possibly reminding him of the things he should flag (at one point the CM just folds the note without reading it and tucks it under the ashtray). The other is Nitin Patel, deputy chief minister of Gujarat and the man whom Rupani piped to the top job. Patel sits opposite the CM. He is very quiet — why I discover a while later: He has stretched his legs out and is snoozing lightly. I'm sure I hear a quiet snore. I cannot help wondering if the two men would be as relaxed if either Anandiben Patel or Narendra Modi were in the room.

Rupani talks about his particular stamp on the governance of Gujarat. Before he became CM he was the party chief. "Before the (2013) elections, I travelled all over the state, in small villages and towns. We discussed with people what they expected from

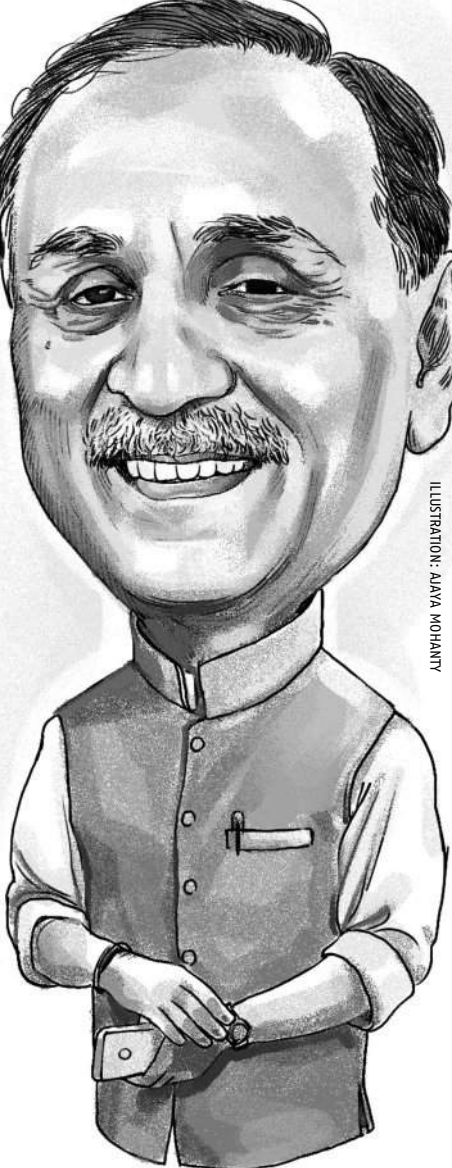


ILLUSTRATION: ANNA MOHANT

the government. Typically, the biggest problems are faced by those who are the smallest — people from the margins in outlying villages and hamlets. They don't want big infrastructure. They just want the government to do small things for them: Easy access to facilities like widow pension, caste certificate, birth and death certificate... so we designed a programme called Seva Setu (the bridge of

service), which would divide Gujarat's 18,000 villages into clusters of 10 villages each. Each cluster needed to hold one programme — where the government would reach the doorstep of the villagers. I took this up. The government lets villagers know two days in advance that a Seva Setu team of officials would come to the village and resolve whatever outstanding problems they have, there and then. A notary, Xerox machines, scanners and computers go with them. Everything is done right there at the doorstep of the villager."

Rupani realises that he can leverage another big achievement of Gujarat — low-cost medicines. Two hundred new medical stores have been opened across the state as part of the Prime Minister Jan Aushadhi programme. By the end of the year, they will number 1,000. Anyone can go to the shops and buy subsidised medicine. "I have an IAS officer. He has to take two tablets every day, each costing ₹800. He told me his monthly medical bill used to be in the region of ₹50,000. He would be reimbursed and he was earning enough to pay for it. But because of the stores selling generic drugs, his expenditure on medicines has come down to ₹6,000." The Gujarati in Rupani cannot be suppressed. He smiles broadly: "The bill that we give the customer states clearly what the original price of the branded drug is and the extent of the discount — in some cases, 70 to 80 per cent. There is also an app, so people know what the government has done for them."

