

Brand-building in a mobile-first world



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

Brand building tools were pretty simple in the India of the 50s, 60s and 70s. You made an ad film and ran it in movie theatres for a year or two. The print ads ran in magazines for months unchanged. All this was transformed when television became an important medium.

In the early 80s I remember discussing the difference between television and cinema advertising with the leading ad makers of that time. It looks obvious now, but most brands ran the same ad that they ran in cinema on television screens. A few agencies were experimenting with multiple ad formats and I was lucky to be working in one of them. When quizzed about the difference between making an ad for cinema versus making one for TV, the film-makers explained that the medium of television is watched at home, it is a black and white medium (till the Asian Games of 1982), the screen is small — 20 inches or a little more — the audio quality suspect and, most importantly, you get to reach the same audience every week or every day, unlike cinema. The realisation of the differences in the medium of TV and cinema created a whole new genre of advertising. Stories became shorter and were told with tight close-ups and dialogues. Multiple ad formats evolved quickly. Panoramic shots were reduced. Indian brands managed to transition from the age of audio-visual advertising, which was large screen on cinema, to one that was small screen at home. Interestingly, with large format TVs gaining ground, panoramic ad films are making a comeback.

Today, we are at yet another transition point. Brand-building has to learn how to transition from TV to a much smaller screen, the mobile. Some numbers to show the dramatic change in media consumption. Total print readership in India is probably touching 190 million [we need to wait for the latest Indian Readership Survey to corroborate my extrapolation of the 2014 numbers]. Television viewership has gone to 780 million, as per the BARC [Broadcast Audience Research Council] report. Around 183 million homes have TV sets, as against the total household population of around 280 million. As against these numbers, in a remarkably short time, the number of unique mobile subscribers has touched 615 million [in 2015] and is expected to cross 915 million by 2020. Smartphone usage is expected to go from 238 million in 2015 to 688 million in 2020, according to the GSMA report.

Just as the writing on the wall in the mid 80s was clear that brand builders need to learn new tricks to use the television medium, the writing on the wall, this time a smaller one, is that if you are not getting on to the mobile bandwagon, you are going to miss some important calls.

It is probably not fair to equate the mobile tsunami to the television storm we faced three decades ago. But there are some interesting parallels.

Imagine, if in the future, all your consumers watch their audio-visual content on their small mobile screen. Will you need to make the content differently? Will story-telling be different? Will the casting requirements be different? Will you be able to deliver longer-format content to those who consent to watch useful content?

Or take delivery of print. It may not all be on paper in the 2020s. [I am sure paper will continue to be used, but chances are that even big print titles may be consumed by a larger audience on their mobile devices]. What should brands do to reconfigure their messages to the digital publishing medium? Will formats change? Will the content be more interactive?

Finally, mobile internet provides a great opportunity for brands to target messages to select audiences, and not broadcast simple stories. Words such as “context”, “personalisation”, “hyper-localisation”, “near field communication technology” will enter popular lexicon.

Adweek, in its article on “mobile first” marketing says, “Brands that don’t understand how to contextually target consumers based on their interests or demographics increasingly will begin to appear out of touch with people who they are trying to reach.” Agencies, and I suppose clients, are cautioned about the need to focus more on the crossover between IT, product development and marketing. Content has to be right, targeted right and delivered in the right environment.

Experts also point out that consumers will tend to blend their experiences moving from one device to another. We are already seeing consumers having multiple screens open when consuming television. What we used to see as a consumer decision journey is now going to get a lot more fragmented, into mini journeys across multiple paths. How clever are brands in making sure they are able to reach consumers as they travel on multiple roads of discovery, is going to be the challenge of the future.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as it was in the past. Going “mobile first” is not just about making films that play better on the small screen. Brands will have to learn to blend various skills in order to engage better with consumers and prospective buyers. The late media guru, Marshall McLuhan, categorised media as “hot” and “cold”. I wonder what he would call the new blend of media: “shaken and stirred” seems to be an interesting definition. Today’s young mobile-first consumers may think that is gross trivialising of their lifeline to the world.

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Courtesy towards the elderly

The walking stick is received with respect throughout Europe, not as much in India



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

Nearly three weeks into England, I must confess my walking stick is by far my most precious possession. Apart from the utilitarian purpose, it at once elevates me to the ranks of the privileged. And not only in England. The stick is received with respect throughout Europe as I discovered during our travels in Portugal, France, Spain and even Norway. Similarly in Cyprus. The deference faltered only when crossing a few miles of Mediterranean tranquillity, I reached Cairo, Alexandria and the Nile. Egypt treated my walking stick with the supreme disdain to which I have grown accustomed in India. It

was another illustration of the difference between East and West, Asia and Europe.

