

WHY THIS SILENCE?

The politics of death is a dangerous game and right now it's being played out in J&K. The silence of the political leadership over the killings of three residents of a village in Billawar is shocking and amounts to rubbing salt into the wounds of a community devastated by the incident. Except for the BJP leaders and a lone Left MLA Yusuf Tarigami, leaders have shied away from reacting to this gruesome incident that is claimed by the terrorists. Many leaders have found it opportune to condemn the hosting of a fashion show in Gulmarg during Ramzan as it is offensive to the culture and ethos of Kashmir and yet they choose to play down the killings of three Billawar residents. The killings of the three civilians including a young child are clearly meant to terrorise the locals and, as MOS Dr. Jitendra Singh said, to engineer communal tension in the region of Jammu. Protests erupted in the area as people vent their anger and frustration over terrorists operating in their area. They were angry over the inaction of forces against terrorists who had killed two villagers in January. Residents are angry over what they always knew that the authorities had been turning a blind eye to the ecosystem building over the years and that supports terrorists to operate. Before eliminating terrorists, the system needs to be purged of the embedded OGWs of these Pakistan-backed groups. The over ground workers of terror groups had remained untouched over the years and it has resulted in the killings. This pattern is the same as we saw it earlier in Rajouri. It's becoming clear that Pakistan has changed its tactic of terrorism in J&K. It's focused on selective killings in Jammu region with a view to diving its peace loving people and spreading communal tension. It's sad that the counterterrorism grid had ignored Jammu for a long time though most of the infiltration was taking place from this side for many years. Jammu needs a concerted effort against terrorists and especially their over ground support system.

Avay Shukla

Come April and I cannot wait to get back to my tiny village in the mountains after a seven-month, soul-destroying hiatus in the wasteland that is Delhi. Purani Koti (PK) is 16 km from the concretised and car-swamped purgatory of Shimla. I have built a cottage there and have tried to atone for my large bureaucratic footprint of 35 years by planting, over the years, about 200 trees on my land, of which 180 or so have survived, a much better rate than that of the forest department! They include oak, deodar, chinar and horse chestnut; the most prolific, however, are the weeping willows, which belie their name by looking luxuriantly happy for most of the year.

I like to be there by March-end and personally experience how man, animal and nature all welcome the arrival of spring. During the four months of winter when we can receive as much as 2 feet of snow, PK goes into hibernation. Most outside activities cease, construction of houses and hotels is thankfully suspended, all birdlife, except the tiny tits and bulbuls, disappears. All "outsiders", including "domiciled" ones like me, head back to the metros, leaving to Geetika the onus of keeping our flag flying in these freezing times!

Geetika has so fallen in love with this place that she braves it out through much of the winter with her three labradors. She runs a charming homestay, but I have a sneaking feeling that that is just an excuse to stay away from Gurgaon! How can one blame her?

The willows and wild rhododendrons are the first to start leafing and flowering, followed by the rock begonias, hydrangeas, geraniums and nasturtiums: my garden explodes with a new colour every day. The roses, as befits their exalted status, make me wait

Changing colours amid the bloom



another month before flashing their blood-red visiting cards. Among the fruit trees, the apricot blossoms stain the landscape a soft pink by the end of March; a few weeks later, the apple and 'nashpati' flowers, too, will add their lilac and white hues to nature's palette.

On cue, the butterflies, bees and bumblebees miraculously reappear, though sadly not in the numbers of 15 years ago when I first arrived here. They flit frantically from flower to flower as if renewing friendships of the previous year. There used to be dragonflies earlier but they have now gone.

The tiny songbirds, barbets and Himalayan magpies, with their extravagant tails, will be here soon, followed by the incredibly green parrots whose non-stop chattering is the avian equivalent of our social media. The elusive jungle fowl and khaleej pheasant can be spotted again at dawn and dusk in our dense forests of deodar, blue pine and oak, furiously rummaging around

in the leaf litter as if looking for something left behind in the summer.

