

The big Apple con



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

So it's 10 years since the first iPhone was released, and we have been treated to the vision of a new, even less affordable model, the iPhone X. The X will be able to recognise your face, thereby moving closer to completion Steve Jobs' grand vision of replacing your loved ones with a phone. (The

moment Siri learns to argue with you about years-old things you said, insisting she remembers them better, that process will be completed.)

The X will cost \$1,000, which in India — judging by the mark-ups on similar imported electronic goods — will eventually mean it will be priced at about ₹1 lakh. Or close enough; this iPhone is reaching that rarefied level of consumer goods occupied by things like bespoke Italian suits and rooms at the Lake Palace in Udaipur, the one where anyone asking the price will not be able to afford it. Of course, a good number of people who can't afford it will buy it anyway, another indication that all of micro-economic theory should be revised to incorporate the fact that when it comes to Apple products, consumers think budget constraints are imaginary.

I have never liked iProducts much, and one of the few things I dislike more than the cult around them is the cult around Jobs himself. I see Jobs as the sort of salesman, who genuinely believed that people were stupid — in the league of, say, Donald Trump, though not quite as successful. Apple products are built around the notion of picking up ideas that are already common, reducing them to brightly-coloured, child-like simplicity, imposing conformity, and then suggesting that buying into that child-like conformity means that you're a seriously cool adult. I once described the Mac aesthetic as "brushed-steel fascism" and, yes, I stand by that. But at least the Macs were sturdy. All-glass iPhones? You really want to buy something worth over \$1,000 that you know you are going to drop on the pavement and smash the very first time you check your email while walking? Or else you want to buy a phone that declares, like some unfortunate Bollywood starlet, that it is cool because it is thin, and then wrap it up in some hideous thick cover that makes it look like something that came free with a Jio connection? I suppose, as long as you know that it's thin inside all of that, you can stay happy.

To be in northern California during an Apple keynote address — as I was for this one — feels a little like being in North Korea as Kim Jong Un announces he has a new missile capable of bankrupting the American middle class. The faithful gather around their iPads and Macbooks and iPhones — the unfortunates in the latter group desperately trying to further turn up the sound on the tinny little low-rent speakers that Apple puts in the "best phone in the world" — while learning how the current Leader intends them to live their lives and spend their resources for the coming year. All that's missing is a giant statue to the Eternal President on stage, though I suppose the huge picture of Jobs with his fingers arched into the eternal "I'm smarter than you" *mudra* pioneered by Sherlock Holmes came close. Apple made its name with the famous 1984 ad in which a similar photo of Big Brother, representing IBM, was smashed by a colourful interloper, representing the Mac — so I suppose this is yet another reminder that, in the long run, we turn into everything we supposedly hate.

Part of why this cultishness confuses me is that it is not, in fact, the case that Apple ever really innovates. Facial recognition is already around; in fact Android incorporated it into its Ice Cream Sandwich version in January 2012. China's Xiaomi has it in its Mi Note 3, which will eventually be sold at, I expect, about a quarter of the price of the iPhone. Waterproof phones are plentiful — I tested an excellent waterproof Sony Ericsson Xperia in 2013. Bezel-less phones — in which the entire front is a screen — are also common; there are literally a dozen Chinese phones under \$100 that look like this. And this is Apple all over; even the iPod, when it was first introduced, was perhaps the worst MP3 player around, but everyone behaved like Jobs had invented music.

Full disclosure: I admit that I do, in fact, own and use an iPhone. In fact, I'm typing this very column on an iPad. So I must accept on my own head all the insults I have levelled at Apple owners. But I also own a Xiaomi phone, which doesn't need charging for days, is faster than my iPhone, has more storage than my iPhone, which cost about ₹10,000 and which I don't ever worry about dropping. In other words, I can see for myself that the iPhone is a con. But the very best cons, the sort Apple has pulled off, ensure that even your critics ignore the evidence of their own eyes.

m.s.sharma@gmail.com; Twitter: @mihirsharma

Resisting linguistic chauvinism

Otherwise, it may breed destructive and violent nationalism in India



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

It seems especially bizarre in London where I am writing this. Those few British who think of India at all are convinced that popularising English was the Raj's greatest achievement. Language is Britain's proudest export and an *Evening Standard* headline screamed the other day, "Berlin may be German but the English language rules." Mastery of another language is always an accomplishment. Yet, a young man was reportedly beaten up in New Delhi for daring to speak in English!

Actually, the incident didn't surprise me. It's been coming a long time as the envious underprivileged took their cue from their political leaders. Linguistic chauvinism is

driven by an inferiority complex that hardened when an Anglicised elite followed British rule. A politician who can't hope to match the eloquence in English that the first prime minister acquired from his British governor and at Harrow and Cambridge tries to compensate for it with bombast, bravado and sartorial flamboyance. Those who once felt sidelined are now getting their own back. The sah'b is now a symbol of obsolete authority.

