

# 12 WHO·WHAT·WHY·WHEN·WHERE

## WHO

### U. Sagayam, an officer on a mission

In Tamil Nadu, U. Sagayam is almost always referred to by his name followed by his credentials: IAS. In recent years, it's also varied between Sagayam for Chief Minister, even Sagayam for President. At 55, Ubagaram Pillai Sagayam, the bureaucrat with a reputation for incorruptibility and honesty, is once again in the news after he approached the Madras High Court last week, complaining of threats to his life from the granite mining lobby in the State.

He was appointed Legal Commissioner by the High Court on September 11, 2014, to inspect mining activities. He is on the verge of submitting his final report in the multi-crore granite scam reported in Madurai district to the High Court.

#### Why is his career eventful?

Mr. Sagayam's has been an eventful career since his entry into the State government service as a Group I officer from a farmer's family of Perunchunai village in Pudukottai district. He has reportedly faced 25 transfers in 27 years of service. In 1989, after clearing the UPSC

examination, he served in the Central Secretariat Service in New Delhi for seven months before he decided to give it up to serve the people of Tamil Nadu.

The State first heard of Mr. Sagayam, after he, acting on a complaint of dirt found in a bottle of Pepsi, sealed the production unit of the multinational company in Kancheepuram district, as district revenue officer-cum additional district magistrate, in 1999. Armed with a government laboratory report, which confirmed that the samples were "not fit for human consumption," he banned sales.

#### What happened in 2011?

In 2011, the Election Commission of India posted him as Collector of Madurai, days before the Assembly elec-



tions, hoping his reputation for being a straightforward officer would stand him in good stead for a district that had become known for bribing voters.

Along with two IPS officers – P. Kannappan, Commissioner of Police, Madurai City, and Asra Garg, superintendent of Madurai rural district – Mr. Sagayam thwarted multiple attempts at bribing voters. They even registered a case against the son of the then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, M.K. Alagiri, a Union Minister at that time.

During this stint, Mr. Sagayam was also recognised as a friend of the poor. He started *Uzhavan Unavagam* (farmers' foodcourt) where poor farmers could sell traditional dishes. He helped in the rehabilitation of three great

grandchildren of freedom fighter V. O. Chidambaram, who were in abject poverty. As Namakkal Collector, he uploaded details of his assets on the district administration's website. Hundreds of youth, who gathered under the banner *Ezhuchi Tamilagam* in Madurai in 2016, appealed to Mr. Sagayam to enter politics to cleanse the system.

#### How did he get the granite case?

A petition under the Right to Information Act revealed that Mr. Sagayam had sent a report on massive looting by granite quarry operators in Madurai district. In the meantime, he was posted at Cooptex, where he lodged a complaint with the Chief Secretary, seeking a probe into the interference of Minister Gokula Indira in an assault case filed by his staff. Mr. Sagayam was transferred.

The next day, the High Court appointed him Legal Commissioner to probe the granite scam. It was after a long-drawn legal battle that the State government was forced to allow him to take up the investigation. Amid complaints of little cooperation from district officials,

he took up the mammoth task of probing hundreds of complaints of landgrab from the people of Melur taluk.

His inquiry revealed looting of high-value granite from private and government land, destruction of waterbodies, diversion of rivers and several other irregularities in the export of granite, right under the nose of government officials. This was evident when vigilance officials raided the houses of two former Collectors of Madurai.

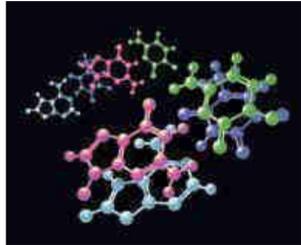
The prolonged inquiry was marked by allegations of wire tapping his room in Circuit House and goons of granite barons attempting to attack him and his team.

Photographs of Mr. Sagayam spending a night during his probe sleeping at a graveyard at E. Mallampatti, a remote village, went viral. After sunset, the police refused to exhume bodies, believed to be part of a human sacrifice ritual done by some granite quarry operators. Mr. Sagayam slept in the open to prevent destruction of material evidence.

