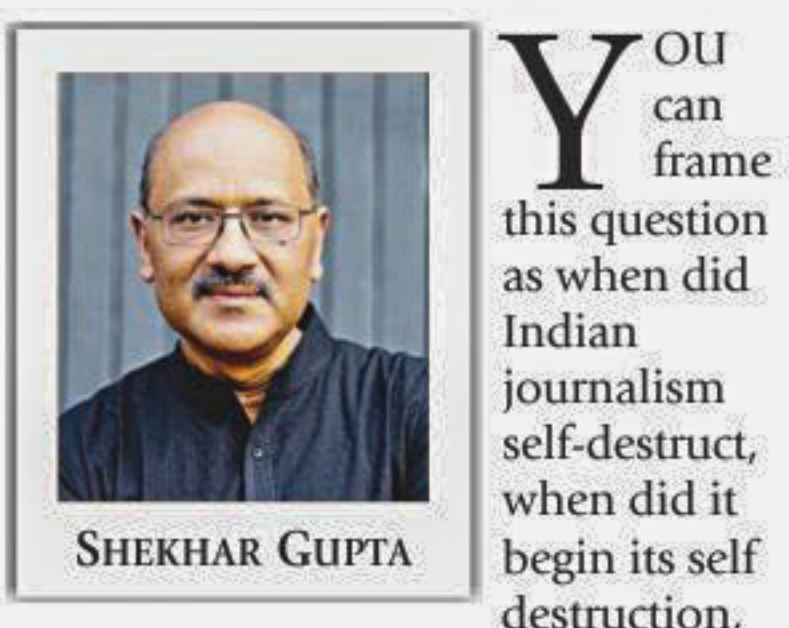


"Kitney Pakistani thhey?"

When journalism is reduced to touching simplicities, it begins to self-destruct.



SHEKHAR GUPTA

YOU can frame this question as when did Indian journalism self-destruct, when did it begin its self-destruction, or, is it on its way to self-destruction? I am choosing the third, although the first is tempting. But why draw dark delight from having predicted our own institutional and professional demise? It is, therefore, not an exercise in (Institutional) self-pity but an invitation to introspection and debate. There are other, subtler ways of framing the above questions as well. Since when did we start thinking of ourselves, journalists, to be our government's spokesmen, keepers of others' morality, and soldiers of the motherland? Why did we stop asking questions on issues of national security and foreign policy as if this was Brezhnev's Moscow? How come nobody feels awkward, or raises questions when most journalists - including among us senior or older ones - use "we," "our" and "us" when talking about our country, and government's foreign policy? Like, "We know you Americans have a complex relationship with Pakistan which works to our detriment but you can't expect us to continue to be sensitive to your concerns." What's wrong with this turn in our journalism is that we are comfortable seeing ourselves as part of the collective establishment. Pakistani journalists and commentators often argue that Indian media is more establishmentarian when it comes to foreign and military policies than theirs. The tough truth is that some of the Pakistani bylines (albeit mostly in English) have routinely and bravely questioned their establishment's policies and claims, including finding fault in the Kashmir policy, cultivation of terror groups and civil-military relations. Some have been exiled (Raza Rumi, Husain Haqqani), or even sent to jail (Najam

Sethi). Indian journalists had an argument: the civil-military issues, non-transparency of policy, patronising of terror groups were issues peculiar to Pakistan. India, as a much better, for more real democracy, apolitical Army, had no such problems so the comparison was irrelevant. And where need be, we raise questions. Nobody can accuse Indian media to have blindly supported the government of the day first on its subversion of Sri Lanka by training and arming LTTE (a story India Today let me break in early 1984 at the cost of being called anti-national by Indira Gandhi at her peak) or its intervention later through Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). Use of military (including paramilitary) power, from Operation Bluestar to Bastar to Kashmir Valley has been widely debated, and questioned. Post-Cold War foreign policy has been debated even more threadbare. A great example of that was the Indo-US nuclear deal. The trend has been shifting and not