Not that everyone was crippled by complexes. An enlightened multiculturalism has always been the pride of a nation that refuses to be defined by a single language or religion. India boasted great individuals who rose above the inhibitions that shape mass conduct. We know that when Oxford University gave Rabindranath Tagore an honorary doctorate, he responded to the citation's "volley of Latin" "by a volley of Sanskrit". If Tagore and other Bengalis were the product of "a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British", North Indians can claim in addition the wider inheritance of some touches of an ancient Greek lineage.

Even foreigners who lived amongst us and, in many cases, ruled us, celebrated India's eclecticism. Akbar's syncretic Din-i-Ilahi, derived from Islam, Hinduism,

Zoroastrianism and Christianity, was one example of liberation from orthodox blinkers. Venturing beyond religion to statecraft, Deep K Datta-Ray claims in *The Making of Indian Diplomacy* that "the Mughals became Indo-Mughals because in India they encountered the dharma-complex via the *Mahabharata*". Many European Union dignitaries have argued that Britain's Indian involvement left the British that much less European. No one escapes India's liberating influence except some doctrinaire Indians who are trying to create a land of bigotry.

It is humbling to read today that as a sub-divisional officer in Midnapore in the late 19th century, Sir Henry Cotton, who served in the ICS from 1867 to 1902 (his grandfather, father and son were also Civilians), did his entire office work except correspondence in Bengali "and for weeks and months together spoke no other language while in office". It would be typical of today's Hindi zealots to misinterpret the message of that confession, try to turn the clock back and ram Hindi or Bengali or Marathi down the throats of unwilling Indians. The real lesson is that people must be educated to know what they are about. They must be instructed in a variety of languages, and encouraged to adopt the one that best promises to allow self-expression and permit social and economic advance as

well as political cohesion. An insistence on only one language will inevitably be resented as a form of imperialism (as happened in erstwhile East Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and resisted.

Such narrow-mindedness also breeds a destructive and, at times, violent competitive linguistic nationalism. When the ruling Congress was identified with cow-belt domination, activists of Calcutta's Amra Bangali group went round defacing English signboards. Reports now indicate similar protests against Hindi in Bengaluru Metro stations, with Karnataka's chief minister, Siddaramaiah, reportedly denouncing the imposition of any language other than Kannada as unconstitutional. Maharashtra seems likely to emulate Karnataka. As the Hindu Hindi fanaticism that appears to receive the Centre's tacit approval drives the many nations that make up the Indian state to assert their own individual identities, one is reminded of Nirad C Chaudhuri invoking the concluding couplet of Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*: "Thy hand, great Anarch! Lets/the curtain fall;/And universal Darkness buries/All."

Nehru wrote perceptively in his prison diary, "Perhaps it is as well that [Tagore] died now and did not see the many horrors that are likely to descend in increasing measure on the world and on India. He had seen enough and he was infinitely sad and unhappy." The Bard was spared the grotesque contradiction of an India driven by its leaders into the dark ages even while glibly proclaiming the attractions of the digital age.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ T KRISHNAKUMAR, PRESIDENT, COCA-COLA INDIA AND SOUTH WEST ASIA

Low profile, high impact

Krishnakumar talks to Shyamal Majumdar about his plans for the company and after

While working at the Murugappa Group several years ago, T Krishnakumar and one of his colleagues had to make separate presentations to the board on an important initiative the group was planning to launch. Krishnakumar, known as KK to friends and colleagues, says he worked very hard on it, but his presentation was not accepted. He was later told by one of the board members that while he was indeed solid on facts, he was not articulate enough.

That, Krishnakumar says, was a turning point in his career, making him realise that "being fluent in English" is as important as being "solid on facts" if he wanted to progress in his career. Instead of losing confidence, he took it up as a challenge and started working at "fluency in spoken English", and spent a considerable amount of time with his grandfather, who had mastery over the language. He also insisted on speaking to all and sundry only in that language for many years. "The only place where I was myself and spoke in Tamil was at home. I still do," he says. He has obviously learnt his lessons well, as the Krishnakumar I am meeting at the Sheraton New Delhi at Saket speaks the language with just the right accent.

He had faced the same problems earlier at IIM Bangalore, where language was often a barrier, forcing him to be one of the low-profile students. "But IIM also taught me one very important lesson: You do not have to be high-profile as long as you put in your 100 per cent and do things that are top-class. Temporary setbacks don't matter," Krishnakumar, 57, an electronics engineering graduate from the College of Engineering, Guindy (Madras University), says, taking a deep sip of the Diet Coke he has just ordered.

By his own admission, he may not be as high-profile as some of his counterparts in other companies, but that evidently hasn't made any difference, mainly because of his hard work and desire to excel. Krishnakumar has obviously walked the talk, evident from his elevation to the position of president of Coca-Cola India and South West Asia four months ago. He had joined the company in 2004.