They respond to different triggers. I had an aunt who looked European, being half English, and wore Western slacks at home. But the sari was her chosen attire when travelling abroad, which she did every year. “I get much better service,” she explained. T-shirts, jeans and slacks were for export cargoes of Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi maids; churidars were favoured by planeloads of women from the Doaba region of Punjab joining their husbands toiling in the factories and fields of the English Midlands. Draped in her flowered chiffon, my aunt cut as regal a figure in Dresden as in Dubrovnik. The natives were awed.

Not that the walking stick I have used since an attack of bacterial cellulites in London in 2015 awes anyone. It’s a shabby artefact with a collapsible metal body and an imitation wood handle that began shedding its paint within the first few days. But by arousing concern and compassion, it works wonders wherever it accompanies me. Only yesterday, an elderly (but younger than me) Englishwoman at the bus stand opposite the British Library tried to force me to take the seat she seemed determined to vacate. It has the same effect

invited to board trains before the stampede (with my wife naturally accompanying me) even at Heathrow, which is not noted for courtesy or consideration, especially to Afro-Asian visitors. Checking in for flights, I am asked if I would like a wheelchair.

It would be untrue to say I have never experienced similar courtesy in India. But it’s the exception and not the rule. When it does occur, it’s a kindly private — never official — gesture. No airport official beckons me to the head of the queue. No security personnel asks with concern whether I would be able to manage after surrendering my stick to the conveyor belt and X-ray machine. No airline employee ever suggests I sit down instead of standing in line. Yet, if the mythology about India is correct, my grey hairs should command immediate deference even without the evidence of frailty that a stick provides. Perhaps, there are too many of us old and decrepit people around, too much competition for courtesy in a land where almost everyone needs some help or other. Following the inflexible law of demand and supply, India might be running out of courtesy.

The Agewell Foundation found not long ago that 96.4 per cent of the elderly complain

of being neglected, abused, exploited or otherwise mistreated, often because of financial reasons. As with every commodity, there’s also the question of fraudulently exaggerated demand, of resourceful people helping themselves to more than their fair share in a catch as catch can society where money and influence are the main drivers. I am thinking of a prominent woman I sometimes encounter on the long flight to London. Seeing her wheeled into the plane and wheeled out of it, I assumed some disability prevented her walking. On one occasion, however, we bumped into her the day after landing at Heathrow. Far from being immobile in a wheelchair, she was trotting nimbly up the steps of a major London supermarket. When I commented on her miraculous recovery, she replied, like my aunt in her sari, “I always use a wheelchair when I’m going abroad!”

Sympathy for the underdog — and what dog could be more under than an old man with a stick? — has always run strong in British life. Many years ago when race relations in London were very fraught, a white woman proudly told a newspaper that she made a point of jabbing Afro-Asians with her handbag so that she could smile sweetly afterwards and apologise. All’s not lost in the world if courtesy is an end in itself. It might even justify a little subterfuge.

BREAKFAST WITH BS ▶ ROLAND FOLGER, CEO & MD, MERCEDES BENZ INDIA

Promoting luxury

Folger tells Ajay Modi he is optimistic that there is much to gain from the luxury car segment in India

The interaction with Roland Folger of Mercedes Benz had been planned in Mumbai, close to the company’s headquarters and plant in Pune. But launches bring Folger to the national capital often and we agree to have breakfast ahead of a launch. We decide to meet at the K3 restaurant at 8.30 am in the JW Marriott, Aerocity, a venue for most car launches in Delhi. I arrive a few minutes late and Folger is already there, in a Mercedes Benz-branded T-shirt and jeans.

I ask him to order but he opts for a juice and then a cappuccino. “I am back from a vacation in Malaysia and need to bring my weight down,” he says. Folger, 57, I am told, is health-conscious and often goes to the gym.

We meet at a time when the GST Council is contemplating raising the cess on large SUVs and luxury cars from 15 per cent now to 25 per cent. I am conscious not to start the conversation with this not-so-pleasant topic. So I ask him about his experiences in India (he completes two years in October). “India is a country of so many impressions, cultures and languages. I am still struck by the fact that nearly every state has its own language.”

