

PARTY OVER

Retirement is for lesser mortals. That seems to be the general attitude of Indian politicians, who tend to hang on to their vocation till the last possible moment. Exceedingly bad health alone may force them out, while healthier 80-year-olds, or close, blow out their chests and dream of the prime minister's chair. A timely and dignified retirement is a rarity. But Surjya Kanta Mishra, a politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal assembly, has suggested that the aged in the party, if they felt their health was failing or that they were not being able to perform, should retire and make place for younger people. The message makes sense for most parties in the country: quite a few have already demonstrated their consciousness of it. The Congress inducted young people, although without deviating much from its love of 'family' values, and the Bharatiya Janata Party seems to have made the shift to a group younger than the seniormost leaders. Mr Mishra's call, however, was directed at his own party. The CPI(M) is bristling with elderly leaders, less politely called 'the same old faces'; that Mr Mishra articulated his message at the memorial meeting of a departed leader who had retired earlier may have invested it with slightly unfortunate irony.

It is rather amusing that another CPI(M) leader, no spring chicken himself but an expert at deflection, hurried to say that the party was busy replacing aged district secretaries when asked if Mr Mishra was taking a snipe at the CPI(M) state secretary, Biman Bose. What the electorate wishes to see are new faces, fresh blood, a promise of dynamism; deflections and evasions cannot create a changed image while the people at the party's head remain the same for decades on end. If the party has been unable to create a viable second line of leadership, that is an added failure. Its drubbing in the West Bengal elections demanded a makeover — that is, if the CPI(M) is not labouring under a death wish. Is the party such that the few younger people it does have must wait till their heads are snowy-white before they can play a bigger role? The CPI(M)'s characteristic imperviousness, however, makes it unlikely that Mr Mishra's message will make a dent.

TACKLING HATE

There is no justification for being racist about racism. It is by no means an exclusively white problem. And India is a good place from which to begin acknowledging this. At an everyday level, without going to violent extremes, negative perceptions of cultural or linguistic difference, and the prejudice and harassment that they foster, make up the unpleasant underbelly of India's legendary diversity. Different templates of individual and collective behaviour — from political bigotry to bullying, rape and lynching — exist, with regional variations, in the interfaces between different communities. Since Nido Tania's lynching in Delhi almost a year ago (followed by other shocking instances of racist violence elsewhere), people from the Northeast studying or working all over India have come to embody the most visible face of this phenomenon. The Centre has now announced that it is considering amendments to the Indian Penal Code that would make racial discrimination and insults a punishable offence. This would be with special reference to the people of the Northeast, and legal reform will be supplemented by a range of other public measures geared to altering perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in different ways all over the country. All this is not only somewhat along the lines of the Bebaruah committee recommendations, but also timed to herald the assembly elections in Delhi.

Waking up to the evil of racism, and planning to do something about it, are laudable reflexes — provided that amending the law does not end up being the only concrete change to come out of the entire process. Besides, the complexity of prejudice and violence between communities in India, and its relations with certain modes of national and regional politics, has to be kept in mind, not only by the law-makers but also by the law-keepers. The home minister's own state, Uttar Pradesh, is a living example of how brutality, prejudice and mischief can combine attitudes to caste, religion, gender and class to produce forms of violence and oppression that might defy strictly defined legal categories of 'racial' crime. Singling out a particular victimized community for protection could also risk a kind of segregation, which then becomes yet another form of the very offence that the measures are trying to prevent. What is needed are rigorous self-examination and vigilance, from the highest levels of leadership to the most ordinary spheres of life.

SCRIPSI

No hunter of the sky should end his days as prey. Better to die on the wing than pinned to the ground. — CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

Putin's recent proposals have thrown a challenge to India

A fine sense of drama

KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN
&
HARI VASUDEVAN

In an international scene unfolding not necessarily to India's advantage, a traditional constant is welcome and India's all-weather relationship with Russia is doubly appreciated when it is substantive rather than ceremonial. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has always possessed a fine sense of drama, and during his recent visit to India, he used this to project his country as a potential key factor in India's energy security, thereby adding a new dimension to his version of the erstwhile German *Ostpolitik* or Eastern Policy, as a supplement to Russia's existing Chinese linkages based on commerce and military cooperation. Putin's initiative was deftly steered and without fanfare. The president's use of the media has its effect in Russia, especially as seen in the course of the year-long Ukraine crisis, and his previous visits to India were not lacking in this touch, involving large media interaction and teleconferencing with audiences from different cities. On this occasion, however, such packaging was left out.