After seven months of living in a neon-reflecting grey shroud, I can see the sun and the stars again, greeting the morning orb with a prayer and wonder in my heart: is this the same sun that one dreads in Delhi? The night sky is like a star-sequined bosom pressing down on my upturned face — silent, comforting and all-embracing. The only occasional sound is that of a jackal complaining plaintively of his lot in life or the learned hoot of a barn owl. It's Eden without the serpent.

The whole village comes to life again: kids in smart new uniforms hop their way to school, labourers from Nepal and Bihar return to jobs in construction and orchards, even the PWD workers survey the potholes while smoking beedis wondering whether it's worth the effort of filling them up. (It's not!). The farmers are back in their now sun-drenched fields, sowing the potatoes, peas and cauliflowers that will see them through the year; the orchardists complete the last of the sprays on apple trees, praying to Shali Mata, the local deity, to spare them the hailstorms that can wipe out a year's earnings in a matter of minutes.

But the rhythms of Eden are changing. Spring arrives a few days early every year, confusing the plants, birds and insects. Villagers are shifting from vegetables to stone fruits and spur variety of apples: these involve less labour, recurring costs and risks; the returns

are also higher. There is less water for irrigation each year: vegetables require regular watering, fruit trees do not. The whole economy of the village is changing, which by itself is not a bad thing, for everything must adapt to survive.

There is, however, one major discordant note: the unwelcome conversion of rich, productive agriculture lands into plots for building of ugly "villas", hotels and holiday homes for well-heeled outsiders looking for second and third homes. They contribute little to the rural economy; they rarely spend more than a couple of weeks a year in them. But they despoil the green environment, strain the limited infrastructure of power, water, roads; dump their garbage and plastics in the forests and foul the little streams. Fruit trees are felled and whole orchards razed to make way for these pestilential structures. Grazing fields have been built over, to the point where villagers have stopped rearing cattle because there is no grazing available. So, now, milk, butter, ghee and even manure are brought in from outside in plastic bags.

The policymakers have devastated the towns in their quest for quick bucks from a tourism model that is unsustainable; they should not repeat this mistake in rural areas like Purani Koti. Promote only homestays and B+B's: these do not involve diversion of precious farm land or orchards, do not strain infrastructure yet provide profitable livelihood options for the villagers.

This is, of course, wishful thinking; it will not happen in my lifetime. I don't think my little Eden will retain its natural splendour much longer. I only hope that I've shuffled off this mortal coil when the serpents take over.

GIRLS WITH THE GUTS TO SPEAK UP

Usha Bande

I glanced at her cherubic face — pink cheeks and a creamy complexion. Manbhari seemed a befitting name for the lovely girl. I smiled. Her eyes sparkled momentarily and clouded just as suddenly and her expression changed to an unsmiling emoji with downturned lips.

Manbhari was our new household help, hired thanks to the entreaties of her mother, who assumed that city life would drum some sense into the adamant and querulous girl. "Nobody will marry her," she added. However, I found Manbhari a docile and willing worker. She was an eager learner and tutoring her was a pleasure.

As Manbhari settled in our household, she opened up. From the snippets she shared occasionally, we could figure out her family's attitude and perception and reconstruct the story of her rebelliousness. Her family back in the village was frustrated with the birth of five



daughters. "When I was born, they called me Manbhari because they were fed up." It must be painful for the child to fight the negativity her name exuded, to combat the daily mocking of her schoolmates rhyming Manbhari with Rasbhari (raspberry).

"I don't like this name, Didi ji," she confided in me. "It sounds like eatables: Rasbhari,

Jharberi or Imarti" — a la Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. She yearned for a moniker like Pooja, her favourite teacher. It was amazing to have a glimpse of a rural world where girls were keen to assert their identity.

Manbhari's story transported me back to the days of my research on gender issues in Maharashtra's rural Satara, where I

came across several girls named Nakoshi. In Marathi, Nakoshi means 'unwanted.' The story is almost identical — when daughter after daughter is born, the last one becomes unwanted.

Finding sympathetic listeners in us, the girls voiced their resentment. "Why don't they call the sons 'Nakosha'?" they argued. One Nakoshi reminisced how a teacher convinced

her mother to change her name to Laxmi. Interestingly, these girls had a cherished list of beautiful modern names they aspired to have one day — Deepa, Juhi, Priya and the like. "Maybe my husband would understand and change my name," quipped another Nakoshi, while others giggled.

