

KOREAN BLUES

The suicide of three teenaged sisters in Ghaziabad has shaken up Indians across all ages about the dark reality of the virtual world that Indian children have unbridled access to. The three sisters were apparently living in a make-believe world of being Koreans after heavily consuming the Korean online shows. As the debt ridden father work up to the reality of his children, he took away their phones and the teenagers could not put up with not seeing their heroes and shows online. The sisters believed they were Koreans and could not manage without their phones and hence jumped out of the ninth flood to death. The tragedy calls upon the government to issue regulations on use of social media by minors. More than the official regulations, society must discuss the issue and spread awareness about the harms of social media. Loneliness is killing people and children of working parents are finding solace in online games, movies, etc. Instead of going to play and join a sports for evening coaching the children switch on their mobiles and get absorbed in its content.

Society must rise to this rising threat to our children from the online content. Both parents out of house for work leave children alone and given them a ruse to switch over to online associations. The breakdown of joint family in the urban set up, leaves children unattended. As such Korean content is very popular among the youth in India. The Korean dramas, films and actors have a huge fan following across India. No harm in it is all this is regulated and monitored. It may be recalled that the Korean entertainment industry is very ambitious as the government allocates a percentage of GDP on it. The idea is that the popularity of the entertainment industry will eventually lead to Korean wares being exported to those countries. No wonder, in Delhi and many other major cities we have Korean markets where everything Korean in sold.

Siddharth Pandey

IN a rather wonderful though ironic twist of seasonal behaviour, 'Winter Proper' arrived in north India this year on Basant Panchami, which marks the first day of spring. One wonders what Percy Bysshe Shelley would have said of this anomaly, given his famous line "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

This time, though, winter caught up with spring in a display of festive solidarity—the yellow of mustard swayed brightly under the pristine white of mountain snow. The much-needed moisture finally freshened the air and rejuvenated the land, ending one of the longest dry spells that the Himalayas have witnessed in recent decades.

But for all its celebratory ethos, the idea of 'washing away' simultaneously embodies a somewhat unsettling impulse, especially when viewed through the lens of our crisis-prone era. The fact that year after year we need rainwater to 'wash away' the gigantic smog-blankets throttling our capital and nearby cities says something about our exceptionally selfish dependence on nature to solve human-made problems. It brings to mind many other images from our years of growing up: from using more water than necessary for cleaning private cars to dumping everyday waste in canals and rivers as if it is the most natural thing to do.

Here, then, is another irony. That what was always regarded as the 'elixir of life' is now invariably also interpreted as a crucible of our collective egotism. If at one point in history, holy rivers were supposed to wash away our sins,



today they accumulate them, serving as silent witnesses to an existence gone awry.

Who can forget those haunting images of dead bodies floating in the Ganges during the Covid pandemic or the persisting visuals of the toxic Yamuna in Delhi, with its lethal froth and foam resembling snow? There is no denying that water and waste have assumed a shocking synonymy with each other in the present age. It's only the first month of the year, but the unholy coupling of water and waste has already defined the news several times. It hopped into the headlines when Indore, India's 'cleanest city', suddenly spewed forth hundreds of hospitalisations and over 15 deaths due to sewage-contaminated drinking water. Soon after, reports on sewage-related water contamination began emerging from Greater Noida, Hyderabad, Haryana and Rohtak while Gandhinagar revealed a typhoid out-

break. A few days ago, a new overhead water tank, constructed at a whopping cost of Rs 21 crore, at Tadkeshwar village in Surat, Gujarat, collapsed during its very first water-filling test.

But one mustn't look at these examples in isolation. They form a part of an ongoing continuum of technological ineptness and slapdash development that has beleaguered the country for a very long time now.

Last year, during the Chhath Puja festivities, authorities in Delhi created fake ghats on the Yamuna banks by propping up borders between filtered-water pools and the real river. And in 2024, three UPSC aspirants lost their lives to heavy flooding in the illegal basement library of a coaching centre in Delhi's Old Raja Nagar.

Waste, in this context, doesn't only refer to the defilement of our most celebrated natural element, but also to the decaying of the

imagination responsible for generating infrastructure around it. Undoubtedly, the stunting of both vision and inventiveness lies at the heart of this growing crisis. And like all crises, this too manifests itself in a multipronged manner, where dealing with one department in the hope of some solution leads us to another division, area or issue. The blame is everyone's and no one's, and passing-the-buck becomes the norm, with apathy and indifference quickly assuming the order of the day.

