

14 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
CIVILITY IS NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS.
— JOHN F. KENNEDY**The Indian EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A SOMBRE OUTLOOK

NDA government should take the Economic Survey's assessment of the economy as a timely warning

IN FEBRUARY, THE Finance Ministry's Economic Survey had predicted India's real GDP growth for 2017-18 to be within a range of 6.75 per cent to 7.5 per cent. But now, a "Volume 2" version of the Survey tabled in Parliament on Friday has practically ruled out the possibility of meeting the upper end of the growth forecast, while stating that "the balance of risks seem to have shifted to the downside". This not-so-bullish prognosis has been attributed to "new factors" that "impart a deflationary bias to (economic) activity". These new factors that have apparently arisen after February 2017 include farm loan waivers by states (which may force them to slash capital expenditures to keep budget deficits on track), transitional challenges from implementing the goods and services tax (GST), the rupee's appreciation in real terms (which could hit exports), worsening financials of power and telecom firms (which would impact bank balance sheets as well), and agrarian stress (from declining price realisations in most non-cereal crops).

If GDP growth does turn out to be below 7 per cent, as the Survey fears, it would mark a second successive year of decline from 8 per cent in 2015-16 and 7.1 per cent in 2016-17. The implications will not just be economic, but also political. Growth is important, simply because there can be no jobs and incomes without it. If growth, investment and job creation show no visible signs of pick-up well before the next general elections — hardly 20 months away — it could present problems even for the Narendra Modi government whose party in currently on a roll. The Survey has, in fact, even raised doubts over the average 7.5 per cent growth figure for the last two years, by noting that it came on the back of a mere 4.5 per cent annual increase in gross fixed capital formation, two per cent rise in export volumes and two percentage points decline in the credit-to-GDP ratio. According to the Survey, no other country in the world has managed to achieve two years of seven per cent average GDP growth on the basis of such weak investment, export and credit offtake performance. Even assuming the GDP numbers to be right, there is no doubt that even this growth is unsustainable. Growth ultimately has to also pass the smell test — which can only happen when people "see" factories, offices and jobs getting created.

The Modi government should take the Survey's assessment of the economy — an official document couldn't have been more candid — as a timely warning signal. The last three years have seen significant reforms, whether in GST, digitalisation, tax compliance, direct benefit transfer, inflation targeting or bankruptcy resolution. These will no doubt yield fruits in the medium and long term. But ensuring growth in the immediate term is no less important.

DON'T TALK, LISTEN

With its angry words against the outgoing vice president, BJP indicts itself, not Ansari

IN HIS FAREWELL speech, outgoing vice president Hamid Ansari quoted S. Radhakrishnan: "A democracy is distinguished by the protection it gives to minorities. A democracy is likely to degenerate into tyranny if it does not allow the opposition groups to criticise fairly, freely and frankly... But at the same time, minorities also have their responsibilities..." Those are wise words that must be heeded in any liberal democracy. But India's ruling party hasn't done so. As he steps down from his office, the BJP has caricatured and stereotyped Ansari's message, expressed in that parting speech and in other public forums. It has tried to shoot the messenger, by casting aspersions and imputing motives.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of the outgoing VP's work as a career diplomat in "West Asia", his family's association with the "Congress" and with the "Khilafat movement", his time spent in the "Minority Commission" and "Aligarh Muslim University" — as if he were putting a label on Ansari's thoughts. Ansari, the PM suggested, had spent many years of his life in "that circle, in that atmosphere, in that thought", and was now free to "work, think and speak" according to his "core beliefs". The PM's colleagues were more vehement. New vice president M. Venkaiah Naidu rejected the view that the minorities are feeling insecure and there is growing intolerance — the burden of Ansari's comments — as "political propaganda". BJP general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya alleged that Ansari's remarks had "damaged the country's image" and that "he may be having a political agenda".

Instead of rushing to condemn him, the BJP should have listened to Ansari. That it chose not to accord him the respect and courtesy of engaging with his ideas and his critique, makes it appear churlish and thin-skinned. It also confirms a charge that is often levelled at the BJP. In its three years in power, even as the party has notched serial electoral successes and its government has energetically projected its agenda, it has seemed intolerant to the dissenting argument and view. This has been most sharply framed whenever an attempt is made to raise the issue of growing insecurities in the minority community in the face of a loud majoritarianism, be it in the guise of a more demanding and performative nationalism or the violence in the name of cow. As the ruling party, the BJP has so far failed to send out the firm signal that, as party and government, it will do everything it can to protect the equal rights and freedoms of the minorities, or that it is committed to safeguarding the spaces for dialogue and debate. With its angry words, the BJP indicts itself, not Ansari.

