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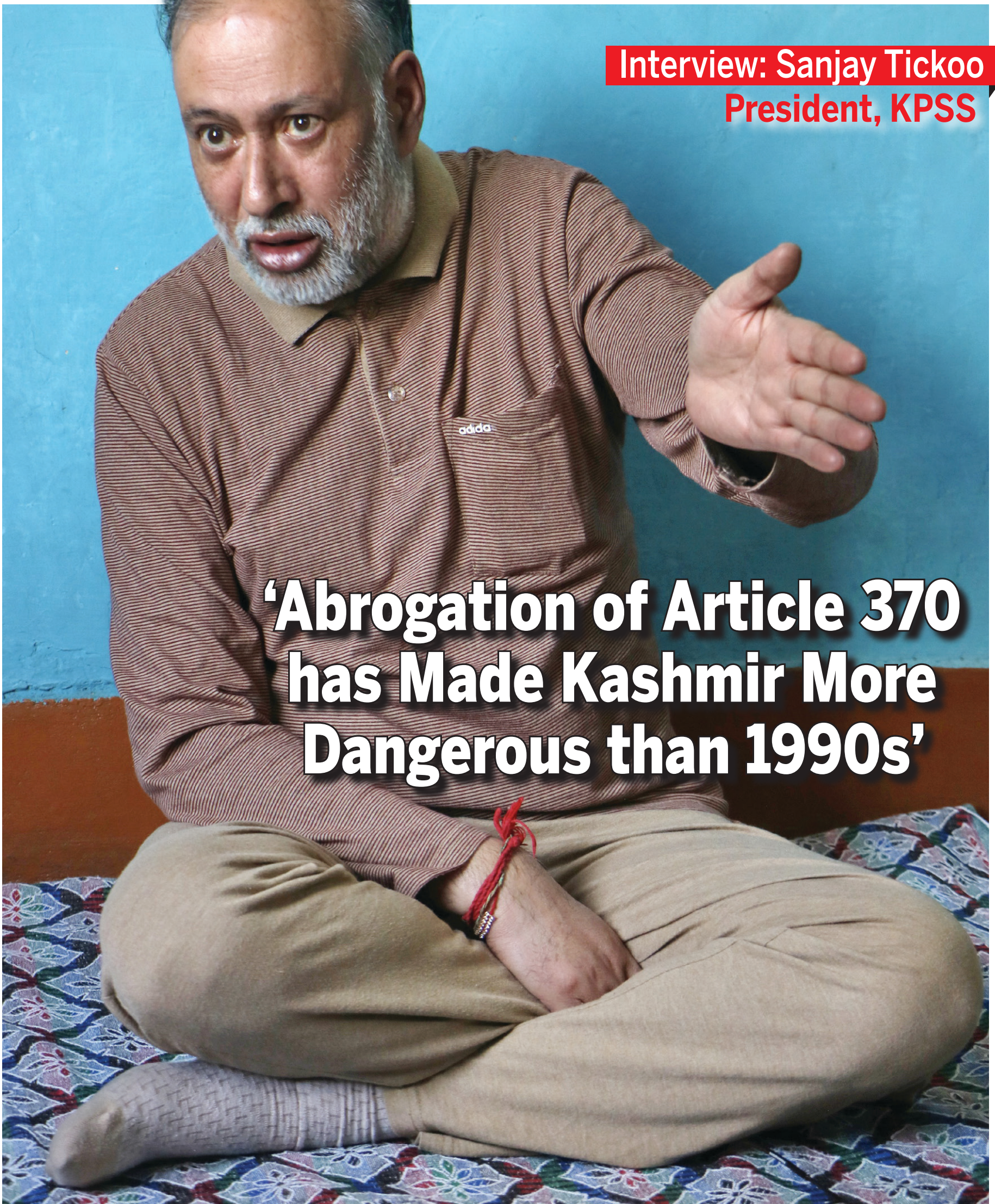
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| Vol: 1 | Issue: 17 | Oct 17–23, 2022

expression unleashed

Interview: Sanjay Tickoo
President, KPSS

**'Abrogation of Article 370
has Made Kashmir More
Dangerous than 1990s'**



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Young Entrepreneurs Must Come Forward to Transform Business Sectors

There is an important lesson to be learnt from what recently happened to truckloads of apples. Trucks carrying ripe and red apples were on their way to markets across India when they were stuck along Srinagar-Jammu highway. The mess couldn't be managed for several days despite assurances from the highest echelons of power. By the time the crisis was resolved, the losses were huge. The fruit had rotten, leaving the orchardists distraught. This year, like the past several years, has been difficult for Kashmir's horticulture industry. From natural causes like unseasonal snowfalls to spring heatwaves to man-made disasters like blockade of highways and unavailability of the local processing industry, the fruit industry is facing a difficult time.

This is why there is a lesson to be learnt from the ongoing crisis. The event of the past month is not, necessarily, going to be a one-off disaster. It may repeat itself - maybe every year. Maybe it will happen again next year and the year after that. Maybe it will happen again and again when the harvest is ready for the export. With a limited shelf life and limited transportation window, a repeat of such a crisis can sound a death knell to Kashmir's horticulture industry.

So, what is the lesson? There is an urgent need for multiple processing units to be established within Kashmir that can transform and add value to the raw products. The transformation of the raw product into a processed one will not only increase profits and sale value, but it will also add more months of life to the product which can then be exported to markets across India and also to markets across continents.

There is an urgent need to establish Brand Kashmir. The first stage in this journey towards self-reliance is that the region needs state-of-the-art processing units, which will ensure quality of the processed product. While apples as a fruit may have a month-long shelf life, if processed into jam or juice, its shelf life can be ex-

panded significantly and the transportation worries can be considerably eased.

While the processing units are important for the horticulture industry, which is a vital nerve of Kashmir's rural economy with more than 35 lakh individuals directly or indirectly dependent on the industry, it is true for every other sector.

Take for example the story of Kashmir's wool sector. Kashmir has more than two million sheep, many of them producing high-quality merino wool. The two million sheep approximately produce eight million kilograms of wool every year, which has the potential to be a significant addition to the region's gross domestic product. The situation of this sector, however, is scary and a lesson for all other sectors to evolve.

Before the COVID years, the demand for the

the brand. In 2020, New Zealand exported wool worth \$243M.

The tragedy of the wool sector, however, has been the post-COVID years when the export demand for raw wool crashed and the prices slid from Rs 140 per kg to Rs 20. With no wool processing unit available in Kashmir that could transform raw wool into a processed product or even wash it and turn it into yarn, many sheep farmers have thrown bags of wool into garbage.

There has to be an urgency in making Kashmir economically self-reliant and this cannot be done without introducing a wide range of processing facilities in the region. While the administration can do little, other than offering subsidies, a young generation of entrepreneurs can step forward and take an initiative. There is a huge potential and profit in the processing industry. Even though setting up a unit can be tiring, it is equally rewarding and an investment of a lifetime.

Kashmir produces large quantities of raw products, much of which is exported to outside markets - at the price of peanuts - where it is processed and the products brought into Kashmir at significantly high rates.

While individual entrepreneurs can work their way into the sector of processed units, a cluster of entrepreneurs is best suited for these ventures and transforming the way the businesses operate in the region.

While a small number of processing units exist in the region, like bottled water processing units or processed spice units, there is a huge gap in the supply and demand. In many segments, the supply and demand is met with 100 per-

cent imports.

The entrepreneurial venturism into processed industry is vital for Kashmir's economic existence. It is evident from the recent apple transportation fiasco. If the individual entrepreneurs are not able to come forward, the village-level self-help groups or block-level cooperative societies can be formed to take up this challenge. The format of Amul - a cooperative society - is an example to be followed and replicated. Amul now generates a revenue of Rs 50,000 crore.