I ask him about demonetisation. "No negative effect," he asserts. "There is a real estate boom in Gujarat, especially in the affordable housing sector. If demonetisation had really been so adverse, you would not have had this kind of boom." What about diamond cutters and diamond polishers, who were laid off because the cash economy in the jewellery market collapsed? Not true, he says, not one person has been rendered jobless as a result of demonetisation. "Yes, initially there were problems. But that was for a month. Today, everything is normal." He also claims that Gujarat has led the rest of the country in job creation. I don't want to argue.

'There is a real estate boom in Gujarat, especially in the affordable housing sector. If not one person has been rendered jobless'

of him. Lee refused to believe this was not Jet's normal service.

Independence Day is over and there's no question of responding to that fatuous email. No doubt there will be others, for this government stakes everything on populism aimed at society's lowest common denominator. But if ever I did respond, it would be to remind the authorities of what preceded August 15, 1947, and why it happened. I refer to the horrors of Direct Action Day, 1946, which I can never forget. I was only nine years old then but the stench of death remains with me. Of course, it was the Muslim League that organised that murderous demonstration, but underlying the frenzied bloodshed and the bloodcurdling cries of "*Allah ho akbar!*" that still ring in my ears was the stark reality of the Hindu-Muslim situation. Britain's Divide et Impera policy may have cynically exploited it but there had to be something to divide, something to exploit.

Rajinder Sachar's 403-page report highlighted that something 11 years ago. Stressing that while Muslims constitute 14 per cent of India's population, they only comprise 2.5 per cent of the bureaucracy, his report concluded that the socio-economic condition of Indian Muslims is below that of even the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The streets of Kolkata may not run with blood again but the injustice and inequality Sachar exposed will always prevent true communal peace. Sadly, it's not something the government seems disposed to address.

I ask him about a sensitive topic — the attacks on Dalits. "We took the strongest possible action any state government could have taken the moment the incident in Una happened. Every state government faces one or the other problem relating to attacks on Dalits. The accused are in jail, the fast-track court is hearing the case. The accused will get a sentence. We gave assistance amounting to ₹4 lakh the very next day to the families. The police officers, who were negligent, were suspended." He adds, "After that, 10,000 gram panchayats went to the polls. Where the incident took place (Samadhiyana), the BJP was elected to the panchayat. What does that tell you?"

I ask him about the zilla panchayat elections. "Yes, we lost the zilla panchayat elections. They took place during Anandiben's tenure," he clarifies, much to my amusement. "It was not just the Patidar movement that had the state in its grip, farmers had some difficulties, it hadn't rained properly... the government was battling many problems," he says complacently. "Now, more than 18 months later, the BJP has won every election."

This brings us to the next Assembly elections in the state, due in 2018. "You write quoting me: the Patidar community has been with the BJP and will continue to be with the BJP," he insists. "They know that it is the BJP that has always stood with them."

So the strategy in the next elections? And the chief minister?

I steal a glance at Nitin Patel. He is now wide awake. "When Narendra Modi was chief minister, Gujarat won 128 seats (out of 182 in the Assembly). Now he is prime minister. Modiji is revered by people in Gujarat. So as PM he will get 150 seats, especially after the UP election. In the 2014 general elections, we got all 26 Lok Sabha seats." I can see this is not rhetoric, Rupani believes in what he is saying. Nitin Patel is listening keenly. "As for the rest, we are all workers. Selecting a chief minister is no big deal. Anandiben resigned and everything fell into place smoothly. The same thing will happen again."

Doesn't it bother him sometimes? There's Modiji, there's Amit *bhai*, there's Anandiben... so many people to satisfy.

"Not at all! A person like Modiji knows every small village and not just village, he knows the people, the families that live there." That's exactly what I am driving at, this perpetually looming shadow in the background. "This is not a problem," he says with a smile. "It gives us direction."

