

Today, cooking up conspiracies is a cakewalk

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHAA DE



Ever since Gauri Lankesh was gunned down, I have been looking for 'safe' topics to write on. I am happy to announce I have finally found one: cake baking. There was a small problem. I had never baked a cake in my life. And only eaten a few. But that did not stop me from attempting a column on a subject I knew very little about. Like it is also being said in the context of Gauri: How many people knew her well enough to comment on her life and death? Very few. How many people are aware of the circumstances under which she was murdered. Ditto. Who knows the identity of her killer/killers? As of now, nobody. But we have all been expressing our opinions, drawing conclusions and coming up with theories, regardless. Right?

It's the same with cakes. We go to fancy patisseries and survey the cakes on display as if we are all cake experts. Then we choose one that suits our budget and taste. We take one bite and decide we don't like it. Ideally, we would like our money back. But that doesn't happen. We start picking holes. We conclude we have been cheated by the pastry shop as the baker may not have used the right ratio of flour and butter. We decide the chocolate was of an inferior quality. The oven was defective. There was less cream. It wasn't whipped sufficiently. The baker had gone overboard with the salt. The packaging was misleading. We feel shortchanged. We decide to boycott the cake shop. We tell our friends about this unpleasant experience. They tell others. The cake shop eventually shuts down bowing to public opinion. Outrage follows.

Some cake lovers then decide to bake their own cakes. They form a group. Not everybody can join this exclusive group. One has to be fanatical about cakes to gain entry. Those who are denied a place at the high table serving home-baked cakes by members, get resentful and decide to start a rival cake club. This leads to friction that threatens to disturb the peace of the neighbourhood. A few incidents of stone-throwing occur. Nasty pamphlets get circulated. There are charges of irregularities and tempers get out of control. People who don't like cakes gather to register their protests. They form their own club called 'Shudh Desi Ghee Mithai'.

A few declare cakes to be anti-Indian and ask, "Why can't these cakewallas make jalebis or rasgullas? Why cakes? There must be a foreign hand backing them.



I'M ALSO GAURI: Nobody so far knows who killed the journalist, but everyone has a theory

Cakes are against Indian culture. There should be a judicial enquiry. The goings-on in the kitchen arouse suspicion. Who knows? A conspiracy could be brewing to change the eating habits of patriotic Indians who have never tasted cakes. Next, they will offer ale!"

A close watch is maintained on the movements of key bakers. It is noticed they sometimes meet people who are not cake eaters. Questions about their motives are raised at closed-door meetings. "What do these two groups have in common? Are they trying to induct outsiders into the mainstream? We must stop them before it's too late!" Someone suggests a morcha. Someone else says morchas are passé. Candle-lit marches get more television coverage. "We are being too soft on these people. They are dangerous to our society," thunders the leader. "A plan is needed before there is a cake outbreak across India. Our sweetmeats must be preserved and protected, as mentioned in our shastras. This cake revolution has to be nipped in the bud before our youth gets further corrupted. Cakes are a part of Western propaganda. It is a part of our ancient tradition to protest against cakes."

A plan is drawn up. In order to stop the rampant spread of cake appreciation, it is decided to get to the root of the problem without further delay. Before more cake recipes get widely circulated and more cake shops open. "Let's make a list of the main cake gourmets first. Send them a warning to desist from praising cakes...or else." "But before that, we have to stop the chief baker," suggests someone. Stop? But how? Cakes by themselves are harmless! Fattening, yes. But nothing more. "Cakes can kill!" declares the self-appointed chief of the group. Adding, "Too many cake fans have been expressing their opinions freely of late. These outspoken proponents of cake making must be taught a lesson." "We can take away their dough!" says a supporter brightly. "That won't be enough!" counters the chief. "Okay. Let's take direct action. Why wait? We have to prove our loyalty to pedhas and barfis, after all." The motorcycles come handy. Donning their helmets, the vigilantes set off to teach all cake lovers a lesson.

Meanwhile, I am faced with a conundrum: To bake or not to bake. That is the question.