S. SUNDAR

## WHAT

### The lowdown on genome editing



**WHAT IS IT?** In a first, researchers from the Oregon Health and Science University along with colleagues in California, China and South Korea repaired a mutation in human embryos by using a gene-editing tool called CRISPR-Cas9.

The mutation seen in the MYBPC3 gene causes a common heart condition called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which is marked by thickening of the heart muscle.

The mutation is seen in about one in

500 people and can lead to sudden death later in life. It is an inherited cardiac disease and the presence of even one copy of the gene can cause symptoms, which usually manifest as heart failure. Correcting the mutation in the embryo ensures that the child is born healthy and the defective gene is not passed on to future generations. There is currently no cure for the condition.

**HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?** CRISPR-Cas9 is a system used by bacterial cells to recognise and destroy viral DNA as a form of adaptive immunity. Using components of the CRISPR system, researchers can remove, add or alter specific DNA sequences in the genome of higher organisms.

The gene editing tool has two components – a single-guide RNA (sgRNA) that contains a sequence that can bind to DNA, and the Cas9 enzyme which acts as a molecular scissor that can cleave DNA. The genetic sequence of the sgRNA matches the target sequence

of the DNA that has to be edited. In order to selectively edit a desired sequence in DNA, the sgRNA is designed to find and bind to the target.

Upon finding its target, the Cas9 enzyme swings into an active form that cuts both strands of the target DNA. One of the two main DNA-repair pathways in the cell then gets activated to repair the double-stranded breaks. While one of the repair mechanisms result in changes to the DNA sequence, the other is more suitable for introducing specific sequences to enable tailored repair. In theory, the guide RNA will only bind to the target sequence and no other regions of the genome.

But the CRISPR-Cas9 system can also recognise and cleave different regions of the genome than the one that was intended to be edited. These "off-target" changes are very likely to take place when the gene-editing tool binds to DNA sequences that are very similar to the target one. Though many studies have found few unwanted changes suggesting that the tool is probably safe, re-

searchers are working on safer alternatives.

**WHY DOES IT MATTER?** Along with sperm from a man with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, the gene-editing tool was also introduced into eggs from 12 healthy women before fertilisation. In normal conditions, a piece of DNA with the correct sequence serves as a template for the repair to work, although the efficiency can be significantly low. Instead of the repair template that was provided by the researchers, the cells used the healthy copy of the DNA from the egg as a template. This came as a big surprise.

Normally, if sperm from a father with one mutant copy of the gene is fertilized in vitro with normal eggs, 50% of the embryos would inherit the condition. When the gene-editing tool was used, 42 out of the 58 embryos did not carry the mutation. The remaining 16 embryos had unwanted additions or deletions of DNA.

Thus the probability of inheriting the

healthy gene increased from 50 to 72.4%. There was no off-target snipping of the DNA. According to Nature, "the edited embryos developed similarly to the control embryos, with 50% reaching an early stage of development (blastocyst). This indicates that editing does not block development."

**WHAT NEXT?** Clinical trials are under way in China and in the U.S. to use this tool for treating cancer. In May this year, it was shown in mice that it is possible to shut down HIV-1 replication and even eliminate the virus from infected cells. In agriculture, a new breed of crops that are gene-edited will become commercially available in a few years. In February this year, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the National Academy of Medicine said scientific advances make gene editing in human reproductive cells "a realistic possibility that deserves serious consideration."

R. PRASAD

## WHY

### is there some worry about the rupee?



#### How has the rupee performed?

■ After falling 2.6% against the dollar in 2016, the rupee is on a roll in 2017. In this calendar year, the rupee is one of the best performing Asian currencies which has strengthened 5.9% against the dollar. It is the best performing currency in Asia after the Thai Baht, the Singapore dollar, and the Taiwanese dollar. On August 4, when it touched 63.56 against the dollar, it was on a two-year high, since July 22, 2015. On Friday, August 11, however, it closed at 64.13

against the dollar on sustained demand from importers and corporates.