Nitin Patel has lost interest in the proceedings now and the CM is preparing to get up and leave. He repairs to lunch with his colleagues but does not invite me to join him. I have lunch with his assistant. It is a feast and I make a pig of myself.

No escape from a parent's tyranny



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

My wife had to give our 15-year-old daughter a beating today," said Mahinder Singh glumly. "Punishment is necessary, I know, but it never feels good to a parent, even though we know it's for her own good." Whatever she might've done, I said, surely beating was not the best solution? It turned out that the teenager had been punished for scoring 88 per cent in her Class 10 board exams. Such high marks deserved reward, not punishment, I commented. Singh didn't think so. His brother's son had stood first in the school with 98 per cent. Those were the academic outcomes to strive for. "After all, I'm a driver with meagre savings," he said. "The child has to do well academically, get a good job and save for her marriage, too." As he

was talking, a thought struck me. The board exam results had come out a month ago. Why were they punishing their daughter for her performance now?

It turned out that they had found their daughter painting. "As a child she love to doodle, and we don't mind her doing so as it kept her out of trouble," Singh said. Apparently, as she grew older, her work improved. So much so that the stationer from whom she bought her paints, often bought her artworks for ₹200-300. "However, last year when she came to Class 10, we told her to stop wasting her time on artistic pursuits," he said. "We felt she needed to focus all her time on studying." This year, Singh and his wife had counselled their daughter to opt for the commerce stream, as they felt it opened up the best job prospects later. "When we found her painting instead of practising maths or accounts, we had no option but to punish her," he said.

As the parent of a child of a similar age whose greatest pleasure is to muck about with paints, his story appalled me. However, instead of saying so (and running the risk of alienating him) I decided to try a different tack. If the girl succeeded as an artist, I pointed out, they might never need to worry about their finances. Even if she didn't, there was a whole range of lucrative jobs today that required artistic ability. A talent for

art opened up job possibilities in web design, computer-aided design, designing publicity materials and so much more. I told Singh that only recently, I had worked with a college student/freelance designer to create a brochure for an NGO. While studying, he took on such assignments and was able to earn much more than pocket money on a monthly basis.

Clearly, I had given Singh some food for thought. "Maybe, I should tell my daughter that she can paint — as long as she buys her supplies from the money she earns selling her paintings to the stationer," he mused. "Maybe that will push her to sell at least one artwork every week." Then his musings became more ambitious. "I could ask her to make a collection of religious paintings for the festive season ahead... Lakshmi-Ganesh paintings would sell like hot cakes and she could make a lot of money," he said.

As he went off to give his daughter the good news that he was inclined to let her paint after all, I mused that perhaps she was going to exchange the pressure of scoring well in school for the oppressiveness of painting saleable art. Who can say which would turn out to be worse? Then a sobering thought struck — whether she pursued academics or art, there was one sort of tyranny she'd probably never escape — her father's.

How to drive jinxes away



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Do you ever have the feeling that you are jinxed? (My wife, of course, likes to believe I am the jinx.) Nevertheless, I can't help feeling spooked every time there is news of another attack, because, in an unnerving way, I can't help thinking, *but I was just there*. The timing may vary by a few weeks, or a few months, or even a few years, but it's like a peculiar creepy-crawly sensation down one's back that the bad guys are following you no matter where you are, and that some day they'll catch up.

Barcelona's recent attack confirms the sentiment: Didn't we just walk down Las Ramblas, loaded with shopping bags and without a care in the world? It was crowded with tourists, and everyone

was having a good time, which is exactly what you're expected to do on a holiday. (Except us, of course — I recall my wife and I having a spat because I thought the second lunch she'd had was exactly the reason she'd put on weight during the holiday. She called me some rude names, in turn, that I cannot draw attention to in this newspaper.) Who would have thought some crazed person would drive a van through tourists, no different from us, killing and maiming them in an act of terrorism.