UNSPORTSMANLIKE

By excluding 'foreigners' from the Dronacharya awards process, India's sports establishment seems ungrateful and insular

SOMEONE FROM THE sports ministry should call up Narasimha Rao, former Indian Test cricketer, to ask him about the MBE (Member of British Empire) medal he received from the Queen of England. Six years ago, he received a letter from UK government, that read: "The honour is conferred on you by Her Majesty in recognition of your services to cricket and to the community in Northern Ireland." The irony in India today, stemming from an irrational resistance to recognise "foreign" coaches for national awards, would not be lost on him.

Back in India, jingoism and insularity seem strewn all over the process of conferring the Dronacharya award on coaches who have been instrumental in producing world-class sportspersons. What else can explain the inexplicable hesitancy in neglecting Heinz Reinkemeier and Gaby Buhlmann who helped Abhinav Bindra achieve his dreams? How can one ignore Leonid Taranenko, whom Karnam Malleswari gave the greatest tribute of all by letting her walk around the Olympic village in Sydney with the bronze medal around her neck? Or Atik Jauhari from Indonesia, the man who helped Saina Nehwal and P. Kashyap take the next step at the international level. Even in India's most popular sport, cricket, it took a foreign hand in Gary Kirsten to help India end the 28-year drought at world cups.

These are individuals who have enabled Indians to achieve that elusive greatness and pride in the competitive world of international sports. It's time to respect the people who help shape our sportsmen. It would only be honouring our own sporting stars' gratitude towards them.



SANJAYA BARU

THE DRIVER OF Chinese strategy at this stage of its development lies in the yawning gap between its geo-economic power and geo-political capability. China has, without doubt, become an economic superpower. However, it is as yet far from becoming a geo-political super-power. Indeed, China may never acquire the geo-political influence and reach that Great Britain enjoyed in the 19th century and the United States of America did in the 20th, even though it may have already surpassed the geo-economic clout the two major powers enjoyed in the heyday of their empires. China's "empire" does not as yet extend beyond its own claimed borders and those of its two principle allies — North Korea and Pakistan.

Most strategic analysts make the mistake of imagining that China has already been able to convert its geo-economic power, as the world's largest trading nation with huge investible dollar surpluses, into military might and geo-political clout. This would be a simplistic understanding of how economic power gets translated into political power. The yawning gap that stares China in its face is its limited geo-political reach, despite the so-called Eurasian alliance with Russia.

More to the point, China's military capability is still limited. As the annual defence publication, *Military Balance*, published by the International Institute of Strategic Studies, shows, the US still spends more on defence than the combined defence spending of the next 10 powers, including Russia, China, Germany, France, UK, Japan, Saudi Arabia, India, South Korea and Brazil.

So how has China responded to this gap between economic might and political power? By buying influence. The Belt-Road Initiative is the latest spending programme aimed at buying friendships. It comes in the wake of the creation of financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the promotion of bilateral economic assistance programmes with neighbours and other developing economies. There is nothing new about this. All economically well-off nations have used what has been dubbed cheque-book diplomacy and China does so too.

Apart from funding government-to-government lending, China has also been able

Mind games at Doklam

Because China's economic might is not matched by its political influence

India is no Philippines. In the Philippines, China managed to declare victory by convincing President Rodrigo Duterte that friendship with China is a better bet than friendship with the United States. China subdued Philippines without fighting. China is now trying to exert similar pressure on other neighbouring countries. Two years after the passing away of its founder-leader, Singapore has become a new target for China's psywar. China enjoys both economic and political influence in the island but the republic has inherited a proud tradition of independent thinking from its iconic founder Lee Kuan Yew.

to create global companies and global brands that have contributed to Chinese soft power. There is no denying the fact that China has been able to convert its economic might into commercial and technological capability. In short, China has emerged as a trading and a knowledge power.

However, precisely because China has not yet converted this geo-economic power into military capability and geo-political clout, it has used its economic and financial muscle to win friends and influence people. More importantly, China has used its geo-economic hard and soft power to launch a well-funded global psywar aimed at projecting its viewpoint across the world and influencing the responses to it. It has been able to use even the Western media to its advantage by successfully propagating certain views. For example, in the 1990s, when China was busy seeking and securing investment and know-how from Japan, it never made an issue of the treatment of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers in the first half of the 20th century. Once China no longer needed Japanese investment it began demanding Japan's apology for past sins. Many have come to believe that China has a legitimate grievance against Japan, forgetting the fact that this grievance was never aired when China was Japan's largest bilateral aid and investment recipient.

