



## Separate ways

Sharad Yadav has adopted a long-term view in deciding to part with Nitish Kumar

On the credit side of his long political ledger, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has been able to carry with him most of his party's State legislators through his flip-flops. Whether he made or broke alliances, whether with the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Rashtriya Janata Dal, a majority of the Bihar unit of the Janata Dal (United) stayed with him. The only blot in his drama-filled copybook so far is the revolt of senior leader Sharad Yadav, who took some of the moral sheen away from the attempt to portray the break-up of the 'grand alliance' with the RJD and the Congress as a principled stand against corruption. Indeed, Mr. Yadav, in describing the dissolution of the alliance as a betrayal of the people's mandate of 2015, has pressured Mr. Kumar into dropping all pretence and formally joining the National Democratic Alliance of the BJP. The prospect of ministerial berths at the Centre might have persuaded some of the JD(U)'s Members of Parliament to go along with Mr. Kumar, but Mr. Yadav appears to have generated some political momentum on his own. With the formalisation of the split, the JD(U) could be in danger of losing its election symbol, the Arrow. Mr. Yadav has made it clear he is not leaving the party he helped found, and led for some time.

A BJP-JD(U) electoral alliance is formidable, but if the 2015 Assembly election proved anything, it was that the RJD retained its core support base. Mr. Yadav knows he can retain his relevance in Bihar's politics by siding with the RJD's Lalu Prasad. The series of corruption cases against him and his family members notwithstanding, Mr. Prasad, with his own brand of backward class identity politics and wooing of the minority community vote-bank, remains a vote-catcher in Bihar. The present turn in the State's politics presents an opportunity for Mr. Yadav to strike out on his own, and find a niche for himself. To go along with Mr. Kumar at every turn would have cramped the political space for Mr. Yadav at the national level. Also, in spite of what he likes to believe, Mr. Kumar might have played into the hands of the BJP. At the time of the next Lok Sabha election, the BJP will most likely call the shots in seat apportioning and constituency selection. Mr. Kumar needs the BJP more than the BJP needs him. Without an alliance partner, Mr. Kumar might just sink; the RJD-Congress combine is sure to take the anti-BJP political space. Thus, in making his decision Mr. Yadav seems to have factored in a possible souring of Mr. Kumar's relations with the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah duo. The prospect of an immediate ministerial berth was probably weighed against the possibility of long-term political marginalisation.

## Missing investors

The Sahara case calls for a thorough probe to reveal all its money laundering dimensions

It has been about five years since the Supreme Court ordered the Sahara Group, led by Subrata Roy, to refund money that it borrowed from investors without sufficient regulatory clearance. But the Securities and Exchange Board of India, which was tasked by the Supreme Court to oversee the actual transfer of money from the Sahara Group to investors, is clueless about where to find those investors. The total amount, including interest on the initial principal, that needs to be refunded to investors has bulged to about ₹40,000 crore now. Of this, SEBI has received an aggregate amount, including interest earned on deposits, of about ₹14,487 crore from the Sahara Group. But according to SEBI's latest annual report, as on March 31, 2017 only about ₹85.02 crore, including interest of about ₹38.05 crore, of this amount has actually been returned to investors. As a background to the case, it is notable that Sahara India Real Estate Corporation Ltd. and Sahara Housing Investment Corporation Ltd., entities that come under the Sahara Group, were directed by SEBI in 2011 to return about ₹24,000 crore that they had raised through the issue of optional fully convertible debentures. The entities had collected the money without seeking SEBI's approval, which led the regulator to order the money to be returned to investors with appropriate interest. The Sahara Group argued that it had sufficient approvals from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs for the issue. But the Supreme Court, on August 31, 2012, upheld the 2011 SEBI order.