#### When did the turnaround begin?

■ Many currency experts said the Union Budget in which Finance Minister Arun Jaitley showed a resolve to stick to the path of fiscal discipline and the government's thrust on reforms boosted investors' confidence. The budget was followed by the monetary policy of the central bank which changed its stance from accommodative to neutral, indicating it wanted to keep inflation under check. This further boosted investor sentiment – as reflected in the rise of the equity indices – both Sensex and Nifty touching all-time highs in recent weeks, though there has been some correction in the last few weeks. Since February, portfolio capital flows were over \$25 billion which boosted the rupee.

#### How are the authorities reacting?

■ For a long time, the sharp appreciation of the rupee was seen as a worry as it hurts exports. However, it seems

there is a change in the thought process of the Narendra Modi-led NDA government. There were several comments from Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Commerce and Industry Nirmala Sitharaman which suggests the country may have developed a higher level of tolerance for the rupee's upside. Ms. Sitharaman has suggested that the exchange rate is not the only factor for exports to grow. On its part, the central bank is not intervening in the foreign exchange market to curb volatility and does not target any level.

#### What is the worry?

■ One of the downside risks of the rupee's recent rising spree is that a large part of the import portfolio is unhedged. Hedging would have helped companies with foreign currency exposure to shield themselves from fluctuations in rates. According to State Bank of India's estimate, at least 40% of the

importers' portfolio is unhedged. In 2013, when the rupee was tumbling, the unhedged position of exporters was seen as a major worry for banks. Now, it is mandated that banks have to set aside capital, in terms of provision, if their corporate clients don't hedge their portfolio.

"While rupee appreciation does have positive consequences in terms of lower imported inflation, in times of lower oil prices, we could perhaps live with a little bit of rupee depreciation," said Soumya Kanti Ghosh, chief economist, State Bank of India. Mr. Ghosh also argued that with regard to trade with China, if the rupee continued to appreciate it could adversely impact the production of these domestic industries. The rupee also appreciated about 3.7% against the Chinese Renminbi since February. This has resulted in a surge in cheaper imports from China. "Even the IIP data reveal that industries such as electrical equipment; motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers; fabricated metal products; and chemical indus-

tries are showing negative growth in the past few months," he said in a note.

#### What lies ahead?

■ While some correction is due for the currency in the near term, currency experts said trend in local stocks could guide the direction of the rupee. "Over this year, any correction in domestic equity beyond 2% from highs have triggered 1% sell-off in USD-INR," Kotak Securities said in a note to investors. "At the same time, Nifty has not yet witnessed a 5% or more of correction since the intermediate rally began in December 2016, the longest streak in nearly two decades. Therefore, there is always scope that the correction could morph into something bigger than the 2-3% declines the market has witnessed in the past eight months. In USD-INR, as we remain structurally bearish, we would view a Nifty-led sell-off in INR as an opportunity to scale into positional longs in the high real yield pair," it said.

MANOJIT SAHA

## WHEN

### 13 August 2017

**Game-changer?** Brazilian football star Neymar will be available to make his debut for Qatar Sports Investments-owned Paris Saint-Germain at Guingamp this Sunday. On August 4, PSG announced that it had signed the 25-year-old from Barcelona FC for a record \$262 million, double the previous record of \$118 million paid by Manchester United for French footballer Paul Pogba from Juventus last summer. The transfer was masterminded by PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi who said Neymar, who will wear the No. 10 shirt, with his "winning mentality, strength of character and sense of leadership" would bring a "very positive energy to the club". With this audacious buy, the football world is adequately rattled. Arsenal manager Frenchman Arsene Wenger said it was way "beyond rationality" and that anything can happen if a "country owns a club". Barcelona brought up the financial fairplay issue, but experts pointed out that this was another way of Qatar raising its international sporting profile after its 2022 bid to host the World Cup was mired in controversy. ■ AP, REUTERS



## WHERE

### In Kerala, anxiety over killing fields of Kannur



Peace talks and meetings are being planned in Kannur this month to break the cycle of violence between rival CPI (M) and RSS groups. CPI(M) state secretary Kodiyeri Balakrishnan, BJP state president Kumanman Rajashekhara and RSS leader P. Gopalankutty sat together at peace meetings held in Thiruvananthapuram and Kannur to come up with a solution to help resolve the crisis. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan also took part in the meeting at Thiruvananthapuram.