Strategic analysts around the world often like to quote Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu who famously said, "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." This is precisely what China has been trying to do across the Asia-Pacific region and it will seek to do in the Indian Ocean region as well, at least in part because it has the economic capability to "subdue" but not yet the military might or geopolitical clout to fight and win.

In the Doklam stand-off, China has tried to deploy its media to create a war psychosis, seeking to draw world attention to it and exert psychological pressure on India. The entire Doklam episode, including the behaviour of some Chinese diplomats in Delhi, has till now followed a textbook psywar strategy. So far it has yielded few results for China, thanks to India's wise and calm response till now.

India is no Philippines. In the Philippines, China managed to declare victory by convincing President Rodrigo Duterte that friendship with China is a better bet than friendship with the United States. China subdued Philippines without fighting. China is now trying to exert similar pressure on other neighbouring countries. Two years after the passing away of its founder-leader, Singapore has become a new target for China's psywar. China enjoys both economic and political influence in the island but the republic has inherited a proud tradition of independent thinking from its iconic founder Lee Kuan Yew. After making a lot of noise about building the Kra canal through Thailand aimed at ending Singapore's strategic advantage in the Malacca Straits, China is now tomming the idea of a railway link through Malaysia with a similar end in mind. These are all mind games aimed at getting Singapore to kowtow like Duterte did.

As part of a wider strategy of weakening Asean unity, picking off one small neighbour after another, China is twisting many arms in Southeast Asia not by using military force but by threatening to deploy economic weapons if its economic incentives fail to secure the intended response. China's dogged pursuit of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement should also be viewed in this context.

Finally, North Korea. Here China is running with the hares and hunting with the hounds with the aim of underscoring its strategic relevance to Asia-Pacific security. Here, China's behaviour is no different from that of the US in the past. Make oneself relevant to the security of a region by first making the region insecure.

But the real point is that much of that insecurity is in the minds of the people. Unlike in Asia to India's West, where people are actually dying due to conflict, in the Asia to India's East the battles are as yet being staged in peoples' minds. China's armed forces may not engage India's at Doklam but they will continue with their mind games aimed to get India, as indeed all its neighbours, to kowtow, like Duterte did.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, United Service Institution of India, New Delhi



KHALED AHMED

IN JUNE 2017, THE month of Ramzan, a vehicle driven by 47-year-old Darren Osborne of Cardiff, Wales, near London's Finsbury Park mosque, crushed a group of people, marking another incident of Islamophobia in the UK. It came in the wake of three consecutive killings of innocent citizens by radicalised UK Muslims. The Muslim Council of Britain condemned the incident. The Finsbury mosque was chosen by Osborne because of its background. When he was captured after the incident, the conscientious mosque imam actually prevented the gathering Muslim crowd from hurting him.

Why is the Finsbury Park mosque stamped in the British mind as the spawning ground of jihadist terrorism? *The Guardian* noted that the mosque was linked to the radical cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri. Al-Masri was the single most effective advocate of al-Qaeda's worldview in the UK and attracted jihadis from all parts of Europe. His sermons were fiery in the tradition of many Middle Eastern preachers, who shamed the Muslim masses for their subjugation to the West. The most menacing "graduate" of the mosque was the ideologue of yet-to-be-born ISIS, Abu Musab al-Suri, who issued his 1,600-page "charter" of terrorist jihad in 2005 and fought in Afghanistan till he was captured in Pakistan.

The British didn't permit al-Masri's trial.

A MASJID IN LONDON

A spectre of fear and suspicion has settled at Finsbury Park

But in 2004 America requested his extradition, which was finally allowed under Prime Minister David Cameron. Al-Masri was tried for "playing a part in the taking of 16 hostages in Yemen in 1998, during which four died; of conspiring to establish an al-Qaeda camp in Oregon; and of dispatching a follower to train in Afghanistan". Lest we forget, he was convicted in 2014 for crimes he committed as a soldier of the West fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. He told the court he had lost his two hands and one eye not in Afghanistan but in Pakistan, "during an explosives experiment with the Pakistan army in 1993". He was designing a steel plate with a Pakistani engineer as part of a wider, unidentified project for which "others were designing explosives". AFP reported that this took place in an "army-issue" accommodation in Lahore.

Al-Masri, together with another UK imam, Umar Bakri, greatly influenced the radicalisation of Muslim youth. Terrorist organisations al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) were "exported" to Pakistan by the UK after ignoring the harangues of al-Masri and Umar Bakri, the latter bad-mouthing the founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah to his Pakistani votaries. Young expats with British accents spread out in all walks of life in Pakistan, and began radicalising children. They also penetrated the Pakistan army, which punished of-

ficers who had formed secret groups.

