

# Fatal flaws of a tragic hero



**B**arring a few critics, Euro-American discourse places the northern Atlantic rim at the core of modern global democratic practice. Russia and China provide rival dispensations, the Soviet experiment had been the first in that direction. M.S. Gorbachev is said to be the tragic hero, who tried to win Russia for democracy. His failure is put down to his fatal flaws and the exceptional nature of the problem he confronted.

Marshal Taubman has an interest in fatally flawed Soviet reformers and made a reputation for a Khrushchev biography. Like his *Khrushchev*, Taubman's *Gorbachev* is studded with archival sources and interviews; his negotiation of memoirs is scholarly, though his biography sets out to tell a personal story, skimming scholarly debates. And unlike much in that debate, Taubman argues a fundamental "decency" to Russians, attributing their problems to systems that come their way through chance or compulsion, including Soviet communism. Contrary to "developing world" accounts of the USSR, he is emphatic about Russian barbarity, Soviet Communist Party tyranny and the marginal standing of intellectual traditions under Soviet rule until Gorbachev. Equality was the equality of the mob, lorded over by Soviet *apparatchiki*; economic achievement was a crude imitation of the Western equivalent and the result of individual

## GORBACHEV: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

By William Taubman.  
Simon & Schuster, Rs 799

hard work to sustain an unworkable system. The will to telescoped modernization gets no shrift.

Locating Gorbachev within this frame, Taubman shows how his protagonist came to seek to change Russia. Beginning with Gorbachev's birth (1931) in the Stavropol area of Kuban country east of the Black Sea he traces family life and village ambience in the steppe (Gorbachev did not see a train until the age of 14). This is situated within the tumult of Collectivization, Stalinism and the War. Gorbachev is linked to the regional elite (*nomenklatura*) where a local grandfather took the lead against fellow peasants in standing for Stalin's devastating policies. Thereafter, the adolescence of a hard-working country boy and award-winning student is punched with details of elevation in Communist Youth (Komsomol) and entry into the Communist Party. This paved the way to Moscow University (MGU) in 1950 to study law, during "high Stalinism" and before Khrushchev's thaw.

In Moscow, Gorbachev encountered the USSR's metropolitan elite, for whom he was a

country bumpkin. He married Raisa Titarenko, also from a Ukrainian peasant background. She had a fine sense of the capital and was on the rebound from an affair with a Baltic Russian, whose careerist mother thought her inadequate for her son. Gorbachev also befriended Zdenek Mlynar, a committed Czech communist, later prominent in the Czech '68. Gorbachev, it appears, read a lot. He and Mlynar respected the Soviet egalitarian agenda but had a firm sense of the realities of Soviet life, despite Stalinist propaganda. That reality was crudity and disorder, illustrated through snapshots of MGU's Stromynka hostel and the mess at Stalin's "lying in state".

It was Gorbachev's hard headed, de-ideologized compulsion to seek public improvement that was his lodestone thereafter. He returned to the Kuban and made his way up through the hierarchy of the Communist Party (*nomenklatura*) before he went back to Moscow. Barring asides on family life, told with sympathy, Taubman's narration comes down to provincial political manoeuvres. Gorbachev "rose" during the ups and downs of the Khrushchev era and the experimentation to refine Stalin's planned economy. He maintained a code of propriety, commenting on a rival that "he didn't mind up whose a\*\*\*\*\*e he climbed, without soap". Gorbachev came to the Central Committee in Moscow under the protection of the former KGB chief, Andropov. And it was during An-

dropov's general secretaryship of the Communist Party (1982-84) that he rose to eminence.

Gorbachev's years in power (1985-91) dominate the volume. The inertia of the Soviet system, contingencies of politics and his over-confidence would defeat a visionary agenda. The claim that there was no alternative to Gorbachev in 1985 may be disputed. But the engagement with the West during 1986-91 is thorough, with unilateral disarmament and the fall of the Berlin Wall in focus. The role of George Shultz as a minor mentor is questionable. The documentation of the democratization of the Soviet political system is excellent — through the 27th and 28th Party Congresses (1986/1990), the rise of the anti-Communist opposition and Boris Yeltsin's emergence as its leader. There is fine drama in the narration of the overlap (1990-91) between this, the crisis over economic reform, the disintegration of the Soviet Communist Party, local crises in the Baltic and Caucasus and Gorbachev's increasing disorientation. The climax of disintegration in August-December 1991 is painstakingly told, and is unrivalled in standard literature in English.

Taubman's "hero" is in the wilderness post 1991 in chapters which attempt poignancy and "verdict", but which fall short of the achievement of the narration of Soviet collapse. Good history has its share of fatal flaws.

Hari Vasudevan

## Lived logic

**T**he scholarly contributions of Jean Drèze over the last two decades have significantly shaped our understanding of the extent and nature of poverty and social vulnerability across India. He has been writing columns for newspapers during this period, discussing topics such as the public distribution system, employment guarantee, tribal rights, ecological sustainability, caste discrimination and so on. This book is a collection of many of these earlier pieces as well as some "top-up" ones. The selection provides a detailed and vivid narrative of socio-economic development (often its absence) in India during the post-liberalization era.