The absence of any advance build-up should not have blunted the Indian anticipation of some unusual initiative, because India has always held a special place in Putin's world view. India has been the president's particular interest and he has carried the bilateral relationship on his own shoulders, picking at times the appropriate government agency and official to assist him. In Putin's opinion, India has been a trusted friend with whom Russia can have few problems, and the bilateral relationship lacks the current animosities with other countries that are brought about by common borders or contentious history. The Russian and Indian near abroads overlap in Central Asia, but India is the only country not to have played any role in the parking of funds or in the spoliation of Russian human resources in the dark years of the 1990s, and has been a firm adherent to the spirit and letter of past agreements on loans and interest payments. In addition, India's presence on the world stage — commanding a degree of attention in international affairs by virtue of population numbers, civilization and erratic talent — has never been used in causes against Russia. In the president's entourage in Russia, there has been an Indian group in his advisory council, and there is even an Indian member of parliament in the Duma representing the president's United Russia party.

Given this background, the down-played orchestration of

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Putin's latest visit to India was noticeable, and, in fact, seemed to be of a piece with the frankly lacklustre record of late in the bilateral relationship. The heights that the Russian inventory had attained in Indian defence platforms suffered an obvious decline, as the purchase of Rafale aircraft from Dassault Aviation confirmed, this time with full transfer of technology from France that hitherto only the Russian MiG and Sukhoi series had supplied, and additionally with the powerful private corporate backing to France by the Reliance group. The Indo-Russian commercial relationship, burdened with problems of logistics, also displayed few signs of vitality. And finally, the latest Russian decision to supply some military heli-



Vladimir Putin in New Delhi, December 11, 2014

copters to Pakistan attracted considerable concern in India.

It is true that elements of geopolitical convergence were clear in the Russian/Chinese sponsorship of India for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In addition, the Narendra Modi government in New Delhi did not deviate from the United Progressive Alliance's Ukraine policy and refused to take a position on the re-integration of Crimea within Russia. But at a time when Russia, because of its Ukraine policy, is subjected to a sanctions regime imposed by the Nato members without the benefit of the United Nations' approval, and was challenged by Indian sceptics to demonstrate the variety of its 'look east policy' beyond a strongly developing relationship with China, the backdrop to the visit promised little. A short stop in New Delhi, a cancelled address to Parliament, a few public statements about improving diamond off-take from Russia's monopoly producer, Alrosa, and miscellaneous scattered agreements on nuclear energy and oil investment: these elements constituted the projected agenda. In in-

terviews both in Moscow and New Delhi on the eve of the visit there were no hints of anything more impressive. The Indian press projected agreements on diamonds, while the Russian media quoted authoritative sources about a 'privileged strategic partnership'.

In retrospect, this was a fine strategy, which prevented an anti-Putin and anti-Russian campaign in an Indian media either wholly self-obsessed or dominated by transparent American interests. The press in India, whether of the left or right-wing persuasion, has remarkably chosen to ignore the reversals that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has suffered in its Ukraine policy over the past months, in the same way that it only projects West-

ern outrage at the events taking place in Ukraine. Moscow-based sources have disappeared from our media and the perspectives of Russia and China, the two permanent members of the United Nations security council, are consciously understated or ignored. Therefore, when Putin played his trump card in New Delhi, there was no advance preparation, and there was some drama when Russian newspapers drew pointed attention to \$100 billion worth of contracts signed in less than 24 hours. The Russian group that arrived in India was itself a geopolitical statement; Putin's aircraft brought with it the Crimean premier, Sergey Aksyonov, a name on the Nato sanctions list. The status of the premier, ostensibly in India on a private visit, may have been in doubt, but his presence, predictably denounced in Washington and Kiev, has been projected by the Russian media as evidence that India is not Nato-influenced territory.