Brigadier Ali Khan was court martialled along with four other officers following the killing of Osama bin Laden for having links with HT, which opposed the US occupation of Afghanistan and propagated the setting up of an Islamic caliphate. He was convicted by a field general court martial (FGCM) in 2012, along with Major Sohail Akbar, Major Jawad Baseer, Major Inayat Aziz and Major Iftikhar for links with the HT. Ali Khan was serving as director of rules and regulations at the GHQ, when he was detained by the military's Special Investigation Branch.

Another case pertained to a prestigious Lahore university, as recounted in the monthly, *The Herald* of January 2016: "Mohammed Zahid was born and raised in the UK. He moved to Pakistan in May 2014, becoming a visiting fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)... In August 2014, he moved to the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) as an assistant professor in the political science department. In April 2015, the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Punjab police arrested him on terrorism charges... According to his wife, he has been languishing in the Lahore Central Jail without a trial."

The writer is consulting editor, 'Newsweek Pakistan'



AUGUST 12, 1977, FORTY YEARS AGO

LYRICIST DEAD

SHYAMLAL PRASAD, A freedom fighter and composer of the famous song, *Jhanda uncha rahe hamara*, which inspired Indians during the Independence movement, died in Kanpur after prolonged illness. He was 86.

COKE VS INDIA

THE COCA-COLA COMPANY reaffirmed that it would not agree to the Indian government's conditions for continuing to trade in India. The conditions were for the Coca-Cola to pass on its technical know-how and for India to have a 60 per cent controlling interest in the soft-drink company's Indian subsidiary. The government said if the company

was unable to comply with its conditions, it would have to cease its activities in India. The company said that the government's conditions for continued operation in India could not be agreed to because of the "company's insistence that it continually supervises the manufacturing of Coca-Cola through a local quality control unit to insure the unvarying quality of its beverage". The company pointed out that the 22 bottling factories concerned controlled by Indian interest.

PM EXPANDS MINISTRY

MORARJI DESAI EXPANDED his council of ministers by inducting 24 ministers of state. Prominent among them are Chand Ram and

Sher Singh from Haryana, S.C. Aggarwal from Rajasthan, Renuka Devi Barkataki from Assam, Arif Beg from Madhya Pradesh, Samarendra Kundu from Orissa, Abha Maiti from West Bengal, Jnaneswar Mishra, Sheo Narain and Bhanu Pratap Singh from Uttar Pradesh and Jagdamba Prasad Yadav from Bihar. The ministry has two women and four Muslims, with Sikander Bakht as Cabinet minister for housing and public works. The 44-member ministry is smaller in size than envisaged in the Administrative Reforms Commission, which says that the government should not have more than 10 per cent of the strength of the Lok Sabha as members, which now has 542 MPs.

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

God as doctor

In Kashmir, religious faith plays a crucial role in providing solace, preserving hope



