

12 WHO·WHAT·WHY·WHEN·WHERE

WHO

Rajiv Kumar powerful planner

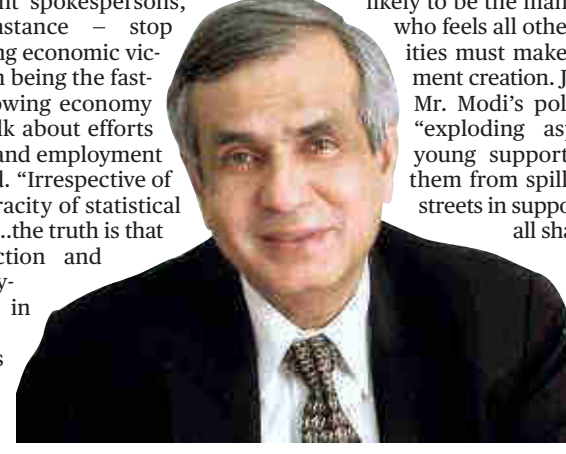
Rajiv Kumar has been picked as the second Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, the think tank set up by the Narendra Modi government as a substitute for the Planning Commission. An Oxford-educated economist with extensive experience in shaping the contours of public policy – both in and outside the government – Mr. Kumar is likely to take charge of his new role in September, once his predecessor Arvind Panagariya returns to academic pursuits at Columbia University in New York. He now serves as Chancellor of the Pune-based Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics and a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi and is also the founding director of Pahle India Foundation, a non-profit think tank in the capital. Reporting directly to the Prime Minister, the think tank's Chairperson, Mr. Kumar could wield a powerful influence on the management of the economy and the Centre's policy priorities.

What does he bring to the job?
He is more than familiar with the gov-

ernment's senior Ministers and top officials, including Cabinet Secretary P.K. Sinha and Additional Principal Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office P.K. Mishra. His word is taken seriously enough by the government to include him on the selection panel for high-profile jobs such as chiefs of regulatory bodies. But it is not the proximity, but the pragmatic policy advice he could bring to the table that would be critical for a government that has now lost two economists of global repute in the past one year (Raghuram Rajan and Mr. Panagariya). His diverse experience and vast social network within industry and the academia should come in handy. Consider this: apart from being a member of the National Security Advisory Board, he has worked at the Asian Development Bank and industry chambers CII and FICCI, and was once the CEO of the economic think tank ICRIER.

Why him?
Having met Mr. Modi first when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat six years ago, Mr. Kumar is in sync with what he calls

the Prime Minister's impressive and 'sharp focus' on economic development. "I was an optimist in government, but didn't let that cloud my judgement," Mr. Panagariya said after announcing his exit. Mr. Kumar is not only optimistic, but probably has the gumption to speak out on issues that others in the government may shy away from. Take his advice to government spokespersons, for instance – stop claiming economic victory on being the fastest growing economy and talk about efforts to expand employment instead. "Irrespective of the veracity of statistical claims...the truth is that production and employment in major sectors are either declin-



ing or stagnating. Rural distress is mounting... Such talk projects an image of a government not empathetic or aware of people's real concerns. This can rebound badly," he wrote in *Modi and his Challenges* released last year.

What could be his agenda?
Spurring the formal economy, reviving private investment and creating jobs is likely to be the mantra of Mr. Kumar, who feels all other economic priorities must make way for employment creation. Jobs are critical for Mr. Modi's politics to meet the "exploding aspirations of his young supporters and prevent them from spilling out on to the streets in support of extremists of all shades."

Mr. Kumar believes higher employment will automatically take the Indian economy close to double digit growth rates

for the next decade. He also has strong views about India's foreign trade policy and could push for an overhaul of the export incentives system.

Any surprises?
Bureaucrats may need to come up with better excuses, but Mr. Kumar could bring some relief for citizens as he believes the government could pare the high taxes on petroleum products to push consumption and investment demand. Last but not in the least interesting, Mr. Kumar is a firm backer for a voluntary two-year social service scheme for the youth to ensure unemployment doesn't lead them astray. "This would have to be managed by our armed forces, as was the case with the National Cadet Corps, and have national integration as the principal objectives. The actual deployment can also contribute to building some assets in the rural sector and address rising rural distress by taking up agricultural extension work." Wait for it.