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wool was good and a kilogram was sold at Rs 140, which would have generated approximately more than one billion rupees. The entire produce was exported to markets outside Jammu and Kashmir, mainly Punjab, where the wool was processed - washed, made into yarn and then into final products like sweaters and blankets. It is a general estimate that 20 kilograms of greasy fleece can be used to produce 35 woollen sweaters, each costing between Rs 3000 to Rs 9000 in the retail market, depending on the marketing of

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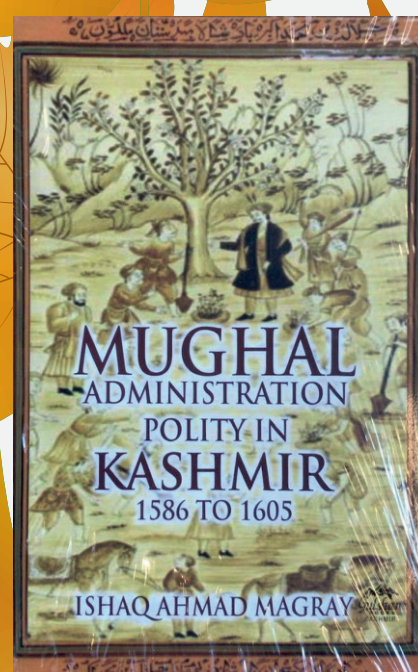
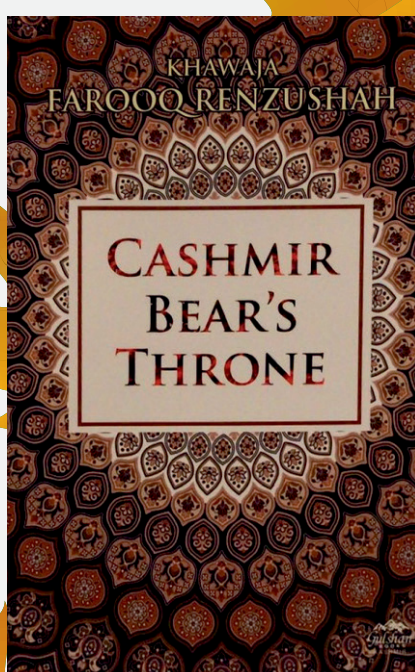
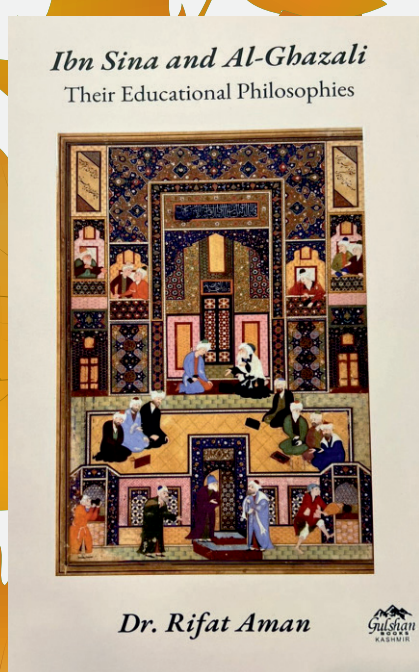
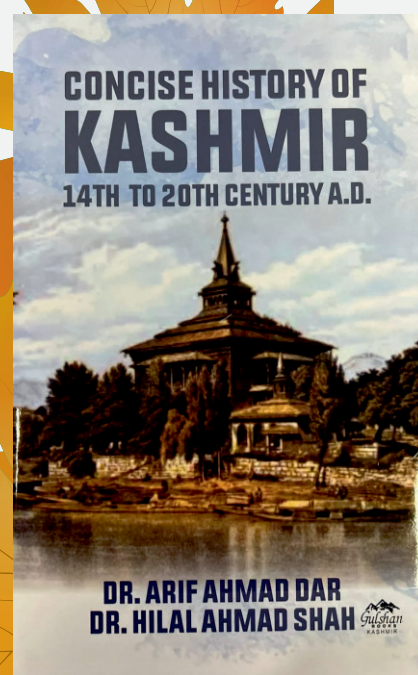
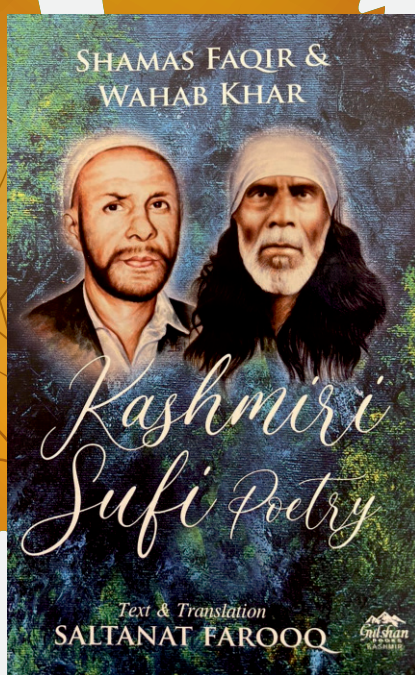
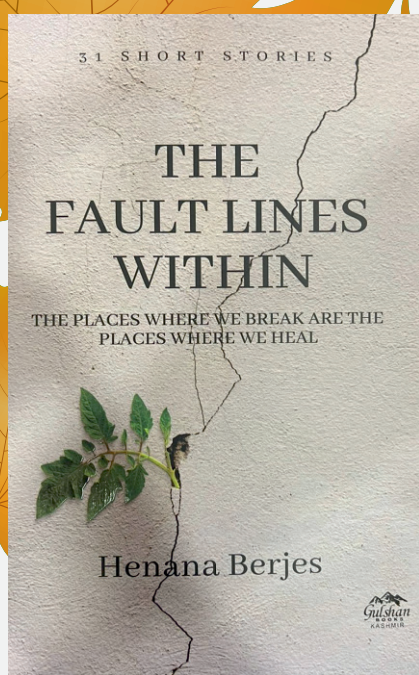




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What does Xi's Likely Third Term as Gen Sec CPC Mean for India?



SHOME BASU

The outcome of the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress that began this Sunday is expected to witness Xi Jinping emerge again as the most powerful man in China and become the General Secretary once again, thereby continuing his marathon run as the President of China.

Let us not forget the timing when such a drastic change is taking place in Beijing. This is probably one of the biggest changes that China will be witnessing in terms of political powerplay since 1949 when CCP became the ruling dispensation there. And this is happening when the West is deeply engaged with Russian President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" mounted on Ukraine that has induced the US to mobilise the NATO much to the discontent of Europe, which is now caught between a rock and a hard place for the past eight months.

This unprecedented move in China, once officially announced, will not only pose the biggest challenge to the West, particularly for the US at a time when Washington is deeply engaged in the Russia-Ukraine War mobilising full NATO support for Kyiv, but this is also going to define the relationship that Beijing will have with New Delhi in the coming decades.

While India, a democracy, will continue to see a change in leadership, Xi will remain to be the Chinese President for almost the rest of his life. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) is poised to become much too blurred.

Xi's Supreme Moment

When Xi had first taken over the CCPC, he gave a lecture, advocating to promote Socialist rule of law and said that "first we must uphold the leadership of CCPC." Today, his party system and his entrenchment into the helm of power structure defines his words.

Xi, who is increasingly getting closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin, wants to assert himself as the most powerful man heading a communist regime while positioning China as the 'Asian Superpower', widening its sphere of influence in the region while boxing the US in and around the Pacific, but not Indo-Pacific.