The fact that very few investors have come forward to reclaim their money is bizarre. SEBI has been requesting genuine investors in Sahara to step forward and claim their money since at least May 2013. This obviously raises questions about the authenticity of Sahara's investor base, which needs to be investigated thoroughly. The Sahara Group earlier claimed that it had already returned 95% of the capital that it borrowed from investors even before the Supreme Court's 2012 decision – it says this is the reason much of the refund money remains unclaimed. But the Group failed to satisfy the Supreme Court's request to provide evidence of the source of funds used to make the claimed return payments. It was always clear that the Sahara case was hardly about investor protection, one that could be handled by SEBI. Yet, even as crores of rupees remain unclaimed from SEBI, investigations into the case from the angle of possible money laundering have been slow. The Enforcement Directorate began proceedings in 2014 against the Sahara Group under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, but has had very little to show for its efforts. The government must step in to expedite a probe into what could be a massive money laundering exercise. This will yield better results than waiting for millions of missing investors to turn up. Finally, the Ministry's rationale for approving Sahara's initial fund-raising efforts should not be left uninvestigated either.

# Patriot games at Attari-Wagah

Seventy years after 1947, it's time to wind down the choreographed hostility at the India-Pakistan border



HAPPYMON JACOB & KAVERI BEDI

“Louder,” the tough-looking Border Security Force (BSF) guard gesticulated to the cheering, flag-waving Indian audience at Attari on the India-Pakistan border as the shouts of “Jio jio Pakistan” from the Wagah side of the border, barely 100 metres away, briefly dominated the air. The hyper-charged crowds were only too happy to comply and shouted back, “Bharat Mata ki Jai”, drowning out the Pakistani “at-tack”.

The older we become as nation-states, the less mature we seem to have become – the retreat ceremony at the Attari-Wagah border testifies to that. Over the past 70 years, the display of respective nationalisms at the border has become far more aggressive, dramatic, and hateful. The well-choreographed hurling of the slogans “Bharat Mata ki Jai” and “Jio jio Pakistan” at each other not only reduces the India-Pakistan relationship to a juvenile shouting match but, more importantly, encourages people to belittle and disrespect each other's sense of nationhood in praise of one's own. The retreat ceremony today is less of a celebration and more about denigrating the other. Does belittling each other's nationhood make our respective nations any greater? ‘No’ should be the ideal answer, but not everyone would agree.

### A choreography of hostility

Following Partition, and the creation of the two states in 1947, the Wagah-Attari border, a short drive from Lahore and Amritsar, remained a trade and transit point between the two countries. During the heydays of India-Pakistan relations in the mid-2000s, it was de-



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cided to allow trucks to go to designated points on either side of the border for unloading cargo. Today, there is more formalised trade between the two countries than there is transit thanks to severe visa restrictions.

The Attari border was managed by the Indian Army in the first few years after Independence and later managed by the Punjab Armed Police before the BSF eventually took over after its creation in 1965. When the retreat ceremony began in 1959, the joint Check Post was marked by a few painted drums, two flag masts and a rubble of stones astride the Grand Truck Road that stretches from Calcutta to Peshawar.

During the early decades, the flag-lowering ritual was a low-key affair that had an almost negligible audience and spartan seating arrangements, a far cry from the grand infrastructure and pavilions that can accommodate as many as 10,000 people today.

India's 1999 victory over Pakistan in Kargil made all the difference, as well as the opening up of the Indian media space in the preceding years. Since Kargil, the Attari-Wagah border has become a tourist destination and consequently led to the expansion of infrastructure on both sides. Unlike the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, when the ceremony was temporarily halted during the conflicts, it continued during the dura-

tion of Kargil. Given that Kargil was India's ‘first televised war’, it also brought about several changes in the way we relate to war, peace and of course the ‘enemy’, Pakistan. Post-Kargil, the ceremony started reflecting carefully choreographed elements of hostility and resentment towards the enemy ‘other’ across the white line at Attari. A quick glance at post-Kargil films such as *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (2003), and *LOC Kargil* (2003) demonstrate how Kargil has influenced our notions of nationalism and the sources and definitions of national security threats.