There is also a societal amnesia at work. It makes us forget the people who have worked hard to elicit change. They include GD Agarwal, later known as Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand, who lost his life in 2018, fighting for the cleaning and protection of the Ganges. An 86-year-old environmentalist and a former professor at IIT Kanpur, Swami Sanand breathed his last after a 111-day

fast in Haridwar. Prior to him, Swami Nigamananda Saraswati had passed away in 2011 after fasting for 114 days, protesting against illegal quarrying in the same river.

Recent viral reels on social media centred on sacred water bodies have drawn attention to the liberal amounts of milk being poured into them in the name of religious practice. While on the surface, one encounters a preponderance of platitudes on living hygienically and caringly, in reality, the majority—including the government—hardly appears genuinely interested in addressing the issue sustainably.

My small village in the Kangra Valley, for example, has repeatedly faced resistance by many residents who are against the idea of drain expansion outside their houses. This is a necessary step for the establishment of a properly networked system, but it is also something that is hugely 'repulsive' to the imagination of a significant number of people for purely parochial reasons.

But no matter how much we exhort individuals to change, for a country as big as ours, models for long-lasting transformation must primarily be provided by the government and bureaucracy in charge. And for these models to take shape, a thorough understanding of the society's material and emotional make-up must be acquired in an interdependent fashion.

Templates from other countries too are available to learn from, but only if we are actually willing to shed our wilfulness. Otherwise, instead of becoming a reality, potable water and healthy rivers shall only flow in the realm of dreams.

RIGHT TO VOTE AND THE DAILY GRIND

Vijeta Shrivastava

EVERY morning, after my children leave for school and my husband goes to work, I instinctively turn to the newspaper when I finally manage to find a little time for myself. I don't quite know why. Perhaps because somewhere between the headlines, I am searching for myself.

As a middle-class woman, I look for the same sense of belonging in these news pages that I have been searching for in my in-laws' home for the past 10 years of marriage. When I first learned about National Voters' Day (January 25), curiosity led me to a Google search. Maybe because every time I go to vote during any election, I am made to feel like the most important person, the one whose presence turns a structure into a house, yet who owns nothing inside it.

What falls to her share is only the daily struggle. A struggle that looks like expensive medical bills for flu, viral infections and breathing problems, illnesses caused by pollution and smog in cities like Gurugram and New Delhi. A



struggle that looks like quietly ignoring other household needs in order to pay exorbitant school fees in a country where education is a fundamental right.

I do this silently, much like I am ig-

nored after casting my vote.

Because I do not fit into the news stories where women voters receive Rs 10,000 each, nor into reports about the SIR (Special Intensive Revision), nor into any of the government's so-called

women-centric self-reliance campaigns, just as every room in a house needs me, yet no room belongs to me.

Waterlogged roads after even a short spell of rain force me to curse the day I carefully decided to cast my precious vote. Amid rising inflation, when I ask for discounts on everyday essentials, I try to protect my household budget the same way a woman protects herself while walking on the roads of Delhi-NCR.

As a woman voter, I continue to watch everything silently and accept it without protest. Why? I don't know. But I do know this much: regardless of which government is in power, women are always kept behind a veil. A veil that one particular community may wear by choice, but which is forcibly draped over those who do not.

The right to vote often feels like the one right that deprives me of many others.

And yet, I continue to watch quietly, carrying within me the desire for safety, self-reliance and equality, and I go back to vote again.

Because, after all, this is my right.

What we are and can be: Wishlist for sporting India

Pradeep Magazine

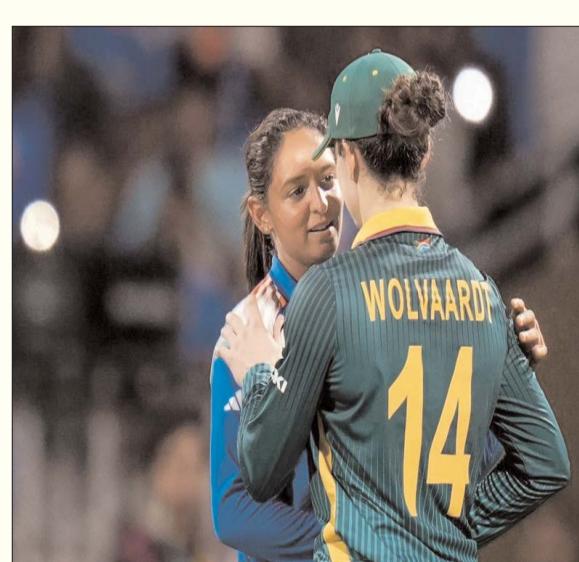
When you are inhaling the poisonous Delhi air that pumps your lungs, looking ahead with hope for a great future in the new year seems a difficult proposition. Yet life must go on as nothing sustains it more than a vision of a future where your wishes become real.