#### What is the latest trigger?

Since the murder of RSS worker Rajesh

in Thiruvananthapuram on July 29, the Sangh Parivar has stepped up its campaign against "CPI(M)-sponsored violence" targeting its workers. The campaign got an impetus when Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley visited the capital last Sunday as an emissary of the BJP's national leadership and met the family of the slain RSS worker.

#### Who is to blame?

The BJP alleges that the CPI(M) is trying to experiment with its 'Kannur model' of elimination of political rivals in other districts of Kerala. The number of workers killed on both sides in political clashes over the past several years shows that neither side can claim to be innocent. Police figures show that of the 52 cases of political murders in Kannur since 2005, 26 were Sangh Parivar workers and 21 CPI(M) workers. The highest number of political murders during the period, however, occurred in 2006-2011 when the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front government was in power. As many as 31 incidents of polit-



ical murders occurred during those five years. Though the CPI(M) is still a major political force in the district, the Sangh Parivar rank and file in the district now show a combative spirit, which is attributed to the coming to power of the Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre.

#### Where is the source of violence?

The social historical backdrop of the

north Malabar region where Kannur district is located has shaped its combative political climate. There are factors such as economic and social backwardness in the region that explain why violence is often the means of political expression in Kannur. Added to this is the legacy of history and culture. The culture of violence that prevailed in the region over the past few centuries in the form of blood feuds has fostered a tendency to settle differences through violence and not through democratic debate and conversation. The history of Communist-led agrarian struggles, which often led to instances of violence, in different parts of the district before and after Independence helped Communists to consolidate their hold.

#### What motivates it now?

Post 2000, though the CPI(M) continues its domination in the district, the BJP is gaining a foothold in many areas traditionally known as CPI(M) bastions. The BJP-RSS has pockets of influence inside the CPI(M)'s pocket boroughs in Kan-

nur. The increase in the BJP's vote share in all the 11 Assembly constituencies in the district in the last Assembly elections has given a sense of confidence to Sangh Parivar workers and the leadership that they are going to be the beneficiary of what they see as the erosion of the CPI(M)'s mass base.

#### What is the solution?

For rival workers trapped in the logic of retaliation, an escape from the cycle of violence is not easy. The rate of political murders in the district since early 2000 has recorded a decline compared to that in previous decades. There lies the hope. Political killings reached their peak during 1989-2000 when 63 people lost their lives. Change in socio-economic profile of people in the politically vulnerable areas, mostly in rural parts of the district, is said to be one of the reasons for the decline. But the recent spate in political violence in the district raises concerns about fresh escalation.

MOHAMED NAZEER

# The reader will not dance

If someone generates violence on the basis of a book or a film, it's a crime that we must condemn



## PASSING BITE

RUCHIR JOSHI  
is a writer, filmmaker and columnist

Here we go again. Jharkhand Chief Minister Raghubar Das and his Bharatiya Janata Party government have now joined a long list of rulers who have thrown democratic principles into the gutter and put a ban on a book they don't like. To be more accurate, it's not even a book they don't like; it's a book to which they have paid no attention until somebody – in this case the State Opposition – decided to turn it into a political football. To be even more precise, Das has peremptorily decided to ban a book of short stories written in English that was published two years ago. He says he has done this so that the mostly illiterate, mostly non-readers of English who are the people of

Jharkhand can be 'protected' from this book. Furthermore, while some outraged people have seen fit to burn an effigy of the writer, Das has asked the relevant authorities to launch a legal case against the man for insulting the Adivasi and for showing Adivasi women in a bad light.