The scale of energy cooperation envisaged by the two countries was the high point of the Putin visit, and the Russian press has portrayed it

as a bid for the whole of the nuclear energy production capacity that India has in mind over the near-term, namely of over 20 nuclear reactors. The Modi government has agreed to 10 reactors to start with, over the next 20 years. This is the most substantial part of an energy vision statement that includes supply of liquefied natural gas to India, export of 10 million tonnes of oil a year to India, a \$1 billion joint venture for hydro-electric projects and additional Indian investments in Russian oil fields. This last sector will involve not only the Gas Authority of India Limited and the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, but also the Indian private sector — a significant departure from past practice because the Russian government has never before partnered Indian private enterprises. In the area of military equipment production, Moscow's proposals for the medium Mi-17 and light Ka-226 helicopter manufacture and export from India have been accepted, and 60 per cent of defence weapons and platforms will still be of Russian origin. All aspects of the Putin visit considered, these changes in Russian policy may introduce a sharp adjustment in the way in which private and public activity is integrated by the Russians in future approaches to India. Furthermore, this is very much part of the principles that guide the Russian-inspired Eurasian Union with which India hopes to collaborate in future.

In the numerous commercial agreements concluded, the Putin visit placed stress on Russia's strengths in special technologies and energy, and underlined the West's weaknesses in engaging India in precisely these areas. This is well understood in Washington, which has been circumspect in its reactions. The eventual implications, though, must remain uncertain. Will the enhanced engagement with Russian nuclear energy generate rancour among the Indian public of the kind already seen at the reactor at Kudankulam? Will Russia's Indian private sector partners lead it into unpleasant complications, such as the entanglement of the Russian firm, Sistema, in the 2G scam? Will new pressures be brought to bear on New Delhi by its Nato-oriented partners such as the European Union and Japan in the context of their tensions with Russia centred on Ukraine and the significance of the Eurasian Union?

What the answers to these questions will be, and whether the Putin visit will later be seen as a milestone towards a new type of Indian non-alignment in an evolving global architecture is something that can only become clear in the future. But what is immediately obvious is that Putin's proposals have thrown a challenge to Indian policy-makers, and the ball is squarely in India's court to shape the consequences.

Wrong track

■ Sir — One fails to understand why Narendra Modi declared that the Indian Railways would not be privatized ("No privatisation of railways: Modi", Dec 26). He used the occasion of 'good governance day' to make the declaration from Varanasi, his Lok Sabha constituency. The fact remains that the government and the railways badly need foreign investment. The expense of ambitious projects such as of building dedicated freight corridors and starting bullet trains cannot be met by public sector funding alone. That is the professed rationale behind the prime minister's aggressive pitch for technological and financial help from countries such as China and Japan.

More important was the re-iteration of the plan to set up four railway universities. These will specifically cater to the needs of the railways and provide it with readily employable candidates. However, it will take some time before the railways finish the task of identifying the locations of the universities and preparing the courses. The proposed institutes should also upgrade the skills of existing employees and provide them with opportunities to acquire higher qualifications.

Yours faithfully,
Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai

Without protection

■ Sir — The massacre of more than 70 tribals in Assam, just before Christmas, marred the celebrations ("Assam toll mounts to 70", Dec 25). Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised us "a *chache din*" before the general elections. The citizens would like to believe that he intends to keep his promise. But for that to

LETTERS



Track changes

happen, militant groups should be reined in and employment opportunities must increase.

Yours faithfully,
Alok Ganguly, Kalyani

■ Sir — The massacre of tribals carried out by the militants of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland in Assam closely resembles the Peshawar carnage. Terrorists of all hues lack compassion for their fellow beings. The Assam carnage has shocked the nation. It has also tarnished India's image globally. The Bodo militants carried out simultaneous attacks on tribal villages in Sonitpur and Kokrajhar districts. This seems to be a carefully planned attack to displace tribal villagers and grab their land. That the killings happened points not just to an intelligence failure, but also at what is perhaps a deliberate negligence on the part of the state government, sections of which view

the tribals as outsiders. Steps should be taken to ensure that the tribals feel protected. They have faced a lot of persecution since Independence.