Folger spent four and a half years in Malaysia, where he was the chief of Mercedes Benz, before moving to India. So he cannot resist drawing comparisons between India and Malaysia. “I keep telling my friends there that Malaysia, area-wise, is only as big as one state of India. It is difficult for the human mindset to come to terms with such a huge land mass and people,” says Folger and draws another surprising comparison. When he came to know about his next stint, India, he compared the number of cars that Mercedes sold in India to that in Malaysia. To his surprise, he found that with a population of 1.3 billion, the company sold only a slightly higher volume than it did in Malaysia, a country which then had a population of about 30 million. Folger is therefore optimistic that there is more to gain in the Indian market, where the luxury segment is just one per cent of car sales. So he wishes to have an extended tenure in India beyond October 2018.

I ask him for his views on the visible resistance to luxury goods in the form of higher taxes and so on. He says he recently became comfortable enough to speak about it. “I found it intriguing that given the religious structure and beliefs here, there is a lot less materialism

than you would find in the West. Therefore, there is a general acceptance that an influential person does not have to have a lot of wealth... These values shape personal preferences and habits,” explains Folger.

Indians need not look at wealth and luxury as a bad thing, he says. “In the US if anyone shows his wealth, he also shows that he is doing a lot for society by paying taxes and creating jobs. Here one employs 15,000-20,000 people, provides for their families, and still does not feel comfortable showing his wealth.” A change in attitude would open up more markets for luxury cars.

I question him about the economic benefits of the luxury car industry and the sensitive issue of the higher cess. He says luxury cars have been at the forefront of automotive development in safety and emission innovations. “We can be much faster than mass producers in adopting technology. We have 3,000 people employed with dealers. These are some of the highly qualified jobs in the sector.”

Folger says he has tried to make it clear to the ministries concerned that they are cutting India off from the rest of the world by making it a highly protected market. “We could and would want to bring in a lot more cars, and create a lot more jobs,” claims Folger and adds that Germany is looking at India and the investments here. They question decisions like the diesel ban and now this relook at the GST rates. “It is difficult to explain why somebody in the finance ministry could make such a mistake.”

Folger believes that the assumption of raising tax revenue by increasing taxes is flawed. “We tried to explain to the finance ministry that if we get a 28 per cent tax, that could double our volume instead of the proposed 53 per cent. If you double the volume, you get not just more taxes but also create jobs on the supplier side and the dealer side and everybody



to learn Hindi yet.

The couple have gone holidaying in states such as Rajasthan and Punjab and Folger remembers them especially for the local food. “The dining experience is highly interesting and so is the street food but you need to have a local person to guide you,” he says, remembering the *lassi* and *jalebi* he enjoyed in Amritsar.

Folger meets many of his dealers over dinner and says he prefers to meet them at their homes instead of restaurants. “I get to learn more, know about their families... The family orientation in India is outstanding in a positive sense.”

I am keen to know about the new things Folger is doing at Mercedes Benz, the only company he has worked all his life ever since he joined it in 1979. Folger said he has worked to bring in a change of culture at the organisation, which employs 400 white-collar employees and 1,400 workers at the plant in Pune. “We spend so much time in meetings and there we need to become more efficient,” says Folger. He has come up with a set of 10 rules on meetings: Come prepared, have the facts ready, don’t pick fights with people (fight before). Lots of thinking went into that and “we are promoting this”, he says.

Remember Folger having told me earlier that the company had decided to put in place a core team, empowered to take quicker decisions when the boss was away. The need for it was felt when the Supreme Court banned sales of large diesel cars in the National Capital Region in December 2015. Folger was on holiday then. “I still remember the dreadful date, December 16, 2015. That also happens to be my mother’s birthday.” Everybody in the Pune office was waiting for him to take decisions to reduce the impact of the ban. “Most organisations here are top-centric. When I came back in

January 2016, we started doing things. This was not ideal,” he says. So he put in place a team representing key departments and has empowered them to decide on things in emergency situations.

“As long as you can improve your market situation even in a declining market, you win.” That is a lesson Folger learnt when he was part of the bus division in Mercedes and Europe went through the eurozone crisis. That halved the bus volume but Folger said the company increased its market share by five per cent. He would like to repeat this if the cess goes up and impacts the luxury market here.

Disability is a state of mind



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

I am always in awe of people who refuse to be stereotyped. Breaking out of societal moulds is brave in itself, but a recent encounter with Bhagaban Mohanta of Mayurbhanj, Odisha, brought me in contact with bravery of another level altogether. When 47-year-old Mohanta was born with flipper-like appendages in place of legs, many in his community believed he was cursed. However, his parents named him Bhagaban (god), and pledged to take good care of him in the hope that this would expiate their own sins. “As I grew up, many questioned what the legless son of a farmer would do in life,” he said. In reply, his father ensured that his young son studied hard, believing that education was his son’s best chance at salvation.