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Victoria learnt Urdu for 13 years. The language is part of our shared history



Queen Victoria's most intimate link to the 'jewel in the crown' was an Indian orderly named Abdul Karim who cooked her curry and taught her Urdu. She created quite a stir by trying to knight him. **Shrabani Basu**, author of *Victoria & Abdul*, tells **Manimugdha S Sharma** more about this special relationship that has now been brought alive in a film starring Judi Dench

FOR THE RECORD

Contrary to popular perception in India, your book suggests that Queen Victoria had affection for India. Could you tell us more about this?
When I started research, the impression I had of Queen Victoria was that of a very formidable person, dressed in black, who represented Empire, the crushing of the Mutiny and the seizure of the Kohinoor. But as I read her letters and journals, I realised how much she loved India and Indians. She defends Indians against the royal household and her own family. She sends them stern memos when she senses they are being racist. So it is a different side to Victoria that emerges in my book. She was definitely ahead of her time and different to everyone in the court and administration. The fact that there was a young Indian at the heart of the royal court is significant. It had never happened before and has not happened since.

So Abdul was her window to India?
As Queen Victoria could not go to India because of the long sea journey, the country came to her in the form of Abdul Karim. He told her about the beauty of the Taj Mahal and the festivals of India, he cooked her curry, even taught her Urdu. He even told her about Hindu-Muslim riots and political tensions, giving her an insight into the real India.

You've mentioned the jealousy that the rest of the royal household had towards Abdul and other Indians - the 'black brigade' as they are referred to. Was Abdul's personal faith also a reason for that?

The household hated Karim because he was an Indian — a subject race — placed at a position of importance (her personal secretary)

by the queen. They also hated him because he was a commoner. So, there were elements of both race and class snobbery. They were jealous that the queen was showering him with gifts, giving him land, houses and titles. The British administration was suspicious of Muslims, as they felt that the Mutiny had been led in the name of the last Mughal emperor. They tried to accuse Karim of being a spy for the emir of Afghanistan as he had a friend in the Muslim Patriotic League. They had him followed when he went on holiday in India, but could pin nothing on him.

When all else failed they threatened to resign collectively if the queen continued to favour the munshi.



The Queen learnt Urdu to know India. But today, some Indians are disowning Urdu, calling it the language of slavery, of the 'other'. Your thoughts on this contrast?
I think it is hugely significant that Queen Victoria learnt Urdu for 13 years. It is a part of Victorian history that was completely

unknown. It would be a pity if a rich and beautiful language like Urdu was allowed to fade away. It is a part of the shared history of India and Britain that both countries should remember.

Tell us about Victoria's relationship with the Indian maharajas.

The queen had very good relations with the Indian maharajas. They often visited her and many were invited to her jubilee celebrations. She had great respect for Sir Pertab, the maharaja of Jodhpur. She was also very fond of the maharaja of Cooh Behar, Nripendra Narayan, and his wife Sunity Devi. Sunity Devi was the first Indian maharani to visit Britain and a guest at the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1887.

Another special relationship was with the young Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last ruler of Punjab, who came to stay with her after the conquest of the Punjab. Later in life, Duleep Singh went into rebellious mode against her but she continued to be very fond of his wife and children. Towards the end of his life, Duleep Singh visited her in France and begged forgiveness. She forgave him but the whole episode saddened her.

How did Indians perceive Victoria as a ruler? And did she know that her statues at some places in India were being defaced?

Many Indians did not like the British administration, but they respected the monarch. In fact, her biggest memorial is in Kolkata — the Victoria Memorial. The money for it was raised by public subscription after her death.

You've written how after the queen died in 1901, Abdul and all other Indians in her household were immediately given the cold shoulder. Does it illustrate how non-whites are treated in Britain even today?

King Edward VII burnt all letters written by Victoria to Abdul and ordered a raid on his house. Abdul was asked to leave, as were the other Indians. Suddenly there were no more colourful turbans in the court, no curries cooking in the royal kitchens. It was a classic display of "foreigners go home" and Brexit Britain. Racism still continues not just in Britain, but across the world, so the story feels relevant even today.

New exit policy where defaulting industrialists go, workers stay is welcome

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR



Till now, the business phrase "exit policy" meant the exit of workers, to allow owners to survive and flourish. Now, for the first time, India has an exit policy for owners that allows workers to survive and flourish. If it succeeds, it may go down as Narendra Modi's finest achievement.