VIKAS DHOOT

WHAT

The lowdown on Article 35A



WHAT IS IT? Article 35A is a provision incorporated in the Constitution giving the Jammu and Kashmir Legislature a carte blanche to decide who all are 'permanent residents' of the State and confer on them special rights and privileges in public sector jobs, acquisition of property in the State, scholarships and other public

aid and welfare. The provision mandates that no act of the legislature coming under it can be challenged for violating the Constitution or any other law of the land.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT? Article 35A was incorporated into the Constitution in 1954 by an order of the then President Rajendra Prasad on the advice of the Jawaharlal Nehru Cabinet. The controversial Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order of 1954 followed the 1952 Delhi Agreement entered into between Nehru and the then Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir Sheikh Abdullah, which extended Indian citizenship to the 'State subjects' of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Presidential Order was issued under Article 370 (1) (d) of the Constitution. This provision allows the President to make certain "exceptions and modifications" to the Constitution for the benefit of 'State subjects' of Jammu and Kashmir.

So Article 35A was added to the Constitution as a testimony of the special consideration the Indian government accorded to the 'permanent residents' of Jammu and Kashmir.

WHY DOES IT MATTER? The parliamentary route of lawmaking was bypassed when the President incorporated Article 35A into the Constitution. Article 368 (i) of the Constitution empowers only Parliament to amend the Constitution. So did the President act outside his jurisdiction? Is Article 35A void because the Nehru government did not place it before Parliament for discussion? A five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in its March 1961 judgment in *Puranlal Lakhanpal vs. The President of India* discusses the President's powers under Article 370 to 'modify' the Constitution. Though the court observes that the President may modify an existing provision in the Constitution under Article 370, the judgment is silent as to whether the President can, without the Parliament's

knowledge, introduce a new Article. This question remains open.

A writ petition filed by NGO We the Citizens challenges the validity of both Article 35A and Article 370. It argues that four representatives from Kashmir were part of the Constituent Assembly involved in the drafting of the Constitution and the State of Jammu and Kashmir was never accorded any special status in the Constitution. Article 370 was only a 'temporary provision' to help bring normality in Jammu and Kashmir and strengthen democracy in that State, it contends. The Constitution-makers did not intend Article 370 to be a tool to bring permanent amendments, like Article 35A, in the Constitution.

The petition said Article 35 A is against the "very spirit of oneness of India" as it creates a "class within a class of Indian citizens". Restricting citizens from other States from getting employment or buying property within Jammu and Kashmir is a violation of fundamental rights under Articles 14, 19 and

21 of the Constitution.

A second petition filed by Jammu and Kashmir native Charu Wali Khanna has challenged Article 35A for protecting certain provisions of the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution, which restrict the basic right to property if a native woman marries a man not holding a permanent resident certificate. "Her children are denied a permanent resident certificate, thereby considering them illegitimate," the petition said.

WHAT NEXT? Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal has called for a debate in the Supreme Court on the sensitive subject.

Recently, a Supreme Court Bench, led by Justice Dipak Misra, tagged the Khanna petition with the *We the Citizens* case, which has been referred to a three-judge Bench. The court has indicated that the validity of Articles 35A and 370 may ultimately be decided by a Constitution Bench.

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL

WHY

do the Kapus in Andhra want quotas?

Why the agitation?

Over a year after a violence-marred agitation, the farming community of Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, constituting about 20% of the population, has again hit the road demanding its inclusion in notified Backward Classes to be able to get reservation in government jobs and educational institutions.

In an attempt to revive the agitation in support of the long-pending demand, the community's leading light, former Minister Mudragada Padmanabham, gave a call to his supporters to join him in a *Chalo Amaravati* (the new capital of Andhra Pradesh) padayatra from his residence at Kirlampudi in East Godavari district on July 27.

A similar call by him on January 31, 2016, led to large-scale violence in Tuni, also in East Godavari district, when the agitators torched a train and two police stations, leaving a number of people and policemen injured.

In asking people to come to Tuni in thousands and lay siege to the rail track, he has drawn inspiration from the Guj-

jars and the Patels. The once smitten twice shy Telugu Desam Party government and the Andhra Pradesh police did not take any chances and kept him under house arrest till August 3.

What role did Chiranjeevi play?

The demand for quota for the Kapus has been there for more than two decades now, and from time to time, the issue has been used effectively by ambitious Kapu leaders and political parties to garner votes from this numerically strong community.