Over the years, the ceremony has become hostile and dramatised with the guards displaying intimidating gestures, stomping their feet and exchanging angry glares across the large iron gates, much to the delight of the cheering crowds. In 2010, BSF and Pakistani Rangers agreed to do away with some of the overt aggression, yet the angry gestures of stomping, thumping and glaring nonetheless remain an integral part of this theatrical ceremony.

### Some niceties

“Your excellency” is the salutation officers on either side use when addressing each other, irrespective of rank, and junior officers salute senior officers from the ‘enemy side’ if they happen to meet. There are ritualistic exchanges of sweets

# Moby addiction

The uproar over ‘Blue Whale’ highlights our uneasy adjustment to a hyper-connected world



JACOB KOSHY

Parents, state legislators, the courts and the police in India seem to be having a harrowing time with an elusive enemy. Blue Whale – an online ‘game’ that supposedly prods teenagers into undertaking a sequence of bizarre, dangerous tasks which include lacerating their skin and jumping off buildings – seems to be as ominous and mysterious as Moby Dick. For now, it even seems as fictional.

It is claimed that some boys who have lost their lives played this online but not a single police investigation in either Kerala or in Maharashtra has conclusively linked the game with their deaths. While everyone from Microsoft to Facebook has been instructed by the government to “disable” links to Blue Whale, there is no clarity on where these are, who its creators are, and how this game is run.

Unlike a flu virus running amok, catching an online link to ‘Blue

Whale’ isn't easy. That's why it is not clear if the government, in its mission to ‘ban’ Blue Whale, will invoke some of its trusty armoury in the Information Technology Act – akin to the purge on pornography – to clear search term combinations of “blue”, “whale”, “game” “death” and “suicide.” Why something as amorphous as Blue Whale has so quickly captured a chunk of public murmur (it's already an Amul cartoon) has less to do with the nature of the game and more with our unease of adjusting to an exponentially hyper-connected world.

### Turning the mirror on us

Mundane objects circulating and systematically killing those who come in contact with them is a favourite trope of fiction. From the glowing briefcase of Pulp Fiction to the killer video cassette of the Ring, few things are more terrifying than the ubiquitous becoming sinister. While video games, Internet chat rooms and now, virtual-reality headsets, have over the decades been blamed by befuddled parents as the body snatchers who have turned their outdoorsy children into inmates of an alternate-reality prison, it's the vast difference



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between our dependence on communication devices and how little we ‘understand’ the inner workings of these objects such as mobile phones, websites, apps, Internet protocol that makes them objects of terror.

A few decades ago, parents could ban prurient books, music and movies because as a rule of thumb anything with sexual innuendo or graphic violence could be recognised and categorised as such and locked away. Now the dilemma that adults face is that they are as hooked to mobile phones as their children. The relative addictiveness of Candy Crush *vis-à-vis* Snapchat can no longer be easily classified and therefore condemned.

and occasional hugs between the BSF and Pakistani Rangers on special days such as August 14-15 and Diwali/Eid (ironically, there are often reports of increased firing on the Line of Control on such days). During times of tensions, this practice is often suspended.

A BSF officer pointed out that not all gestures are as aggressive as they are perceived to be but are sometimes indications to the other side about the conduct of the ceremony and what to do next. If you travel to the other side on foot, what surprises you is not just the seamlessness of life on either side of the border but also the chit-chatting and familiarity between the ‘adversaries’ that one gets to see. Behind the stomping and angry glares then, there is a certain cordiality that exists on the Attari-Wagah border, and that in a sense is what makes it even more ironical, and a theatre of the absurd.

### The commerce of patriotism

The retreat ceremony today is not just a daily exercise in the display of nationalism and military vigour. Over the years, it has become a heady cocktail of Bollywood music, businesses flashing their tri-coloured advertisements, souvenir shops selling patriotic memorabilia, and LCD screens displaying the sponsors of the event. Nationalism is good business too.