Mohanta ended up being one of the few

to graduate from his village. “I had to till our land of course, but wanted to do something more,” he said. So, Mohanta began volunteering with an NGO in his village that worked with children — Centre for Youth and Social Development. “My region is very backward in the state, and is prone to several forms of exploitation of children,” he said. “Child labour, early age at marriage and worst of them all, child trafficking, used to be common.” Walking or cycling (unable to protect his knees on uneven terrain, he taught himself to ride a regular bike to move around) to schools, families and panchayats, he started spreading awareness about the importance of education. “I would personally intervene with parents when I found that they were sending their children to work or were planning to get them married young,” he recounted. He would go to the pastures where children would take the cattle to graze. “I would talk to them about how education was the only way that they could do something better than this in their lives,” he said.

It wasn’t all plain sailing, though. “Over the years, I have faced everything from abuses to threats on my life,” he said. “Some people would refuse to open their door to me, others would tell me to mind my business.” But from the time when his younger sister would carry him to the village school, Mohanta had learnt to be resilient. Today, however, everyone in his village respects and acknowledges

his work.

Thanks to his efforts, there has been a discernable drop in school dropout rates over the years. Not a single child can be found grazing cattle today. Mohanta has also personally prevented between 10 and 15 child marriages. He has been appointed the secretary of the Khandbandh Gram Panchayat-Level Child Protection Committee. The government has recognised his work and appointed him as a district-level child protection trainer. Incredibly, other than the stipend he gets from the government for training, Mohanta’s work has been purely voluntary. “My disability had given me a lot of empathy towards people, especially children, and I am happy to spend my life serving others,” he said. Recently, Plan India presented him with the Impact Award in recognition of his efforts.

Today, the same people who once thought Mohanta was cursed, say that he has been a blessing for his community. “I tell my two children that ability and disability are simply states of mind,” said the man who, when coming to Delhi to receive his award from Plan India, was quite surprised to be offered a wheelchair at the airport. Mohanta said he wanted to dedicate his life to child protection and child development. “It’s the children that matter,” he says. “They are the future.”

When 3 generations live together



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Several years ago, when helping a cousin purchase an apartment from a senior bureaucrat, a secretary with the Government of India, he declined to sign a stamp paper, stating he was of sound and able mind. It is a document many of us have put signatures to over the years, especially in matters relating to property transactions. But the official refused to sign it, saying the Indian government’s faith in his ability to lead his ministry’s department was proof of his sanity. In the end, my relative had to accede to his point, but I’m happy to report that over the years the now former secretary has shown no signs of deviant behaviour.

I recalled the incident when my fam-

ily and I began to wonder whether my father’s attempt to fiercely guard his independence could be construed as such an aberration. Now 90, he had become completely dependent on his staff and vulnerable to their fiscal manipulation. When it was pointed out to him, he stoutly defended his position — it was his money, he said, to do with it as he liked. His health was failing, he’d recently had a fall, and my mother was finding it a chore to run the house — but my father liked his freedom too much to relinquish it for an alternative.

My father is as sane as they come, and his behaviour isn’t entirely unreasonable, so what is one to make of his obstinacy? Or of our family’s collective decision to move my parents lock, stock and barrel to the city and in with us? At what point did my father lose his choice, however flawed, to make his own decisions? When did he, in that sense, lose his option to say no? Is he merely trading one sense of dependency for another? What of his “able and sound” mind?

There are no answers to what are essentially age-related concerns such as this playing out in various parts of the country. And it has caused no less consternation in our home than it has in my parents’. Our need for space has

expanded, necessitating the search for a new house spacious enough to accommodate three generations while allowing everyone their privacy. It has meant adhering to each other and conceding differing points of view on how a house should be run. There is the purely practical aspect too: More TVs, towels, servants, cups of tea, bed linen — all the small things that make a house a home.

But mostly, it has meant a fresh set of dynamics between different generations, an illustration of which should suffice. Breakfast at our house begins at dawn, with protein shakes and mixes for my son as he heads for the gym. My daughter, who is the earliest to leave for work, is served next, and nobody is ever sure of what she wants. That fuss is barely over when my mother joins me at the breakfast table, but given her ill health, our menus are dissimilar. My son’s post-gym breakfast changes daily to suit his dietary needs. My wife spends her morning gardening, so portions of her breakfast are to be found on the terrace parapet, amidst plants in the balcony, or on the staircase. My father eats his breakfast at noon. And this is the easy part. When my children’s friends raid the bar at a suitably late hour of the night, my father has words to say — to me — as does my son. I’ve become a patient listener.

