



**A thought for today**

Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less

MARIE CURIE

# Chasing Shadows

*"New India" is not compatible with the state playing moral police*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for a "new India", a vision that would be impoverished if it is confined merely to building shiny roads, airports and power stations (Saudi Arabia is already there, but that's not where new India wants to get to). It should incorporate changed mindsets as well, where citizens are empowered rather than seen as mere wards of the state. That, in turn, means that citizens are allowed to make their own choices as long as these do not impinge on the freedom of others, instead of the state and authorities appointed by it making all their decisions for them. Without such empowerment, new India is bound to fail.

Unfortunately, there are just too many instances of this principle being denied in practice. Contrary to the recommendations of a parliamentary panel, the government may not remove transgenders from the ambit of section 377 of IPC, when this section itself ought to be dropped as no government should dictate sexual choices made by consenting adults. This means, in effect, that transgenders have no sexual rights and their very existence is criminalised.

Likewise the nebulous meme of 'love jihad', popularised by the Sangh Parivar, is often invoked by conservative parents when they want to stop their children from entering into interfaith marriages. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has taken up an alleged instance of 'love jihad' and discovered a 'pattern' in such cases, which in turn has persuaded an initially reluctant Supreme Court to order a probe. It is disturbing that if young men or women marry who they want they are subjected to such intervention and interdiction by the state, including by NIA which immediately raises the prospect of a terror link.

The apex court has suggested a connection between the alleged 'love jihad' case and the Blue Whale Challenge, indeed an apt analogy. There is grave reason to doubt the phenomenon of a rash of teen suicides allegedly linked to an online game (see accompanying oped), and stopping teen suicides by telling Facebook and Google not to provide a platform for Blue Whale is a bit like stopping terror by interdicting interfaith marriages (doing so, in fact, increases the probability of terror and communal violence by ghettoizing and putting up walls between communities). To the extent that NIA goes haring off after red herrings, it will blind itself to the next terror plot when it does unfold.



# Foster Competition

*Instead of targeting Delhi's private schools, improve government schools*

In a bizarre proposal, the Delhi government has told the high court that it intends to take over the management of 449 private schools that have failed to refund excess fees. The schools were identified as defaulters by the court-appointed Justice Anil Dev committee. While excess fees being charged by private schools may be an issue, the Delhi government threatening to take over these schools is a throwback to the old India of the 1970s. In that sense, the capital's ruling AAP dispensation appears to be left of even the Left in Indian politics.

It's welcome that the Delhi government has made education reforms a key agenda. However, its statist approach hampers improvements. Going after private schools for charging excess fees can be politically projected as an anti-elite move. But it does little to address the main problem afflicting primary education - lack of adequate number of quality government schools. There's a huge demand-supply mismatch which results in parents fighting to get their children admitted in a handful of good private schools. If the Delhi government is serious about rising school fees, it should establish quality government schools that can attract students from all economic backgrounds.

This holds true for primary education across the country. According to a new study, between 2010-11 and 2015-16 student enrollment in government schools across 20 Indian states fell by 13 million while private schools gained 17.5 million new admissions. This shows a clear preference for private schooling and the corresponding poor standards of government schools. Solution to the rising fees problem lies in bridging this gap, not government taking over and running private schools to the ground. In the Delhi case, the high court questioned whether the state education department had even 50 trained officers to take over the 449 private schools in question. Instead of such ludicrous proposals, authorities would do well to improve quality and quantity of government schools.



# Planet of the Apps

*We humans are so smart that we've made machines which are already outsmarting us*

Jug Suraiya

The bad news is that smart machines - collectively known as AI, Artificial Intelligence - are going to take over our lives and enslave us. The worse news is that this has already happened.

I try to send a text message on my mobile phone. When I key in my name, J-u-g, my phone changes it to J-i-g, or J-o-g, or H-u-g, or M-u-g. But never J-u-g. This is called a predictive dictionary, and is an inbuilt feature of the phone.

It predicts what it thinks you want to key in, and if you key in something different it automatically corrects the word to what it thinks it ought to be.

As my phone won't let me sign off as Jug, should I change my name by deed poll to Jig, or Jog, or Hug? Or how about Mug? Which is exactly what I feel like for allowing my phone to dictate to me what my own name ought to be.

While the driverless car is yet to be mass produced, there is already a driver-less car. Driver-less in that you must obey its commands before you drive it.