The Rome car explosions on Via Marmorata in the centre of the city happened exactly where we had stopped by a traffic island to enjoy our gelatos. I can still remember the piquancy of the flavour. The Westminster in London is where we returned on several occasions, even taking the time to take selfies, and have the pictures to prove it. Only, they remind us of what followed, which makes the memory an unpleasant one. Blasts in Bali? We were in the self-same spot in Kuta. Paris: tick. New York: ditto. Sanctions against Doha? You can bet I was in the Qatar capital on a working trip some while back. Visited Kathmandu? The tremor that shook the Nepalese capital was inevitable. Either the world is becoming a more dangerous place, or the gremlins of mis-

fortune are trying to get me to pay heed.

Stay at home? I'd like to know who believes it's a safer place. Some years ago, I persuaded my wife to get herself a perm — and have lived to regret it forever. Having preened in front of the mirror, and loved the way her new look suited her, my wife was horrified at her friends' giggly reactions, and that lent fury to her actions. Which, dear reader, led to her taking a pair of scissors to my hair as I slept that night. Since this happened long before the recent spate of hair chopping incidents across north India, I couldn't blame it on unhappy, distraught spirits. Besides, my wife was more than happy to take credit for it.

Others might make light of these coincidences, but at least one person — whose salary is dependent on my well-being — has decided to take remedial steps instead. Mary, our long-time cook and general guardian of the family, now performs complex rituals every time I have to travel outside the city. She brings out limes and chillies, burns spices over a flame, chants incantations to chase away evil spirits, asks me to blow on powders in her palm, and in general behaves like a friendly occultist. Strangely enough, instead of irritating me, it has a placating effect. It's nice to know someone is in charge of booging the jinxes away.

Beyond oxygen supply

The Gorakhpur debate, as to whether children died at the hospital because of a shortage of oxygen or for other reasons, matters very much in terms of individual criminal liability for those who failed in their duties. From a broader perspective, though, it should not be the main point of focus. Even if it is contended (in the face of specific parental accounts) that children did not die for lack of oxygen, the gross mismanagement of oxygen supplies was indefensible in itself, and criminally negligent because children could have died. But focusing primarily on this specific question of whether deaths occurred as a direct result of the lack of oxygen or for other reasons takes one's attention away from the larger and systemically more important question of how the hospital was being managed (or mismanaged), the rackets of various kinds that were apparently flourishing in the hospital (including, it would seem, the theft of oxygen cylinders), the probability of kickbacks being demanded for payments to be cleared, the poor budgetary prioritisation reflected in the sharp slashing of outlays for medical education, the general lack of hospital cleanliness and hygiene, and the poor state of public health programmes that have led to the endemic spread of encephalitis in eastern UP. All of these are more important questions, indeed they are as urgent as the issue of deaths on account of lack of oxygen, and they are more difficult to deal with because you cannot get away by simply arraigning a doctor or two and a supplier.

The government's defence, in response to the charge that the lack of oxygen caused children to die, is that many more have died during periods when there was oxygen available. But what sort of defence is it for a government to say that hundreds of people die every year, in the ordinary course, because of encephalitis? If the issue is that the problem was endemic, not specific to any government, the point is easily conceded that Akhilesh Yadav and his predecessor(s) are as responsible as Yogi Adityanath if not more, in that they were in office for five years whereas the Yogi has had only four months. But the solutions have to come from the present chief minister; and they will come more quickly if the focus stays on the continuing deaths from encephalitis. The tragedy in Gorakhpur did not end when oxygen supply was restored.

At its core, the problem is with what is considered normal, because this particular kind of normal should be unacceptable. Seventy years after Independence, the real tragedy — especially in what are called the Bimaru states — is that the Gorakhpur hospital is not an isolated example but a typical case of a public health institution caught in the usual mix of negligence and maladministration. And it is a pity that, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi lost an important opportunity to use the Gorakhpur episode to focus on this larger question.