In 2008, the popular actor-turned-politician K. Chiranjeevi, who belongs to the Kapu community, formed the Praja Rajyam.

He wanted to make a political impact, riding on the sentiment that none from the community could rise to the level of Chief Minister though the population was larger than the Reddys and the Kammas.

The chief ministership had been shared by these two communities for a major part of the last 60 years. But Mr.



Chiranjeevi could win just 18 of the 294 seats in the 2009 Assembly elections; his party merged with the Congress in 2011 and he himself entered the Rajya Sabha.

The Kapus were disappointed with his move.

What did Naidu promise?

It was in this background that the first elections after bifurcation of the State into Telangana and the residual Andhra Pradesh were held in 2014. In his bid to stage a comeback, after being in the Opposition for a decade, Telugu Desam Party chief N. Chandrababu Naidu promised all things to all, from crop loan waiver for farmers to quotas for the Kapus within six months of coming to power. Kapus, a sizeable chunk of whom were voters of the Congress, shifted their loyalties and helped Mr. Naidu return to power. Three years on, there has been no announcement on the quota. After last year's violence and Mr. Padmanabham's fast, the government constituted the Manjunatha Commission to look into the demands for quota by the Kapus and other communities.

What about the Manjunatha panel?

There is no word yet from the Com-

mission though it has been touring the State and taking representations. The delay appears to have come in handy for Mr. Padmanabham and the main Opposition YSRCP to hit out at the government and get some political mileage.

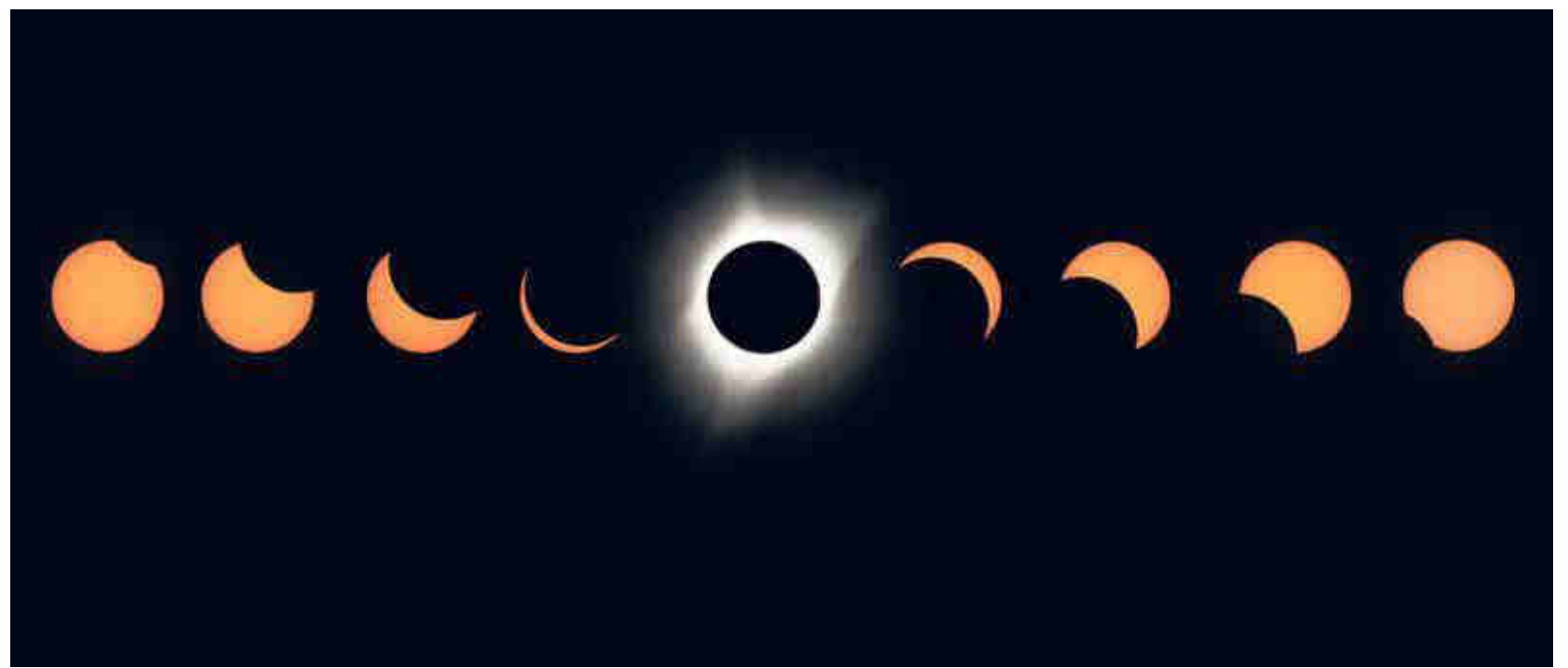
The YSRCP and the Congress have extended support to Mr. Padmanabham's movement for reservation. Their frequent consultations led the ruling Telugu Desam Party to see a conspiracy against the government. In Andhra's political firmament, Mr. Padmanabham is seen as a "maverick" who has switched loyalties from one party to another, starting with the Janata Party in 1978 to the Telugu Desam Party and then to the Congress and even the Bharatiya Janata Party. He resigned from the Cabinet of N.T. Rama Rao and started his own outfit, Praja Rakshana Party, but wound it up. He has not been contesting elections since 2014 but sees an opportunity in the Kapus' grouse of being denied quotas.