You want to show off your new car to your neighbour. You switch on the engine to show him how cool the A/c and the console are. "Fasten your seat belt!" "FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT!!" An automotive Auntieji inside squawks at you louder and louder.

Fastening your seat belt is of course very necessary when you're actually driving. But do you have to be made to feel like an idiot fastening your seat belt in a stationary car which you have no intention of driving? You do, if it's a driver-less car.

There's a gadget called a fitbit. You strap it on your wrist and it tells you how many steps you've walked/run and how many calories you've burnt. Pretty soon you find your fitbit will give you a coronary by making you walk/run more and more. It's called progressive training. It's also called giving yourself a fit trying to become fit.

Thinking machines oughtn't to be called Artificial Intelligence. Their intelligence isn't artificial, it's real. Our intelligence, for having invented them, is AI - Aitu-faltu Intelligence.

jug.suraiya@timesgroup.com  
http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/juglebandhi/

# Blue Whales And Other Folk Tales

*We, the middle class are as susceptible to urban legends as anyone else*

Amulya.Gopalakrishnan@timesgroup.com

It started last May, with a series of clickbait stories on the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta. They described the bizarre Blue Whale challenge as an online game that preyed on teens, with a moderator giving each participant a set of escalating challenges, eventually leading to suicide. The British tabloids ran with it next, and soon, solicitous police departments were warning parents. From Brazil to India, by now the Blue Whale story has been heard around the world.

And yet, hardly anyone has direct knowledge of the subculture. Forums discussing suicide are not alien to the internet, but there's a fog of facts around the Blue Whale bogey. A 21-year-old Russian man called Philipp Budeikin was arrested for masterminding the game on the basis of one wild, braggart interview. Many of the first claims have been deflated. The estimated number of suicides has swung wildly, from 130 to "at least 16". In many countries, including Russia, the original story has been undercut, but to no avail.

The lurid appeal of Blue Whale is just too great, as is the number of media outlets prepared to swallow it whole, the array of experts willing to speculate without facts, the majority of adults convinced that kids are up to dumb, dangerous things, and malign forces roam the internet.

The journalist Anne Collier, who works on young people and digital safety, has tried to put Blue Whale in perspective. In Russia, tens of thousands of bots were found using those hashtags. There were a few seeming followers, and the rest looked it up out of curiosity, or were advertisers trying to promote something, and "professionals testing technologies for information dissemination".

Radio Free Europe tried to find suicides linked to Blue Whale, and came up empty. The fact-checking site Snopes went at it too, and found no conclusive evidence of Blue Whale, in specific, goading teens to suicide. Bulgaria's Safer Internet Centre, which empirically studies teen digital behaviour, pointed out that given that Russia has among the



highest teen suicides in the world anyway, it would be hard to prove that this weird internet subculture actually caused the deaths.

In other words, we've all been had, and how. Even one teen death is one too many, but to get agitated about Blue Whale instead of noticing signs of mental trouble, is irresponsible. The danger with spreading such sensationalist stories about death cults and copycat suicides is always this: it triggers real tragedy, because a few vulnerable individuals get swept up in the contagion.

Look up stories about the "suicide town" of Bridgend, or the Slender Man meme about a tall thin supernatural killer that swept the US a few years ago. With Slender Man, what started as a tale told around a campfire became a networked horror story. Folklorists studied the scale and velocity of the myth, as people recounted the phenomenon, added their two-bit and their FOAF (friend-of-a-friend) accounts, shared creepy visuals as "evidence". Eventually, it led to a real stabbing.

Technology has always been blamed

**Even one teen death is one too many. The danger with spreading such sensationalist stories about death cults and copycat suicides is always this: it triggers real tragedy, because a few vulnerable individuals get swept up in the contagion**

for driving teens round the bend. Decades ago, there was a similar moral panic around the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, which was blamed for suicide and demon worship. Violent videogames were held out as the reason for mass killings like Columbine. While excessive focus on anything, whether workaholicism or exercise or Netflix, should be a sign of mental distress, that's not

to say that these activities cause the mental distress and its violent manifestations.

Of course, in India, even urban legends are divided by class. People like us deplored the "mass hysteria" that drove folks in UP and Haryana to believe women's braids were being chopped off by mysterious forces, even as we solemnly appealed to the grownups in government to tackle the "Blue Whale" problem. Even a presumably rational communist like Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to Prime Minister Modi to do something, anything. The IT ministry declared the game "unacceptable" and ordered social platforms to scour their content.