Year after year, as we celebrate International Women's Day, honouring urban women, conferring awards on them for their achievements and patting our backs for empowering them, let us be aware of the struggles of womenfolk in the hinterland who are still burdened with societal insensitivity and expectations. How can a woman, struggling with her callously chosen name that remains etched in her psyche, ever be empowered?

Yet there is a bright side to the stark picture. Girls like Manbhari and Nakoshi are mustering courage to speak up, to make their voices heard. "A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman," Melinda Gates has rightly said.

A gaur-gantuan encounter in the Sahyadri reserve

Girish Arjun Punjabi

It happened on October 13, 2020, that unnerving encounter with one of those forest giants who I thought I had become quite familiar with. It happened in the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve, a little-known reserve in the northernmost frontiers of the Western Ghats.

As part of my work with the Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT), I have spent thousands of hours trekking through this beautiful landscape over the years. That morning was no different. It would be another usual survey for us. Or so we thought.

We were staying at the Chandel Protection camp — five of us, a motley mix of forest staff and researchers. The morning started with the usual routine. There was a slight nip in the air that morning. Our team broke off into two. Along with forest guard Dyaneshwar Kale and forest watcher Krushna Wadan, I de-

cidated to survey an area reaching up to another camp called Siddheswar. It would be an hour's trek, up a slope, from the spot where we would park our vehicle in the forest.

The walk commenced as planned, and there onwards it was, as I said earlier, 'the usual' fare i.e. collecting data on animal signs as we came across fresh signs of gaur, wild pigs, multiple old droppings of dholes, and fresh scrape marks and scat of a leopard! Exciting, yes, but nothing out of the ordinary for me by then. We reached Siddheswar as planned, without event.

Then, once at Siddheswar, on a whim, we decided to continue our trek a bit further to a place called Siddhtek, a small grassy knoll at the crest-line of the mountain from where one can get a bird's-eye view of the Konkan region. You can imagine the view. I always have thought of such views in the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve as my reward at the end



of many an arduous trek.

Oh, and another thing — when you emerge from the thick forests on to Siddhtek knoll, your phone buzzes incessantly! Yes, network coverage — that elusive elixir for all us researchers who spend most of our field stays completely cut off from mobile connectivity.

When living in such remote camps inside the forests, the buzz of phone messages gives a long-lasting dopamine high, quite unlike the incessant and instant gratification we're used to in cities.

So, we walked. About 20 minutes into our ascent to Siddhtek,

everyone's phones started buzzing with messages, an indication that we were nearing the crest-line. However, since we were still on the survey, everyone desisted from viewing their phones. As we would soon find out, this proved to be a very sensible decision. We noted fresh

hoof-marks of a gaur leading up along the trail. Since I was leading the walk, I momentarily stopped to look back and whisper to my teammates that we should tread carefully to the hilltop.

And then, it happened! No sooner had I whispered those words and turned back to look forward towards the trail, a huge gaur metamorphosed in front of us, barely 15m away, peering from the dense Karvi bush! In a matter of seconds, even before I could fully register what was happening, this bull charged at us at full throttle. His aim was clear — knock these intruders down! Involuntarily, I screamed to my teammates to jump to the side of the trail. We leaped immediately, almost mindlessly, even as the ground thundered under this gaur's hooves, almost as if a train engine was hurtling towards us. They say when accidents happen, in that critical moment, time slows down almost like it does in those movies. In that moment, I

realised what that felt. Time slowed down, and all I saw was this startled gaur speed past me with its massive horns, barely a few centimetres away from tearing through my flesh. And then, suddenly, that slow motion reel ended and there were sounds of great commotion and crash as the gaur, having missed his target, thankfully, sped away on the trail through the bushes.

My heart was almost bursting through my chest. I remember sitting on my knees to calm myself. The others were in a similar state.

We had literally just dodged death, or severe injury, at the very least. No one said a word for a few minutes. Then, and some of you may find this to be strange, we burst into laughter. We were certain the gaur was as spooked as we were. We gathered our wits, took a breather and then forged ahead — after all, the stunning view and the scores of unread messages awaited us!