He has fond memories of Chennai's Mylapore, where he grew up under the tute-

lage of his two grandfathers, who had a profound impact on him. Apart from Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, where he studied, Mylapore itself, he says, is an epitome of the Indian middle class. "I grew up in that surrounding and I still carry those values in me wherever I go. You can be well rooted in our tradition and culture and discuss world events at the same time," he says.

Krishnakumar says what keeps him going is his mandatory hour-long *pujas*, in whichever part of the world he is in. "I am not a religious person in the narrow sense of the term, but I think it's important to submit yourself to a superior force. That helps in clarity of thought and do your best without bothering too much about the consequences," he says.

Dakshin is a favourite spot of his and though the décor and the menu haven't changed much, it gives him a sense of nostalgia. Krishnakumar says he finds his current job easier than the one he did for almost 10 years (he led BIG's [Bottling Investments Group] operations in India and South West Asia since 2009). That job involved leading a company that operates 24 bottling plants. During his tenure, Coca-Cola consolidated its bottling operations, buying out franchisee bottlers. Today, 67 per cent of Coke's volumes are from company-owned bottlers and the rest from franchisees.

His current job, he says, is mostly about marketing and strategising, which is like going back to his roots. Before joining Coca-Cola India, he was mostly in the marketing function across several companies. "The only thing that has changed is that I am now the face of Coke in India and have to meet a cross-section of people, including the media. That's what I am here for today," he says with a deadpan face, adding that one doesn't necessarily have to be in business suits to succeed. I notice his white, cotton half-sleeved shirt, and his keen sense of humour.

As the stewards come to take the orders, Krishnakumar takes charge, saying he knows the menu almost by heart. He orders vegetable *thali* for himself and a non-veg one for me. The food is standard Dakshin fare — an assortment of south Indian delicacies.

We turn to Coke's indifferent perform-



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

ance in India in recent times. The company has been under pressure in the country for the past few quarters, with sales dropping "by a low single digit" during January-March 2017. During the same period last year, the company reported an 11 per cent growth. During the full year 2015-16, its profit in India fell by about six per cent while sales were flat. Krishnakumar says the company

expects to come out of these short-term headwinds soon, and will look at pricing metrics to cater to consumers at every price point.

His main job now, he says, is to push forward a strategy that the company has already adopted — to evolve into a multi-category beverage player, in the space of ready-to-consume, non-alcoholic drinks. Coke is present in three categories now — sparkling beverages, juices and juice-based drinks, and water. The plan now is to focus on fruits and fruit-based products and straddle across price points. Besides, there are multiple drinking moments that everyone has, and Coke wants to get a significant share of those moments.

One of the ways of doing it is efficient use of technology, as the products have to be made available to consumers where and when she wants. This change has created an unprecedented complexity, as consumers move from multi-screen to multi-forms of content, and from experiential to online communities. All of these changes point to the role that artificial intelligence, data and content can play in connecting with the consumer. Coke already has a "freestyle app" in many parts of the world, which sort of allows consumers to create their own drink choices and connect to a Coke Freestyle machine to get the drink. It will come to India, but Krishnakumar is non-committal about the time frame, as the company has to weigh the cost-benefit angle.

Coke, he says, has enhanced the reach and distribution of its products, which are now available in more than 2.6 million outlets. But that still is like scratching the surface of the packaged beverage market in India and his priority is to keep reinventing the company to stay relevant in the market. That's a must, as Indian customers are the most difficult and want the best at the least possible price. But he sees this huge aspiration and knowledge of the best and latest practices all over the world as a big opportunity for Coke.

The most immediate challenge for him, however, is to become no 5 in terms of volume sales for Coke (from sixth now) and move up to the top three markets in the world in the future. That was the target set by Coke's global CEO, James Quincey, when he was on a recent trip to India. Evidently, it's a tall order.

As we walk out of Dakshin, Krishnakumar says he has two definite plans for life after retirement: One, along with his wife, he wants to get involved in helping the rural and underprivileged communities become empowered through education; two, he wants to write a book on his experiences and the formula for success in corporate life. Considering his list of to-dos in Coke India, all that will have to wait for a long time.

How smart are we with our smartphones



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

It's a jungle out there, and we've no weapons! I often get the feeling that as a society, we're moving so fast that not only our cultural norms, but also our laws are unable to keep up. Take cyber safety, for instance. Today several schools offer cyber security workshops, ensuring that teenagers at least know about the dangers of sharing information online. What about people older than them, who grew up in a more digitally innocent era? They have the money to buy the best phones, but are unaware of the dangers lurking within. A couple of days ago, Rakesh Kumar, a Delhi-based driver, came to me for advice on something like this.

"My 24-year-old niece loves to chat with her friends on WhatsApp and Facebook," he said. He and the other elders in the family, indulged her with the latest model of a

popular smartphone, after which the girl began using its more superior camera to take selfies and constantly change her display picture on social media. She had no clue that these innocent pictures could be downloaded and used any which way, by anyone who knew her number.

