

Vendetta, Psychopathy, and Other Year-End Blues

The Needle's Eye



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"When the old mother received the body of her child, which the neighbours had brought back to her, she did not cry, but she stayed there for a long time motionless, watching him. Then, stretching her wrinkled hand over the body, she promised him a vendetta."

So run these chilling words from a 19th-century story by Guy de Maupassant. It is a very short story and I recommend you read it to understand how the Widow Saverini avenges the killing of her son Antoine, and why 'vendetta' conjures up images of windswept Sardinian or Sicilian coastlines where people exact retri-

bution for terrible wrongs.

Both Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal, over the past few days, have accused PM Narendra Modi of waging vendettas against them. It is all dramatic, sinister, portentous, and blood-curdling. But we are talking about good old-fashioned politics here.

Rahul and his mother Sonia (who, Maupassant-like, swore "I am the daughter-in-law of Mrs Indira Gandhi, and I am not afraid of anybody or anything") have been summoned by a Delhi court this Saturday in connection with alleged malfeasance. As any smart Indian businessperson will tell you, the National Herald/Associated Journals Limited/Young Indian mess is as opaque as any clever business enterprise, or as the Russians say, like a babushka doll: one inside another inside another and so on.

The Gandhis are in the dock because of a lawsuit filed three years ago by Subramanian Swamy, a BJP politician. A Congress PM ruled the country then, and it does seem far-fetched to allege that the court summons has been engineered by Modi's government. In fact, the Gandhis and other Congress leaders decided to appear in court this weekend rather than appeal to the Supreme Court. So if the law is to take its course, why is Parliament being hijacked yet again, and GST held hostage?

Which should remind us. Have you noticed how every session of Parliament is held hostage by one earth-shattering scandal after another? And have you noticed how these scandals fade from the public glare and 'breaking' television coverage, one after the other, not



IT'S ABOUT TIMING

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with a bang but a whimper? If it is not the Lalit Modi-Sushma Swaraj-Vasundhara Raje outrage, then it is the Dadri beef lynching outrage, or the intolerance outrage.

Little matter that Swaraj is now flying high as foreign minister, and has just returned from an ice-breaking trip to Pakistan. Little matter that Lalit Modi has just been confirmed as president of the Rajasthan Cricket

Association. Little matter that Aamir Khan has been charged with sedition for his remarks on intolerance.

Of course we ought to be grateful for small mercies. Police in different Indian states are filing a flurry of sedition charges – there were 47 in 2014 and three in the first ten days of December 2015. Thankfully things are not as dire as in China, where human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang faces imprisonment after a mere three-hour trial this past Monday for seven – yes, seven – microblog posts 'provoking trouble' on Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter. At least we in India can freely indulge in what digital media watcher Amy Webb calls 'internet mob justice'.

Now, a mere two weeks after a convivial chai pe charcha between Modi and the two Congress Gandhis, a pleasing report by a panel headed by the government's Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, signals that a constitutional amendment bill decreeing a more palatable Goods and Services Tax at below 18% is about to dawn on us with all its effulgence. This game-changing economic reform seems about to bite the grimy polluted dust of another Delhi winter.

It goes without saying that if the Winter Session of Parliament, which ends on the 23rd, does not pass the constitutional amendment for GST, then FM Arun Jaitley's vow to have it operational by April 1 next year is doomed. The amendment has to be followed by a central GST bill and templated GST bills will have to be passed by every state legislature. It means putting in place a technical eco-

system, for which a separate company had been set up. Jaitley sounded nearly desperate at a conference with chambers of commerce on Wednesday, where he warned that non-passage risked a future where economic reform would be forced through by executive fiat.

The world is not waiting for India to get on with economic reform. By the time you read this column, the US Federal Reserve will have announced its first interest-rate hike since June 2006. By doing so, the Fed will be bucking the trend among major central banks – India's included – to trim rates in a desperate attempt to shore up flagging growth. The US, on the other hand, is seeing slowly rising inflation, falling unemployment, positive consumer sentiment, and signs that a 25 basis points rate hike is finally called for.

In India, though, GST is just one of the booster engines powering the nation's rocket. The others are sputtering. Consumer price inflation edged up to 5.4% in November. Although industrial production growth jumped by 9.8% in October, CRISIL Research warned that investment-related sectors' growth is fragile, and capital expenditure is unlikely to pick up until 2016/17. More alarmingly, merchandise exports have fallen for 12 months in a row.

Which is not to say that all is gloom. Reform continues to expand economic opportunity, and Modi's foreign-policy successes are in stark contrast with the political discord at home. Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's visit over the weekend yielded everything from \$12 b in assistance for the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project to offers of Japanese nuclear re-

actors, increased defence cooperation, and even a convention centre in Varanasi. India has walked away mostly satisfied from the Paris climate summit. On Wednesday, the World Bank announced a \$1.5-b loan for Modi's Swachh Bharat Mission.

Although India pronounced itself satisfied with the Paris summit, splitting hairs about per-capita carbon emissions is not going to change the reality for citizens in flood-ravaged Chennai, where 18 people died in a private hospital when their respirators lost power. Nor will it strengthen the lungs of people in New Delhi, where the SC had to step in to ban sales of big diesel cars for three months and restrict the entry of smoke-belching trucks.

This should have earned sympathy for Delhi CM Kejriwal, who is battling pollution by banning cars with odd and even numbered plates on alternate days from January 1. Instead, on Tuesday all hell broke loose again when Kejriwal termed Modi a 'psychopath' after the CBI raided the home and office of the CM's principal secretary in pursuit of a corruption charge that pre-dates Kejriwal's tenure.

What exactly is a psychopath? I watched a video of a 2012 talk by Jon Ronson, a Welsh journalist and humorist, who says he is now a certified psychopath spotter; he trained to be one after a clinician at a U.K. prison for the criminally insane told him psychopaths are glib and grandiose speakers who lack empathy, and are cunning and manipulative. "Capitalism at its most remorseless is a physical manifestation of psychopathy," he says. Now that doesn't sound like an Indian politician, does it?