India is famous for having many sick industries but no sick industrialists, whose political clout (and legal delays) precluded seizure of their assets by lenders. That has changed dramatically with the enforcement of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code 2016. The RBI is using this to force banks to get tough with defaulting promoters, forcing them to sell assets to repay debts and make their companies solvent. If this does not

work, the banks will eject the promoters, and appoint a professional manager to run the company till it is auctioned to new buyers.

This is a revolutionary change. In June, the RBI identified 12 major companies for insolvency proceedings, each owing over Rs 5,000 crores. Bhushan Steel, Electosteel Steel and Lanco Infratech headed the dirty dozen, owing a whopping Rs 1,75,000 crore (almost a quarter of all bad bank loans).

Reports say the RBI has prepared a second list of 40 companies, including giants like Videocon and Jindal Steel and Power Ltd. The top 500 defaulters face similar action. The finance ministry backs a "zero tolerance" policy for bad loans.

Many questions remain. Will new buyers be available? Will these ask for such high loan forgiveness in the takeover package that banks will refuse, leading to stalemates? Will old owners regain control at bargain prices via benami companies in tax havens? Time will tell. Yet let's hope for a new era where industrial might is no protection against the rule of law, and the exit of celebrated but defaulting industrialists is not only possible but happening. True capitalism requires exit for capitalists no less than workers.

Once, Vijay Mallya was politically so powerful that banks kept ever-greening loans to his sinking Kingfisher Airlines. He hoped to survive a debt of Rs 9,000 crore, as industrialists always had. But when the BJP government moved to arrest him, he fled abroad in 2016. His assets in India — including holdings in United Breweries and United Spirits — have been seized. The Enforcement Directorate claims these assets will cover his bank debts of Rs 9,000 crore, and awaits court clearance for an auction.

The Essar Group ran up huge debts to expand its empire, among allegations of inflated capital costs. Lenders have forced it to sell Essar Oil, which includes India's second biggest oil refinery, its captive port at Vadinar, a power station of 1,010MW capacity, and 3,500 filling stations. The

\$12.9 billion sale to Rosneft will enable the group to halve its debts, and probably hang on to indebted Essar Steel. However, the group's debts remain huge at Rs 70,000 crore.

The Jaiprakash Group (Jaypee) had a spectacular rise in the 2000s as it borrowed hugely to fund enormous infrastructure projects and real estate. That bubble then burst. The initial reaction of banks was to keep extending their loans to Jaypee despite defaults: this was business as usual. But in today's new era, they have leaned on Jaypee to sell its cement plants to the Birlas for a reported Rs 16,000 crore. As part of its debt recasting plan, the banks are reported to have taken over Jaypee's land assets worth over Rs 13,000 crore. Never before have owners ever been obliged to part with such massive, profitable assets to repay old debts.

Ousting promoters is not an end in itself. Many promoters were unlucky, including those hit by land acquisition delays, and those who

built power plants but could not get fuel from Coal India. "Resolution" in banking terminology means a deal where the lenders and owners (and sometimes trade unions) all agree to take a hit so that the enterprise becomes viable again. Resolution is the simplest and most preferred outcome. But it is feasible only when company assets are still substantial and the business is fundamentally viable. Resolution will not work for run-down companies with worthless assets.

In the old days, banks kept lending till a company became worthless, and closed without paying workers. The new approach is to seize a defaulting company while it still has good assets, revive it through resolution, or else go for a forced sale to a new buyer. The owner will exit but most workers will remain employed. It remains to be seen if this works. If it does, how marvellous!

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How Congress dropped six sitters it should have caught

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST

CHETAN BHAGAT



In cricket there is a term called 'sitter'. According to Cricinfo, it is "the easiest, most innocuous and undroppable catch that a fielder can ever receive." The website further says: "To drop one of these is to invite a whole world of pain from the crowd and constant embarrassment from the giant replay screen."

Consider the BJP currently at the batting crease, and the Congress fielding in the opposition. The entrenched BJP recently had a series of weak political moments. An opposition with its eyes and ears open could have taken these easy catches, dismissing some of the government's political capital. Sadly, the Congress wasted an entire over of sitters.