### The real harvest of the ban

This argument for banning and prosecution made by the Jharkhand Chief Minister as well as Hemant Soren, the Leader of Opposition in the State Assembly, is a lie. This is because when Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's book was published – to considerable acclaim, as it happens – it caused no upheaval among the Adivasis of the State. It's a lie because a book cannot 'insult' a religion, a god, a prophet, a people, an ethnic group, a caste, or a country; a book is a book, and you can choose to read it or not; a book doesn't open by itself, it stays shut until someone chooses to pick it up and read it; a book does not collar you in the street or on a village path; a book does not spit in your face, 'outrage your modesty' or assault you.

With this lie, Das and Soren join a



group of illustrious politician-liars. In 1988, Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress government banned a book because they wanted to pander to the Muslim vote bank. A few years later, the CPI(M) government in West Bengal banned another book for the same reason. Across the last several years, we have seen all sorts of evil clowns in various positions of power in India trying or succeeding in getting books and films banned. One of the things that is common in all these banning projects is that the book or film itself is never the real issue; the real har-

vest of the ban, each time, is the gain in political power it brings to the person, group, or party shouting for the ban.

### Setting dangerous precedents

There is a rule of thumb when analysing any riot or terrorist attack: look beyond the obvious and try to see who ultimately benefits from that particular riot or atrocity. Once you identify the profit-making party, you will be closer to identifying who actually engineered or choreographed the deadly event.

A similar rule can be applied to the

business of banning books, plays, and films. For instance, were millions of Indian Muslims really going to be affected by some novelist writing in English and making oblique references to a fictional figure who may resemble the Prophet Mohammed? Of course not. The real danger lay in the fact that some unscrupulous opportunistic leader or politician could create unrest among Indian Muslims by using the book for his own ends. So, rather than having the political courage to come down on whoever might cause the trouble, it was far simpler to ban *The Satanic Verses* and set off a domino chain of banning precedents. Likewise, was Wendy Doniger's book, *The Hindus*, with all its flaws and inaccuracies, going to cause great pain to millions of Hindus? Obviously not. The only counter needed against the book were a few reviews pointing out the mistakes. After which the book could have been left to be read by the few hundred people who might actually have picked it up. But no, if you succeed in bullying a big publisher into withdrawing a book, you can set a precedent. If today the malevolent champion of the Hindutvaliban, Dinanath Batra, man-

ages to snuff out Doniger's book, tomorrow he can hope to snuff out Tagore. And if he manages to remove Tagore, then deleting Gandhi and Nehru from the consciousness of our schoolchildren can easily be the next target.

A book is a series of words on a page or a screen, a string of words that forms ideas and images, and it's up to each individual reader what he or she does with those ideas and images. If some are hurt by reading a book, then, well, they are hurt; they can write another text to counter the hurtful book. If someone wants to generate actual violence on the basis of a book or a film, it's a crime and there is no justification for it. As a society claiming to have democratic ideals, we have to prosecute the perpetrators of violence and not ban the book or film used as an excuse for that violence. If we as a nation start to applaud and bolster people who burn effigies of writers and artists, we are done for. If you don't want to see a country bereft of thinkers, a dissent-mukt Bharat, please go out today and buy a copy of *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. That will show those in power that we as a society will not dance to their malicious drumbeat.

# Our problems are solvable now

What is lacking is the will, the focus, and clear plans



## ON THE OTHER HAND

RAGHAVAN SRINIVASAN  
is Editor, The Hindu Business Line

The release of the second part of the Economic Survey for 2016-17 – the part which contains all those interminable tables and graphs which our honourable MPs usually tended to skip over when the Survey used to be presented as a single document – has once again shifted the current topic of public discussion away from the showdown of the strongmen in Gujarat to more fundamental questions like *roti, kapda, makaan* and whether *achhe din* are finally around the corner or not.