The book is divided into ten sections, each of which contains selections of thematically connected articles. Each theme is introduced by Drèze with a description of the context and also its present relevance. The themes include social conflict, education, food security, the political-corporate nexus among others. While



addressing each theme, the role of economic incentives, especially perverse ones, naturally receives prominence. The discussions indicate how these incentives create, perpetuate or evolve out of the political economies and social structures that characterize insufficient socio-economic progress. Beyond the importance of the individual chapters, this volume has great potential for the economics discipline.

The book is primarily a call for more action-oriented pedagogy and research in economics. From the time of Samuelson, the shift towards mathematization and the quest for more sophisticated analytical tools rendered mainstream economics more abstract. The disconnect between reality and the analytical models presented in a

### SENSE AND SOLIDARITY: JHOLAWALA ECONOMICS FOR EVERYONE

By Jean Drèze.  
Permanent Black, Rs 795

typical textbook is now profound. Many students choose economics as a major subject during college because they regard it as social science, which should provide scientific explanations and solutions for socio-economic problems. It is important to harness that curiosity and energy by a more relevant curriculum.

So, understanding the role a *jholawala* performs assumes extra significance. The *jholawala* is usually a social-development worker, often working with limited resources in absence of State support. She has intimate knowledge about the lives of people trapped in vulnerable socio-economic positions, and that informs her actions and research. If economics, especially development economics, has to thrive as a meaningful social science discipline, the *jholawala's* perspective and passion need to be recognized. The objection to such an approach is that objectivity in research would be compromised. But Drèze correctly argues that the issue is essentially that of integrity in research; disinterested research, which has led to abstraction, cannot be the primary goal of a social scientist. The goal of designing interventions should be to harness the sentiment and the energy of the community which would be democratic and, therefore, workable.

At a time when uniformity and myopia are taking over educational vision, students must be made aware of the wealth of lived experiences. Drèze's pieces constitute a great selection that should motivate researchers to appreciate the rigours of analytical techniques beyond mathematical modelling and to pursue diverse reading, including in the humanities, to inform their scholarship. Drèze himself performs the role of a *jholawala* here by providing an intervention. But given the complexity of the problem, the *jholawala* may have to come up with a welcome longer opus.

Prithviraj Guha



## Everyday horrors

### THE RELIVE BOX AND OTHER STORIES

By T. Coraghessan Boyle.  
Bloomsbury, Rs 599

**V**iktor Vasnetsov has famously depicted the four horsemen of the apocalypse — death, pestilence, famine and war — as muscular, marauding figures sweeping across the earth (picture). T. Coraghessan Boyle's apocalyptic figures are more ordinary. They are everywhere: in an author who spends his life imagining and writing about death till his friends start dying one by one; in a man who has developed a drug-resistant form of tuberculosis that forces him to live life behind a mask and who, in a bid for freedom, spits in the face of his captors; in a suburb full of people who have to take extreme measures to deal with years of continuous drought; and in the buff warrior Jesus who roams the earth in tight shorts, purging it of Islamic State militants and Mexican drug lords. With each story, the sense of urgency increases as Boyle's characters struggle to deal with the inhuman force of a situation brought about by humans: climate change. What makes the stories even more alarming is the casual acceptance of a world ravaged by drought and other climatic disasters.

Boyle slyly combines sci-fi and nostalgia to suspend his characters in a sort of limbo: one imagines the stories are set in the recent future but Boyle's protagonists are too hung up with the past and live

there. (At times, virtually, with the help of technology like the relive box.) Yet, all that happens is eerily close to the present. However, the stories mostly never expand to meet the scale of their subject. They remain isolated, both in terms of geography and perspective. For instance, when the protagonist is a teenage boy, the plot focuses on his crush and his first chance to cop a feel. All the while, a hurricane scratches at the walls of the school where his entire village has taken shelter from a flood that threatens to drown his island. This limited point of view of literary fiction which foregrounds the self and relegates nature to the background is what Amitav Ghosh takes up cudgels against in *The Great Derangement*. While Ghosh's argument tends to be a sweeping generalization, the self-involvement of Boyle's characters fits nicely into the former's critique.

Yet when this self-centredness comes in direct contact with climate change and its demands, the stories shine. In "You Don't Miss Your Water" ("Till the Well Runs Dry"), a record-setting drought

threatens the suburban bliss of a small American town. Measures to save water begin as a disruption of the daily routine and lead up to a complete breakdown of social relations — the community goes first, then the neighbourhood, until finally, the narrator reaches "a universal resentment of anyone who used water for any purpose". Boyle shows that the outcome of climate change is the same as its root cause: a contraction of the imagination till nothing but the self matters.