K. VENKATESHWARLU

WHEN

21 August 2017

Darkness at noon: A total solar eclipse united most of America on Monday with millions gazing at the sky as the sun vanished behind the moon for the first time in nearly a century. The total eclipse could be seen coast to coast across 14 States from Oregon to South Carolina, with the spectacle lasting two minutes and 40 seconds at places like Madras, Oregon (in the picture). The U.S. space agency NASA streamed it live, beaming stunning pictures, including one of the sun looking like a "luminous diamond ring", which appears for an instant before and after totality. When the moon blotted out the sun, it became dark and temperatures dropped. It became a cultural event too, with people clicking photos with cellphones and bombarding social media. As the *New York Times* said days before the event, "the most celebrated is the 1919 solar eclipse in which photographic measurements verified Einstein's idea that space and time can bend.... This time, the surest claim is that the Great American Eclipse of 2017 will be the most photographed in history..." •AFP



WHERE

In Bengal, a land agitation puts govt. in a spot

Often in the news for political violence, Bhangar, a predominantly rural area in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district, is on the boil again. Villagers are angry over the alleged forced acquisition of about 14 acres of land by the State government on behalf of the Power Grid Corporation of India (PG-PCI) to set up a power grid in the area.

What happened?

There had been an undercurrent of tension since the agitation turned violent in January, but on July 30, the situation took a turn for the worse when a local Trinamool Congress leader and member of the Bhangar II panchayat samity Ashikur Rehman was shot dead in a market area.

Even as the villagers and Trinamool leaders began a blame game over his death, a section of the locals alleged that the fresh bout of violence was an outcome of the ruling party leadership's attempt to force Trinamool factions to work together without resolving the land issue.

Rehman belonged to the faction led by former Trinamool MLA and strongman Arabul Islam.

Why is the government in a fix?

The land agitation in Bhangar has put the Trinamool government in a spot as it has a declared stand against forced land acquisition.

After the Nandigram and Singur land movements, which Mamata Banerjee spearheaded and which led to the end of 34 years of Left rule in the State, the Trinamool Congress government clearly stated that it would play no role in land acquisition, which has been seen as a major hurdle to industry. The 1955 West Bengal Land Reforms Act also has a stringent urban land ceiling (Section 14) that prohibits possession of land in excess of 24.2 acres.

On June 12, at a government programme in Bhangar, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee spoke in favour of setting up the power grid and said there were no facts to substantiate the claims of agitators that crops would become



dry and there would be infertility among locals if the grid came up. She sought to differentiate the situation at Bhangar from that of Singur and Nandigram and claimed that private compan-

ies were trying to capture villages in Bhangar.

What are the residents saying?

The residents, however, repeatedly emphasised that they were not against the power grid but that they didn't want it in such a densely populated area. The agitators said they were ready to resolve the issue, but that the State government had not called them for talks. The process of acquiring land started about three years ago. But things got out of hand in January when two men were allegedly shot dead by the police after the villagers staged a protest demonstration when a popular local leader Sheikh Samsul Haque, who belongs to the Trinamool but supports the agitators, was arrested. Following the deaths, irate villagers not only blocked roads with tree trunks to prevent the police from entering the area but also attacked the policemen already deployed there.