IN GOOD FAITH

ARSHAD HUSSAIN

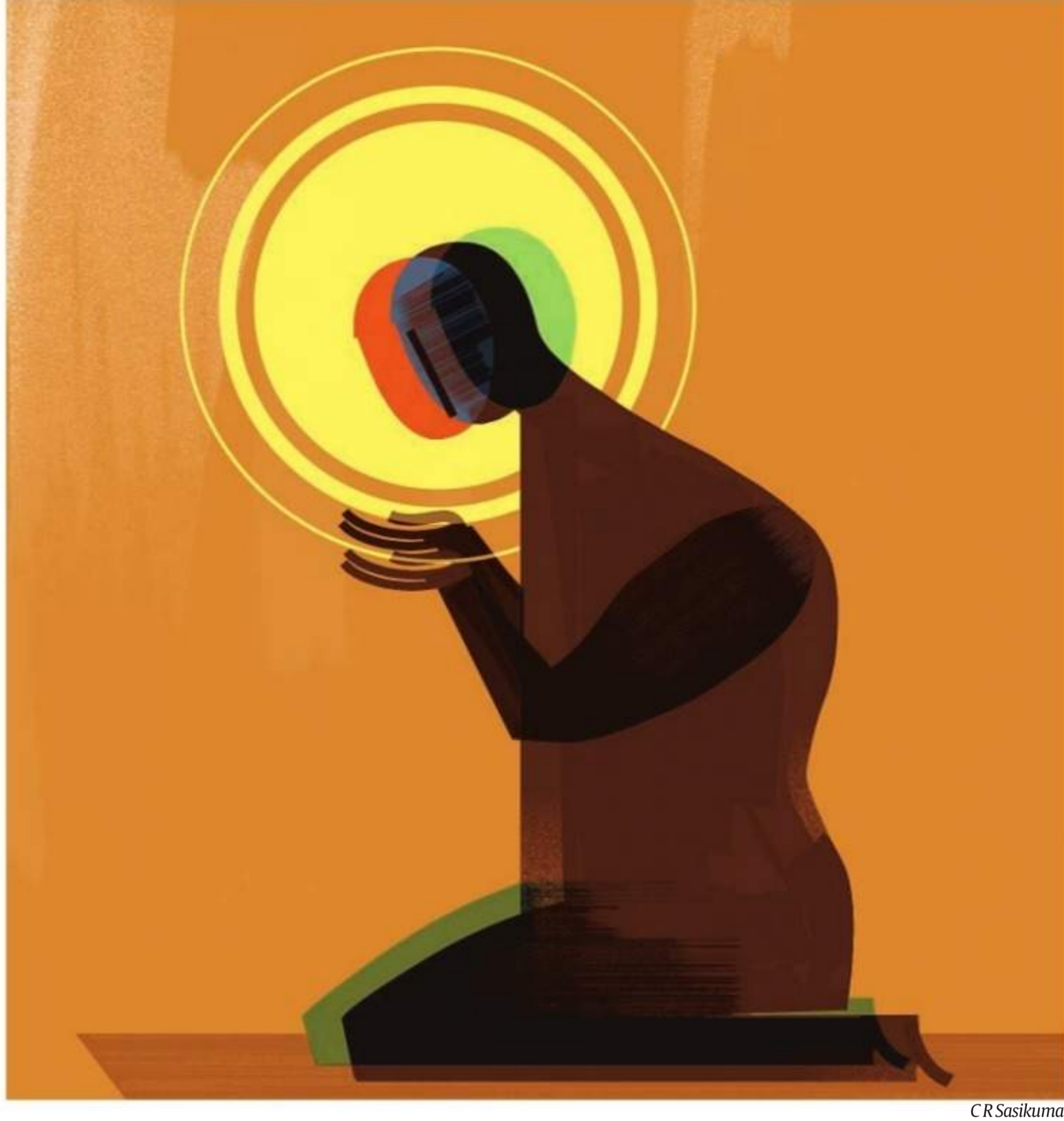
ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON, after I finished work at my rural clinic in Anantnag, a friend asked me to accompany him to Zain Shah Sahib's shrine located on a hill top in South Kashmir's Ashmuqam village. I sat down near the holy cave, enjoying the cool breeze, when I heard a woman wailing. I could hear her address God. She would pause after each cry, as if waiting for an answer to her pleas. "Why did you take him away? You knew he was the lone support of my family. You knew how poor we are. You knew how weak I am," she said.

She cried for a while and finally I saw her walking away from the cave. She was smiling. It looked as if her prayers had already been answered. Her son Riyaz had fallen victim to what we call "enforced disappearance" in the early 1990s. She came to the shrine every week to plead for her son's return.

In June 2000, I was in the hospital OPD, seeing patients. A woman from downtown Srinagar was being carried by a group of women, her neighbours. She was crying and the other women were trying to console her as they ushered her in. Her son too had disappeared, never to return. I had been a practising psychiatrist for only a month. Somehow, I gathered the courage and asked her why she was crying. "How can you help?" She asked. "Can you return my son?" I didn't know what to say. "You cannot. You too are a part of the same system. You will give me a few pills, talk to me for a while and then leave me to deal with my own pain." "Instead," she said, "I will go to the dargah (Hazratbal shrine, situated close to the hospital) and ask my God why he is not returning him". She kept talking, and I kept listening. Once she left, I thought she won't return. But she came back, and each time, demanded that I talk to her. *Masa* (aunt in Kashmiri) became my first patient for cognitive behavioural therapy and undertook several sessions with me. She told me that my nose resembled her son's and that is why she comes to the hospital. Besides, the hospital is on her way to the dargah. Her condition improved and I knew it was because of her cathartic visits to the shrine. Soon, she stopped coming to the hospital.

I have been practising psychiatry for 17 years now. When I began, there were only seven psychiatrists and the load of patients was unimaginable. There were more than one lakh patient visits to the hospital where I worked. All these years, like my colleagues — though the number of psychiatrists in Kashmir has risen to 35, we are still unable to cope with the rush — I have realised the only reason we have been able to avoid a mental health catastrophe caused by the unbelievable levels of stress, pain and grief in Kashmir is the unflinching faith of people in God.

In the third year of my residency, a woman would come to my OPD, every Monday, with her daughter. The daughter had clear conversion symptoms (severe



CR Sasikumar

psychological distress presenting as neurological symptoms). My initial assessment was that she had depression of moderate severity. I put her on medication and she started feeling better. But her symptoms did not abate.