At the two-thirds mark

There is a paradox at work. The Modi government gains in political strength and popular support even as the economy swings downward. Can the two continue to move in opposite directions? For a while, certainly. Indira Gandhi remained hugely popular for many years even as the economy slipped into its lowest growth phase since Independence. What helped her was that she sold people the dream of removing poverty, and took a number of populist steps: Nationalising banks and giving below-cost loans to the poor; and raising income tax rates to 97 per cent in a Robin Hood scenario of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. She also won a war and carved up Pakistan, even as she built a personality cult.

Are there parallels with today? Yes and no. Majoritarian nationalism is the current *zeitgeist*, more resilient than the old promise of *Garibi Hatao*, which depended on performance. The narrative of taking on the corrupt rich has been re-invented through demonetisation — something that high income tax rates did back then. The current writing off of bank loans for farmers compares with below-cost bank loans then, even as Jan Dhan today mimics the bank reach-out done after nationalisation. Doklam is not comparable to victory in the Bangladesh war, but it has fed the narrative of a strong Narendra Modi standing up to the Chinese. Finally, there is the same personalisation of politics.

Two things upset the appraiser for Indira Gandhi: The spread of the then unfamiliar stench of corruption, and the double-whammy of an oil price shock combined with successive drought years, which caused runaway inflation. In the face of political and economic disaffection, she turned authoritarian. Today, Mr Modi's corruption-fighting narrative still holds and indeed gets buttressed, but there is economic danger: Not inflation but a slowdown that feeds an employment crisis. The criticism of demonetisation leads to the broader charge of economic mismanagement, following two quarters of poor GDP numbers. But without a matching political narrative, Mr Modi faces no real threat in 2019 — unless, even in a progressively opposition-*mukt* polity, his and his cohorts' incipient authoritarianism and street thuggery turn people off. The economy needs a boost, but what we have is a financial storm brewing in the form of bank loans that cannot be repaid. Growth needs credit, which is stagnant. And rapid growth requires exports to pick up, but the rupee's exaggerated value does not help. Investment needs to recover, but the Reserve Bank misjudges growth prospects (7.3 per cent this year, it says) as badly as it did inflation, and keeps interest rates too high. Factor markets (land, labour, capital) have not been reformed, so the conditions are yet to be created for a real estate revival or for "making in India". The skills programme will work only if it is tied to apprenticeship — no one will pay for acquiring a skill if there is no job at the end of the rainbow. The management of cities and towns cries out for reform. That the employment guarantee programme now needs additional outlays is comment enough on the jobs front.

The prime minister must know that, two-thirds of the way into the life of his government, he is at a crucial juncture. Luckily for him the original promise of scaling up to double-digit economic growth has faded from public memory, but the government's programmes have to work so that Mr Modi gets his talking points. He has quite a few: Macro-economic stability, major tax reform, success with renewable energy, more highways built, the virtual abolition of petroleum subsidies, and so on. But the problematic outcome of, or poor progress on, many initiatives also figures: Uday, crop insurance, *Swachh Bharat*, halving the share of imports in defence orders, cleaning the Ganga, safe travel on the railways ... The ministerial reshuffle comes at the right time, but most of the ministers in this government have been strictly peripheral to the main action. It all comes back to Mr Modi, who as always scores high on effort but is now slipping on the results front.

ILLUSTRATION BY AJAY MOHANTY



Rise of the party Commissar

Fifty years after Kamaraj, Amit Shah is the first truly powerful chief of a ruling party. Watch this cabinet reshuffle for evidence

The living-room of BJP President Amit Shah's residence has minimal furnishing, much like the homes of old-generation politicians. He speaks to visitors sitting on his favourite spot on the middle sofa, with his back to the wall. The visitor notes the two framed portraits on that wall: Chanakya or Kautilya to the left and Veer Savarkar to the right. Those two deities determine his politics — Kautilya for political craft, and Savarkar for his ideology of Hindutva-nationalism.

Mr Shah could, however, add a third portrait to that wall, ideally in the space between Kautilya and Savarkar. It would be a pucca Congressman, because while his political and state power and philosophical impulse come from the two already there, his political style and authority over his own party hark back to the heyday of the late Congress President K Kamaraj (1963-67). Not since Kamaraj had cabinet ministers trooped into the ruling party president's office, to read their own report cards, or offering to resign to devote time to party work. The drama is currently playing out as a cabinet reshuffle looms.

