



## Star war

Kamal Haasan will soon find that Rajinikanth and he are vying to fill the same political space

All these years, the Tamil film industry had enough space for both Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan, two stars with wide fan bases who could deliver one blockbuster after another. But Tamil Nadu's political arena is likely to be too small for both of them. With their entry into politics, the actors will realise sooner than later that each can only succeed at the other's expense. Both Mr. Rajinikanth and Mr. Haasan are vying to fill the same political space, the vacuum created by the death of Jayalalithaa. They are hoping to take over the AIADMK's vote bank on the assumption that the party will not survive another election. While Mr. Haasan has indicated he is not averse to political alliances, Mr. Rajinikanth has insisted he will contest all 234 Assembly constituencies. Inevitably, the two will find themselves in opposite camps. Despite the age-related ill-health of its president M. Karunanidhi, the principal opposition party, the DMK, remains in serious contention for power with its organisational structure and cadre base. The actor-politicians will therefore have to fight for their share from the rest of the pie.

It is true that voters in Tamil Nadu are tired of the electoral choices before them, having voted in and out one of the two major Dravidian parties, the DMK and the AIADMK. A huge chunk of the AIADMK's vote-bank is actually an anti-DMK vote-bank; the converse is true for a large section of the DMK's vote-bank. Mr. Haasan, like Mr. Rajinikanth, can try to tap into this negative sentiment as a third alternative. Indeed, Vijayakanth, a contemporary of Mr. Rajinikanth and Mr. Haasan who joined politics in 2005, won more political supporters than he did film fans precisely because he offered an alternative to the two Dravidian parties. But he could not attain the critical mass needed to mount a serious challenge and ended up as a spoiler, not a king-maker. Unlike Mr. Rajinikanth, Mr. Haasan has been more forthright in expressing his political views, through tweets, press conferences, public speeches and columns. At the very least, Mr. Haasan appears willing to articulate a political programme with a vision and stated goals, in marked contrast to Mr. Rajinikanth who did not go beyond vague generalities while announcing his entry into politics. But Mr. Haasan will be mistaken if he assumes his star status in the film world will automatically open doors for him in politics. Winning over voters in different regions with different livelihood concerns and social identities is no easy task. His stardom may have earned him immediate attention, but he will need to mobilise people around their own interests if he wants to be a credible alternative. Otherwise, a Rajini-Kamal joust might be no more than an interesting sidelight in the next Assembly election.

## Saving lives

It needs political will for India to bring down its shamefully high newborn mortality rate

A new country-wise ranking of neonatal mortality rates – the number of babies dying in their first month for every thousand live births – gives India cause for both hope and shame. Shame, because the report, produced by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), ranks India behind poorer countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Rwanda. Hope, because the ranking shows that financial resources are not the biggest constraint in improving this health indicator; political will is. According to the report, titled "Every Child Alive", while average newborn mortality in low-income nations is nine times that of high-income ones, several countries buck the trend, showing a way forward for India. For example, Sri Lanka and Ukraine, which like India are categorised as lower-middle income economies, had a neonatal mortality of around 5/1000 in 2016. In comparison, the U.S., a high-income economy, did only slightly better with a rate of 3.7/1000. Meanwhile, Rwanda, which falls in the lowest income group of less than \$1,005 per capita, has brought down its mortality rates from 41/1000 in the 1990s to 16.5 through programmes targeted at poor and vulnerable mothers. Money matters, but intent matters more.

India saw the 31st highest newborn-mortality rate, at 25.4 deaths per 1000 in 2016, while Pakistan had the highest. Coming in after 30 countries is no comfort, however, because a small mortality rate can translate to numerous deaths when the birth-rate is high. This means India lost 640,000 babies in 2016, more than any other country. How can we chip away at this staggering number? The report points out that the most powerful solutions are not necessarily the most expensive. The 10 critical products that hospitals must stock to save newborns include a piece of cloth to keep a baby warm and close to the mother to encourage breastfeeding. The list also includes antibiotics and disinfectants, the use of which can stave off killers like sepsis and meningitis. But other solutions will need greater investment. The biggest cause of death is premature birth, while the second is complications like asphyxia during delivery. Preventing these would mean paying attention to the mother's health during pregnancy and ensuring she delivers in a hospital attended by trained doctors or midwives. India has programmes such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana for this, but must expand its reach in lag-gard States like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Then there are factors outside the healthcare system, like female literacy rates, that make a big difference to healthcare-seeking behaviour. But changes in education levels will come slowly. Despite these challenges, progress is within reach. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu show that by focussing on these factors, newborn deaths can be brought to fewer than 15 per 1000 in Indian settings. It's time for the rest of India to follow suit.