India may not be a sporting power yet, far from it, but there is a lot happening next year that should reaffirm a nation's progress in winning competitions. The T20 World Cup and the Asian Games are two major sporting events where India should showcase its undeniable strength. As hosts of cricket's shortest and arguably most popular format, India, in the minds of its fans and more importantly in the opinion of most experts, are the favourites to win. Nothing surprising, given the spread of the game, abundance of resources, money and the vast multitude that plays and benefits from a money-spinning tournament like the Indian Premier League.

In a cricket-centric nation, India has lagged behind in other sporting disciplines where competition is fair

tougher and playing nations greater in number and strength. India may have hosted the first Asian Games in 1951, but has never topped its medals tally, finishing fourth in the last Games in 2023. While there is no hope of overtaking or even getting anywhere close to China, which is a formidable sporting power in the world, India can dream of overtaking Japan and South Korea in the event to be held in Nagoya, Japan, in September-October next year.

In this future-gazing game and fulfilling of wishes, let us not forget that nothing reflects a nation and its society's civilisational goals more than the way it plays sports and the manner in which its people react to victory and defeat. Do we look at sports as a manifestation of excellence in physical skills, an art form that transcends boundaries of national loyalties, caste, creed and religion? Is skill subservient to the nation-state or does it break human boundaries and unite people of the world in celebrating the limitless possibilities of achieving perfection? As I reflect on what lies ahead, many life-changing experiences of the past flash in my mind.



Experiences that serve as a lesson for what should not be and what to desire for in this relentless, inexorable forward march of time. What is an aspiration or an achievement worth if its end-goal is to make the "other" feel insecure and inferior? Does one aspire to win to feel good and satisfied at having showcased mastery over a particular skill-set, or does one win to show

the other side weak and meek?

I have grappled with these questions ever since I felt "humiliated" at defeats on a cricket field in foreign lands. India's tour of Australia in 1999 left deep scars on my psyche, where I felt that an entire nation and its media were against India as a nation. More than the defeats, the over-the-top crowd celebrations and the equating of India with "dark ages" felt like a piercing stab in

the gut.

In one of the Test matches, India refused to play under floodlights when fading light interfered with the match. The playing conditions stated consent from both sides if such an eventuality arose. India exercised its right. A headline in the next day's paper screamed: Back to dark ages. More than a series of defeats, the loud, intimidating celebra-

tions of the crowd made us sulky, smarting, wounded and helpless. When in one of the Tests, a ducking Sachin Tendulkar was given lbw to a Glenn McGrath bouncer that hardly rose knee-high, a scathing piece against umpire Daryl Harper followed in the newspaper I was covering the tour for. Tendulkar was probably out, but a siege mentality had gripped us, hence the angry reaction.

While nothing went right on that tour, a lengthy opinion piece in a leading Australian paper ridiculed the ill-tempered, macho, over-the-top Australian team's reactions and the aggressive crowd celebrations. It called its own team, for these very reasons, the most "disliked" in the cricket world. That article had put things in a larger perspective of national identity and sports. It advocated saner ways of celebrating victories and tried to convey that what is loud and visible need not mean it represents the majority sentiment.

Over the years, Indian cricket has transformed into this gigantic monolith of muscle and money power, with its team having gained in strength and riches. History, however, has not taught us to become humbler. The "hunted" has become the "hunter". To those who were at the receiving end of Australian taunts and jibes in 1999, the Indian crowds and its media appear no different from them today.

The last match I have seen at a ground, among the crowds, was the India-Afghanistan 2023 World Cup match in Delhi's Kotla stadium. The flag-waving, raucous celebrations and verbal targeting of the Afghan supporters was scary. It was more like a mob looking for a target than fans enjoying a game of cricket while celebrating their own team's superior performance.

Among the many wishes I have for the next year is to see a more inclusive India, sensitive to gender and caste inequalities among its athletes. Let talent and not religion define a sportsman. I wish for us to realise that sports is not being in a territorial war with the enemy. It is not played with guns and bombs. A loss does not mean the end of life and winning not a conquest of the world.

Here's to a Happy New Year in pursuit of excellence, with the goal of playing the game of sports and life with courage, skill and wisdom.