Is there a fight within Trinamool?

Factional feuds in the Trinamool have

complicated the situation. While Mr. Islam allegedly forced the villagers to sell their land for the power grid project, opposing groups, led by Trinamool MLA and expelled CPI(M) leader Abdur Rezzak Molla and local Trinamool leader Kaizar Ahmed, fanned the villagers' discontent in a bid to stop Mr. Islam from supplying construction material for the project.

Bhangar is a Trinamool stronghold, and yet the government hasn't been able to contain the discontent or the violence. In this backdrop, a relatively unknown party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Red Star, joined the fight. Although the party has no organisational base in the State, two of its senior leaders, Alik Chakraborty and Sarmistha Chowdhury who was arrested and released on bail, are leading the agitation. According to the villagers, peace can be restored at Bhangar if the government addresses their concerns through talks.

SOUYMA DAS

Walking down many memory lanes

Cities such as Berlin have valuable lessons on how multiple histories can coexist in a single place



PASSING BITE

RUCHIR JOSHI
is a writer, filmmaker and columnist

Spending time in one of northern Europe's big cities can be instructive in many ways. Once you get over the effects of long-lasting wealth on a society, the smooth, extensive transport systems, the latest technology in daily use, the plethora of goods, the wide choice of cuisines, the relative safety which women and children enjoy, the palpable good health of most of the people you see on the street and so on and so forth, other stuff comes to the fore.

Change and continuity

Having been in Berlin for the last few weeks, I'm once again struck by the continuity the urban landscape has with previous centuries. Standing at this or

that U-Bahn or S-Bahn station on the metro network, one sees on the walls not only advertising imagery but huge black-and-white photographs of what the area around the station looked like earlier, in the 19th century, in the early years of the 20th century, mid-century, and more recently. It's startling to see the huge church you've just walked past looking the same in black and white, except dotted around it are horse-carriages or cars from the 1930s. "Chalo", you think subconsciously, "obviously a church or a monument would be preserved and kept protected from developers." But then you see a street-scape and you recognise quite ordinary but beautiful buildings, a corner of a park or even a kiosk, and you find yourself thinking, "No, that would not have survived back home; someone would have tampered with it, erased it."

Places like Venice or Paris are obvious outliers in a sense. For centuries, these cities have ingrained in their DNA the understanding that their USP is their glorious past, that they are what they are because tourists from all over the world come there to see and admire



various 'golden eras' that adorn the city in the shape of the buildings, the squares, or the waterfronts. Berlin has also attracted people over the decades, starting from the latter part of the 19th century, but unlike Paris and Venice it took serious damage in the Second World War as the Allied bombers retaliated for the ravages the Nazi air force had visited on their cities. Unlike any other European city, Berlin was cut up after the war, first into four sectors and then into two. During the Cold War, for nearly half a century, the city was made schizophrenic by the Soviets and the

Western powers, with West Berlin an outpost surrounded on all sides like an isolated rook on a chessboard. From 1961 the siege effect was intensified by the huge, ugly wall that sawed the city into two with a wide, barren no man's land running through the middle like a dead river. And yet, all that has been absorbed as Berlin continues to transform. Absorbed, digested, but somehow not *erased*. Over the last 150 years and more, Berlin has had huge ups and downs: the capital of the newly unified German state was established here; there was the pomp of the Kaisers; the

radical scientists and the subversive, subterranean strata of artists and bohemians who worked here before the first World War; there was the humiliation of defeat in that first huge conflict and then the great flowering of the arts that followed in the '20s and early '30s; there was the ugly triumphalism of the Nazi era and its destruction, followed by the Cold War years and the three decades that have followed. Today, you can see traces of all these times.

Cookie-cutter homogeneity

What this brings home to an Indian born and bred in our major metros is that we, as a nation and society, have no value for anything but our ancient or medieval structures and even that is highly tenuous. As for our colonial past, the formative years of the Republic, and the first layers of our modern cities, we are happy to throw them into the dustbin and replace them with cookie-cutter, real-estate developer homogeneity. Now, it's as if each generation is the first one, with nothing having come before except a fake, twisted notion of an 'ancient culture'. Not only are we poor eco-

nomically or in terms of health, we have also managed to impoverish ourselves in terms of memory: devastating large swathes of our heritage, wiping out the topographies that trace how we got from the past to where we are now.