honourable retired general to make a critical appraisal of this obvious failure was Lt-Gen J S Dhillon. And you can see why. Dhillon commanded one of the five brigades that fought their way into Jaffna exactly during these October days in 1987, and reached there fastest, with the least casualties. An old-fashioned, no-nonsense soldier and such an exception in this era of grey-moustachioed prime-time comedians. I would submit the shift began with Kargil. The Kargil story, or war, began with about three weeks of universal denial. The Pakistanis denied they were there, our Army denied their ingress so deep and so spread out, South Block didn't appreciate the implications and journalists got there before generals. It led to a mutually beneficial and unintentional embedding of journalists with the Army units directly involved in operations. A personal and professional bond developed that nobody had plotted. The end result was good for all: India's credibility rose as it had allowed independent, uncensored press, Army gained from stories of its incredible valour reaching

the entire country and journalists glowed in that halo. Never mind that one key story suffered in the process: how did so many Pakistanis manage to walk and dig in so deep, why it took us so long to find out, why we sent out half-hearted probes (thus using small patrols) or used aircraft vulnerable to shoulder-fired missiles and lost three (two MiGs, one Mi-17 besides a PR Canberra damaged) when better options were available. Who failed to stop the Pakistanis sneaking in over months; who all failed to appreciate the seriousness of the incursion? As a result, no heads rolled. The local brigade commander was the obvious scapegoat but got his reprieve in Armed Forces Tribunal. We were right to cover the story of the valour of young officers and soldiers. We were wrong to let the political and military establishment get away with colossal incompetence if not dereliction of soldierly duty. There is no failure more dangerous than that of military commanders and that is why traditional armies lay much emphasis on accountability. There

were many deserving gallantry awards given to brave young men in Kargil, but the guilty in higher places mostly got away. We in Indian media had meanwhile been already hailed as force-multipliers. We soaked in the moment, but also imbibed the wrong lesson: that journalists are an essential part of the country's war effort, force multipliers of its military. They can be both, but by seeking and speaking the truth, not by screaming at retired Pakistani generals, paid to take abuse, or converting their studios into war-rooms with *Chandamama* style sand-models, faux flak jackets. No wonder there are no Cyril Almeida and Ayesha Siddiqas in India, willing to speak the harsh truth, despite the risk of being condemned as "enemy" spokesmen. The self-destruction of journalism is in large part a story of Indian news TV stars (by and large) voluntarily diminishing themselves into propagandists and trumpeters. That it works commercially, is not in doubt, at least for the pioneers of this genre. Copycats might struggle, but won't give up as it is so tempting to suspend

all questioning scepticism, or even imagination to confect a formula to challenge warrior TV's present-day equivalent of old Gabbar, a Khan's immortal snarl: *Kitney Pakistani thhey?* I'd qualify: better count them dead not alive. When journalists accept "force multiplier" as a definition of their KRAs, there is no scope left for questions. The provocation of this argument is obviously Uri and its aftermath. It's left the media polarised, but extremely unevenly. On one, greatly dominant side, are those who not only ask no questions but sprint ahead of the government and the Army making claims they never made, and frankly, wouldn't. Mythical "representative" footage of nightly commando exercises is used to buttress these. Nobody, frankly, has been able to say with any authenticity what exactly happened almost three weeks ago. Either our government has become very good at keeping secrets, or we journalists have stopped looking for them. And you can see why. Because on the other, tiny and shrinking pole are the permanent, holier-than-cow doubters. They believe none of the government's claims, call them farcical but produce no evidence, no fact, no real scoops. Their demand, most touchingly, is that the government give evidence to back its claims. Every young person who goes to journalism school is taught governments hide, journalists find out. Here we have our most liberal, best educated, reputed, famous celebrity-journalists in the doubters' corner, not bringing scoops, but demanding a press conference. Further, they can't get the story, but "set" standards others must come up to. One group says, I believe even more than you told me, I don't need evidence. The other says, I believe nothing of what you say so make a public disclosure of military missions or I will presume you are lying. Now don't ask why I say Indian journalism is self-destructing.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist who is currently working with Business Standard. He was also the Editor-in-Chief of *Indian Express* for 19 years. Twitter: @ShekharGupta