After the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) at Astana in 2017 where Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a pull-aside meeting with Xi, New Delhi suffered a setback in the form of a bitter standoff in Doklam, a tri-junction area between India, Chi-



Xi Jinping is all set to become the General Secretary of the CPC for the record third time.

na and Bhutan that went on for three months from June to August. Once that was mitigated, a so-called informal summit was organised which was held in the Chinese town Wuhan in 2018 April where both the leaders were believed to have reached an understanding on the boundary question, albeit unofficially.

The Wuhan Spirit gave way to the second informal summit that took place in October 2019 in Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, even as the Indian Army carried out the exercise Him-Vijay in Arunachal Pradesh as part of the routine familiarisation and orientation process while Beijing fumed.

Tensions were already high between Beijing and New Delhi during the second informal summit as it took place a couple of months after the Modi government amended the Indian constitution and scrapped Articles 370 and 35 (A) in J&K and reorganised the region as Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh as two Union territories. The atmosphere was tense and hence not much came out from the meeting in Tamil Nadu between the two heads of the states. What culminated next was a massive military standoff in the eastern sector of the LAC in Ladakh in April-May 2020 that began at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic while the whole world was brutally locked down to contain the pandemic.

History

The dream that Xi is to envisage is what Mao asserted in 1949 when Peking (currently Beijing) grabbed the power from Chiang Kai Shiek's nationalist Republic of Formosa (currently Taiwan). With the seizing of power, Mao disbanded all the ambassadors as ordinary foreigners and threw the bait for a proper recognition of Communist China (PRC) while cutting all ties with the KMT based out of Taiwan.

India, being at such crossroads, had all its people at the mission in Beijing, headed by K M Panikar, with no diplomatic immunity. What Mao bragged along with it was that it was the only big Asian power which defeated the Japanese imperialism while not recognising India's role in decolonisation and the anti-Japanese stands.

The reason India was at worry was because there was an intelligence that the Tibet region would be taken over by the PRC which they did mil-

itarily in 1950. The line which divided Tibet with India was drawn by a British officer Henry McMahon who got Dalai Lama's plenipotentiary, Lonchen Shastru and KMT diplomat Ivan Chen to British India's summer capital in India, Simla, to convene a tripartite which said that Tibet would be ruled by Dalai Lama but the suzerainty would remain with China. But some news floated that Ivan Chen was kept in other room while the agreement was drafted to be signed in the Viceregal lodge in Simla. British had attempted to make Tibet as a buffer state that would be led by Dalai Lama, who was militarily weak and only engaged in mystical Buddhism.

Mao ordered a military mobilization into Tibet in 1950, declaring it as the liberation of Tibet. The Chinese Red Army was then at the doorsteps of India but PM Nehru was confident that China wouldn't attack India unless provoked. The problem emerged soon from Ladakh in the north to Arunachal Pradesh (the NEFA) with the McMahon Line that the British had drawn for their convenience. The last KMT ambassador in New Delhi in 1947 had already conveyed the message that Nationalist China did not consider McMahon line a legal border. Negotiations were the only solution now.

In 1951, Chinese Premier Chou En Lai informed Indian Ambassador Dr Panikkar to have an early meeting on the issue of McMahon Line as it had commercial interests of trade along the Himalayas for hundreds of years as part of the mini silk route. Over the years to come, Nehru along with G S Bajpai (former Secretary General of MEA) thought that McMahon Line was not in the interest of India. All problems started from here as the line was a hurdle to China's expansionist policy. China soon claimed the NEFA and parts of Ladakh as their own.

Meanwhile, in the farthest lands of Kashmir's Aksai Chin, China moved their machines to build a road to connect their Xinjiang province. B N Mullick, then the IB chief, revealed in his book 'Years With Nehru' that the Chinese wouldn't discuss any geography on the west of Karakoram which was the part of Kashmir with India and instead would talk to Pakistan.

In the east of Karakoram, the Chinese maintained the Karakoram as the

watershed while picking up any hill feature as the point to join Pangong Tso to Chumar via Demchok. This was wrong as each hill feature on the Karakoram pass would have different contours drawn hundreds of miles away dividing the huge lands of Ladakh creating confusion. It was not the territory but the alignment that confused India as 16,000 sq miles kept uninhabited as the regions ranged from Eastern Xinjiang to Northern Ladakh. Trade routes via Karakoram via Shyok to Leh then Hajilangar to Amotgar lake-Aksai Chin and Hajilangar to Leh were important places while lands in-between Pangong and Lanak-la were green pastures where Phorbang people moved with cattle in the summers for grazing. The areas used by traders and nomads were to be defined and had to have border protocols.

Keeping the talks going, Nehru visited Beijing in 1956 and met Chou En Lai and, together, they coined the slogan 'Hindi-Chini bhai bhai'. Three years later, however, in March 1959, Dalai Lama fled to India via NEFA (later Arunachal Pradesh) along with thousands of people while in early August, at the Longchu, Chinese PLA killed two Indian personnel from Assam Rifles and also took some prisoners. Already by 1958, the highway from Aksai Chin to Xinjiang was completed which is now called G219. This was the gathering of the storm and Jawaharlal Nehru came under heavy criticism in the Parliament. With the elections scheduled in 1962, the tension inside the Lok Sabha was high.

From Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai, the tempers were now rising and Nehru in a note to Beijing mentioned about Aksai Chin being part of the Indian territory, though, he knew it was long gone with a road now constructed. Nehru had once even said that Aksai Chin was a place where no vegetation would grow, so the usage of the barren land was of no use. Heavily criticised, the parliamentarian compared his bald head with Aksai Chin as a metaphor.

Then came the jolt in 1962 as China attacked India along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India was unprepared and many Indian soldiers were killed or taken prisoners. It was a major embarrassment to Nehru who couldn't fathom the fact that China could attack and that too at such a scale. With military preparedness not up to the mark at the LAC, a lack of ammunition and ordnance support was seen as few reasons for the loss along with weak intelligence provided to Nehru by his advisors.

Similar attacks in 1967 at Nathu-la was answered equally by the Indian Army which stunned the Chinese. Even in 1965 during the India-Pakistan war, the PLA was seen to intrude again in Longchu in Arunachal which can be assumed as support to Pakistan as they were and remain all-weather friends.

With the all-powerful Xi at the helm again, in all likelihood for life, not much between India and China is likely to change on geopolitical front.

Shome Basu is a New Delhi-based senior journalist.

Beware of Unauthorised Lending Apps

Know the RBI guidelines that are in place to safeguard the borrowers.



SAJJAD BAZAZ

The deadly impact of the Covid-19 pandemic taught us some important lessons of the century by triggering radical changes not only in the way of our living, but also reshaping the economic processes on the whole. In the context of changing lives, it's the economics of living where a series of radical transformation has been set in motion. The systems and procedures driving our economic processes have been highly impacted and most of these pre-Covid processes are fast becoming redundant. In other words, the virus has made technology viral. Precisely, the biggest contribution of the pandemic on the developmental side is the huge push it gave to the digitization of the systems and procedures, particularly in the financial system. Today, digitization is driving inclusion across the financial services' landscape, education platforms and healthcare ecosystem for all the citizens of the country.

Let's focus on the radical changes it brought in the financial system. When we talk of the financial system, it's our banking system which is in focus for the kind of massive technology-driven changes witnessed in its day-to-day operations. Today, payments are made through a mobile phone not just at retail outlets but also peer to peer, completely redefining the way in which money is transferred between individuals. Besides, we have seen innumerable payment apps which facilitate transfer of funds at lightning speed. Besides, we are witnessing a mushroom growth of digital lending apps.