It's true there is only so much we can learn from the wealthy countries. Just as what has happened to the Indian urban landscape is complex, with each major metro and smaller town having its own struggles between preservation and real-estate depredation, between the need to protect 'heritage' and provide for the needs of a burgeoning population. But in all this, the tendency across every political party, municipal regime, State and central administration has been to avoid difficult decisions, jettison history, and allow the nexus of politicians and builders a criminally free hand. Even as we feel outrage at every precious ancient monument the Islamic State destroys in West Asia, perhaps one of the lessons we could learn from the multiple histories that coexist in cities like Berlin is that we ourselves must find feasible and sustainable ways to cease the carpet-bombing of our own history.

Thinking outside the manufacturing box

We need to create jobs beyond, not just in, factories



ON THE OTHER HAND

RAGHAVAN SRINIVASAN
is Editor, *The Hindu Business Line*

Last week, Arvind Panagariya, the outgoing vice chairman of NITI Aayog, organised what was perhaps the most innovative and inclusive effort yet to make Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Make in India' a reality. Two hundred of India's best and brightest young CEOs – apart from a handful of exceptions, almost all of whom were under 50 years of age – were invited by the government's think tank to brainstorm over a day and a half and come up with ideas and solutions for making India a manufacturing hub of the world.

At the end of the 'Champions of Change' programme, the CEOs were expected to come up with short presentations covering possible solutions, cutting across the six core themes of the conference: New India by 2022, Doubling Farmers' Incomes, creating Cities of Tomorrow, Make in India, Reforming the Financial Sector, and building World-Class Infrastructure.

The reality of jobless growth

While the themes address the core policy thrust areas of the Modi administration, it was pretty clear which problem the government would really like to see addressed. Speaking to the gathering, both Prime Minister Modi and Panagariya said pretty much the same thing: think of ways to create large numbers of productive, well-paid jobs.

The reason why jobs are top of mind for those who are running the government – even Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, while releasing the NITI Aayog's three-year plan on August 24, chided India Inc. for its "reluctance" to invest in labour-intensive sectors – is not hard to fathom. The spectre of



"jobless growth" is real, and as millions continue to join the workforce every year without finding enough 'good' jobs, jobs or the lack of them could become a make-or-break issue at the next general elections, approaching with gathering speed.

India is doing fairly well on the growth front: the overall economy is growing at 7.1%, while the services sector, which accounts for over 53% of the gross value added, is clocking 9% growth, the highest in the world in the services sector among major economies, according to the Economic Survey. The trouble is, this is not translating into an adequate number of jobs.

Even Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya admitted as much recently. Speaking at one of the events to mark three years of the Modi government in May, he said: "The current growth is a jobless growth. Many European and Asian countries, including India, are facing it. Growth is being reported but it is not reflecting in employment generation."

The numbers don't really matter. The reality is that the number of jobs created – over 6 lakh according to Dattatreya and just 1.35 lakh jobs in three years according to the Centre for Equity Studies's India Exclusion Report 2016 – pale in comparison to those being added to the workforce. It is no wonder that the Prime Minister is constantly urging India Inc. to rise to the challenge.

The trouble is, that is an ask which practically any modern, globally competitive manufacturing industry – in India or anywhere else in the world –

will find pretty difficult to deliver on. In order to be globally competitive, any large-scale manufacturing – in India or elsewhere – is now increasingly automated, with more robots than people. Last month, for instance, I visited Hyundai's manufacturing plant near Chennai. Its new second manufacturing line produces a car every 72 seconds – but is 95% automated.

The only way to stay competitive is greater investment in technology and automation. In other words, fewer jobs. What, then, is the solution?

Creating a circular economy

Maybe it's time to revisit Mahatma Gandhi's idea of a circular economy. Increasingly, the world is coming to an understanding that the manufacturing-led "take, make, dispose" model is simply unsustainable from both an economic and ecological point of view.

As the focus necessarily shifts to a more circular, "take, make, refurbish, repair, reuse" model, the manufacturing sector could look at how it can create jobs around the products it makes, rather than find ways to create more jobs making those products. Every car Hyundai or Maruti makes creates dozens of jobs down the line – from drivers to mechanics to spare parts and fuel shops to even car cleaning. A single mega factory can manufacture all the denim needed for all the jeans worn by young people in the world – but it would still take millions to convert cloth to clothes, to sell them, to repair zips and buttons, and eventually, when they are worn, to recycle them.