Yours faithfully,
Asok Mitra, Calcutta

Ugly gesture

■ Sir — India squandered a golden opportunity to create history as they lost to archrivals Pakistan in the semi-final of the Hero Champions Trophy over India in the Champions Trophy Hockey Tournament. Muhammad Arslan Qadir's move proved to be crucial at the end. It was an evenly contested match. However, the post-match behaviour of some of Pakistan's players was a spoiler ("FIH suspends 2 Pak players", Dec 15). They won the game but not the hearts of the spectators. It is natural to get excited in any India-Pakistan sporting encounter. But the manner in which Pakistan's players celebrated their vi-

ctory is indefensible. The Pakistan coach has tendered a written apology and two players have been banned for a match by the International Hockey Federation. This is not enough. The players deserve stricter punishment for bringing disrepute to the game.

Yours faithfully,
Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee,
Faridabad

■ Sir — The obscene gestures made by some members of the Pakistan hockey team after their semi-final victory over India in the Champions Trophy were in bad taste. Such behaviour has no place in sports. Sportspeople are also cultural ambassadors of their respective nations. Youngsters and sports-lovers get inspiration from the sportspeople's struggles and learn from their on-field behaviour. Sports administrators must ensure that such incidents are not repeated. A policy of zero tolerance would help in that.

Yours faithfully,
Saikat Kumar Basu,
Lethbridge, Canada

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GWYNNE DYER

FIFTH COLUMN

NO TIME LEFT

The main purpose of year-end reviews, of course, is to hold the ads apart. But they can also serve as a kind of annual check-up on the political, economic, demographic and even physical health of the planet and its teeming human population. So imagine that we are a panel of high-priced medics reviewing the health status of our most important client, the human race.

The first thing to note is that the client is still piling on weight at an alarming rate, but continues to thrive, for the most part. And most of the ailments that it worries about are mere hypochondria. Take, for example, the widespread concern that the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in the no man's land between Iraq and Syria will lead to catastrophe. There will allegedly be a surge in terrorist attacks around the world, a Sunni-Shia religious war spanning the entire Middle East, or even a global religious war between Muslims and everybody else.

The Sunni and Shia fanatics are far too busy trying to kill each other to have time to spare for attacking non-Muslims. (Besides, most Muslims don't want to attack anybody; they just want to be left in peace.) Quite a lot of the slaughter in Iraq and Syria is driven by religion, but we are still a long way from a religious conflict that directly involves the really important states of the Middle East: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

Even the anticipated surge in terrorist attacks outside the region is not likely to come to pass. The only strategic purpose for such attacks by any organized group of Islamist extremists is to gain support and recruits within their own region. If they can lure Western powers into killing lots of Muslims in their region, then their cause will prosper locally.

As it turns out, the Islamic State has not even needed to carry out terrorist attacks in the West to achieve this goal. Videos of Western hostages being beheaded have been enough to get the bombing going again, and Western governments are no more troubled by the sheer pointlessness of the bombing than they were in the past. Both sides are playing for the home audience, and really don't care much about the impact of their actions on the alleged enemy. The whole "Islamic State" panic is a tempest in a fairly small teacup. Even in the unlikely event that a Sunni-Shia religious war should engulf the Middle East, it would have no more effect on the rest of the planet than the European wars of religion four centuries ago had on the Middle East. That is to say, hardly any.

The other great shock of 2014 was a war in Europe. The Ukrainian revolution was a messy and complicated business, but it need not have ended in Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and in a Russian-backed separatist war in Ukraine's two easternmost provinces. We owe that mainly to Russian President Vladimir Putin's world-view as a former agent of the KGB, which (as the old saying had it) thwarted ten anti-Soviet plots for every one that actually existed. There was no Western plot, but Putin is driven by the belief that there was. He took Russia into a confrontation with the West that it cannot win, and the country's economy is already crumbling. He is finding it almost impossible to back away without losing face, but he has nothing to gain by continuing the conflict either. Risk of a new Cold War: minimal.

The only big worry the doctors have is the same one that has bothered them for the past 25 years: the patient simply won't stop smoking. Climate change is the spectre at every feast, the unstoppable rot that undermines every positive development. The failure at Copenhagen bleeds indistinguishably into the fudge at Durban and on into the feeble compromise in Lima, which sets us up for the bigger disappointment of Paris. And even if by some miracle we get a useful agreement in Paris this year, nothing will actually be done until 2020. The patient thinks there's still plenty of time to quit. There isn't.