The two primary factors that are a blot on India's human development record are its poor education and health attainments — worse than they are in a much poorer Bangladesh, for instance. These also happen to be the critical factors that lie at the root of growing inequality — poor education blocks the poor person's avenues for upward mobility, and health episodes push families back below the poverty line. Mr Modi has launched dozens of schemes in the three years and more that he has been in office; he should have used the shock caused by Gorakhpur to mobilise national opinion and launched twin campaigns on public health and quality education at the primary and secondary levels, backed them up with increased outlays, and in the future followed up with regular monitoring of progress. It is a pity that he chose the alternative path of making a cursory reference to Gorakhpur before moving on to other issues. Like crises, scandals too can be useful opportunities for systemic correctives. This has been a scandal wasted; more's the pity.

ILLUSTRATION BY AJAY MOHANTY



Put the dog down

When real judges won't trust a 24-year-old with knowing what's good for her, you decide what's more curious, real life or reality TV?

The name Judy Sheindlin won't ring a bell with most Indians. It might register on some if we said Judge Judy instead. Particularly on those who've lived in America or vicariously live the American life by watching their unique reality TV genre of arbitration court dramas. Judge Judy, anchored by Judy Sheindlin, a retired Manhattan family court judge, is a chart-topping success, in its 21st uninterrupted year. It involves rivals bringing small disputes to her on live TV after signing a contract to accept her verdict.

All that's very fine, and very American. But why are we featuring such trivia in National Interest?

Because a hilarious and heart-wrenching viral clip from one of her shows popped up on the web with the usual "breaking the Internet" endorsement. It is Judge Judy settling a dispute between a man and a woman claiming a poodle so adorable that you and I'd want it too. The woman displays her vet's prescriptions as evidence but Judge Judy ticks her off. "Put the dog down," she tells the person carrying it in the court and firmly repeats the order thrice. The poodle goes running to the man, jumping all over him, who scoops it up in his arms as the courtroom bursts in tears and applause.

Does this make you think about something important that made our headlines this last week? I will give you some clues. It was in the Supreme Court of India. In the unlikely event that you still haven't figured, here's more: Instead of a dog, it involved a woman whose "ownership" was contested by her parents and the man she asserts she has married. Further, this drama is from Kerala. It reached the Supreme Court because the state high court made a finding, annulling her marriage to a Muslim. Her "husband" came in appeal.

Our honourable Supreme Court Bench did not ask the woman (Akhila) where she wanted to go, to which home and to which religion. Instead, they ordered India's premier anti-terror (crime) investigating agency to go fact-finding. To ensure fairness, they also assigned a retired Supreme Court judge to over-

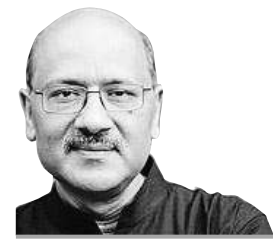
see it. The woman, the lordships said, will be asked for her views only after the agency had given its findings. Our court would not work on that simplistic "put the dog down" doctrine.

The cast of characters in this real life courtroom drama leaves no scope for frivolity. The Supreme Court Bench has two of our most respected and reflective judges: Chief Justice J S Khehar and Justice D Y Chandrachud, who is among our sharpest and youngest judicial minds. Equally, on the bar, the two contesting teams are headed by lawyers Kapil Sibal and Indira Jaising on one side, and Additional Solicitor-General Maninder Singh, Shyam and Madhavi Divan, on the other. This is as high-profile a case as one can be.

The Bench has faced some criticism as well as praise for its decision. In fairness to the court, a few facts need to be underlined. One, the judges have not yet examined the legal merits of the case. Theirs is a one-page order for fact-finding. Second, the order states that the petitioners (from the young woman's side) accept the National Investigation Agency probe if it is impartial, which they will ensure. And third, once the facts are in, the judges will listen to the woman in a closed room. Only then will they take

a final call.