Then the first envelope arrived. It was a nondescript brown cover with six photographs of Kumar's niece. The girl realised that these were some of the display pictures she had uploaded on WhatsApp in the last three months. The elders in the family, Kumar included, were all school dropouts, and not particularly internet-savvy. "We didn't know how to deal with such online harassment," Kumar said. "I changed her SIM card hoping that this would reset her WhatsApp account."

Of course, the WhatsApp account remained active. The next envelope contained a threatening letter and more pictures. This time, in one of them, she was nude. "The sender said he had unlimited access to all her photos, and the next time, he'd send them to others in their community. The conservative Madhya Pradesh family was shocked and terrified that this would ruin the girl's chances of a good marriage — even though it was clear that her head had been morphed on someone else's body."

Kumar had come to ask if they had any legal recourse. A quick search on the internet told me that although the information tech-

nology law of 2000 could offer a way ahead, the sort of harassment that Kumar's niece was facing was troubling, but hard to pin down. "We can't wait for something worse to happen," he muttered worriedly as he left.

Later that night he called to give me good news. "This evening, we asked other youngsters in our mohalla if anyone had been hanging around my niece," he said. Two mentioned the same boy. Kumar and his brothers went to the boy's house, requested his parents to examine his smartphone and sure enough found all their niece's pictures on it. The mortified parents, both illiterate, cried, saying that they kept track of their 17-year-old's offline habits but simply couldn't do the same for what he did online. "Eventually, we decided to let it go as they were our neighbours and the boy promised never to do this again," Kumar said. "So we gave him a couple of tight slaps and left."

I'm glad the story ended well for Kumar but a thought continues to rankle. While smartphone and internet penetration is growing at an incredibly fast pace, most users remain unaware of how to protect themselves online. The problem is exacerbated in users belonging to illiterate households. The internet takes them places their families can't even conceive of. Everyone is rushing to buy the latest smartphones, unaware that each app they download takes them deeper, blindfolded into a jungle with hidden pitfalls — and they've no weapons to protect themselves.

Proof of happiness is in giving

GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

The adage says it's better to give than to receive. But is it really? The scientific evidence that generosity is good for us has been scant, even as the benefits of selfishness are obvious. Recently, however, a neurological study published in *Nature Communications* found there may be some biological truth to the maxim after all. The study showed that generosity changed the activity in people's brains in ways that increase feelings of happiness, even if the generous act is small or only imagined.

Scientists at the University of Zurich and elsewhere began by recruiting 50 men and women and asking them to complete questionnaires about their current mood. They then were given 25 Swiss francs (about \$25) once a week for the next month. Half of the 50 were asked to spend this on themselves. The other half were instructed to choose a new recipient each week on whom to spend the money. In other words, half the volunteers agreed to be selfish and the other half to be generous.

At the beginning of the study, participants slid into an fMRI machine with a computer screen that flashed hypothetical scenarios involving mon-

etary gifts to a loved one at a personal cost. The fMRI recorded their brain activity as volunteers decided how they would react to each situation.

Afterwards, the researchers again asked participants about their mood, especially happiness, and compared the results with the responses on the initial survey. Those who agreed to give away money reported feeling significantly happier than those who planned to spend it on themselves. They also made more generous choices during the fMRI testing, agreeing to more scenarios that came at a personal cost. And their brains worked differently, too. When the study subjects, who had pledged to spend money, made generous picks, the fMRI scans showed greater activity in a portion of the brain, the temporo-parietal junction, associated with altruism. And that portion of their brains was also showing greater functional connectivity, communicating more readily with another part of the brain, the ventral striatum, known as the brain's reward centre.

In effect, the pledge to be generous primed people to be more giving. There

are probably evolutionary undercurrents to this process, says Thorsten Kahnt, who was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Zurich and co-author of the study and is now an

assistant professor of neurology at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. Our early ancestors might not have been so eager to share food and labour with one another, he suggests, if those actions didn't entail some reward — including the potent, if abstract, reward of happiness.

In the month following the fMRI study, researchers provided the promised cash to each volunteer and checked in about its dispersal. For the most part, the volunteers who had agreed to give the money away did. Though the experiment lasted only a short time and involved only simulated gains and losses, Kahnt says that "it does show a mechanistic linkage in the brain between doing something nice for someone and feeling better about yourself".

© 2017 New York Times News Service
People Like Us will be back from September 22

Creating new winners

Twenty and more years ago, the mantra was: If the government or public sector cannot get the job done, hand it over to the private sector. And who is to argue that this approach has not worked? We only have to look at the private airlines, phone companies, private banks (or at least some of them), and the post-privatisation record of the metals companies (aluminium, copper and zinc) to accept the broad conclusion that in open competition the public sector comes off a poor second-best, and that the consumer is best served when private players are allowed entry. This is so even when private companies have not excelled in the quality of their service (like the phone companies), or if many of the airlines have gone belly up (that should be taken as proof of a competitive market).