Here are the six easy catches Congress dropped, mainly due to not having its act together. Sure, some Congress spokespersons did comment. However, responses from their leader Rahul Gandhi (already suffering from low credibility) were delayed, muted, or not pointed enough.

One, Gorakhpur. In a ghastly tragedy, more than 50 little children died in a Gorakhpur hospital in 48 hours due to lack of oxygen. Essentially, it was a case of pure mismanagement in the constituency of one of BJP's most high-profile MPs. The Congress narrative should have been this: while policy change is happening at the top, the government is unable to govern at the ground level to the point of killing our kids. Instead, there was utter confusion in the Congress on who said what. Catch one dropped.

Two, demonetisation. The data from RBI came late, which itself raised eyebrows. Of course, the data was shocking. It said 99% of the old cash was deposited in the banks. Whatever other benefits DeMo may have brought, this one data item had the ability to make the government go as purple-faced as the new 2,000-rupee note. The Congress narrative needed to be how the "black-moneyed rich got away under the government's watch". Instead, we had references to a polite, old Manmohan Singh article opposing demonetisation. Really guys? Catch two dropped.

Three, GST. Yes, GST is supposed to be amazing and one day it will make India richer further. However, the current GST is not a true GST yet. There are at least half a dozen different tax rates. These are all arbitrarily assigned by the government, going against the very grain of GST, which aims to reduce government interference in such rates. The current GST is also too high with the most common rate of 18% (didn't we have service tax at 10% just five years ago?). Many businesses have suffered. Many end-consumers are paying more in the post-GST era, with no immediate tangible benefits. The Congress could have jumped on this. They could have called the high GST a burden on the com-

mon man. Perhaps it's too busy filing its own GST returns. Catch three lost as well!

Four, economic slowdown. Perhaps as a result of DeMo, GST or cyclical reasons, the economy has slowed down since last year. While the common man may not understand this, creating a media narrative of the BJP unable to deliver on economic growth could have hurt the government's image. Of course, communicating this well requires a finesse that's lacking in the Congress. Alas, catch four also spilled.

Five, the Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh riots. A criminal godman patronised by government? Check. Mayhem on streets? Check. National visibility? Check. What did the Congress do? It reacted late, and at junior levels. A chance to show BJP's reluctance to deal with all things God-related even if it meant lawlessness was lost.

Six, Gauri Lankesh's deplorable murder. We still don't know the people and the motive behind it. However, it does seem to be connected to her work as a journalist, which included anti-rightwing writings. One can't ac-



MESSING UP: The Congress response to the Gorakhpur tragedy betrayed utter confusion

cuse the government of the murder. However, one can paint a picture of an environment of fear where nobody is safe, especially if they speak against the government. Instead, the Congress state government in Karnataka played 21-gun salute politics. This backfired, and the easy catch became a six.

In fact, at the time of writing this, the BJP seems to have lobbed another bonus sitter. Quite bizarrely, it has sued historian Ramachandra Guha for defaming the RSS and BJP. The act of suing has become bigger news than the article in question. It's an easy one — scream hard that the BJP is intimidating its critics. Given the Congress' fielding record, chances are even this sitter will be dropped.

Meanwhile, BJP opponents in the stands (read social media) are frustrated. They vent hard, even though it doesn't change anything on the pitch. Hope they realise this. Until something changes in the fielding, nobody is going to catch those sitters.

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INBOX

Swami wrong on oustees

Swaminathan Aiyar's piece ('Why many tribals don't mind being ousted by dams', Sept 10) is a classic case of misinterpretation of data. Indeed, his own figures show that tribals do mind being ousted. Given that the Sardar Sarovar oustees were resettled 25-30 years ago, and the project has poured in hundreds of crores for resettlement, these figures don't speak of oustees being better off, but their pathetic state — 55% had no access to drinking water, 63% no access to a PHC and 86% no access to hospitals. This, when they've been settled closer to cities and their former neighbours continue to remain in remote hilly areas. While concluding that "many tribals want to leave the forest for a better life," Aiyar never asks the fundamental question as to why they have to be evicted from their homes to have a better life. Making sweeping generalisations, he betrays a haste to give a clean chit to the rehabilitation. The reality is far more dismal. **Shripad Dharmadhikary, Nandini Oza**
Former NBA activists