Here's the story of how we came this far. This "woman" is Akhila (who now prefers to be called Hadiya), a medical graduate from Kottayam in Kerala, whose parents, alarmed by her closeness with Muslim "radical" organisations, approached the high court, pleading that she was going to be safe only in their "custody". In January 2016, the Bench rejected it, and ruled that the woman was an adult and could decide for herself. In August 2016, the parents were back with a fresh petition. Akhila, meanwhile, had moved to live with Satyasarani, a Muslim organisation, right-wing, but not proscribed. A different Bench of the high court admitted the new petition, and while the case was being heard, Akhila appeared one day with Shefi Jahan, saying she had married him.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

The flawed defence of racial bias



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Barack Obama spent eight years in the White House. Since Mr Obama is a black man, this means that there is no discrimination against black Americans. The carriers of Confederate flags often say that it is absurd for Mr Obama to complain that blacks face discrimination.

Their argument goes thus: Mr Obama was president. Mr Obama is black. Therefore, blacks don't face racial discrimination. Similarly, the success of Oprah Winfrey proves that there is no discrimination against black women. Extending the logic, Mr Obama's middle name is the uncompromising "Hussein".

Hence, some of the "very fine people" who rallied recently in Charleston may argue that black men with Muslim names are among the most privileged of American citizens.

When Mr Obama expressed anguish about an unarmed black teenager being shot by a paranoid white man, they felt he had no right to complain about the slaughter of an innocent he described thus, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon Martin". That specific incident sparked off the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

But regardless of the existence of Mr Obama, Ms Winfrey and General Colin Powell, any statistician who reviewed sociological data about American blacks would unequivocally state that there's damning evidence of racial profiling and discrimination.

A black man is 10 times more likely to be arrested than a white American, and about five times as likely to be sent to jail. A black woman is twice as likely to be arrested and jailed. Blacks comprise about 14 per cent of the American population — roughly one-seventh. But blacks comprise one-third of the US prison population. A black is umpteen times more likely to receive a death sentence than a white.

The community has lower per capita income than the American median. It has poorer access to decent education in terms of public schooling. Sociological experiments suggest that a job applicant submitting a resume with a "typical black name" like Jada or DeShawn is more likely to be rejected than an applicant with the same exact resume and a race-neutral name or "white" name, like Luke or Holly.

Life expectancy is lower for blacks — much lower if violence is taken into account. An unarmed black man going about his business is way more likely to be shot by a white police officer who is also very likely to be cleared of all charges after departmental investigation.

A black driver, or a black walker, is way more likely to be pulled over by the police for "investigatory stops". This is so common that "Driving While Black" or DWB is often used as ironic shorthand for racial profiling. The physicist, Neil deGrasse Tyson, once described the multiple times he's been stopped for investigation as DWB, WWB (Walking While Black) and JBB (Just Being Black).

Mr Obama speaking out for his community made a positive difference. He, along with Ms Winfrey and Mr Tyson, is

a huge outlier. He had, and has, a big global audience. People were forced to look at racial discrimination in the US, five decades after the Equal Rights Amendment and 150 years after slavery was abolished. American police are now a little less likely to shoot a teenager for JBB since protests by Black Lives Matter activists are guaranteed after every such incident.

Returning to *apna desh*, there have been multiple *gau-rakshak* lynchings of Muslims (and of Dalits). Muslims are substantially over-represented in prison and under-trial populations across every state, according to National Crime Records Bureau data. They are less likely to receive bail. They are under-represented in government jobs across every state, and in the central services and in public sector units. Even their right to marry non-Muslims is now being questioned by the Supreme Court.

But of course, Hamid Ansari, had no business using his position to spotlight their plight. Since Mr Ansari was the vice-president of India (and Zakir Husain was President), Muslims have no right to feel insecure.