Basically, in the past couple of years, we have been observing a dramatic shift in customers' choices and preferences. Their expectations have gone up to newer levels. This changing dynamic of the customers' expectations threw a big challenge to the banks and they had no other choice but to fall in line with the changing mood of the customers. To be precise, the changing landscape of banking revolves around the adoption of emerging technologies, meeting the customers' demands through customisation of products and services and automation of systems and procedures.

The banks are fine-tuning their operations on continuous basis by proactively adopting newer technologies and entering into collaboration with fin-techs. This way they are scripting new-age banking in the country.

However, the changing scenario in the banking system also threw serious challenges to the RBI. There are regulations which don't cover some of the emerging new-age banking practices. For instance, among significant changes observed in the banking industry is the digital lending system which has emerged as one of the most preferred means of getting access to credit by customers. In fact, the digital lending platforms are all set to transform the traditional lending practices, especially in the retail sector. Today, we come across digital lending apps making it to almost everybody's smartphone. Most of the apps are unregulated and operating illegally. Reports indicate that millions of Indians rely on lending apps and there are no guiding sources for the borrowers to pick a legal lending app.

They have been lending money outside the formal financial system. Even as their loan appraisal and disbursement is quick, almost real-time, they lose no time to invoke their aggressive recovery tactics on a small miss in repayment. Notably, these lending apps download contact lists, photos and other data from borrowers' phones and the same is used against the borrower in case they default. Here chances of misusing the data are not ruled out.

It's worth mentioning that the RBI guidelines in some areas of digital lending were missing. In this uncontrolled environment, the digital lending ecosystem became the fastest mode of getting a loan sanctioned and disbursed. But, at the same time, reports of rising malpractices such as uncontrolled engagement of third parties, mis-selling, breach of data privacy, unfair business conduct, charging of exorbitant interest rates, and unethical recovery practices started hitting media headlines.

Over a period of time, customer complaints of malpractices against digital lending platforms were rising and

the RBI framed a committee in January 2021 to enhance customer protection and make the fast growing digital lending ecosystem safe. The committee came out with its report in November 2021 and suggested to restrain digital loan platforms through a mix of regulations, including setting up of a nodal agency to verify their credentials and legislative measures to prevent "illegal lending". The committee also found that more than half of about 1,100 digital money-lenders were operating illegally.

A snippet of the committee report highlights the country's lending space witnessing a tectonic shift with loans increasingly being disbursed through digital means in recent years. It says that over 6% of all the loans given by commercial banks in April-December 2020 were digital, a marked jump from less than 1.5% in 2016-17.

Now, in response to the committee report, a few months back, the RBI issued strict digital lending guidelines to regulate the digital lending platforms in the country.

Intent behind RBI Guidelines

These guidelines have been issued to curb the menace of fake digital lending platforms where the end user incurs the loss. The guidelines have been designed to protect the interest of the borrowers and to ensure that the money cycle is taking place through legitimate apps with proper KYC structure and audit mechanism. This will not only ensure that the digital lending platform is functioning in compliance with applicable laws and is not indulging in malpractices but will also help the borrowers make informed choices regarding borrowings.

In other words, the safeguards provided under this framework will ensure that the interests of borrowers are protected and will, at the same time, enhance consumer confidence in the regulated digital lending ecosystem.

What are the guidelines that the borrowers need to know before approaching a digital lending platform for a loan?

The RBI guidelines envisage that

all loan disbursements and repayments through the digital lending apps should be executed only between the bank accounts of borrower and the regulated entity without any pass-through or pool account of the lending service provider (LSP) or any third party. Besides, all fees or costs to LSP to be paid by a regulated entity and not borrower.

The RBI, through these guidelines, has mandated an upfront disclosure of all-inclusive cost via annual percentage rate to the borrower. This is to make the borrower aware of the kind of interest they will pay on digital lending platforms. There is also a cooling-off period when a loan can be paid off to be part of a loan contract. Additionally, to protect data privacy, the RBI has stated that the data collected by the digital lenders should be need based, should have clear audit trails and should be only done with prior explicit consent of the borrower.

The guidelines also empower borrowers with the option to accept or deny consent for use of specific data, including the option to revoke previously granted consent as well, besides the option to delete the data collected from them by the digital lending platforms in the past.

Is there any scope for the borrower to file a complaint against the digital lender, if any? Regulatory Entities (REs) will have to ensure that they and their loan service providers or third parties engaged by them shall have a suitable nodal grievance redressal officer to deal with complaints related to fintech and digital lending. The grievance redressal officer shall also deal with complaints against their respective digital lending apps (DLAs). Details of the grievance redressal officer must be prominently displayed on the website of the RE, its LSPs and on DLAs.

Borrowers can raise their grievance and complaint by reaching out to the nodal grievance redressal officers engaged by the Regulated Entities and the loan service providers or third parties. A borrower can also complain against their digital lending mobile app. The details of the officers will be there on the websites of Regulated Entity, LSPs and the app.

As per the guidelines, the complaint should be resolved within 30 days. In case the complaint isn't resolved within 30 days, the borrower can directly reach out to RBI through integrated ombudsman scheme.

Sajjad Bazaz heads Internal Communication Department of Jammu & Kashmir Bank Ltd. The views expressed are his own and not of the institution he works for.

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‘Abrogation of Article 370 has Made Kashmir More Dangerous than 1990’

In this in-depth interview with **Kashmir Newsline**, President Kashmiri Pandit Sangarsh Samiti (KPSS), **Sanjay Tickoo**, talks about everything from the 1990 exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits (KPs) to the killing of Puran Krishan Bhat who was gunned down on October 15 in South Kashmir’s Shopian district.

How do you view this latest killing of a Kashmiri Pandit, Puran Bhat, in view of New Delhi’s claims of peace and normalcy in Kashmir?

I think we need to go back to the late 80s. The political dispensation of that time had started a smear campaign against Kashmiri Pandits that we were the agents of the Jan Sangh, the precursor of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Are you alluding to National Conference?

Yes. We were projected as the agents of the Hindu right in the eyes of the majority community and the Kashmiri Muslims were portrayed to New Delhi as pro-Pakistanis. This way, they gave New Delhi the impression that they were doing an incredible job of saving Kashmir. Then in the 1987 elections, when the Muslim United front (MuF) won some seats and accused National Conference of widespread rigging, Kashmiri Pandits were again badmouthed and portrayed as villains. Later, there were accusations against Farooq Abdullah that he was responsible for several bomb blasts after falling out with Rajiv Gandhi.

Are you trying to say that there was an anger building against Kashmiri Pandits among Muslims?

There was a majority within the Muslim majority that had harboured serious anger against Kashmiri Pandits which turned really ugly after the Gawkadal Massacre of 21 January 1990. It led to a widespread resentment against Kashmiri Pandits who were seen as the stooges of New Delhi. There were several killings of the KPs in the wake of the massacre in which dozens of Kashmiri Muslims were killed. We were a miniscule minority- seventy sev-

After the killing of Puran Bhat, a fresh wave of fear has spread across the Pandit community living in Kashmir. Pic: Qazi Irshad



en thousand families across Kashmir. There was fear psychosis and the community found its safety in migration to Jammu and other parts of India.

There are several theories surrounding the exodus of the KPs, the most prominent being that it was the then Governor Jagmohan who engineered it. What do you have to say about that?

I think this Jagmohan theory is preposterous. As you know, he didn't enjoy the goodwill of the majority community and that included the mainstream politicians, National Conference in particular. I have a question for all those who put the blame of the KP exodus on Jagmohan. If it's true that Jagmohan wanted to bombard the majority community into submission and then bring the migrant Pandits back, why would he allow more than seven thousand families to stay back against all odds?