One gets the impression that Boyle simply glances around and finds the protagonists of his stories wherever his eyes alight. They are common people with relatable problems such as a man caught in one of those internet scams which promises to transfer a stratospheric amount of money into his account, a chef at a small deli who becomes rich on the back of his idea to overload a burrito till it weighs five pounds, a bored writer and a mathematician stuck between his brilliance and family life. But while the author populates his stories with characters he finds all around him, his plots seem to come from existing works. Take, for instance, an infestation of ants so bad that the roiling sea of insects covers and carries away a baby. Sounds familiar? It will to anyone who has read *One Hundred*

*Years of Solitude*. At other times, the similarity is not quite so obvious. Roosters and chickens are, after all, a far cry from rhinoceroses. But the entire town save the protagonist turning into one kind of animal — birds in this case — is bound to ring a bell. And it is not just in fiction that one finds resemblances; there is also the reliving of memories of past relationships à la *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Although if one has to pick the most annoying thing about the stories, it would be the tediously stereotypical portrayal of women. As wives and girlfriends, women are mean and harpy-like, as neighbours, colleagues and health workers, they are sex-objects. Not to mention that all of them are mind-numbingly stupid. Even rain is seen as either male and "macho" or female and "soft and indecisive". A quick look at some of Boyle's other works suggests that such misogyny is perhaps more a reflection of his own mindset than a satire of his male characters.

The shortcomings of the stories notwithstanding, Boyle is a skilled storyteller. His effortless language and the horrifying picture of the future that Boyle evokes are bound to keep the readers hooked.

Srimoyee Bagchi

### PAPERBACK PICKINGS

## Read the signs

**■ DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE: REBUILDING ITS FUTURE** (Sage, Rs 495) by Philip Kotler paints a bleak picture of the contemporary world. The author argues that the concept of democracy is facing an unprecedented credibility crisis globally. So, steps to restore people's faith in the system must immediately be taken. He identifies voters' interest in unconventional figures like Donald Trump as a sign of desperation. Kotler, who is the author of over 50 books on markets and marketing, likens democracy to a product that is failing to serve its customers.

In *Democracy in Decline*, Kotler lists a few measures through which the situation can be redeemed. For instance, he argues in favour of fixing term limits for members of the Congress in the United States of America. Kotler contends that this would infuse new blood in the legislative bodies and prevent power from resting



only in the hands of a few. One remarkable quality of the writer is that he explains critical issues in simple, everyday language. But the fact that Kotler, like so many of his compatriots, too, believes that America is the principal flag-bearer of democracy in the world will not go unnoticed to the discerning eye.

**■ DIABETES WITH DELIGHT: A JOYFUL GUIDE TO MANAGING DIABETES IN INDIA** (Bloomsbury, Rs 299) by Anoop Misra should be read by everyone, whether they are diabetic or not. With more than 60 million diabetics, India is now truly the diabetes capital of the world. And many more citizens are at the risk of developing this lifestyle disease. Given the situation, it is important for all to learn how to defer the onset of the disease if not prevent it altogether. Apart from busting many myths associated with the ailment, Misra recommends some diabetes-friendly recipes that would definitely satiate Indian taste buds.

## Caught between the home and the world

**I**n a memorable passage in *Pakdondi*, an autobiographical work by Lila Majumdar — yesterday was her 11th death anniversary — the author describes her arrival at a house in Darjeeling. As she entered Orchid Lee, a humble building with a tin roof, she noticed some blue birds — they were House Martins — taking flight. This was no ordinary moment. A young, restive Majumdar had sought out the hill station as a refuge. Yet, the first thing she noticed on reaching 'home' was birds taking to the open sky. What Majumdar alerts her readers to is a symbolic, but fleeting, intersection of two conflicting emotions embedded in the human consciousness: to belong as well as to be set free.

*Pakdondi*, Aar Kono Khane, even *Shob Bhuturo*, some of Majumdar's most popular works, have been enriched by this tension between the search for and the simultaneous rejection of roots. This restlessness, or attempts to explore it, is integral to a long and diverse literary tradition. *The Odyssey* is often interpreted as an ode to exploration, but it also bares the primeval horror of and fascination for restlessness. Odysseus, on returning to Ithaca, confides to Eumaeus that "Nothing is more evil for mortals than wandering." The pull of an illusory shelter is also expressed by W.B. Yeats, most beautifully, in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" ("for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by

the shore"). Interestingly, in *Pakdondi*, Majumdar too writes that in the dead of the night in Calcutta, after the city and its trams had fallen silent, she would pine for the sound of the wind among the trees, the familiar echo of her childhood in Shillong.

Yet, in real life, Majumdar had found it difficult to stay rooted to one place. As an adult, she switched jobs and places at will (her parents disapproved of her 'impetuosity'). But this vacillation was a deeper, existential conflict and the fodder for much of Majumdar's creativity. What is striking is that she chose to examine the complicated interlocking of belonging and unbelonging in books written for children. It is probable that

her works would also strike a chord with the constituency of immigrants and the displaced.

Was this incongruity ever resolved? *Pakdondi* does not provide a clear answer, although it includes a chapter where Majumdar, upon returning to Shillong 27 years later, discovers that even though the sleepy town had become unrecognizable, her memories of what was once home had been left un-molested by change.

Is that a clue that Majumdar has left for the restless — the young and the old — who are caught between the home and the world?

Uddalak Mukherjee



Darjeeling by Gaganendranath Tagore