This fairly straightforward narrative has now changed. Because the flip side of the story about bankrupt government-owned banks is private borrowers. As the figures for the banks' non-performing assets climb remorselessly from one miserable quarter to the next, and as the requirement of additional capital needed by banks soars to quite simply impossible levels, India's private sector must surely have questions to answer. However impecunious the government-run power distribution companies may be, and however much bankrupt companies like Air India may have borrowed, they are not the reason for the banks' troubles. Everyone knows that, at the end of the day, the government will pick up the tab and the banks' money is safe. The problematic debt is private debt. And it is not just the communists who note that if the banks are in trouble, it is not primarily because of farm loan write-offs.

You could argue that business is inherently risky, the upheavals in many markets over the past decade were not anticipated, and the perils of getting into long-gestation infrastructure projects were not fully understood. All of that would be acceptable as explanation if other questions did not intrude. People accused of grossly over-invoicing imports related to domestic projects argue in defence that their costs were the lowest; but that only raises questions about what others with higher costs were doing — were they creaming off even more? Those who bagged bank funds for highway projects on the basis of vastly inflated capital costs have similar questions to answer. Note also that the airlines say our airport charges are among the highest in the world; is that too an account of inflated project costs?

If we assume significant private corporate failure in all these areas, what are the implications for the future — especially (but not only) for making infrastructure investment happen? If the nature of our political funding means that adverse selection remains a high risk, we can no longer argue simplistically that, if the government or public sector can't do the job, call in the private sector. Which government banker will have the courage today to lend to a private highway project? What is the safety of the funds given for a power project if its power purchase contract is not worth the paper it is written on? Can the people bidding today to be chosen as long-term strategic partners for high-tech defence projects be trusted to deliver planes, missiles and tanks when the time comes — or will we simply have the grim joy of reading future reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General?

We need alternatives to the Air India kind of story in the public sector, and they exist. Especially if we can't steer clear of mountebanks when choosing private sector entities for major projects, the essential challenge is to replicate the strong public entities created in the past, which (for a while at least) set performance benchmarks: Entities like National Thermal Power Corporation, Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, Indian Dairy Corporation/Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation and of course the Indian Space Research Organisation. If in decades past we could find the people capable of setting up such strong public institutions, surely we can do it today.

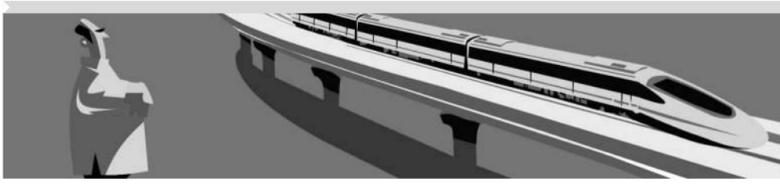


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Homoeopathy as ideology

The criticism of the bullet train project shows our fear of scale is like mass hypochondria, where we fear real medicine and drift on with dainty, sweet, ineffectual pills

Homoeopathy, a relatively modern therapy, was invented in Germany by Samuel Hahnemann in 1796. It's been hailed, questioned, researched, rejected and mocked as a pseudoscience in developed countries since.

Only in India is it still a mainstream therapy. Every city, big or small, has its homoeopaths and usually a most trusted one called "Dr Banerji". The fad is nearly dead in its homeland, Germany. In India, it thrives and also gets sizeable Central government funding. The 'H' in the ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy) stands for homoeopathy. It is dangerous in our country to make fun of it. I bet some abuse and outrage are on my way ahead for coming this far.

There has to be a reason why Indians so adore homoeopathy. Is it because it was designed for the pucca hypochondriac? At the first whiff of a health doubt, you start chewing those sugary, spirit-flavoured pills, often for months. You feel no effect of the drug, but in the course of time, you might believe you are better, even cured, apparently with no side effects. Any stronger medicine or surgery we dread.

Are we then a country with a homoeopathic state of mind? This is what seems to pervade our thinking in other areas too, especially governance, and more specifically infrastructure-building. Do it in small, harmless doses, but nothing bitter, sharp, or bloody.

You have to mention a project of any size and a million jump at your throat, predicting apocalypse. The foundation stone-laying ceremony of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train by Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe this week evoked many such responses. Most emphatic was from the Congress party's erudite lawyer Abhishek Manu Singhvi. Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal, he said, left India in economic ruin, famines, and starvation. The bullet train will run, he added, but the rest you can imagine. Immediately, in fact, I would now worry for New Delhi's Shah Jahan Road.