When the KP migration happened, JKLF was the predominant militant group. What do you think triggered the mass exodus? Do you think militants wanted to drive your community out or was it fear as a result of killings and pro-azadi and Islamic slogans that the KPs didn't identify with?

Look, when a tiger attacks a herd, it doesn't kill every single animal in it. It kills one or two but it sets panic in the herd and all the animals start running for their lives. Fear psychosis played a big role. I also want to set the record straight here. The notion outside Kashmir that it was the fundamentalist, Islamist militant organisations that killed

the KPs is misplaced. The survey that KPSS carried out shows that ninety per cent of the killings were done by the so-called secularist JKLF.

Despite fear and unrest, you and many other Pandits like you chose to stay back.

There were several reasons. Some of us felt we would lose our livelihood and feared living as refugees. Others had a strong sense of belonging and they chose to stay put in the middle of the violence that they had no clue about. We learnt to live in the middle of fear and insecurity. But the last one year has been extremely fearful. There are several reasons for that. The key reason being August 5, 2019 when Articles 370 and 35 (A) were scrapped. And then the state was downgraded and bifurcated into two UTs. Whatever lofty claims the BJP may make, the truth is that we Kashmiris were kept in an open prison. No communication was allowed and we were cut off from each other and the rest of the world. New Delhi was over the moon that there was no hue and cry and it comfortably managed to control an entire population. Let me tell you that I was also surprised when there was no uproarious reaction to the August 5 move. When the restrictions were lifted after a few months and the communication restored, I met various sections of the society extensively in an attempt to make sense of the calm, even if it was forced, that prevailed in the valley against all fears. What came to the fore is quite interesting and revealing. What I gathered from meeting people from different parts of Kashmir was that they were prepared for it be-

cause Government of India took several measures before August 5 which wasn't lost on the locals. It included a widespread crackdown against Hurriyat activists and those from various sections of the society who were seen as aiding and abetting the separatist movement. Also, the Amanath pilgrims were sent back before the culmination of the *yatra*. Tourists were evicted from hotels and sent packing back. So the people knew what was going on. But, while most of the people weren't happy with it, they felt that if the people's movement was for a greater agenda, there was no point losing their lives over the revocation of Article 370. I can assure you that was the main reason. But the establishment here and New Delhi thought now that the job was done. BJP started claiming that Article 370 was the root cause of all the ills in Kashmir and that a new Kashmir – 'Naya Kashmir' – had come into being.

Kashmiri Pandits living in different parts of India celebrated the abrogation and distributed sweets and danced. How do you see that?

I also saw many such videos. I think most of them were those who had migrated way before the 90s. Those who have no stake in Kashmir. Who have been living their lives happily outside Kashmir for many decades. Also, some of those celebrating were the ones who subscribe to the RSS ideology. We can't blame an entire community for that. I got in touch with some of those people and told them that we would have to pay for their actions. I think what was even worse was that, while the BJP leadership kept bragging about its achievement all the time, it didn't care to reach out to the people. They thought they could achieve everything by force.

As a Kashmiri Pandit who is living in the valley and has his ear to the ground, what are the pluses and minuses that you would associate with the August 5 decision of the Government of India?

There is nothing positive about it. It was a terrible decision. As a Kashmiri, irrespective of which community I come from, 370 was my identity. It has been snatched from me. It safeguarded our rights and interests and that includes the rights of the Dogras and other ethnicities and communities from Jammu and Ladakh as well. Many in the rest of India have been made to believe that the move is some great service to the nation. It is not. Even the Dogras of Jammu who celebrated it initially are regretting now because the reality has started dawning on them. They realize that they are going to suffer more than the Kashmiris. It's true that 370 was misused as well, especially by our political parties, but by and large it was meant for our security and betterment. The abrogation of Article 370 has made Kashmir more dangerous than it was in the 1990s.

You met Prime Minister Modi in 2014 when he visited Kashmir in the wake of the massive floods. What did you talk about?

I was leading a delegation that met him. I told him that he was not the prime minister of BJP but of the entire India. I asked him to show farsightedness and sensitivity while dealing with Kashmir.

You also met Home Minister Amit Shah last year after the killing of some Kashmiri Pandits when he visited Kashmir. The meeting, if I am right, wasn't pleasant. Why so?

That is right. Before meeting the Home Minister, we had issued some statements about the fate of the KPs. So when we met him, he was like: '*Haan ji, kaun baat karega; kya masla hai* – so, who is going to talk; what is the matter?' We found it insensitive. Then he asked us how many Pandits, Muslims and non-Kashmiris got killed after August 2019. I gave him some tentative figures. '*Kam maray gaye na* – so, not a big number,' he said. I said to him: 'Sir, have you come to listen to us or dictate to us?' Then he told me that we should keep security guards. To which I had to tell him we shouldn't be needing any security going by the tall claims of peace and normalcy that the BJP makes about Kashmir. So I told my fellow delegates there was no point talking any further and we left.

There are around 800 KP families living in Kashmir. How secure, or insecure, do they feel?

When the news of Puraan Bhat's killing came yesterday, I got several calls from fellow KPs from his village. I was shocked to hear that the security forces stationed there ordered them not to gather to mourn and forced them into their homes. The situation is so bad that we aren't even allowed to mourn our dead.

Iremember in the 90s and also in the 2000s and beyond, whenever KPs felt insecure, they would go to the separatist leadership, people like Geelani, Mirwaiz or Malik. Did it help? Also, did you ever, in all these years, try to reach out to the mainstream parties?

From 2003 to 2021, barring two political killings which happened alongside several political killings of Muslims as well, there was not a single killing of a common Kashmiri Pandit. And that was because there was a protective wall, not just from the separatist leadership, especially the late Syed Ali Shah Geelani, but also from the civil society. That strong wall is gone now. Nobody is willing to stand up for us as they would do earlier. As for the political parties like NC or PDP, they won't do anything except playing their dirty politics which they have always done. Through your medium, I want to appeal the majority community, preachers and others to come out and show solidarity with the KPs.

There are some hardcore right-wing KP organisations that constantly keep demonizing Kashmiri Muslims. How far, in your view, does it harm the KP cause?

There is no doubt that such organisations and individuals can't be our friends or representatives, as they claim. But I must also tell you that there are such elements in the majority community as well that need to be discouraged.

Did you watch The Kashmir Files?

I saw some clippings of the movie. I could clearly understand that it was politically motivated. They have grossly exaggerated events and that is no service to the cause of the KPs.

Cover pic: Qazi Irshad



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How a Man's Passion Saved a Life and Shaped Many

When he realised that it could be a matter of life and death, he ripped the plaster off and hobbled towards the garage.



FAROOQ SHAH

In the winter of 2019, a senior police officer's wife who lived in a remote village in north Kashmir, was suffering from cancer and needed some quick medication. However, her physician was from another village. Without his advice, the patient's life was hanging in a balance.

The top cop was resourceful enough but there was a serious problem on hand. All the roads leading to the doctor's home were completely buried under snow. No police driver was able to manoeuvre a vehicle through the thick layers of snow. And that is when Fahim Ahmed Sofi came in the picture.

For Sofi, an expert off-roader who drives his 4x4 Gypsy like a child drives a toy car, such emergency was nothing new. It was a subordinate who had alerted the officer about Sofi. "Sir, I know a guy who can do it," said the junior officer.

Sadly, when the call came, Sofi's right leg was in a plaster due to a fractured foot. However, when he realised that it could be a matter of life and death, he ripped the plaster off and hobbled towards the garage. Removing the cover from his 4x4 Gypsy, he attached a chain to its wheels and drove off. He managed to reach the village and brought the all-important man with him who gave the lady the life-saving drug.