We realised that her current ordeal started when a cousin accidentally revealed how her father had died. Her mother had hidden the fact for years and even asked her not to reveal it to us, her doctors. But that day the daughter decided to talk. Her father was a militant who had died in a gun fight with forces and her mother and other family members had witnessed it. Earlier, her maternal uncle too had been killed in the course of the encounter. The daughter was too young then to realise what had happened. The family, instead of telling her the truth, thought they could help her by concealing it from her. For six years, they had told her that her father was working in West Asia. But one day her cousin revealed the truth to her. "Ever since that day", she said, "whenever I go to sleep I see my father's blood-soaked body. I am scared to fall asleep."

In our next meeting, I asked the mother how she coped with such grief. She said it was her destiny, and that she was waiting for God's benevolence to return. She said she has no doubt that God will eventually

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make her daughter well again.

Masa returned in 2008 and told me that one of her neighbours had been killed in police firing and ever since she wasn't able to sleep. She had reverted to her previous condition. A week later, she told me she felt better. I did not see her until October 2010. This time she was in a very bad state. She talked about the many boys from her neighbourhood who had been killed in the firing. She was angry with everybody. She talked about the death of humanity, she remembered her own son and talked about him. But most importantly, she talked about God and how we need to collectively plead before Him for solace. In 2016, I saw one of her neighbours at SMHS hospital (one of the biggest general hospitals in Srinagar) where his son was admitted with pellet injuries. I enquired about *masa*. She couldn't bear the pain anymore and had died recently, he said.

Bessel Vander Kolk, while teaching me about trauma, had said that all biological problems don't have biological solutions. In my 17 years of psychiatry practice, I have found this to be most relevant: Faith heals. It gives hope because its foundation is eternal justice.

The writer is associate professor, psychiatry at Government Medical College, Srinagar

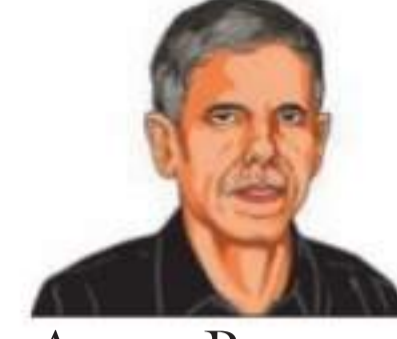
WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The adventurous trespassing by India can be attributed to its sense of insecurity given the friendly relations between China and Pakistan."

—CHINA DAILY

Hubris of science

It has become an ideology of the powerful. Democratic societies need a plurality of knowledge systems



AVIJIT PATHAK

"SCIENTISTS MARCH AGAINST unscientific, obscurantist ideas". News of this kind attracts our attention, primarily for two reasons. First, the cognitive power that modern science is endowed with makes us believe that it is always progressive and emancipatory. Second, in these troubled times when all manner of falsehood is projected as "truth" in the name of faith, science is seen as a saviour — a "true consciousness" of sorts. No wonder, when marches were held in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Pune and other cities, and scientists from top institutions raised their voice against religious intolerance and the paucity of adequate funds for scientific research, it is regarded as a progressive venture. Even though science plays an important role in our quest for knowledge, and scientists have reasons to articulate their voices of concern, I want to interrogate the taken-for-granted/simplistic notion of science as something sacrosanct, its self-image as a body of superior knowledge, not to be doubted by anybody.

There is a heroic notion of modern science that evolved through Baconian empiricism and Cartesian rationality, Newtonian physics and Darwinian theory of evolution, causal explanation and determinism, Industrial Revolution and technological progress. As sociologist Robert Merton has argued, the four "institutional imperatives" of science — universalism, communism (or shared knowledge), disinterestedness and organised scepticism — made it into a cherished doctrine of liberal/democratic/secular values. Science, we are led to believe, fights dogmas and practices, it gives us clarity of understanding, and the power to demystify and objectify nature for establishing human control over it, and hence, no modern nation in its quest for material wealth and secular reasoning can escape science. Possibly Jawaharlal Nehru's celebration of "scientific temper" was based on this grand optimism centered on the ability of science to emancipate mankind from what Auguste Comte — the early champion of positivism — would have regarded as "theological" and "metaphysical" fixations. In fact, in all modern nation-states, science has been heavily pampered; science is close to the centre of power.