Not since Kamaraj in his first reign, 1963-67, has a full-time ruling party president wielded such power. For clarity, we are talking only of full-time party presidents, as distinct from Congress prime ministers who were also party president or a party president who had an "appointed" prime minister with limited powers. Other full-time ruling party presidents, Dev Kant Barooah, Chandra Shekhar (Janata), and those who held the same position in the BJP during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's prime ministerial years had limited powers and, therefore, do not make the cut.

Mr Shah's power is more unique because Prime Minister Narendra Modi doesn't owe his rise to him. It is the other way around. Mr Shah was Mr Modi's per-

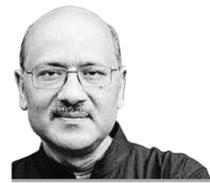
sonal choice as party chief in 2014. You can search hard, with the highest degree of suspicion as medical pathologists like to say, but it isn't possible to find an issue on which he may have worked at cross-purposes with Mr Modi. Nor is there evidence yet of his having been overruled or a decision thrust on him.

"Just what were they smoking, drinking, eating, thinking, when they did so?" I had asked in a

National Interest (Lose-Lose, July 13, 2013) when the BJP put him in charge of its UP campaign. For sure, I was proved wrong because he delivered 73 seats (including two with allies) out of UP's 80. The reason, in retrospect, was an assumption I made erroneously: It is that the BJP once again wanted to build an NDA government in the image of the one of Mr Vajpayee, and that the party's approach will be inclusive, soft Hindutva without upsetting the centrist status quo. If that belief was true, the conclusion about Mr Shah being

a bad choice for UP was going to be correct. As politics unfolded, I was proved to have been unwise in making that assumption. Subsequent politics has further underlined how wrong that assumption was. Far from building one more government in Mr Vajpayee's image, the Modi-Shah view was to build a "genuine" and unapologetic BJP-RSS government. There was also an understanding that Mr Vajpayee's government was hardly a BJP government because a large number of key ministries were with non-RSS people. This is true for ministries given not just to allies like George Fernandes, who had the defence portfolio, but also for Jaswant Singh, Yashwant Sinha, Rangarajan Kumararamangalam, Arun Shourie and others, who were not ideological natives of the RSS and the BJP.

That government is now seen to have been true



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Genetic tailoring is no empty slogan



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Think of a public personage you dislike. It could be a politician, a godman, a business tycoon, a TV host. One saving grace: That person has a finite lifespan. One day, soon in celestial terms, the Earth will be rid of this pest.

Now think of somebody you admire. Again, it could be anyone — a musician, scientist, writer, porn star. There is something seriously wrong with you if you admire a godman or a politician but even somebody from those categories may fit your bill. Sadly, the day will come when that person will need the last rites.

Now imagine a situation in which that person, or somebody who is identical and

possesses very similar intellectual and physical qualities, could live forever. In the first instance, it would seem like a dystopian nightmare. In the second, it may seem like a pleasant dream.

Now imagine a scenario in which such a person, admired or reviled as the case may be, may have enhanced abilities. Inherited susceptibility to diabetes, cancer, or heart disease might be removed. A scientist's ability to do higher mathematics may be enhanced. A politician or godman might be given an enhanced ability to talk rubbish without blushing. The vocal range of a musician might be extended. A cricketer may be able to generate more pace.

Sounds good? This is science fiction but the science quotient is, so to speak, being enhanced, as the grasp of genetics improves. Someday soon, in celestial terms, it could turn out to be entirely science and not fiction.

Gene editing and the identification of genes associated with certain diseases and characteristics have improved by leaps and bounds in the past few years. The latest experiments include genetic treatment for cancer. The US has just cleared a leukaemia treatment that involves genetically modifying the patient's genes to create a new protein

that targets and kills leukaemia cells.

Experiments carried out with human embryos, as well as with animals and plants, indicate that it may be quite possible to remove genes associated with hereditary diseases. What is more, the change in genetics will be inheritable. Hence, the children of somebody with a congenital predilection for heart disease will no longer have that problem since the gene will be removed. Similar cut-and-paste methods of gene editing could remove a tendency to diabetes, or thalassaemia.

No, the embryos in the experiments mentioned above weren't carried to term, though some were apparently viable. Nor were the experiments entirely successful. There was a high failure rate and there are questions about the methodology. But such experiments will continue and nobody in the field doubts that such an excision of undesirable genes is possible.