# Talk like a South Asian

Democracy in India cannot exist without the extension of the democratic imagination to the region



SHIV VISVANATHAN

The Maldives imbroglio has become a fable for international politics. Politics, especially international politics, often appears to be an eerie combination of slapstick and farce. One sees an exhibition of egos, of the sheer pomposity of power barely hidden behind sanctimonious words like national interest and security. Whenever Chinese one-upmanship finesses India in the neighbourhood, we fall back on exercises in pedantry, unaware that India cuts a sorry figure in the local political scene. Our obsession with Pakistan and China makes us indifferent to other countries in the neighbourhood. South Asia as place, as a bubbling culture of diversity, gets converted to space or at the most to turf or territory. The future of India as a South Asian imagination becomes dim as India turns hysterical over China's entry into the Maldives. Yet three things are obvious. We have no sense of the Maldives. We treat their politicians as vassals who have become rebels. We are almost orientalist in our attitudes to islands like the Maldives, Mauritius, treating them as lesser orders of political reality. It is as if the annexation of Sikkim is our chosen model for South Asian politics.

### A limiting framework

One thing is clear. Not much can be expected within the current framework of policy, where categories like security operate in a Pavlovian style and India acts only when it sees a Pakistani or Chinese move. The current frameworks

and mentalities add little to policy. India needs to see South Asia as a new imaginary if the idea of India and Indian foreign policy is to succeed.

South Asia is a tapestry of myriad ecologies from islands to mountains, a confluence of civilisations, religions and regions. India is today the dominant power, but beyond a sense of hegemony, it plays bully and Mr. Simplicissimus. One needs to add the power of these diverse imaginations to an emerging hybridity called India. Consider a few examples. During the recent Cyclone Ockhi, a priest told me, we are fishermen, we think from sea to land but we are run by a land-locked regime. An understanding of island geographies could broaden into ecological imagination, create new imaginaries to unlock India's land-locked mindset. An island imaginary adds as much to our imagination and alters our attitude to marginal people on our coastlines.

Watching South Asia, one senses India lacks of a sense of neighbourhood and region as a component of our imagination. Take Kathmandu. The similarities between India and Nepal are immense, and yet India lacks any comprehension of Nepal's fierce sense of itself. By playing big brother, India repeatedly displays a lack of sense of the diversities around which need a new sense of unity. By acting as a bully or an unempathetic headmaster wielding the stick, India reveals an absence of its South Asian self. It issues warnings to the Maldives or Nepal, threatening them not to be seduced by the Chinese imperative, but it does little to sustain the reciprocity and autonomy of the relationship. A change in tactics is not enough; one needs a sense of strategy, a paradigmatic argument for a new South Asia which adds to



the creativity of Indian democracy.

### Time for renewal

Reflecting on this context, one is reminded of a South African proverb which says one must invent a stranger to renew oneself. The stranger is the other that renews the self, reveals the unities and reciprocities behind difference. In the South Asian context, India must adapt these words of wisdom by inventing and reinventing the neighbour every day. It has to invent a South Asia which is civilisational, reciprocal, local in its diversity. Merely thinking as a nation state reveals the procrustean nature of the Indian mind, making it a victim of 19th century mindsets.

Even experiments which could have been promising have lost their creative power. One of the most exciting of these regional ideas was the creation of the South Asian University (SAU), with a faculty from all South Asian countries. While we have the faculty, what we lack is a South Asian theory of culture and knowledge which should anchor this imagination. SAU looks like any other university, part of the embassy set in South Delhi. It needs a manifesto which makes South Asia central to its imagination. Such a manifesto

# Planning for electric mobility

Transitioning to an electric vehicle-based regime will be difficult, but well worth it



AMIT BHATT

In October 2017, the Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health, published by the peer-reviewed *Lancet* medical journals, attributed to air pollution an estimated 6.5 million premature deaths globally, with 1.1 million being from India. Dreadful as these figures were, they were not surprising, considering that back in 2014, the World Health Organisation's urban air quality database had found four Indian cities to be among the world's 10 most polluted. The database also placed 10 Indian cities in the 20 worst list.

### Big savings

There are multiple reasons for India's deteriorating air quality. In urban India, emissions from motor vehicles are among the prime reasons. Acknowledging the challenge of rising vehicular pollution in Indian cities, Piyush Goyal, then Union Minister for Power, said that from 2030, India would completely shift to using electric vehicles (EVs). The push for electric mobility was backed by the government

think-tank, NITI Aayog, which has estimated that the nation can save up to ₹4 lakh crore by rapidly adopting EVs.