If it weren't for his passion for off-roading, not only would Sofi not have been able to save another person's life but also his own because it kept him away from many a social evil.

Sofi was introduced to off-roading by chance. While on a trip to Nagasari with his family in the Kupwara district of north Kashmir, he noticed that a part of the river bridge they were supposed to cross was missing. Apparently, there was no choice except to retreat, but Sofi had other plans. Despite the broken bridge, he made up his mind to cross over. Amid his sisters' vehement opposition, a resolute Sofi bravely drove through the river, navigating his way through muck and boulders to reach the opposite bank with his petrified family in one piece.

The adrenaline rush was so powerful that it inspired Sofi to become an off-roader. He modified his Gypsy by adding a variety of accessories. In addition to an electric winch, a snorkel and a hood, the changes featured a higher suspension with larger wheels and special off-road tyres.

"Gypsy is a bare basics mountain goat without even an AC or a power steering, but its go-anywhere prowess, punchy petrol engine and dependable mechanicals makes it a favourite among rallyists and off-roaders," says a proud Sofi.

After making a few solo trips to several isolated locations of Kashmir, Sofi was looking for a group that would not only keep him company but also inspire him to explore farther than anybody else had ever gone before. His prayer was answered. An amateur club called Kashmir Offroad had already hit the road by the time Sofi mastered the craft. The club would welcome enthusiasts from across the valley and journey through unpaved surfaces smeared with sand, gravel, riverbeds, dirt, snow, rocks and other natural terrain to the farthest reaches of Kashmir and, occasionally, to districts located in the Jammu region.

There was a lot more to visiting Kashmir's numerous isolated regions than just their sense of pride and content. The participants would witness firsthand the flagrant devastation of

Kashmir's rich ecology due to deforestation, illegal mining, and pointless urbanisation in addition to numerous other acts of human misdemeanour. To get the attention of the authorities, they would use high-definition cameras to shoot photos and films, occasionally even deploying drones to capture footage, and post them online.

In these remote locations, where even the most basic healthcare services are lacking, the clubs carry food and medications to distribute to the nomads living there. In these efforts to promote peace and stability, the police and the army occasionally work together with these clubs to organise the off-road events.

"We expect the government to work with off-road clubs to bring not only healthcare and other basics to these forlorn places but also the significant message of peace because we volunteer to travel to these distant locations," says Sofi. "The response of the government has been lukewarm thus far, but we are hoping for better cooperation in the days to come."

According to Sofi, banks can play an important role in supporting events while promoting their products as well.

"Banks can make use of this opportunity to advertise their goods, schemes

and deals in a more effective way because, on a given day, we drive nearly 300-500 kilometres across various districts and our convoys are viewed by thousands of people," says Sofi.

Off-roaders, he says, can also play a significant role in educating the public, particularly students, about the dangers of drug abuse, which has increased among youngsters.

Overtime, many off-road groups, including Moto Explorer's Club and Xtreme Offroads came up until Sofi decided to launch his own: Valley Offroad Association.

At the beginning of the year, Sofi finished second and received a cash reward of Rs 5000 at a Mudzilla competition hosted by his club, which attracted at least 10 participants from Jammu as well.

Off-roading, Sofi says, has been his best teacher. "It has transformed my outlook, actions, and thinking. Without this passion, I wouldn't have been what I am today."

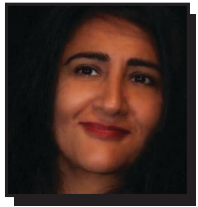
Farooq Shah works as Media Communication Officer for the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), J&K.



His passion for off-roading, Sofi believes, has transformed his outlook. Pic: Farooq Shah

Review: Laal Singh Chaddha

The movie is shallow and monotonous, and reduces most of the tumultuous events of the last few decades to diluted sequences.



JASPREET KAUR

I had been a bit apprehensive about watching the Bollywood remake of one of the greats of the 90s – Forrest Gump. Eventually I did watch it on Netflix and I am so glad I gave it a miss in the theatres.

Laal Singh Chaddha was excruciatingly painful to watch, both for its pace and Aamir Khan as Laal Singh.

It not only lacks the magic of the original but also of Aamir Khan's PK and Advait Chandan's Secret Superstar.

Aamir Khan plays the role that is similar to his earlier roles as the slow-witted twin in Dhoom 3 and as an alien in PK—naïve, eccentric but good-natured. However, as Laal Singh Chaddha, his attempt at the Punjabi speaking Hindi or Hindi speaking Punjabi is flawed and unbearable, as also his “ummm” after every sentence. His method acting is either totally amiss or has gone overboard in his attempt to capture Tom Hanks' memorable body language and speech patterns. Ahmad Ibn Umar, the child actor who plays the young Laal Singh Chaddha, has given a far better performance with fewer dialogues and amazing expressions.

Forrest Gump is a 1994 American comedy-drama film directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Eric Roth. It is based on the 1986 novel of the same name by Winston Groom. Various interpretations have been made of Forest Gump – both of the protagonist and the film's political symbolism. In 2011, the Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the United States National Film Registry as being “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.”

At an early age, Gump is deemed to have a below-average IQ of 75. He has an endearing character and shows devotion to his loved ones and duties, character traits that bring him into many life-changing situations. Along the way, he encounters many historical figures and events throughout his life. Using Gump acts as a “social mediator and as an agent of redemption in divided times.” Many film critics consider Gump as “everything we admire in the American character – honest, brave and loyal with a heart of gold.

It is probably for the same reason that Laal Singh's character is a Sikh. While most Sikhs have objected to the portrayal of a Sikh man as a dim character, some feel that he is all that is epitomised as a Punjabi and more so as a Sikh – brutal honesty, very little or no ego, unconditional love and the disappearance of the ‘other’ with preservation of the ‘self’ – the universal qualities which go beyond Sikhism and should be in all humans. Also, that the movie is a



better depiction of Punjabi life than the loud and crude Punjabi movies of today.

The movie introduces Singh's forefathers falling victims at the borders in a tonally jarring inserts of humour. Laal Singh Chaddha appears more to be a quick recap of the events of the last few decades, some of the country's bloodiest conflicts in recent memory, such as 1984's Operation Blue Star and the subsequent massacre of Sikhs in 1984 or the 1999 Kargil War. These three are shown with some detail of involvement of the protagonist. Other incidents like Advani's *rath yatra*, the Babri Masjid demolition, Mandal Commission protests and 2008 Mumbai terror attacks are a mere TV news. The Gujarat genocide of 2022 is entirely skipped. All violent sectarian events waived off as “malaria”, which though some consider to be a reference to communal hatred, also is a reminder of several recent political speeches calling out “parasites.” During his run across the country, Singh crosses Varanasi where a large hoarding announces “*ab ki bar Modi sarkar*.” Most of the incidents are not as nuanced as they could have been.

While events of bigotry and communal hatred have been highlighted, the effect they have on the social structure, the young impressionable minds, the old, men and women is left out in the

clean slate of the slow wittedness of the central character. All these are beyond Singh's understanding.

The film's portrayal of the 1999 Kargil War, though an attempt to comment on the futility of war, is rather diluted, especially the character of the rescued member of the Pakistani army, Mohammad. Perhaps the idea behind the naive rescue of Mohammad during the war is to show that the other side are humans too, but it ends up being a rather caricatured portrayal. Mohammad, who becomes Laal's marketing manager, is later ‘reformed’ after he sees an image of Ajmal Kasab on television during the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. This, or any of the other events shown, fail to show how Singh's life may have been impacted, except for the ‘Rupa underwear-make rich business’, which was his, again caricatured friend Balaraju's dream idea, and which, as in most Bollywood movies and TV series of today, seemed like a sponsored insert.