Toxic Trump and his trumped up foes



WARREN FERNANDEZ

ONE newspaper called him a "most unlikely pretender to high office", a "dunderhead" with a "big mouth", known for his "scattershot, impulsive style". He had a penchant for long, rambling speeches, projecting himself in messianic terms, promising to lead the country to a new era of greatness. He emerged amid a "constellation of crises" - economic hardship and unemployment, an "erosion of the political centre" and a "growing resentment against the elites". This fed a hunger for a strongman touting radical solutions. Donald Trump? Boris Johnson? Rodrigo Duterte? No, actually, the lines above are from a recent *New York Times* review of a new book titled *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939*. Of course, for all their faults, Messrs Trump, Johnson or even Duterte have, so far, not done anything as heinous as the notorious German chancellor did. But the parallels in their rise to prominence are uncanny, and troubling enough to warrant pondering. This thought played on my mind as I sat through the recent bust-ups between the two candidates for the United States presidency, Mr. Trump and his Democratic counterpart Hillary Clinton. Both exchanges were long on rhetoric but short on substance. They left me feeling a little sorry for American voters. They have endured a two-year-long campaign only to be in the unenviable position of having to choose between two unpopular options. Depressed at this prospect, I lamented to an American friend how alarming it was that someone as clearly ill-suited to the task as Mr. Trump might even be a contender for the nation's top job, let alone harbour hopes of winning. "Don't worry," he replied. "It won't happen." The US presidential election, he explained, is not a direct vote. The American Founding Fathers, in their wisdom, had set up an electoral college to thwart populist candidates sweeping the field and also to ensure a geographical spread of electoral power. So winning the election would require a candidate to chalk up delegates in a long slog of state-

by-state victories. Going by recent polls, Mr. Trump "has no path to the White House on these delegate counts", he assured me. He seemed oblivious to the irony that America's much-vaunted democracy might be saved from a political disaster only by dint of not being quite as democratic as it is often made out to be. Now, how America picks its president is for its people to decide. But for us in Asia, the unfolding political drama holds a certain fascination, not least because of the unpredictability of the outcome and what it might mean for global politics. Lamentably, both candidates have struck electorally expedient poses which will come back to haunt whichever of them makes it to the White House. But beyond constraining their hands politically, the bitter rhetoric in last Sunday's debate also had a more insidious effect. The "degrading spectacle", as *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman put it, "damaged the prestige of democracy." "At one stage, Mr. Trump boasted that Mrs. Clinton would 'be in jail' if he were in charge of the legal system. Political rivals to the president get imprisoned in Mr. Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. America is meant to live by different standards. "Sunday night's spectacle is not just embarrassing for the US. America is widely regarded as the 'leader of the free world'. So the rise of Mr. Trump threatens to damage the prestige of democracy everywhere," he wrote this week. As I see it, the toxicity of Mr. Trump's campaign stems from the way he has framed the debate around what might be called "trumped-up foes". In his dystopian world, globalisation, immigration, free trade, political elites and the media are the enemies. They are to be pilloried for a litany of sins, from American jobs being "stolen" and shipped abroad, to Muslims and minorities fomenting insecurity and terrorism at home. Mr. Trump is neither original nor alone in pushing these simplistic soundbite answers to complex challenges facing societies today, including here in Asia. Yet, his noxious, no-holds-barred rhetoric emboldens politicians elsewhere to join in the attacks on these electoral bogeymen. Writing in the *New York Times*, columnist Roger Cohen summed it up this way: "Trump likes to blaviate about China and unfair trade deals, but you can take China out of the equation and the American jobs lost to cheap labour in Asia

are not coming back. Robots are doing those jobs, artificial intelligence is replacing them and technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace in ways that make human beings redundant. "People know this. They feel the tectonic plates shifting, not only of America's place in the world after two wars without victory, but also of production, employment, their livelihoods. Precariousness is the new normal. Everything is visible, including the immense wealth of the rich. Tossed here and there by dimly understood global forces, people revert to nativism, nationalism and ethnocentrism - in a word, to 'Trumpism.'" Asian voters are not immune to Trumpism. It will take hold unless political leaders in our

countries have the courage - and voters the good sense - to debunk Trumpism. They will have to assert loudly and clearly that globalisation is not the enemy; foreigners, immigrants and Muslims are not the enemy; the media and journalists are not the enemy. Elites in society might have many foibles, but vilifying them is not the answer. Nor is attacking democracy and its institutions. For all its failings, representative government underpinned by the rule of law - which enshrines checks and balances, so that politicians don't get to decide who is sent to jail, or enjoy unfettered powers to run the country as they fancy - is not the cause of the present economic malaise our societies face. The causes lie deeper, in the failure of