The achievements of science are remarkable. Yet, its very success is its tragedy. Science has been reduced to scientism: It has become hegemonic, an ideology of the powerful, be it the militaristic state or the glitz of corporate capitalism. Scientists, as Paul Feyerabend revealed with extraordinary insight, are like "determined conquerors" who seem to have destroyed all other traditions of knowledge. The orthodoxy of old-fashioned priests, astrologers and practitioners of witchcraft is nothing

compared to the damage caused by the official priests of heavily-pampered techno-science — emissions from nuclear reactors, or, for that matter, bombardment of human body and soul by the technologies of, to use Ivan Illich's words, "diagnostic imperialism".

Yes, the non-critical adherents of science would always argue that science is pure — free from "interests" — and it is the political system that has to be blamed for the aberrations. This logic is superficial because science is never practiced in a state of social vacuum: Research priorities are often dependent on the interests of donor agencies. Moreover, despite tremendous progress in the philosophy of science, the majority of the practitioners remain reductionist and deterministic in their approach. They fail to understand the nuanced meanings of reality — the entire domain of symbolism, human longing and creative exploration. Man is not just "rational" and "logical"; man is also a visionary, a mystic, a poet, a wanderer and civilisation progresses because there are multiple ways through which we make sense of the world. Science is just one way, it has no right to silence the other perspectives — say, the way Walt Whitman saw "miracle" in every inch of space, William Blake saw the entire world in a "grain of sand", the Vedic sage saw man's quest for the transcendental in the upward flame of agni or fire, and M.K. Gandhi saw Kurukshetra as the turbulent inner space torn between good and evil. Are all these articulations merely pieces of "fiction" without hard evidence? Is it not a fact that science too is a fiction, a modern mythology of "progress" that, despite the devastating wars, holocaust, environmental disaster, we continue to regard as "solid", "objective" and "foundational"?

Superstitions have to be fought. However, it is wrong to believe that science alone can fight it. The sages with immense spiritual sensitivity have been fighting it. Where is the scope for fear mongering priestcraft, greedy astrologers and market-savvy, TV friendly babas and gurus in Chaitanya's *bhakti rasa*, Kabir's sublime prayers, and Ramakrishna's ecstasy? In fact, at times we notice a strange case of compartmentalisation — from 9 am to 5 pm, I am a "scientist" in my lab and the rest of the day I think of the gold I have to offer to Tirupati temple for the marriage of my daughter.

A truly democratic society needs plurality of knowledge traditions, not just science. It needs a poet's metaphor, an artist's play of imagination, a prophet's vision, a sage's intuition; it also needs the language of folly. We need to be mad because, as Pascal said, not to be mad would amount to another form of madness. Scientists demand more grants for the promotion of science education. Have they ever thought that the other seekers of truth — poets, philosophers, historians and anthropologists — too need a solid support system? Have they ever thought that what goes on in the name of science education at our schools and colleges has got nothing to do with the spirit of critical enquiry? Possibly our scientists need to learn the art of self-criticism.

The writer is professor at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

BEYOND AN EPISODE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Making common cause' (IE, August 10). News channels are not persistent when reporting a news report. Their prime concern is TRPs and do not follow reportage of an episode. But do we regard the stalking episode as just another incident. Doesn't it resonate beyond few hours of reportage

Nishant Parashar, Chandigarh

UNEQUAL NATION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Tryst with inequality' (IE, August 10). Manual scavenging can be described as a caste-based discrimination, which is prevalent in our society even after the practice has been outlawed. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has made no dent on this inhuman activity. According to a UN report, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, UP, Tamil Nadu account for more than 72 per cent of sanitary latrines and 1,82,000 households of rural areas are that of manual scavengers. The prime minister has promised that manual scavenging would be abolished by 2019 but there is no appreciable change. Merely increasing wages of the sewage workers and enacting laws will not serve the problem.

Navdeep Kaur, Mohali

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Tryst with inequality' (IE, August 10). Inequality in wages is a social ill. It is disappointing that a country which has some of the richest people in the world also has 172 million people living below the poverty line. The country is the largest exporter of the rice in world, but fails to protect its farmers. The country is beset with

LETTER OF THE WEEK

BEGIN FROM TOP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Paradox of the vote' (IE, August 9). The article suggests that incremental democracy would have tackled the problems of the country systematically. But the suggestion is blinkered against the poor. Universal adult franchise gave a voice to such people. Making the state answerable to only urban or rural magnates, on practical grounds, would widen the gaps between haves and have-nots. The development of Western nations is not a product of limited franchise but technological churning and colonialism.

Manisha Legha, Bikaner

gender inequality.

Heema Mukesh Parekh, Mumbai

CASTE AND CASTEISM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Defenders of varna' (IE, August 4). An ad published in various newspapers on August 9 by the government of India urges citizens to take a pledge towards "Casteism-free India". It surreptitiously mentions the word "casteism" instead of caste. Does this vindicate the argument that preservation of caste is the top priority pursuit of the Hindutva forces?