In Forrest Gump, Gump is the epitome of all that is good – a God-fearing, American football player and war hero who has no use for the counterculture movements of the late ‘60s. Despite a below average IQ, he achieves fame and financial success. Laal Singh Chaddha too easily escapes from making any commentary on political events.

Laal Singh Chaddha was excruciatingly painful to watch, both for its pace and Aamir Khan as Laal Singh. It not only lacks the magic of the original but also of Aamir Khan's PK and Advait Chandan's Secret Superstar.

Singh, a nobody who is overly protected by his mother, becomes a war hero and a wealthy man simply by living his life in his simplicity and naivety, attributed to his dimness from birth. He never comprehends the complexities of life or any of the political events, which mostly remain in the background. The movie is not able to strike a balance between the attempt to show the turbulent periods of recent history and the love story of Singh and Rupa, his childhood friend.

Rupa's dream to make it big in Bollywood depicts the Bollywood under-world nexus which was big news in the 90s. Besides this, there are references to few other events such as India's 1983 World Cup victory, the 1994 Miss Universe pageant, Shah Rukh Khan, appearing in a cameo, learning his signature pose from a young Singh and Milind Soman-Madhu Sapre's controversial photoshoot.

Unlike Forrest Gump, which used computer-generated imagery, to depict Gump meeting deceased personages and shaking their hands and thereby even changing the course of history, Laal Singh Chaddha remains a mere spectator to the events happening around him. His apolitical stance is projected as the best of the human virtues.

The supporters of the ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), boycotted the film even before its release. They claimed the boycott was due to Aamir Khan's remarks about “growing intolerance” in India and his movie PK that allegedly mocked Hindu gods and Hinduism. There were mixed opinions as to whether the film's poor performance was due to the boycott trend or the unsatisfactory content and portrayals.

Overall, the movie is shallow and monotonous and reduces most of the tumultuous events of the last few decades to diluted sequences. Perhaps the sweetness of chocolates ought to have been swapped with the tangy spiciness of *gol gappe*.

Jaspreet Kaur is an architect and urban designer based in Delhi

T20 World Cup: Pakistan's Batting Woes

They have a tremendous bowling attack, but the batsmen will have to impactfully step up to the plate.



BILAL AHSAN DAR

From Asia Cup to the recent home series against England, Pakistan's middle order drew widespread criticism from experts and fans alike. However, it is not just the middle order that is ailing Pakistan. A flawed strategy, batting order and the selection are the key components to Pakistan's unreliable batting lineup.

Strike Rate

Stats may suggest that Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan are currently the best T20 openers in terms of consistency - runs scored, averages, partnerships and any other quantitative measure. The ICC rankings may also support this, but there is a serious issue with this partnership as far as T20 cricket is concerned.

Babar-Rizwan is a one dimensional pair that mostly relies on playing copybook cricket shots to score in a fast paced T20 game and is unwilling to improvise and take the attack to the opposition. The two openers who value their wicket a bit too much isn't fearless enough to take risks to gain early momentum. Therefore, more often than not, unable to make most of the powerplay. Their strike rates, which are pivotal in determining a batsman's impact on the game, are unimpressive when you look at other batters around the world who have the ability to change the complexion of the game within a couple of overs. In the powerplay, Babar's strike rate in the last three years has been just 113.81 and Rizwan's 128. After the powerplay, from over number 7- 15, Pakistan has the lowest run rate in the last two years, i.e. 7.93. Again, the reason is that most of the times Babar and Rizwan partner beyond powerplay and are reluctant to open their arms.

While all the other teams believe in taking the powerplay advantage and get a flyer upfront, Pakistan's strategy is to preserve wickets up to the 15th over. While teams like England, Australia and India have an aggressive template, always targeting a score of 190 or 200 plus, Pakistan mostly appears to be eyeing a score of 170 -175 or even less. A strategy that needs a review if Pakistan has to challenge stronger teams on consistent basis, especially in major tour-



naments like the world cup.

Fragile Middle Order

There is a notion that the Pakistani batting is all about Babar and Rizwan. Once you break that partnership, the middle order, bereft of any quality, falls like a pack of cards. To a large extent, the fact is valid considering the career record and quality of the middle order that comprises batsmen like Ifhtikar Ahmad (matches: 36, average: 27, strike rate: 125), Asif Ali (matches: 54, average: 15.49, strike rate: 134.49), and Khushdil Shah (matches: 24, average: 20.6, strike rate: 110.8). These batsmen have been around for nearly two years now and, despite their consistently poor performance, they are not replaced.

Nonetheless, it is also true that they rarely get to face a fair number of balls because of the slow but prolonged partnership of Babar and Rizwan. Most of the times they come in when the team needs 10 runs or more per over to win or set a challenging target and it is unfair to expect them to go hammer and tongs from ball one every day and produce results. So it's the pressure that the openers build which accumulates to bring down the middle order. For example, in the last four matches, Pakistan's top three batters combined have faced 279 balls without hitting a six. Their combined strike rate on 279 balls is 116, which is a clear reflection of a lack of intent in the opening overs.

Shan Masood was inducted into the side after regular failures of the middle order. He had some outstanding performances under his belt in the domestic

circuit and the county cricket but his approach too doesn't seem to be any different from the openers.

Flawed Batting Order

While every other team plays powerplay enforcers as openers, Pakistan does it the other way round. It is beyond comprehension that regular opener like Fakhar Zaman, who missed the last two series owing to injury, plays one drop and a highly successful one drop batter in the ODIs, Babar Azam, opens the innings for Pakistan, that too when the middle order is struggling and he can gel it together. Batsmen like Kane Williamson and Virat Kohli also play at one drop for their sides to anchor the innings and allow the regular openers who are more of bashers and better suited for the powerplay to open the innings. It is strange that despite so many failures of the middle order, Babar didn't opt to bat at 3.

Pakistan had a chance of trying a different opening pair in the recent series against England and the following tri-series in New-Zealand to find a solution to their middle order woes but for some strange reason, the management is reluctant to experiment.

Way Forward

Fakhar Zaman's comeback is a big plus for the team. He's the only genuine impact player in the top order and if he gets going, chances of Pakistan doing better in the world cup are more. Ideally, he should be opening with Rizwan in the World Cup, but that looks improbable. If Pakistan carries on with

the same strategy of preserving wickets at the cost of strike rate, no. 3 becomes a tricky position for acceleration. Shan looks doubtful and unsuited for the role and therefore Fakhar is the best candidate in the side to take the role when he is not opening. No. 4 and no. 5 are a major problem and the patchwork of promoting the lower order all-rounders may not be the answer. But, in a situation where you don't have any specialists available for the role, the best bet is to shuffle the batting order. Nawaz did well at number 4 recently, he could be sent to up the ante in the middle part, especially when the opposition has a left arm spinner bowling. Shadab's promotion, which wasn't taken well by many, could still be considered. He has a good PCL record batting up the order and can improvise and manipulate the field. Also, he is someone who clears the fence more regularly than some other batters in the side. Asif Ali, though unreliable, has to be the pinch hitter who can deliver an odd cameo to seal a game or two for Pakistan. Ifhtikar, having earlier played a couple of good innings in Australia, could come handy with both bat and ball. To sum it up, there can't be any wholesome changes in the team now but the captain and the coaches have to be tactical enough to outthink the opposition and use the available resources for maximum effect. Pakistan has a tremendous bowling attack, but the batsmen will have to step up to the plate in an impactful manner.