societies to tackle squarely the challenges arising from rapid, sweeping and inescapable economic and technological change. Grappling with these will not be easy, nor without pain. So, voters would be wise to be wary of those peddling "beautiful", quick-fix and cost-free solutions that will make the country great again, if only everyone would just do as they command. The *Asian Editors Circle* is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the *Asia News Network* and published in newspapers across the region. The writer is Editor-in-Chief of The Straits Times and Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group. E-mail: warren@sph.com.sg, Twitter: @theSTeditor



গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার
 পরিবেশ ও বন মন্ত্রণালয়
 'সার্ভে অব ভাস্কুলার ফ্লোরা অব চিটাগাং এন্ড দ্যা চিটাগাং হিল ট্রাস্টস'
 শীর্ষক প্রকল্প
 বাংলাদেশ ন্যাশনাল হারবেরিয়াম
 চিড়িয়াখানা রোড, মিরপুর-১, ঢাকা-১২১৬
 নং-বান্যায়-এসপিএফসি প্রকল্প (মাইক্রোবাস ভাড়া)/১৬১৭/২৫২ তারিখঃ ১৭ অক্টোবর ২০১৬

মাইক্রোবাস ভাড়ার দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি
 বাংলাদেশ ন্যাশনাল হারবেরিয়াম কর্তৃক বাস্তবায়নাধীন 'সার্ভে অব ভাস্কুলার ফ্লোরা অব চিটাগাং এন্ড দ্যা চিটাগাং হিল ট্রাস্টস' শীর্ষক প্রকল্পের প্রয়োজনে চাহিদার বিপরীতে ১৫০০ বা তদুর্ধ্ব সিসির, ২০০৭ সন বা তারপরে নির্মিত এবং ০৮ (আট) আসন বিশিষ্ট একটি এয়ার কন্ডিশন মাইক্রোবাস দৈনিক ভাড়াভিত্তিক ভাড়া গ্রহণের জন্য সিডিউলে বর্ণিত শর্ত সাপেক্ষে প্রকল্পের অবশিষ্ট মেয়াদকালীন সময়ের জন্য প্রকৃত মালিক/প্রতিষ্ঠানের নিকট হতে দরপত্র আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে। অত্রহী দরদাতাগণ আগামী ২০/১০/২০১৬খ্রিঃ তারিখ হইতে ০২/১১/২০১৬খ্রিঃ তারিখ পর্যন্ত অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারীর কার্যালয় হতে ১০০০.০০ টাকার বিনিময়ে দরপত্র সিডিউল সংগ্রহ করতে পারবেন এবং দরপত্র দিলে চাহিদাকৃত তথ্যাদি ও দলিলাদি সংযুক্তপূর্বক যথাযথভাবে সীল ও স্বাক্ষরযুক্ত করে বন্ধ খামে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারীর দপ্তরে রক্ষিত দরপত্র বাজে আগামী ০৩/১১/২০১৬খ্রিঃ তারিখ দুপুর ১২.০০ ঘটিকার মধ্যে ডাকযোগে/কুরিয়ার সার্ভিসে/সরাসরি হাতে হাতে দরপত্র জমা দিতে পরিবেন। একই দিন দুপুর ১২.৩০ ঘটিকায় দরপত্র উন্মুক্তকরণ কমিটি কর্তৃক দরদাতাগণ অথবা তাদের প্রতিনিধিবৃন্দের উপস্থিতিতে (যদি কেহ উপস্থিত থাকেন) দরপত্র খোলা হবে। প্রকল্প কর্তৃপক্ষ কোন কারণ দর্শানো ছাড়াই যে কোন দরপত্র গ্রহণ অথবা বাতিল করার সম্পূর্ণ অধিকার সংরক্ষণ করেন।

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Shah Md. Shahidul Hoque
 Upazila Engineer
 Local Government Engineering Department
 Sariakandi, Bogra
 ue.sariakandi@lged.gov.bd

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