While transitioning from an internal combustion engine (ICE)-based regime to an EV-based one is expected to be a painful process, the long-term benefits could outweigh the hardships significantly in the wake of India's ambitious renewable energy plans.

Today, as the NITI Aayog lays stress on the need for a robust action plan to move towards electric mobility by 2030, India needs to address five fundamental issues immediately.

The first is about who will take the lead. EVs, unlike ICE vehicles, involve several actors at the national, State and city levels, respectively. In the first, it needs multiple ministries such as Road Transport and Highways, Housing and Urban Affairs, Heavy Industries, Power, New and Renewable Energy, External Affairs as well as national institutes such as NITI Aayog. Also, since the initial EV revolution would predominantly be an urban one, State and city-level players need to be involved so as to address several technical and infrastructural needs. Coordination between all three is crucial in driving the EV agenda.

The second is figuring out the best mode forward. China has fo-



cussed on the use of electric buses as a catalyst for EV penetration. It is the largest electric bus manufacturer in the world, with most in use in the country. In 2016 alone, about 80,000 electric buses were added to China's roads. The Netherlands, on the other hand, has captured the EV market using a simple yet well-crafted strategy of creating charging infrastructure and encouraging investment in charging technology by providing incentives to EV buyers. Today, it has the densest charging infrastructure in the world and is a major exporter of this technology.

These two case studies show that sustained growth is possible only due to positive economic impacts of EVs. India is today the largest manufacturer and exporter of two-wheelers and auto-rickshaws. Could these vehicles pave the way for an EV revolution?

The third is the battery conun-

must transform ecology and culture into a theory of South Asian diversity and difference. The borderland, the frontier, the island, the riverine communities have to anchor a local imagination which diversifies South Asia as a region. Out of ecology should emerge a creative sense of regionalism as a new style of ecological politics rather than treating the region as a lesser order of politics in a global regime.

Second, the availability of eccentricity as dissent, alternatives, minorities has to be reworked constitutionally so the focus is not on trite obsessions with India-Pakistan but a genuine exploration of voices and theories. One has to weave ideas of Swadeshi and Swaraj into foreign policy, where South Asia creates the availability of vernaculars. SAU as a dialogue of ecologies, religions, vernaculars located in a civilisational frame can add to the ideas of knowledge, sustain memories and defeated cultures without getting bogged in the modern sentimentality called development. South Asia as a concept to be sustainable and creative has to be life-giving.

Diversity becomes the next axis of the South Asia imagination. Between its demographic density and its ethnic diversity, South Asia offers an experiment in religious dialogue, an exercise in the cultivation of informal economies, a surge for human rights where culture and livelihoods become central. The creativity of civil society and social movements marks the dynamism of these regions. In fact, South Asia is going to become a site for the growing battle between human rights/cultural diversity and the fundamentalist imagination.

South Asia, with its motley collection of minorities, has to rethink the question of the border and border crossings which are so cru-

drum. The assumption that anyone who controls the battery will control electric mobility rings true in the current scenario. India does not produce lithium-ion (Li-ion) batteries currently, and companies making battery packs are dependent almost exclusively on imports from China. This is a cost-saving strategy as setting up a cell manufacturing unit in India would be expensive. Accelerating EV use in India should be linked to the "Make in India" goal and domestic battery production. Investment is required for research and development in battery-making and exploring alternative technologies.

The fourth is about charging infrastructure. EV charging is more than just using electricity. It involves exchange of information requiring a communication protocol. There is no unique or single-charging technology for EVs. The three major EV users, China, Japan and the European Union, have their own charging technologies which are often conflicting and not interchangeable.

The absence of a standard global infrastructure is a major deterrent for EV penetration in India, as creating infrastructure can be cost-intensive. For this, the government needs to select or develop appropriate charging technology that avoids multiplicity and reduces the cost of infrastructure,

cial to the survival of these groups. One is thinking not only of the Rohingya, but the Rohingya as a paradigm for border crossings. We need an open idea of hospitality and the nation so ethnic imaginations do not merely become destabilising but provide new vernaculars of the imagination in terms of inventive notions of citizenship, livelihood and regionalism. One has to allow for tribal, ethnic, nomadic and pastoral groups moving freely without being hounded by the panopticon called the boundary.