Cloning is old hat. Identical twins are clones developed naturally due to the splitting of the same zygote during pregnancy. Assisted pregnancies can create triplets or quadruplets by inducing multiple splits. The cloning of mammals using adult cells started with Dolly the sheep back in 1996. Creating a clone of an adult human is not impossible; it's mere-

ly illegal in most places.

So, imagine that there's a powerful megalomaniac somewhere. I can think of a few candidates. In between composing funny slogans, having hair transplants, and posing in smart clothes, our dear leader (DL) okays a cloning experiment and donates some genetic material. The boffins discover an unfortunate inherited tendency to flatulence and remove that gene. Instead, they splice in a gene for combating hair-loss, which helps DL save on transplants. The viable embryos are stored in vats. One by one, they are turned into clones and educated to DL's specifications. Whenever DL shuffles off the mortal coil, a clone is seamlessly inserted into place.

Only the very rich and powerful would have early access to such technology. This means that they could literally mould the next generation to specifications by weeding out undesirable genes like, say, the wrong colour of skin, and adding in desirable genes. Of course, everybody would gain in terms of enhanced health and longevity in such a scenario. But the top decile would gain disproportionately.

Dystopia or utopia? Your view will depend on the microscope you can afford.

Twitter: @devangshudatta

How to cope with a drunken gorilla



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Other than the size of their countries, what is the difference between Xi Jinping, President of China, and Kim Jong-un, Great Leader of North Korea? Anyone who can spot it will get a copy of Mao's and Kim's thoughts from me.

But until then let us talk about the similarities. The comparison is very illuminating.

Thus, both are heads of *naam ke vaaste* Communist parties. Their parties run their governments, which are highly repressive.

Both have a strong sense of entitlement. Both break rules.

Both also routinely break promises.

Both spend a very high proportion of their GDP on the military. Both rely on their armies to keep them in power.

Both have nuclear weapons. Both indulge in a lot of bluster. Both threaten their neighbours.

Both get offended at the drop of a hat. Both try to bully everyone and have their own way. Both mostly fail.

Both are ridiculous figures who will remain in power for the foreseeable future. This is a very serious problem for the world. It is as if Hitler and Mussolini have been reincarnated.

But while the world makes a lot of fun of poor Kim, no one dares to of Xi. Such is the successful propaganda by China.

This, however, is equalled only by Xi's follies. For, who else would piss off every country except Pakistan and North Korea?

But Xi's follies are not his only problem. China is highly vulnerable on a variety of counts. Let's look at two of the

worst of them.

Food

China has been quietly trying to plant the idea that just as we have a ban on chemical and biological weapons, there should also be an international convention that prohibits the use of food as a weapon.

This is because in spite of the supposed high productivity of China's farms, the country is highly dependent on imports. Depending on how you define food, it imports between 7 and 10 per cent of its food requirements. This is not abnormal, though. Barring North America, which had plenty of land, every country that experienced rapid economic growth, and a consequent rise in incomes, has had to import food sooner or later.

This gives the West, which exports the most, a handle. If it cuts to half of what it currently sells to China, you can expect serious unrest.

Before you object, the point is not that the exporters will not do so because they are making

so much money. The point is that China is highly vulnerable on this count. That is why China can't, in the end, afford to bite, not least the hand that feeds it. But barking harms no one.

So remember this: At Doklam Narendra Modi has demonstrated to the world that much of what Xi does is posturing. More countries should call his bluff.

Barack Obama could have. But he chickened out. We must wait to see what Donald Trump does.

Debt

Chinese banks and other lenders are owed anywhere between \$25 trillion and \$35 trillion. Yes, trillion. Is there anything more that needs to be said about Xi's policies since he took over in 2013?

Like Kim, he will continue in power regardless. The Chinese media is putting it about that once he gets his second term in about eight weeks from now, he is going to tighten the screws.

Tighten the screws? On whom? How? With what deflationary consequences for the

Ahmed Khan's world

EYE CULTURE

UDDALOK BHATTACHARYA

It is not surprising that the passing of footballer Ahmed Khan on Sunday went virtually unnoticed at least in the print media. Ahmed Khan, say football legends such as Chuni Goswami and Pradip Banerjee, is India's greatest forward since the Second World War. If the history of Calcutta football is to be carved into phases, Khan belonged roughly to the third phase of it (I stick to Calcutta football, because football has never been a pan-Indian game, even though some southern states — Ahmed Khan was from Mysore — and the Railways had excellent teams). But it was an important game in Calcutta, not just for the crowds it drew but also for the way much of the city's social life was anchored in football. And, though in international football India never figured prominently — there has never been an Indian team at the World Cup — in Asia it was among the top sides, proved by the fact it won the gold at the Asian Games in 1951 and 1962. And India did qualify to participate in Olympic football in those days, 1960 being the last of those happy years.