This is all to the good. As a nation, we tend to outrage over inconsequential things like whether Amazon Canada is selling slippers with pictures of Hindu gods on them, and tend to skim over the really life-altering ones like demonetisation and GST. So, some talk about the economy is good.

### The gloomy growth horizon

The consensus of first-cut opinion on the Survey-II's findings is that the news is not good. There are dark clouds looming over the growth horizon, and not of the good, rain-bearing type. From a GDP growth rate projection of 6.75-7.5% in February (during the Budget), the Survey says meeting the higher end of the band is pretty much not possible, with the "balance of risks" having shifted to the downside.

Amongst the risks, the Survey points out the growing crisis in Indian farming, with rising agrarian distress and unremunerative prices for almost all non-cereal crops; the balance sheet risks of the rising tide of farm loan waivers in States; India's growing private sector balance sheet crisis; and the real threat of deflation.

To me though, there are other takeaways from the kind of overall view of an economy the size and complexity of India's that a document like



the Economic Survey provides, takeaways which should form the basis for detailed reflection on where we are as an economy, how far we have travelled towards the many goals that we have set for ourselves, and more importantly, picking and prioritising which problems we can, and should, solve first.

The first is that we are a pretty large economy, whether in rupee or dollar terms. Gross National Income grew from a mere ₹10,360 crore in 1950-51 to a staggering ₹1,49,94,109 crore in 2016-17. When we cheer 70 years of independence come August 15, this is a number we can certainly cheer to. Per capita income grew from just ₹254 in 1950-51 (current prices) to ₹1,03,219 in 2016-17. This is the first time in our history that (even if notionally, and on paper), every single Indian is a lakhpati.

The size and financial strength of the government, too, has grown in proportion. The first interim Budget of India estimated total government revenues at just ₹171.5 crore. In 2016-17, the total budgetary outlay of the Central and State governments and Union Territories together amounted to ₹38,38,558 crore. That is nearly \$608 billion. In a single year.

That still pales in comparison to the trillion dollar-plus budgets of the U.S. and China, but six hundred billion dollars is not chump change. There are a lot of problems that you can solve by spending that kind of money every year. The question is, are we solving the right problems?

### Lagging behind smaller nations

We may be among the fastest growing economies in the world, we may be

militarily strong enough to rattle sabres at China, but for a vast number of our people, the growth or development or strength is yet to touch them in any meaningful way. India ranks 131 out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index. The Survey admits: "In comparison to other nations in the BRICS grouping, India has the lowest rank... The Life Expectancy at Birth (LEB) is also lower than that of Bangladesh, Brazil, China, and Russia."

It is now 42 years since India launched the Integrated Child Development Services, the world's largest early childhood intervention programme. During this period, India's Infant Mortality Rate dropped 68% – but at 40.5/1,000, is still much higher than neighbouring Bangladesh, Pakistan or Nepal and well shy of the 29 deaths per 1,000 live births target which was meant to be achieved by 2015.

Now this is a problem we can fix with \$600 billion, with enough and more left over to tackle another big problem: education. The mean years of schooling for India are the lowest in comparison to other BRICS nations. According to a Pratham report, about 42% of children in Class 3 are able to read at Class 1 level in 2016. "The fact that the ASER report compares the skills of Standard 3 children in Standard 1 levels is an example of the state of the learning outcomes of the primary education," the Survey admits.

I could go on, but the point is that we are in the big league now and have the technology and the money to solve problems which even little league nations have cracked. What we need is a clear focus on what to solve – and steadfast execution.

# Cities on our reading list

Seeing new places with the coordinates given by favourite writers and books



## WORD COUNTS

MINI KAPOOR  
is Ideas Editor, The Hindu

In this unfolding year of extraordinary fiction, Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* is already a standout novel. A filmmaker who saw the events of the 'Egyptian Revolution' of 2011 and its aftermath up close, Hamilton explores how the uprising in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the initial exhilaration at ushering in a democratised order, and then the waves of repression and the setbacks changed the interior lives of people. Ever since General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (subsequently elected president) removed Mohamed Morsi in 2013 – perhaps even before as Morsi's regime lost the confidence of many who had rallied against Hosni Mubarak – it has been difficult to get a sense of where the revolution is at, whether it is in fact still a work in progress, or how the ideas that sparked the Tahrir uprising have shifted around.