M. Zubair Khan, Delhi

This sari moment

The garment is like fashion itself — a little ahead of all that's done about it



SHEFALEE VASUDEV

EVERSINCE SOCIAL media ripped open our real and metaphorical closets, there has been a surge in sari consciousness. Cherished textiles with nostalgia-evoking resumes along with their hoarders, designers, revivalists, narrators, historians, film-makers began tumbling out of the closet. Sari pacts, seminars, exhibitions, books, melas and fashion collections wove a textured meme — half-serious, half-curious but well intentioned to "save the sari". This meme made many of us living the sari script everyday happy to be finally noticed even as it gave others a story-telling device. For yet others, the drape became an exciting tool to be strapped up, stitched, zipped and primed with unconventional accessories and blouses.

Now, every year has a sari moment — three even — that pushes up the current rate of interest in the unstitched garment. The #SareeSearch, a Twitter poll by MaryKay Carlson the Charge d'Affaires of the US Embassy in India is definitely a Sari Moment. Carlson has invited votes to help her choose her debut sari for the 70th Independence Day next week.

By narrowing her search to four kinds of saris with Carlson photographed in each, the #SareeSearch is personal yet public, Indian yet devised by an international diplomat. Best of all, a winner is waiting to be picked.

This year got another sari moment. The Sari Series, an Anthology of Drape, a non-profit project by digital publication *Border&Fall* documents regional drapes through 80 odd how-to films to be released next month. These digitise, modernise and innovate the story beyond sari matriarch Rta Kapur Chishti's documentation in her book *Saris: Tradition and Beyond*. Sixty stylishly shot photographs are up on #WeWearCulture, Google's Art and Culture platform.

Before Carlson walks out wearing her winner next week, it is time for the *de rigueur* annual sari article. This is that kind of piece which first pays homage to the sari with lyrical adjectives — beautiful, powerful, poetic, revered in literature, film and fashion, the timeless costume of goddesses, queens and desi girls. It then pulls out some threads. How did this garment we thought we may leave behind get ahead of us?

That's what the sari is today — like fashion itself — a little ahead of all that's done about it. The #100sareepact, a rage two years back, no longer sounds as energetic. Toronto-based visual artist Meera Sethi's #Unstitched: The Sari Project to create a sari community of 108 South Asian women has slipped from top recall. Men wearing saris in the quest of a non-gendered identity don't raise eyebrows any more. Designer

Sabyasachi Mukherjee's Save the Sari campaign? No longer relevant: The sari has been saved. It went from being anti-fashion, a fixed garment from our costume history to a charm in fashion upstaging every innovative garment in its way. It continues to knock out its peers like the dhoti, bandhgala, the salwar kameez in popularity and adaptability. But you already know that. The arrival of the bikini sari, made from technologically advanced performance fabrics? Oh yes.

There is little doubt that the sari is a versatile, imaginative *sutradhar* to talk about India's past and present. It lends itself well to marketable events, the dark theatre of plagiarism as well as to fabulous weaving interventions. It has fascinatingly regressed from being Auntie-ish to an Instagram diva. Designer Payal Khandwala is set to launch her short saris — half the length of six metres — that she says "can be worn with anything, even a pair of jeans". So far, a sari was the heroine in a woman's look, everything else became secondary. Now that it is open to playing supporting actor, watch out for more national awards.

Yet let's not forget that the sari benefits from an ideological bias — being a national treasure, its sanctity clouds the fact that the sari trend is just that: A trend. No wonder the veteran nurturers of Indian handlooms, also sari saviours as a logical extension of

their roles, go about unfazed.

Sari evangelism might need some debate. A sari by itself can be beautiful but to become powerful or humble as it is often called, it needs a human being to steer its language. Chiffons now copy handlooms and handlooms are woven with design dexterity to imitate sleek chiffons, but isn't this a resounding victory of weavers working in creative tandem with textile designers than some social media fad?

The modern sari's (and what is that?) most compelling contribution is as a tool of self-determination in the culture of identity politics confused as it was by global options. So now we don't just wear a sari. We wear My Sari with a personal twist, a shirt, sneakers, chewing gum or rolling eyes — anything. The sari is not synonymous with being traditional nor is it a badge of nationalism, new or old. So before a national sari day is announced or the Great Indian Sari Challenge becomes a reality TV show, or a politician unfurls it as her election symbol (and why not?) its present story can be summed up in two quotes by the late textile guru Martand Singh: "The world is looking for organic subjects." and "Any intervention has a life of its own."

But by god, what an enviable run.

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