More such came from elsewhere: Can India afford this, is it sustainable, will it make economic sense and, the criticism made with the greatest passion, that a country could not afford such a toy when it had 17,000 unmanned crossings and trains were

derailing. Never mind that the same people would then complain that the top average speed of our trains hadn't changed much since 1971, which is a fact.

Most interesting is the economic argument — it is that with air tickets being so cheap, who'd pay for the bullet train? This discounts the fact that the only reason air fares have fallen is that privatisation increased capacity and supply. Changing aviation from an embarrassingly incompetent and expensive state monopoly to free markets has been a bold and successful reform. It has led to a spectacular democratisation of air travel. By the way, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport had again, in 2013, opposed plans to privatise six other major airports. Speaking on its behalf, now CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury had said, "We're totally against privatisation and transfer of assets to private entities."

The criticism of bullet trains by the same lot now conveniently presumes airfares will never rise and bullet train fares won't fall, with economies of scale.

Nor would they lead to a boom in land values and urbanisation, or that the real, virtuous switch may be from carbon-spewing cars on the highways. Stay within your means. Even the softest 50-year debt could ruin our future. It means nothing to the millions of our poor commuters and is therefore a moral hazard.

This farce plays out whenever a project of scale is planned. The outrage when E Sreedharan began building the Konkan Railway and Nitin Gadkari as a young transport minister in Maharashtra (1995-99, when he was in his thirties) planned the Mumbai-Pune expressway was similar. It will devastate the environment and government finances. Now you can't imagine a world without it. And one of India's first, albeit short, BOT (Build, Operate, Transfer) expressways is the inspiration for a mass highway-building campaign nationwide. Toll fully pays for the project. Yet, the real benefit has come elsewhere. The expressway has made Pune a metro-sized sibling for a saturated and tired Mumbai, and a magnet for IT/innovation/new economy. It has generated tens of billions of dollars of wealth. Konkan Railway is the pride of India and the lifeline of Marxist Kerala.

In the past, it was the Planning Commission that ensured any notion of scale and ambition was



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

As with Babylon, so with robots



VIEWPOINT
DEVANGSHU DATTA

Decades ago, before Tim Berners-Lees invented hyperlinks, I watched some "futuristic" porn. A man buys a telepathic sex-robot, which anticipates his desires. The problem is, he's masochistic and into public humiliation. The "Fembot", to use a term borrowed from Austin Powers, insists on beating him up publicly and, thus, causes much embarrassment since she has no sense of appropriateness. By porn standards, much thought had obviously gone into creating this scenario but from what I remember, the DVD quality was terrible.

The base premise — a lifelike, talking

robot programmed to deliver sex through onboard artificial intelligence — is now reality. "Harmony" was launched recently by a subsidiary of Abyss Creations and "Samantha" in August by Synthea Amatus.

Abyss has been in the business of making sex dolls for a decade. Harmony is legion. She comes in a wide range of physical types though the basic template seems to be tall, leggy, blonde. The buyer can order multiple heads, to be swapped at will if variation is desired.

Harmony's anatomically exact, with a range of customised voices. The AI agent lets her indulge in saucy, "sensual" conversations. No, she doesn't have the ability to move her arms or legs but that is surely just a matter of time. Her eyes move and blink, her eyebrows rise, she turns her head, and changes facial expressions. Her battery heats up her skin to normal levels.

Samantha is similar, apparently. In passionate mode, she declares, "I can take much more loving!" and "Give it to me!" The USP for Samantha is that she's always up for a threesome with a jaded couple. But she has to be "treated nice" and chatted up before she gets passionate. Samantha also has a "family" mode when

she can play with children and all the innuendos are put on hold.

This technology isn't cheap. Basic models start at \$6,000 and go up the line till \$50,000 and change. There's also an android Harmony app, which can be downloaded. Subscribers pay around \$20 a year. That allows users to interact with "virtual harmony", which looks, dresses, and speaks in a manner designed to suit user-tastes. According to the company, people talk to her for hours every day.

If these early attempts are commercially successful, there will soon be a much larger market for sex-bots catering to more exotic tastes. As production scales increase, prices will reduce dramatically. Every successive generation will also have improvements that will make them more lifelike.

These services will soon start generating huge data, which will be used to fine-tune responses and improve the quality of interaction. The data will be explosively sensitive. Even the meta-data — the mere fact that X is a subscriber to a sex robot service — is sensitive. What X talks about or does with Harmony would go into another realm of hyper-sensitivity. Suitably anonymised, such data may provide useful insights into 21st Century

kinks. Hacked, such a database could be a blackmailer's wet dream. The questions of who controls that data and who is allowed to mine those could redefine the law.

There are many interesting possibilities: Disease-free escort services, programmed strippers, etc. Sex-robots could provide sex education. Quite apart from the anatomical stuff, which can be casually accessed on porn sites, the Samantha feature of "treat them nice" may be extended to training young adults about interactions involving consent.