Even as Hamilton's debut novel provides grist for us to add more questions to that list, it is remarkable how familiar the Cairo of *The City Always Wins* appears. It's perhaps not just that when the international media descended on the city in 2011, the non-stop coverage immersed us in the events and locales of the revolution. The fiction of writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Alaa Al Aswany and Ahdaf Soueif (who happens to be Hamilton's mother) had already enabled us to inhabit Cairo in our imaginations – so that all it took was a little help from Google maps for us to find our bearings in this great city amid the news-casts.

### Fiction as a guide

Finding one's way in a new city with the help of fiction alone is what a writer does in one of the travelogues collected in *Footsteps: From Ferrante's Naples to Hemmett's San Francisco, Literary Pilgrimages Around the World*.



Ann Mah's essay was published in *The New York Times* (where all these travelogues first appeared) in January 2016 when Elena Ferrante's identity was more of a mystery. (An Italian journalist subsequently claimed to have outed Rome-based translator Anita Raja as the person behind the pseudonym.) Mah says all she had for a guide to Naples were Ferrante's wildly popular four Neapolitan novels, and no guidebook or map even, at a time when it was not even known whether 'Elena Ferrante' was, in fact, a man or woman. For: "To view the Naples of Ferrante is to view Naples like a native."

That's an ambition, however unrealistic, shared by most travellers, isn't it, to find oneself in a new city and to be enabled to go around as if one is an inhabitant already? As it happens, Mah takes the help of a "Naples native" to zero in on the neighbourhood that matches Ferrante's descriptions of where Elena and Lila, the two women at the heart of the Neapolitan series, spent their childhood.

Others in this collection have the writers' coordinates as they go exploring, and those tend to influence the itinerary. Among the most haunting, even more than the efforts to find Jorge Luis Borges's Buenos Aires or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Mompos, is Michelle Green's stay in Taprobane in Sri Lanka to find glimpses of Paul Bowles's time there. Taprobane is a privately owned island with just one villa that is now a luxury resort. But it was once, in the mid-twentieth century, under the ownership of Bowles, author most famously of *The Sheltering Sky* and who's more often associated with Tangier in Morocco. Bowles

wrote about Taprobane that "there's nothing between you and the South Pole", given its location off the coast of Sri Lanka, and it's a description tourist guides still use. But not much remains by way of material connect from that time, and Green instead wanders around the well-provided resort recalling Bowles's stay there. His wife, who had a difficult time in Taprobane, said of it when she first arrived: "I can see why you like it. It's a Poe story." It's enough to separate the reader from the neat, well-appointed villa of the tourist brochures today, and throw us into the imagery of a house with an overgrown garden, with "the nightly invasion of bats" and "vegetable life" so powerful that it led him to write: "It's a rather unpleasant sensation on the whole, to feel very strongly that plants are not inert and not insentient."

### Seeing like a native

And for those of us who are cricket fans, especially of the West Indies game, Monica Drake's tour of Antigua with Jamaica Kincaid's books as her guide is special too. On this island advertised for its 365 beaches, Kincaid is a necessary author. As Drake quotes her from memoir *A Small Place*: "An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist... a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness..." It takes a book to know that to think it is possible to see a new place like a native is, after all, the visitor's conceit.