There's an old saying, "The plural of anecdote is not data". To that, one could add the codicil that not every racist idiot is white, or American.

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The dare to die

EYE CULTURE

SHUMA RAHA

The Blue Whale challenge, the deadly online game which has so transfixed us lately, consists of 50 escalating tasks spread over 50 days, and culminates in the player taking his or her own life by jumping off a high-rise building. In India at least three teenagers have jumped to their deaths, fulfilling its final dare. Two others have been saved in the nick of time. And one does not know how many adolescents in this country and around the world are in thrall to it right now, cutting themselves up and growing increasingly fascinated with the idea of a spectacular suicide.

In fact, this is hardly a game. It is a lethal trap which lures vulnerable young minds and nudges them towards suicide — its "curators" sinister modern-day Pied Pipers leading our children to their deaths. Terrifying as it is in its ability to prey upon teens who are given to depression and self-loathing, the Blue Whale challenge didn't just spring out of nowhere. In truth, it belongs to the storied tradition of the glamourisation of self-harm on the internet. For years, pro-ana (websites, blogs and discussion groups for anorexic girls and women) content has not only normalised anorexic behaviour, but also influenced girls to try and attain the body shapes of emaciated "thinspiration" models. Graphic images of self-injury, of cutting and mutilating oneself, swirl around the internet. In hidden social media groups, young people may feed off each other's discontent, where youngsters pour salt on their skin and then press a cube of ice on it for as long as they can. The resultant chemical reaction plunges the temperature of the ice to -28 degrees centigrade, causing second and third degree burns.

A "challenge" is particularly appealing to an adolescent who wants self-affirmation and recognition from others. However, most challenges that go viral on the internet, with millions posting pictures and videos of themselves pulling them off, involve serious bodily harm. Take the "salt and ice challenge", where youngsters pour salt on their skin and then press a cube of ice on it for as long as they can. The resultant chemical reaction plunges the temperature of the ice to -28 degrees centigrade, causing second and third degree burns.

A few years ago legions of girls were doing the "Kylie Jenner challenge", where they sucked into a shot glass placed over their mouths. The exercise could leave them with puffed-up lips resembling those of the young reality TV star. Or it could leave them

The judges finally ruled the marriage a sham, declared her incapable of being old enough to decide what's best for her and said she will be looked after best in the custody of her parents. In fact, the court used the doctrine of *parens patriae*, whereby the state has the responsibility to play parent for abandoned, surrogate children. They employed it for a 24-year-old qualified doctor. A quaint footnote: The first Kerala High Court Bench had a Hindu and a Muslim judge. Both judges on the second one were Christian.

It is their order that Akhila (Hadiya) and the man she now claims to be married to have challenged in the Supreme Court of India.

The unusual thing about the Supreme Court order, or rather intervention, is its alacrity. The judges haven't yet gone into the merits of the high court judgment in 96 pages, brief by Indian judicial standards. It would have been important, and interesting to know what the nation's top judges think about some problematic observations on which that order is based. Some samples:

■ It is that she (Akhila) has no consistent stand or a clear idea about her life and future...is acting on dictates of some others who are bent upon taking her away from her parents.

■ According to the petitioner, his daughter is likely to be transported out of India by people having links with extremist organisations. Their apprehension...that their daughter is likely to be married to a Muslim, stands substantiated by events that have unfolded...he (the husband) also has radical inclinations as evident from his Facebook post.

■ We are not satisfied that it is safe to let Ms Akhila free to decide what she wants in her life. She requires the care, protection and guidance of her parents.

■ She would be safe only with her parents, taking into account the fact that she is a girl aged 24 years.

■ A girl aged 24 years is weak and vulnerable, capable of being exploited in many ways...The court exercising *parens patriae* jurisdiction is concerned with the welfare of a girl of her age... (this duty) can be discharged only by ensuring that Ms Akhila is in safe hands.