The whole point about a moral panic is not whether the story is true or false. The question is, what is the standard used to call it an 'epidemic'? One person, or ten, or hundred, or more? Usually, a small or stray 'actual' incident is made into a gripping narrative, one that stokes genuine social anxieties. Media may be a big part of these moral panics, where attention builds, peaks and then falls off just as suddenly. It's happening with the braid chopping story, and will inevitably happen with Blue Whale too.

A moral panic is a dramatic production that involves several actors - there's always a 'folk devil' or scapegoat (in this case, the internet), there are law enforcers, media, politicians and the public who all play their part. New technology often sets off moral panics - from electricity to the telephone to social media, each new thing has made us freak out about the fraying social fabric.

And yet, no technology actually turns anyone's head, it only makes it easier to do what they were doing anyway. Our protective posture towards young people, our sense of their suggestibility, guilt about not having given them enough attention, our discomfort with their growing autonomy, all combine to let us readily believe such 'trends among the youth' stories.

Falling for such narratives is not a failing or an embarrassment, it's the human default. But perhaps knowing that we are all suckers for a sensational story should make us a little humbler, a little less quick to judge others who do the same.

# 'DD breached constitutional boundaries. This is an attack on democracy, there is now an authoritarian system in India'

The Left Front has accused the central government of censorship, saying Doordarshan refused to broadcast the original version of Tripura chief minister Manik Sarkar's customary Independence Day speech in Agartala. DD has denied charges that it blocked coverage. It claims that its local station did broadcast Sarkar's speech at 7pm on August 15. DD's official note though did not refer to the original message that the Tripura CM recorded on August 12 - to be broadcast on August 15 - and later circulated by Tripura government's information department. Manik Sarkar spoke to Rohit E David on the controversy, Centre-state relations and why he accuses the central government of censorship:

**You have accused Doordarshan of breaching constitutional boundaries by refusing to broadcast your Independence Day speech in its original form? Do you see this as an insult to the office of the chief minister?**

Yes, this is absolutely correct. They crossed constitutional boundaries. We live in a federal country. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi can address the people of the country,

chief ministers can also do the same in their state. On Independence Day, they recorded the entire speech. Then suddenly, they asked us to reshape my speech. How dare they ask me to reshape my speech? They cannot dictate to me. This is an attack on democracy. This is thoroughly authoritarian.

This was not a regional function. It was a day when the nation's introspection can be done. The central government is controlling everything. This is a very bad thing. They are not in a mood or position to tolerate any sort of dissent. What is this?

Doordarshan has certainly insulted the Tripura chief minister's office. I have been elected by the people. I cannot suspend the Doordarshan and Prasar Bharati personnel

in the state. Both the state-level organisations of the national broadcaster are being controlled by the national organisation. This sort of attitude is not acceptable at all.

**What action are you planning to take in response to this action by Doordarshan?**

I have brought this to the notice of the common people of our country. They are the best ones to judge what is going on in India. According to me, action means to create awareness amongst the people about what has happened. I am doing exactly that.

**In your official capacity, what has the state government done after this incident?**

We have protested against my speech not being aired. I can't say anything more at this moment.

**Do you think this case reflects poorly on the cooperative federalism that PM Modi has spoken about?**

Where is this cooperative federalism? Can anyone tell me in this country? Federalism means it is cooperative but that is not the case. The central government first removed the Planning Commission. When this organisation was there we had the scope of discussion between the Centre and state. Now, where do we go?

Everything has been transferred into the hands of Niti Aayog. Niti Aayog is only serving the agenda of corporates. What happened to National

Development Council (NDC)? The fact is that not a single meeting of NDC has been called for by the central government. What has happened to the Inter-State Council? Why has there been only one meeting in the last three and a half years? In practice, there is nothing like the cooperative federalism that PM Modi has been talking about. There is now an authoritarian system in India.

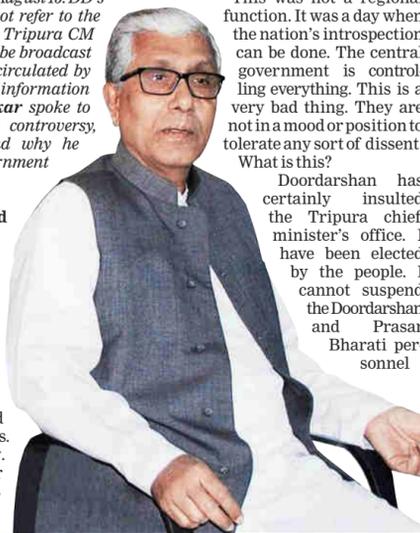
**But critics say you were talking about national political concerns in your speech rather than focusing on state-specific issues as chief minister.**

Tripura is part and parcel of India. I was speaking at India's national Independence Day. Without talking about national issues how can I deal with the state? This is an inseparable part of the country.