# The shape of a mushroom cloud

Our conventional vocabulary has no means of articulating the singular horrors of atomic wars



## SERENDIPITIES

KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN  
was born in Palakkad and lives in New York

As a child, one of the things that fascinated me was that the two atomic bombs which were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (on August 6 and 9, 1945) had names: Little Boy and Fat Man. That things so destructive could be called something, especially something so playful, even irreverent, as if they were nicknames for kids I played with, struck me as incredible. But, like many private truths discovered in childhood, few around me I knew were interested in my discoveries. Over time, with a child's possessiveness for secrets and a taste for competition, I believed those names told me more than they told my classmates about how the world was truly constituted. For me, those names became trivia to be used in a quiz competition or as means to impress my parents' friends at dinner parties with my precocity should talk ever turn to war or

atomic bombs. But talk among my prospective audience rarely veered to atom bombs or Japan. While the Cold War's peace was largely kept thanks to the logic of mutually assured destruction by nuclear weapons, few in my middle-class Indian childhood wondered aloud about the shadow of annihilation under which we lived.

### An illusion of knowledge

Undeterred, however, with the patience of a stamp collector, I accumulated more obscure details about the atomic bomb: the Little Boy designs were de-commissioned well before the mid 1950s, the name Fat Man came from the novel *The Maltese Falcon*, the original goal was to bomb Kokura but cloud cover led the Americans to Nagasaki. Names, personas, histories, and so on. I thought about them every so often on my way from school, cycling amidst the grime and smoke of traffic, burdened by homework, with the melancholy of a con artist who couldn't share his secrets with the world. During one of those rides, what struck me as incredible was the possibility that one could know his story, even something so concrete and all-powerful as an atomic bomb, through a collection of facts.

Somewhere amidst this childhood



obsession with atomic bombs was an emergent recognition that the more facts I knew about the world, the more the world would become comprehensible. To understand what I saw all around me, I told myself that all I needed were facts, numbers, hierarchies. Where did this idea come to me, I cannot say. But by my fourth or fifth grade, collecting facts irrelevant to my daily living – the capital of Liechtenstein is Vaduz, the temperature of the universe was 4 degree in the Kelvin scale, and so on – became an abiding

passion. Similarly, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the numbers killed, and technical details of the bombs used were filed away in the storehouse of my mind. Neatly, like some easily retrievable piece of paper, which gave me the illusion of knowledge.

It wasn't until three decades later when I happened upon Kenzaburo Oe's masterful narrative on Hiroshima (which, in turn, I discovered thanks to *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick's moving essay on Oe and his son Hikari Oe's autism) that I realised how little I

actually understood. On reading Oe, I was slowly filled with a sense of shame as he calmly chronicled the sufferings that followed, the dignity of the survivors, or the innumerable small and large personal storms into which many lives capsized. Amidst all those facts on the atom bombs, I had somehow glided past the eternal brutality about that blinding violence that incinerated men and even ashes into nothingness. Somehow, over those years of reading, the technicalities of mass murder had intrigued me more than the nature of suffering that followed. That I had never found the imagination or energies to think of what happened in those cities filled me with a private recognition of how profoundly amoral was the kind of knowledge I had accumulated.

### Beyond words

I had mistakenly thought information was understanding, reading was recognition, and that numbers conveyed magnitude. What I had missed was that at the extremes of human experience – such as an atomic bomb – words become deformed. Their meaning and their context fold into themselves, revealing the emptiness at the core of all our constructs. It is hard not to conclude that our conventional vocabulary

has no means of articulating the singular horrors of atomic wars. It is this recognition that makes the present war of words between Washington, D.C. and Pyongyang all the more indistinguishable from a theatrical preview for the macabre. It is one part posturing for effects, and another a litany of bureaucratic euphemisms for death.

This tendency to be loose with words and looser with their meaning is not solely a forte of distant political or military rulers. It permeates across society, including our education system, media discourse, and self-descriptions where technical and commercial vocabulary substitute for moral conscientiousness. The result is a kind of milky white blandness that afflicts many, especially among the upwardly mobile in the developing world. In their scramble to educate themselves, to control their environs, to escape their middling lives, they find solace in the enumerable, the quantifiable, and in the manipulable. Many of their capacities for imagining the suffering of the other – a quality typically often developed in close-knit communities, castes, or communities – are slowly effaced for this instrumental knowledge that produces an illusion of control even if it leads to a mushroom cloud on the horizon.