The whole event is electrifying. Hordes of school students enthusiastically waving the tricolour, BSF guards dressed in white sportswear getting around the venue and sloganeering over the loudspeaker, and men and women dancing to the tune of patriotic songs from Bombay cinema – ‘*Kandhon se milte hain kandhein*’, ‘*Yeh desh hai veer jawaanon ka*’, ‘*Dushman ke chakke chudade hum India walle*’, ‘*Desh nu chalo desh mangta kurbaniyan*’. The drill on the Pakistani side is no different, only the songs and flag are.

The Bollywood connection to the retreat ceremony doesn't end there. Popular film actors are often seen at the venue promoting their films and connecting with the

crowds, besides adding to the nationalistic atmosphere.

Then there is Sarhad, the highway restaurant close to the Attari-Wagah border that serves both Pakistani and Indian cuisine, reminding you of the common architectural, cultural and culinary heritage of pre-Partition Punjab. Sarhad also displays murals narrating the story of pre-Partition bonhomie, Partition and its aftermath, and a potential future of borders without barriers.

For those returning from the war of words at Attari, Sarhad plays soothing Coke Studio songs such as Gurdas Mann's ‘*Ki Banu Duniya Da*’ (what will become of the world) – ‘*O Wagah de border te, raah puchdi Lahore'an de haye, raah puchdi Lahore'an de*’ (at the Wagah border, I look for roads that once took me to Lahore). War and peace, after all, is also a state of mind and it's in our minds that both the retreat ceremony at Attari and the Sarhad restaurant seem to be persuasively engaging in radically different ways.

### Seventy years on

Seventy years after the violence of Partition, the India-Pakistan relationship today has been reduced to this: jointly-choreographed shouting matches and threats of apocalyptic nuclear wars. The retreat ceremony at the Attari-Wagah border, a well-rehearsed exchange of insults, is a constant, daily, reminder of our hostility towards each other as against the idea of each other's nationhood, and the inhabitants of the two nations. Seventy years may not be a long time in the lives of two post-colonial nations, but the 70th anniversary of freedom is a good time to start accepting each other's existence as sovereign independent entities. India needs to accept Pakistan's tryst with its destiny and what it does with it, and vice-versa.

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That human beings, young or old, are primed towards irrational thrill-seeking is a biological fact. Wise people, with doctorates in medicine, continue to smoke despite incontrovertible evidence of the toxic effects of tobacco. Pilgrims and trekkers sign up, on faith, to trudge on swaying bridges and brave inhuman weather to visit homes of mythical gods and for views from mountain peaks that can be bought with a plane ticket.

### A case for investigation

There have yet been no government diktats to ban bungee jumping, adventure rides and wildlife safaris, all of which carry the small possibility of ensuring certain death. It's in fact the delicate balance between danger and safety that makes them alluring unlike the online game which, if you don't move from your seat, can never kill you. The young and old – again by the fact of being primates – are irrevocably drawn to being part of group hierarchies and their attendant peer pressure. On an average, we as a species only differ in the kind and not degree of activities that we choose to obsess over. Why, for instance, should a devo-

tion to prime numbers and weekend long binge watching be considered noble and tolerable but a quest to the point of sleep- and food-deprivation to complete *Civilizations* be considered ‘unhealthy’? These priorities essentially boil down to cultural quirks. Inducing anyone to commit suicide – online or offline – is an act that merits criminal investigation and must be viewed by authorities from the lens of trafficking and stalking rather than viewing the Internet as a uniquely potent cauldron of evil.