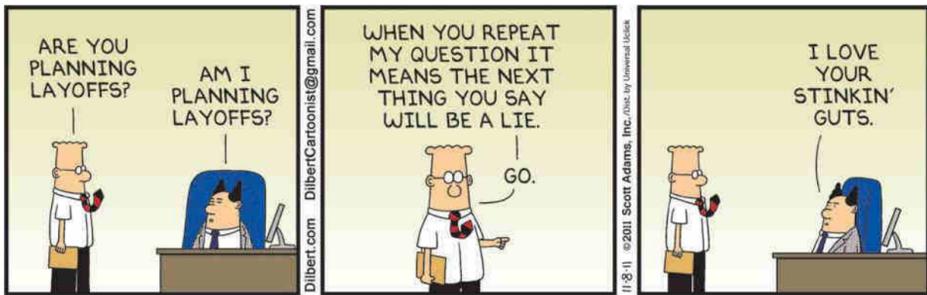
**Are your saying that the individual freedoms of Indians are under constant attack under the present central government?**

Today, minorities and Dalits are under attack. Their security has been shattered as never before. It is precisely these things that I had mentioned in the speech. If anyone opposes the government's ideas, they will block it. This is not right.

India is a big country. We have our tradition. The people of India cannot be fooled or be bullied. I have full confidence in them. When the time comes they will take a stand, turn around and face any issue.



## dilbert



# Ways To Deal With Change And Stress

Nayaswami Jyotish

Through the years, I've had a lot of opportunity to work with people under stress and I've seen how important meditation is, for staying balanced. Stress training is common today; but, most stress training simply helps people relax. As important as this is, it is not enough because it works only with the conscious or subconscious mind. Meditation, however, enlists the super-consciousness, the infinite awareness at the core of our being. It is from this deep level, that lasting changes come.

Unhealthy levels of stress usually come from trying to control the uncontrollable. Chronic stress can cause serious health problems. Since the effects of stress begin in the mind, the same event will affect different people in completely different ways, depending on how they react. It has been said, "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." Learn

to flow with life and much of your stress will disappear.

Be more accepting of life. Life is a school and we draw to ourselves the events, circumstances, and relationships we need to help us grow. Every problem offers us two choices - to expand or contract our consciousness. Eventually, through meditation, we can discover an underlying joy that doesn't change under any circumstance. And expansion of consciousness is the essence of spiritual growth.

Acceptance might seem like a somewhat passive state. But, we can develop a higher, more active state of acceptance. Paramhansa Yogananda said we should train our minds to be "even-minded and cheerful in all situations". This is a powerful, life-changing technique. How do we achieve this state of mind? Commit yourself to being happy under all circumstances.

Then watch your reactions to events. As soon as you catch yourself being pulled down, reaffirm your decision to be happy. Decide, also, to let go of old baggage. Realise, finally, that your highest duty is to love - to love others, to love life, and to love the Divinity within.

Make some practical changes to allow you to better deal with stress. On the physical level, make sure your diet is filled with fresh and vital foods. Get regular exercise. Find activities that expand your horizons, get out in nature or go to events that uplift your mind. Get sufficient sleep and rest, and try deep breathing during times of pressure.

Look at your home environment to see if it helps you have a positive state of mind. Move your TV out of the centre of your life to a place where it doesn't intrude. Choose carefully the

music that you listen to. Music has an incredibly powerful effect on our consciousness. Try to spend more time with those friends who are positive and self-contained, those who can help magnetise you into a state of being even-minded and calm.

Get more in touch with your spiritual nature. Tune into your deeper essence, the joy and peace that lie within you. As you claim your own higher reality, as a child of God, you will begin to see Him reflected back from everyone around you. Daily meditation is the way to find these deeper states.

In the morning it prepares you to face the day from a state of inner calmness and joy. At night it helps you to release everything and offer all your attachments back into the divine light. Ananda Sangha offers Kriya Yoga meditation classes starting Aug 20 in NCR. Contact 9899267698 / 9899200605, or visit anandadelhinc.org.

## Sacredspace

Real & Unreal

*Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. So, accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces.*

Sigmund Freud