Of course, it could go the other way. The question of consent doesn't arise when you boot up your laptop, or pop a slice of pizza in the microwave. If you have a very lifelike sex robot, which can simply be told to do unspeakable things, users might get utterly desensitised about consent.

Sex always sells. It sold in Babylon and on the old Internet. It's a huge earner on social media. Sex robots are just a new line of merchandise and, if you think about it, an obvious one. Where this could lead is a different matter. Sex online has already changed mores. Sex robots could cause another tectonic shift in attitudes.

Twitter: @devangshudatta

Ideology, leaders and leadership



LINE AND LENGTH
T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

All of a sudden, there is a growing sense that Narendra Modi is failing. People are starting to believe the Opposition's charges and disbelieve the government's claims.

There are many reasons for this but I think the main one is that though Mr Modi is a truly great political leader, his leadership in governance has been quite poor. And bad policy is not the only problem.

A bigger problem for him is that there is now a question mark on his leadership as a prime minister. People who had supported him are beginning to

ask if he is quite up to it. The problem is the usual one: Good political leaders don't always provide good leadership in government. This is even more so when they have strong ideological beliefs, which cloud their judgment.

Between 1964 and 2014, when India was led by single parties and coalitions, everyone would moan that those governments had no ideology, only leaders. They would point to the Jana Sangh/BJP and the Communists and say look they had an ideology, and it was only a matter of time before leaders of national stature emerged.

Well, the prediction turned out to be correct for the BJP at least. From September 2013 onwards, Mr Modi mesmerised the country, including me. Everyone assumed that he would provide great leadership.

Mr Modi, meanwhile, thought that if he fixed the broken plumbing, the water would flow. That has not happened.

It is true that UP2 had left the economy in a shambles. The

country was willing to be generous to Mr Modi and gave him a lot of time and political goodwill. But he has frittered it.

Then, as Jean Dreze so accurately described it, on November 8, 2016, after two and a half years of non-performance, he shot the economy's tyres with the demonetisation decision. The demonetisation decision was inspired by a mix of ideology and ignorance.

The paradox

This leads us to the original question. Are we better off with leaders who represent no ideology, or with those who do?

History shows that ideologically inspired leaders are good at bringing about a change. But it also shows that they are not much good at providing good leadership in government.

The past is littered with such people. Imagine Gandhiji as prime minister.

The right combination of good leader and good leadership is very rare and a country has to be very lucky to have both simul-

taneously. The closest we have come to it is when Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister.

But, alas, even he, the moment he allowed ideological considerations to creep into his policies — as he did at the Aavadi Congress, which adopted a 'socialist' route — began to falter. India is still paying for his policy errors.

Indira Gandhi was the opposite: A great political leader with no ideology whatsoever. She and Mr Modi resemble each other because she too won elections but failed after that. Her bank nationalisation was exactly like Mr Modi's demonetisation — a terrific political success and an equally terrific economic disaster.

In contrast, her son Rajiv Gandhi was not a great leader. Nor did he have any great ideological moorings. And his five years (1984-89) were the best India had had in the previous three decades.

The same thing was true of P V Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Manmohan Singh.

Give me hope, Joanna!

EYE CULTURE

RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN

Dear Mr Modi

#I am Akhlaq #I am Pehlu #I am Junaid #Not in my name #I am Gauri. Your technology fetish has at least given us a new vocabulary of expressing ourselves using hash tags. My sincere thanks to you.

Would you turn a blind eye if a Hindu seer of a temple were to be killed in broad daylight? Imagine, for a moment, Mr Modi, that some self-styled Baba, were to be killed in such a cold-blooded manner. God forbid such things. Since I uphold non-violence very dearly, I don't wish such a thing to happen to anybody. But, imagine that one of them had to undergo the trauma of being lynched by an angry mob for whatever reason. Just imagine. Don't you think it is pitiable that we have to conjure imagined reactions to imagined deaths to appeal to your party's conscience? One does not have to stretch one's imagination to think how the *Bhakt* brigade would respond to such an event. Would you be proud of them?

Do you remember how the ABVP reacted in Ramjas College earlier this year for merely calling a JNU student for a seminar? Do you know how some professors and students at Haryana Central University were harassed because they staged a play written by Mahasweta Devi? Do you remember how some lawyers had beaten up Kanhaiya Kumar on the premises of the High Court? Is it true, Mr Modi, that there was pressure from the PMO on Ashoka University because one of their faculty members, (along with some non-faculty members), had signed a petition on Kashmir? Is that true, Mr Modi? If that is indeed true, don't you think it is akin to using a sledgehammer to kill a mosquito? The petition, if you remember, was well within India's democratic framework, seeking non-violence and people's voices in Kashmir to be heard through a referendum. Does it remind you of Milan Kundera's book "*The Joke*"? Are these really the priorities of the government?