Cetology has it that whales have been beaching for a variety of reasons for millions of years. This could be due to algal poisoning, disorientation by sonar, the tendency of some species to unquestionably follow a “leader” and, sometimes, an awry instinct to swim closer to shores when they get older and weaker and less confident of staying in the deep. It's news when pods of whales get stranded en masse on beaches but the overwhelming majority of whales die silently in the oceans. Blue whales included.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### China's hostility

It is not unexpected that in the middle of a charged border stand-off, China, our neighbour, has not been sharing hydrological data with us (“No data from China on Brahmaputra this year”, August 19). What is surprising though is that we are still dependent on China to provide us with the necessary hydrological data during the flood season despite all the technological progress we have made and a range of satellites launched to boost remote sensing. This shows that we need to reorient our scientific and technological research to meet these practical requirements. With hostility around us, we should not be caught on the back foot.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI, Hyderabad

■ There seems to be no limit to China's belligerent attitude which now almost borders on growing and open hostility (“Video shows troops trading kicks,

punches in Ladakh”, August 20). It is high time that India takes an extremely serious note of the situation and acts accordingly. As a first step towards launching an offensive, but in a peaceful manner, our foreign policy makers should accord diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.

ARUN MALANKAR, Mumbai

■ I wonder how many will pay heed to the wish expressed in the Open Page article – “Why we are friends, and should remain so”, August 13 – by a Chinese youth who travelled in India and penned his memorable experiences here. His genuine wish that the two Asian giants attempt conciliation over confrontation is quite appealing. When there has been tension for over 60 days at Doklam, his point that a piece of land is just a piece of land and that it is pointless in sending young people to their death just

for a plot of barren land must strike a chord. “Peace and friendship with all mankind is our wisest policy, and I wish we may be permitted to pursue it” is what Thomas Jefferson said. It must be tried out without delay.

K. JAYANTHI, Chennai

### On Charlottesville

When we talk about the U.S., we tend to think of it in terms of equality for all, great freedom and a tolerance towards every religion. The appalling violence in Charlottesville belies these. What we witnessed in the U.S. is akin to some of the social turmoil in India. While the root cause of the violence in the U.S. is linked to white supremacy, the factors here are religious jingoism and parochialism. The parallels do not end here. The leaders of both nations share a somewhat similar stance as far as the minorities are concerned. Both leaders share an

extreme ideology and come up with exaggerated rhetoric laden with fancy promises. They have also failed to be vigilant and take the required steps needed to stem extreme tendencies in their respective countries. The notions of bigotry, racism, hatred, fascism, parochialism and communalism are antithetical to equity and are evils which pose a strong threat to a well-functioning democracy.

DEEPTI JAIN, New Delhi

### Surprise checks

Puducherry Lt. Governor Kiran Bedi's act of checking measures for women's safety in Puducherry by going on a midnight motorbike inspection, and incognito, should prompt authorities across India to conduct surprise inspections at all hours to check the functioning of essential services and government establishments (“Kiran Bedi plays cop again, polices streets”,

August 20). Such a step gives officials true information about the functioning of various departments and paves the way for good governance. We can learn a lot from our ancient kings who disguised themselves as ordinary people and kept a eye on administration.

K. MANASA SAANVI, Hyderabad

■ Going viral seems to be the trend today. Kiran Bedi's intentions may have won appreciation, but how does a picture evolve “without being noticed”? Examples of other “inspections” going viral are of Kerala Road Transport Corporation MD M.G. Rajamanikyam spending time in the workshop assisting in repairs; the Health Minister of Kerala on a ‘surprise visit’ to the Thiruvananthapuram General Hospital and taking errand staff to task; and a sitting judge of the Kerala High Court clearing a clogged storm water drain. How the press came to

know about these is anybody's guess. The show must go on.

T.V. SREEKUMAR, Bengaluru

### Corporate rumblings

Happenings in the corporate world in the form of the resignations of Vishal Sikka from Infosys and Cyrus Mistry from the Tata group once again highlight the issue of ‘unwanted interference’ from supposedly retired ‘mentors’. There is no doubt that these stalwarts have given their life and blood in bringing their respective companies to their present stature but at the same time find it difficult to ‘let go’. Their all-pervasive personality looms large over the company stifling the working style of the incumbent heads, ultimately paving the way for their destruction.

SHARADA SIVARAM, Kochi

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