The Prime Minister is banking on the manufacturing sector to solve the jobs problem. The sector can do so, but only if it thinks out of the manufacturing box. Maybe that's the real challenge we should be looking at. It is time our young CEOs turned their attention to how the products and services they deliver can create jobs outside the factory – and come up with innovative solutions and skills programmes to make that happen. India may not become the 'making' capital of the world – but it can become the 'remaking' and 'reusing' capital.

All the books that are on the shelf

Our reading options may not be so innocently collected



WORD COUNTS

MINI KAPOOR
is Ideas Editor, *The Hindu*

This week, on Friday, *The New York Times* announced the unusual step of yanking a book off the No.1 spot on one of its bestseller lists, and readjusted its Young Adult Hardcover Books list without Lani Sarem's *Handbook for Mortals*. This followed feedback about peculiar activity that had catapulted Sarem's debut novel, the first in a planned fantasy series, to the top. *The Guardian* reported that upon news of its supposed success, other YA writers had become suspicious about how a book that was out of stock on Amazon and that others had hardly heard of could be a genuine bestseller. As they asked around, they found bulk orders at "NYT-reporting shops", a list of stores that's supposed to be confidentially drawn up so that writers and publishers cannot game the lists, and their sleuthing compelled the paper to announce that "the sales for *Handbook for Mortals* did not meet our criteria for inclusion" and that it had been expunged from the list.

This episode draws attention to how much of our discovery of new books is dependent on crafty placement of titles, if not outright manipulation as in the above case. Getting on the *NYT* list, for example, creates its own momentum in increasing sales of the book – in the U.S., the bestselling books are often placed prominently in bookshops, and offered on discount, giving the books on the list a double advantage at recommending themselves to buyers. A book that's noticed has a better chance of being bought.

Making of a bestseller

Indeed, the very fact of a book being stocked itself determines how well a book does. As Keith Gessen noted in his short but exhaustive inquiry into



the making of a bestseller, *How a Book Is Born*, the stocking choices of individual stores can influence a book's trajectory among the reading public. His numbers are more specific to the U.S. market and are from early in this decade, but the trend is telling: "While they cannot force anyone to buy a particular book, the return rate of a good independent bookstore is quite low, between 15 and 20 percent. Which means that, on the one hand, the book buyers for indie stores are very conservative, taking two of this, three of that; but it also means that statistically speaking, once a book is in a store, it has an 80 to 85 per cent chance of being sold." Incidentally, he found that Barnes & Noble, the American giant, had just one buyer for literary fiction for all its hundreds of stores: "On the one hand, this makes sense, and is the very definition of an advantage of scale; on the other hand, it seems outlandish that the tastes of one person should have such an effect on what tens of thousands of people buy and read."

It may appear that unlike bricks-and-mortar stores with their limited floor areas, online bookstores with no space constraints would allow us to better crowdsourcise a list. But algorithms, of our own individual making, tie us to the few preferences of

ours that online bookstores know when they make recommendations. Go to the books "recommended for you" at Amazon. It's such a limited variety that it never really gives us a wide enough range of options even if we keep marking off books we already own so that the list is not dictated by our browsing history and purchases at the online bookstore alone. There is, of course, also the "customers who bought this also bought" button, but keep at it, and you may soon enough be caught in a loop that brings you back to your original choices.

Those old books

In fact, even keeping books in our libraries can be susceptible to gaming. In her short book *Bookshelf*, that is part of the Object Lessons series, Lydia Pyne cites an experiment by writer Phyllis Rose. Rose decided to read all fiction in the LEQ-LES shelf in the New York Society Library, and found among other things that keeping a book in circulation is vital for a library to keep it on the shelves. Writes Pyne: "In a bit of brilliantly fabulous ironic snark, Rose observes that a crusade to keep certain books on their library shelves doesn't necessitate actually reading them, just checking them out of the library." Time to visit the library and borrow old favourites.

The confederacy of conspiracy theorists

Under Trump, white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, and self-declared neo-Nazis have moved from the margins to the centre



SERENDIPITIES

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Little noticed amidst all the political punditry that followed Donald Trump's improbable rise to power was the daily diet of conspiracy theories that he had engorged himself on and had thrown around for his base as red meat.