Help the Rohingyas

Threats to national security come from specific individuals or groups, not communities at large. Unfortunately, Swapan Dasgupta's column (Sept 10) ignores this fact. Instead it suggests that India must deport Rohingya refugees en masse, because we have to choose between "compassion and national security". But India can have both, if we set up a proper refugee protection framework, and run fair and efficient screening processes for asylum seekers. This will address concerns about security threats, and also help ensure that refugees are not returned to the horrors they have fled. India has a long tradition of providing refuge to people in distress. To throw this tradition to the winds and give in to fear would be misguided. **Shailesh Rai**, director, law and policy, Amnesty India

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The secret to happiness: Don't just make a living, make a life

MEN & MORALS

GURCHARAN DAS



Everyone I know was profoundly relieved when the China-India stand-off at Doklam ended last month in a mutual pullback. Many of us were deeply grateful to Bhutan for standing by India and we longingly yearned for similarly good relations with our other neighbours. Bhutan has, of course, become famous for pioneering Gross National Happiness to replace Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of national success. Initially, I was sceptical if governments could make one happy because happiness seems to be an 'inside job', a matter of personal attitude and domestic circumstances. Most of us are unhappy because of failed marriages, ungrateful children, losing a promotion, or even a lack of faith. But now I think Bhutan has a point — a state which ensures freedom, good governance, jobs, quality schools, healthcare and absence of corruption can vastly improve the wellbeing of its people.

Not surprisingly, Scandinavians are at the top of the World Happiness Report 2017. America is ranked 14th and China is at 71. Surprisingly, happiness hasn't risen in China although income per capita has multiplied five times since 1990. The reason could be a decline in the social safety net and recent growth in unemployment. India, alas, lags behind at 122, behind Pakistan and Nepal. Rankings on many criteria in the report depend on subjective wellbeing — it would be better to call it a National Wellbeing Report since happiness is such an individual experience.

Happiness is also a vast industry sitting in the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' section of our bookstores. Ironically, nothing makes me feel less happy than reading a book on happiness — I conjure up grim images of smiling hippies, holding hands and chanting 'make love, not war'. Unlike the French aristocracy, which believed that the natural state of man is idleness, I think passionate work is essential to happiness. One is lucky if one has the chance to work at something that one enjoys and also what one is good at. I agree with George Bernard Shaw: 'Life isn't about finding yourself, it is about creating yourself'.

How then does one give purpose to one's work and to life? To answer this question, I sometimes play this thought game with my friends: You've just been informed that you have three months to live. After the initial shock, you ask, how should I spend my remaining days? Should I finally take a few risks? Should I confess my love to someone I have loved secretly since childhood? Should I turn to religion? Or learn to listen to the sounds

of silence? How you live in these months is how you should live your life.

Ever since childhood we are told to work hard, get good marks in school and get into a good college. At the university, we are pushed to take 'useful subjects' rather explore the unknown. We finally land a reasonable job, marry a suitable partner, live in a nice house and get a nice car. And we repeat the same process with our young. Then one day in our forties, we wake up in the morning and ask ourselves, 'Is this what life was all about?' We seem to have stumbled through life, intent on the next promotion, while life has passed us by. An unfulfilled life is a tragic loss.

No one bothered to teach us the difference between 'making a living' and 'making a life.' No one encouraged us to find a passion. We were not exposed to choices in different fields. We did not read the great books of the humanities which portray struggles of men to create meaning in



LESSON FROM BHUTAN: The state can vastly improve the wellbeing of its people

their lives. Very few are lucky to be a Mozart, who found a passion for music at the age of three. The way to tell you have found passionate work is when it doesn't feel like 'work'. Time gets distorted and suddenly it's evening and you forgot to eat lunch. You were in the 'zone' as the athletes call it.

My ideal of happiness is consistent with Krishna's idea of karma yoga in the Gita. Instead of detaching oneself from work, Krishna advises us to act disinterestedly, which means not to seek personal credit or reward from one's work. When I am absorbed in passionate work, I find that my ego tends to disappear. Passionate, self-forgetting work is of high quality because you are not distracted by the ego. This is my recipe for making a life, and it is also the secret of happiness.

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