Bilal Ahsan Dar is a blogger and cricket buff.

Ukraine War: Gloves are Off

For now, AFU is trading territory for lives while RF is trading territory for time. Only winters will tell who is going to succeed.



SAURABH KUMAR SHAHI

The recent tactical setbacks—not that recent given that the last one happened almost two weeks ago—that the Russian Armed Forces (RF) received in Kharkov and Kherson sectors in Ukraine have created much excitement in both the pro and anti-Russia crowd. The Western press that was starving of any good news from the fronts ran away with it to such an extent that in the ever-hopeful western capitals, it appeared as if the Ukrainians were about to enter the limits of Moscow itself as the Nazis did in 1941-42. However, what's actually happening on the battlefield is, like always, a bit nuanced.

The nature of this Special Military Operation (SMO) has shifted since it was launched in February. The RF, however, has not changed its tactics. At least not till two weeks ago. And therein lies the answer.

Russia started this SMO with less than 2 lakh soldiers. The majority of them consisted of the separatist militias from LNDR, contract soldiers and soldiers from Wagner PMC with regular Russian units in artillery and air-support roles. The total number of Ukrainians they were about to take on was around 6 lakh armed men including regulars, Territorial Defence and units from National Guards. The Lancaster Law of Battle says that an invading force looking at occupation of a foreign land must have a 3:1 superiority in force. Here, Russia was invading with a handicap of 1:3.

However, there was a simple explanation for it. Russia didn't attack to occupy the territory then. The idea was to reach Kyiv quickly and force the hands of President Zelensky to keep his promise of implementing the Minsk 2.0 Agreement that Ukraine's Western partners had promised it would do.

To that end, the goal was about to be achieved. Shocked by the blitzkrieg, the ex-actor folded - and quickly at that. A deal was brokered by President Erdogan and Ukraine was all set to sign it. That is, till the then Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, personally landed there to sabotage it at the behest of the US. Zelensky's hand was forced and the war continued with the West willing to fight till the last Ukrainian. Every bit of this information is on record.

As the war persisted, and it became clear that this had to become a war of occupation, Russia didn't change its tactics. It didn't need to. The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), for all practical purposes, lost the war in the first month itself. They lost mobility and were pushed to doing heeled-in defensive actions with no capacity to mount even a limited offensive or so much as to force a manoeuvre. However, this also turned out to be a bane for the Russians.

As the RF gradually achieved victories, it didn't think it shall have to abide by the Lancaster Law. While it kept rotating the initial 1,80,000 soldiers, Ukraine ordered five rounds of mobilisations. This meant that because of the Rest & Recuperation (R&R) regimen, at any given time, only 1,20,000 Russian soldiers were on the battlefield with one-third in the R&R regimen. AFU, on the other hand, even after losing over 2 lakh men as KIAs, WIAs and MIAs managed to replenish the ranks through mobilisation. Agreed, the quality of those mobilised was poor but they were anyways being used as cannon fodder. This helped AFU send the mobilised units to a certain death while keeping some of the better ones in the rear for future offensives. However, most importantly, it was NATO that was fighting this war on Ukraine's behalf now. Their combined intelligence and reconnaissance apparatus was now targeted towards Russia, not to mention the sustained flow of around \$60 Billion worth of weapons. To put it in perspective, that's the combined total of the purchase the Indian Armed Forces has done in well over a decade.

This could have been taken care of easily by the Russians but for the obstinate position of President Putin. As soon as the nature and the goal of SMO changed in March, Russia should have gone for their own mobilisation. But it didn't. This was, however, not the end of Putin's folly. From the very beginning,

The idea was to reach Kyiv quickly and force the hands of President Zelensky to keep his promise of implementing the Minsk 2.0 Agreement that Ukraine's Western partners had promised it would do. To that end, the goal was about to be achieved. Shocked by the blitzkrieg, the ex-actor folded - and quickly at that.

he forced the RF to fight this war with one hand tied at the back. As soon as the NATO weapons started to flow, Russia should have destroyed the transportation and communication nodes and taken out the energy generation and supply infrastructure. It didn't. Why? Because Putin wanted to look good in the eyes of the Western public. You can imagine the careflessness of RF by the fact that this is the first war in modern history where the civilian-to-soldier-killed ratio is so low. In itself, this might sound like a humane gesture, and it is, however it also means that RF created a problem for itself which could have been eliminated very easily in the initial days.

But because it was not, AFU managed to make tactical gains in September. What did it do? Well, it went for multi-vector probing attacks. How was it achieved? NATO reconnaissance gives it an accurate picture of the number of troops defending a sector of a front. Since Russians didn't mobilise, they often leave very few soldiers, in the lower thousands, to defend a sector while the main force goes on the offensive. There are simply too few men. AFU, which has a very short shorter-internal-logistics structure manages to create feints easily by first probing the Kharkov line in the north and then quickly probing the Kerson line in the south. This made the Russian reserves giddy as they didn't know which front they had to protect. AFU hid the actual plan till the last hours and then attacked the front that was manned the least and punched through the defences easily. Had the RF destroyed the railway and communication nodes of the AFU on the rear, they wouldn't have managed to deploy forces so easily.

There are other issues as well. Ironically, the wanton destruction of AFU's officer class has now started to help them. How? AFU's junior-most commanders are now free to take tactical decisions regarding target-hitting and manoeuvres. Simply because there are often too few seniors to turn to. RF on the other hand relies on the archaic method where even smaller measures like bringing to bear the artillery fire have to go through a chain of command, which makes the process slower and consequently less effective.

AFU also enjoys NATO funded and SpaceX-facilitated Starlink Communication program. Without it, the Ukrainian Front will collapse in a week.

Russia has the world's best electronic warfare complexes that this correspondent has seen being used successfully in Syria. Why was it not used effectively against Ukraine is anyone's guess. However, the recent setbacks in Kharkov and Kherson woke the Russians from a stupor and something is being done to suppress Starlink. This is the primary reason Ukrainian rollback has stopped in the last 15 days while the Western press is baying for Elon Musk's blood as they suspect him of sabotage. The fact, however, is less conspiratorial. RF has simply started using EW complexes more frequently and effectively.

RF is rectifying other mistakes as well. The mobilisation is going as per the schedule and those mobilised should be able to participate effectively in the winter offensive that the RF is planning.

There's a marked improvement in other areas as well. After the foiled sabotage of the Crimean Bridge, it appears that Putin has taken the gloves off. Several days of attack on Ukrainian railway nodes, 330MW Power Transmission hubs, and several arms-maintenance factories in the rear being hit is a testimony to that. However, there needs to be persistent hits on these places. A couple of days of attack wouldn't degrade the AFU capabilities substantially.

The issue of command and control is also being sorted out. A new general is at the helm and the chief of staff and the defence minister, though not removed, have been cut from the chain of command for the day-to-day battle.

What does all this mean? The window for AFU to make further gains is shrinking. They might be able to still make some gains till mid-November, but once the expected winter offensive starts, the effects of their victories in Kharkov and Kherson will bear heavily. In capturing the 2000 square kilometres of land, they have lost several thousand of their best-trained soldiers. This will come to bite. For now, AFU is trading territory for lives while RF is trading territory for time. Only winters will tell who is going to succeed.

Saurabh Kumar Shahi has covered The Greater Middle East for over 15 years and has reported from Kabul, Peshawar, Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, and Jerusalem among other places.

As the war persisted, and it became clear that this had to become a war of occupation, Russia didn't change its tactics. It didn't need to. The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), for all practical purposes, lost the war in the first month itself. They lost mobility and were pushed to doing heeled-in defensive actions with no capacity to mount even a limited offensive or so much as to force a manoeuvre.

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