March of the neo-Nazis

Since January 2017, when Trump became President, many conspiracy theorists have emerged as amplified voices in the American public arena – including white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, and self-declared neo-Nazis – all of whom rely on a steady dose of conspiracies and enemies to sustain their movements. Nowhere was this seen more vividly than in Charlottesville, Virginia, a couple of weeks back when American neo-Nazis, their allies, and intellectual godfathers marched openly in a show of force.

Armed with 19th century social science claims about race, cultural uniqueness, biological superiority of the whites, and 21st century technology to spread their word, the neo-Nazis chanted ("Jews will not replace us") and stormed into the national conversation. Notwithstanding the irony that many of the 21st century white nationalists (with ancestries from the Balkans and Southern Europe) would have had difficulty being identified as "white" in 19th century America, the present-day Nazis announced their intentions to build an apartheid-style ethno-state. Much of this rhetoric is intended as a public show of commitment for their base. But for now they did the next best thing: they went in front of cameras. They denounced with fervour any and all who didn't agree with them as globalists, cosmopolitans, Jew-lovers, and cucks ("cuckolds" – sexual anxiety about race mixing is a persistent theme).

Later when asked to comment on (and hopefully condemn) the neo-Nazi march, Trump, instead of providing moral clarity and leadership, went down a rhetorical rabbit hole that was indistinguishable from the kind of mealy mouthed justifications that self-respecting adulterers deploy when caught. More telling, however, was



Trump's extraordinary reluctance to condemn these supremacists groups except when he was later forced to read out a written statement (a "hostage note", as a wag described it).

In parts, Trump's instinctive demurral is understandable. He and these groups consume the same media sources – sources where conspiracy theories grow faster than mushrooms after monsoons – to shape the worlds they inhabit. Together, they bathe in a wellspring of reactionary anger that sees the wreckage of their idealised past float by, thanks to the patient chipping away (by law and demographics) of the

monolith of historically experienced white privileges. Trump's instinctive willingness to offer up equivocations for fellow reactionary minds is a form of a bully's empathy for those losing their monopoly of historically accrued power and social capital which is often mistaken for even-handedness. To expect Trump to ask whether monopolies of power in society are good in the first place is, by all accounts, to ask too much of him.

All this said, last week's events in Charlottesville aren't new in American history per se. Neither for its organised efforts to intimidate on racial lines nor

the underlying sense of panic that marks white nationalist movements. In 1964, the political scientist, Richard Hofstadter, described American politics as marked by a "paranoid style". From anti-Catholic movements in the 19th century, the "Red" scares of the mid-20th century, to the rise of Barack Obama, shifts in demographics of culture and power bases have periodically fuelled mass anxiety and exclusionary rhetoric. What follows is an extreme form of suspicion towards any discourse about society that emanates from 'elites' (universities, media, businesses). This suspicion is operationalised by counter-theories that seek to explain less but feed into, what Auden wrote elsewhere, "a climate of opinion".

The more opaque a society's institutions become, the more conspiracy theories become a mythology-from-below on how those institutions truly operate and who wields the real power. Conspiracy theories thus become a form of open-sourced cultural production of communicable paranoia that subgroups consume and reinterpret when faced with their own increasing sense of irrelevancy to historical forces at work. To such a view, as Hofstadter describes, "history [itself] is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost

transcendent power".

Typically, this theatre of suspicion is played out at the margins, with the centres of power protected by the praetorian guards of the establishment. With Trump's victory, however, a conspiracist and his retinue are now at the centre. Predictably, Trump's only response has been to launch counter-conspiracies in the hope of annulling the effects of the imagined original conspiracy. Like some malevolent Quixote, he charges every day up against the American media, often accusing them of treason for disagreeing with him. This, even as he feeds real dragons of white nationalism with his blather.

A moral paralysis

The irony, however, is that power in the abstract – the currency in which conspiracy theorists transact – rarely resembles power in the concrete. A conspiracist in power is often defeated by the mismatch between reality and the claims of his pet ideas. What follows is a moral paralysis and rhetorical glibness. Predictably, after much criticism, when asked yet again about the neo-Nazi marches and accompanying violence, Trump's answers were absurd: he blamed the media for being unfair to him by reporting his words accurately.