At the very outset it needs to be stated that though the epicentre of Indian football was Calcutta, it was never a purely Bengali affair except in its early years, which may be called the first phase. The Mohun Bagan team that won the IFA Shield in 1911 — the first Indian team to have done so — by beating the East Yorkshire Regiment was almost entirely Bengali. The victory stoked nationalist feelings to a great degree because it showed Bengalis, though they played barefoot, could beat boot-wearing Brits in their own game.

But the subsequent years proved that the win was a flash in the pan. No Indian side achieved any success worth the name in the next 23 years, until 1934, when Mohammedan Sporting won the League for the first time and went on winning it for the next four years, making it five times in a row (a record that held for almost 40 years). Though it could be a fanciful way of seeing the past as always glorious, this Mohammedan Sporting has been held by many (Pradip Banerjee included) to be India's greatest club side ever.

And most of the players were either from the North-West Frontier Provinces or Mysore. Growing up hearing about the footballing exploits of Osman (goalkeeper), Jumma Khan, Bachchi Khan (a murderous tackler), Masoom, Rashid, or Abbas has been

neither to ideology nor to the party. The current dispensation belongs to the other end. Where the party doesn't have the talent for a job with the requisite ideological purity, it is no longer willing to explore outside to find it. The party would rather give power only to the absolutely pure, or those who have paid their dues through the decades. This approach has been driven unforgivingly by Mr Shah. This BJP/NDA government, in that sense, is completely different from the earlier one. That the BJP now has a majority of its own makes a difference, but you can be quite sure if L K Advani or any of the other older BJP leaders Delhi is familiar with had been given this majority, he would not have built a government with such uncluttered ideological commitment. Mr Modi underlined this with his choice of RSS *pracharak*s and a young faithful as the chief ministers of Haryana, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra, though they were political lightweight. Mr Shah then moved in with his own choices — Vijay Rupani as Gujarat chief minister, Yogi Adityanath as Uttar Pradesh chief minister, and Ram Nath Kovind as President of India. These were not in defiance of the prime minister but it is just that the initial choice was made by Mr Shah, who kept each secret from the party.

On Gandhi Jayanti in 1963, Kamaraj created a political upheaval by resigning as Tamil Nadu chief minister to rededicate himself to party work. Following him, six cabinet ministers and five other chief ministers also resigned. It saw heads like Morarji Desai and Jagjivan Ram roll. His was a brutal internal clean-up and was called the Kamaraj Plan though he wasn't Congress president then. It has faded from memory now, but it was for long a purge of Stalinist dimensions, though bloodless and "voluntary". It kept political cartoonists and satirists busy for a long time. Nehru, then in decline, was so impressed (and possibly insecure) that he asked that Kamaraj be made party president. He remained in his element after Nehru's death, ensuring the swearing-in of Lal Bahadur Shastri first and Indira Gandhi next as prime minister, destroying the ambitions of the well-entrenched Morarji Desai. During these years, 1963-67, the most powerful Congressmen chased him for favours and his fabled reply "*paarkalam*" (let's see) in Tamil joined India's political dictionary.

We don't yet know if Mr Shah has such a favourite line, but the rest of the Kamaraj playbook is all there. Ministers line up before him, but not the prime minister, who has given him this power. And he would persuade them to "volunteer" resignations to rededicate themselves to party work. They will all come out smiling, claiming to be loyal party workers with no other expectations even as their hearts bleed. They work on the presumption that the Modi-Shah leadership will continue till 2024 and have more clout as time passes. They would keep hoping that Mr Shah takes notice of their party work and brings them back at some point.

For half a century, Delhi has not seen a truly powerful ruling party president. It is taking its time, making adjustments. Mr Shah has made other significant changes. The BJP's parliamentary party meeting now takes place in the party office, and the prime minister goes there to attend it. This changes the long-established practice of holding these meetings in the prime minister's house for his convenience. The Cabinet, chief ministers, and even the heads of the most powerful departments and agencies now acknowledge where power lies, besides the prime minister's office. They are making adjustments accordingly. This reshuffle will further reaffirm this new normal.

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