■ Her marriage being the most important decision of her life, can also be taken only with the active involvement of her parents.

■ Therefore, it is only appropriate that the parents are given custody of Ms Akhila. She shall be cared for, permitted to complete her House Surgeoncy (sic) Course and made professionally qualified so that she would be in a position to stand independently on her two legs (sic).

The Supreme Court can order an inquiry into any situation it deems fit, and by the agency of its choice. It could, however, have reflected on the implications of postponing its examination of the socially revisionist implications of the high court order. Is a 24-year-old not old enough to decide for herself? Will the age of majority be decided on a case-by-case basis by judges? Has a new judicial doctrine been proclaimed establishing arranged marriage and parental consent as a pre-requisite? Does a 24-year-old woman still need "care, protection and guidance" and only from parents? Is a Facebook post enough to declare a person a dangerous radical?

Which brings us back to Judge Judy, who ordered "put the dog down" and trusted a poodle with four legs with deciding what was good for it. Are we to not trust even 24-year-old humans to "stand independently on their two legs?"

By special arrangement with ThePrint, and Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta

'What do you mean we, Paleface?'



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

In 1947, the British freed us from their rule. Amidst violent Hindu-Muslim riots, they also freed some Muslim Indians from the fear of Hindu majority rule by giving them Pakistan.

Pakistan has moved on since then. Seventy years later, however, we in India are still angling over Hindu-Muslim relations.

But as Tonto famously asked the Lone Ranger "We, Paleface?" who are this 'we' of India who continually angst over Hindu-Muslim relations?

As a Tamil who has lived for 60 years in Delhi, let me say it

plainly. The Hindu-Muslim 'narrative' of the 29 states that make up our otherwise lovely country has been captured by just three states — Kashmir, Punjab and UP. Their experience has become our national experience.

Thus, Kashmir determines the degree of jingoism. Punjab determines the extent of tearfulness. And UP determines the extent of divisiveness in Indian politics.

If you are a painful little pedant, you will point to Maharashtra or Gujarat, where they turn a very useful Hindu-Muslim trick politically. And now Bengal is also trying something similar by importing the very Muslims who had chosen to leave Hindu-majority India.

But that is about all. In the rest of the Indian states — including indeed in many of the North Indian ones — the Hindu-Muslim thing is done differently. Not that the Hindus actually love the Muslims there; nor do the Muslims love the Hindus. They mostly ignore each other

so that they can live together peacefully. Not acknowledging each other is thus an important contributor to communal peace. But the fake *jhappi-pappi* culture of Punjab and UP is totally absent there.

Live and let live

There are at least two reasons for this dichotomy which I think we must acknowledge. One reason is very old, and the other one is very new.

The old reason is the way Islam came to North India through Punjab and expanded via UP. The sword was the primary instrument of expansion. The North Indian experience was thus of a violent Islam, what it called the *Turki* variety. That violence is the dominant memory in much of North India.

In the rest of India and in the South particularly, Islam came via trade, not the sword. There the memories are different. The two communities despise each other but "no hate please we are not from the North". Sadly, it seems the absence

of hate has no political or social value. Politicians insist on focusing on the North even though the rest of India offers a better way of engaging with our Muslims namely, live and let live.

The new reason is what happened after Partition. In Punjab and Bengal most Muslims went off to Pakistan, east and west.

But in UP only the rich fellows departed. The rest stayed on saying, quite rightly, this land is my land.

Except, hang on: It is not just in UP that they stayed on. They stayed on in the other states too. Don't ever forget this.

So Partition, in my North Indian Tamil perspective, was more a Punjabi-Bengali thing than a Muslim-only thing. And — please don't interrupt — had it been a purely Muslim thing, East Pakistan would not have chosen to break up with the West.

Religion proved a poor adhesive. Islam played a role in defining the political identity but it could not join the two cul-