Mr Modi, it is a matter of grave concern that so many deaths have happened in the last few years and yet you or your party does not seem to have done anything tangible to even send signals of peace and equity. Why is it that all those who've been silenced have either belonged to minority communities or been critical of the Hindutva

forces? Is it difficult to see a pattern here?

Pehlu Khan was mercilessly beaten to death in Alwar. The attack, like the one on the young boy Junaid, was a public spectacle. Does it not strike you as odd that the people whose names were given by the dying man, Pehlu, have been let off by the Rajasthan government for supposed lack of evidence? Would a dying man lie? Is it a mere chance that the six men who were let off were, according to reports, members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal? Don't you think it's poisonous for people to be living with so much hatred in a severely unequal society? New reports seem to suggest that the "ballistic signature" of Gauri's killers are the same as that of the scholar M M Kalburgi. Our country seems to have given a free rein to quite a few perverted, trigger-happy people who are so well-trained in using bullets. Could you please tell them that bullet trains mean something else? What constructive peace message has been given to them? What have we been reduced to, Mr Modi,

that some people in this country celebrate the death of a free voice and the prime minister "follows" them? What kind of signals does that send?

It is with the deepest sense of grief and anguish that I am appealing to your conscience, Mr Prime Minister. The killers of rationalists and the plunderers of reason and free speech appear to be getting encouragement and tacit sanction from your party members. Indian democracy has become an oxymoron. Is it too much to ask for a speedy impartial inquiry into all these deaths? Is seeking justice for the bereaved and the languishing not a reasonable request? Is it too much to ask an elected government to respect the Constitution? Don't you think these are things that the nation really wants to know?

This unabashed violent means to suppress freedom and dissent in a seemingly functional democracy would only increase more voices of dissent. I am optimistic that the truth would prevail, Mr Modi, and that more people would see and act based on reason, peace, non-violence, and compassion. I am hopeful that more people will boycott this politics of perversion and hatred and realise that this isn't sustainable for our great nation to prosper.

May I add that the views expressed are personal, secular, and constitutional.

Sincerely,
A concerned citizen in agony.

squashed before it could get off the file stage. There's a real (not apocryphal) story of Yojana Bhavan dising the Maruti project as a pipedream as its "projections" showed Indians would buy not more than 50,000 cars a year. Hindustan Motors and Premier were already providing these, so why Maruti? It was wisely overruled. Today, India is a global automobile power. In 2016-17, it bought more than 3 million and exported 750,000 passenger vehicles.

Examine the debate over the privatisation of big metro airports. Besides the usual Leftist mass-mourning over privatising state "assets" and thereby disembowelling their unions, there was talk of feasibility, over-capacity, and scarce resources. Today, Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru are already overcrowded and furiously expanding. Our aviation boom — and rock-bottom air fares — would not have happened without these. Even AeroCity, the new hospitality district near Delhi airport, dismissed as a white elephant, is buzzing. The utterly idiotic CAG report on Delhi airport privatisation, which made a buzz, has faded away. Many similar arguments were used when Delhi Metro was planned. Today, 11 cities are building metros and Delhi is completing its fourth phase. Footnote: Transport expert and IIT professor Dinesh Mohan had said in 2002: "I don't think the Metro will be able to survive till 2021 when all 5 phases are completed."

There are also instances where the minimalists or the homoeopaths won. Mumbai's sea-link was abandoned when it was one-third built, just from Bandra to Worli, dumping Versova-Bandra and then Worli-Chowpatty, which would have become its north-south jugular. New options have been caught in analysis-paralysis. In Delhi, the elevated east-west Barapulla corridor (caught in the Commonwealth Games maelstrom) stopped halfway as the government lost the nerve to finish it. It is being taken westwards again now, seven years later, to realise its potential.

This brings us to that living showpiece of Indian mis-governance, the capital's Rao Tula Ram strip, which was built as a two-lane bottleneck connecting the ends of an eight-lane highway to Delhi airport. One excuse was to save money as "traffic projections" didn't justify it. An unspoken reason also was that one privileged and powerful caste group, fronted by former President R Venkataraman, also got a promise from the government, on the fear of the Lord, not to disturb the rock on which its popular Swami Malai Mandir was built. Within a few years now, it's being rebuilt and expanded.

The Delhi-Jaipur and Delhi-Amritsar sections of national highways are being six-laned when four-laning had barely ended. The eight-lane Delhi-Gurgaon expressway was choked even before it was completed and government "planners" had rejected the idea that it be made 12-lane instead. The result is all our infrastructure is constantly under construction — planned on a lower scale for creating shortages, and then expanded at additional cost.

Planning by homoeopathy, therefore, isn't harmless. It only makes the disease worse. The best thing about the bullet train is that the Japanese will control the project and the money. And whatever your quibbles with the Modi government, even its obsession with the gigantism of statues, you can't say that it has the chronic Indian fear of scale and speed. It's another matter that it has enhanced its sarkari commitment to homoeopathy.

By special arrangement with ThePrint