### A warning signal

One has to be clear it is not the immediacy and constant intrusiveness of China or the bellicosity of Pakistan which can trigger a new South Asian identity and imagination. Security is too narrow and provincial a base either for the sustenance of diversity or for the promotion of peace. The so-called imbroglio of the Maldives must be a warning signal to persuade civil society groups like human rights activists, media, university academics to articulate a new idea of South Asian identity and democracy, to revive the neighbourhood as an imagination, when globalism is turning colourless. We need a movement from muscular diplomacy, which we are poor at, to a diplomacy of diversity for the South Asian imagination and drama to be reinvented again. Democracy in India cannot exist without the extension of the democratic imagination to the region. South Asia as an imaginary becomes text and the pretext for such an experiment. An India with a new South Asian identity triggers a new imagination beyond the dullness of security and nation state.

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while making it convenient and safe for users.

The final point is about jobs and the economic impact. India is the world's fourth largest fifth auto market, where over 25 million motor vehicles are produced. The sector is estimated to provide direct and indirect employment to about three crore people and accounts for 7.1% of the nation's GDP. The industry is estimated to grow to \$300 billion in annual revenue by 2026, creating 65 million additional jobs, and contributing over 12% to the GDP.

### A road map

A thorough qualitative and quantitative estimation of the new jobs the EV sector will create would go a long way in negating apprehensions and securing the pathway for EV technology and use.

EVs have the potential to disrupt the mobility ecosystem, and, if implemented well, could have a positive impact on the economy as well as the urban environment. India, however, needs a road map, with timelines, processes, well-researched impact studies, bold initiatives and robust investments in technological research to turn its EV dream into reality.

*Amit Bhatt is Director, Integrated Transport, WRI India Ross Center for Sustainable Cities*

## 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.

### Kamal enters the fray

Kamal Haasan is an impossibly talented actor but politics is a different ball game. Whether he succeeds as a political leader remains to be seen. Mr. Haasan's claim of being 'above caste' is a poor substitute to his being passionately opposed to caste. His party must champion the cause of Dalit rights and work for the annihilation of caste, emerging as a bulwark against a cultural invasion by right-wing forces. No party can survive for long without an ideology and the MNM cannot be an exception. It will not be easy for Mr. Haasan's new party to compete with the two principal cadre-based Dravidian parties.

G. DAVID MILTON,  
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

■ Ideologies may have had a place soon after

Independence, as the common man was interested in knowing which way the country was heading. However, over the years, development has taken precedence over ideology and people are not too concerned about any 'ism', as long as their basic requirements are met. Kamal Haasan should not dwell much on his ideological leanings which in the course of time would bring in more adversaries than friends. His focus should be on development without making compromises on the twin principles of honesty and integrity. He can succeed provided he is not caught in the web of ideology in order to placate a few sections.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chennai

■ The problems with a party such as Mr. Haasan's is that other than him, the public does not know anybody else

in his group. Parties such as the Congress, and even the BJP and the DMK, were not started in this manner. Then it was all around a group of men and women, already in the public sphere, well known and who came together for politics. It does not inspire confidence when it is all about a one-man show.

M. BALAKRISHNAN,  
Bengaluru

### India's awkward stand

It would be incorrect to say that the supporters of the so-called Khalistan movement are concentrated in Canada. They are there in almost every part of the world. Why single out Canada alone when these elements have their footprints even in the U.S. and in Europe?

The conspicuous lack of warmth towards Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is a case of glaring

diplomatic failure on the part of the Prime Minister and India. It looks as if our diplomatic outreach to national leaders is not balanced in approach and differs according to the personality who visits India.

N. VISVESWARAN,  
Chennai

■ Mr. Trudeau has set a sterling example by inviting immigrants from all countries, including India, to make a new beginning in his country. India cannot ignore the fact that there is a large Indian community in Canada, and something it must be proud of. The fact that many Indians, including Sikhs, occupy important positions in government, and even in the cabinet, is because they are meritorious. Some have stood for elections and won fair and square. For India to feel uneasy about this does not

speak well of our maturity as a democracy.

M. RASHEED,  
Chennai

### Jarring

It is not the first time that the political class, irrespective of whether in power or in the Opposition, has been involved in either manhandling or assaulting government officials. Only a few days ago, a Union Minister was recorded using a "cuss" word against an official in public. If the report of AAP MLAs assaulting Delhi Chief Secretary is true, action should be taken. The officers' association needs to exhibit the same zeal which it has shown in Delhi when officers are attacked in other States. Uncivilised acts by politicians need to be nipped in the bud ("AAP MLAs assaulted me: Delhi Chief Secy", February 21).

N. NAGARAJAN,  
Secunderabad

### On the field

Virat Kohli, both as captain and batsman, has undoubtedly contributed to Indian cricket's resurgence ("Tale of two captains", February 21). However, his on-field behaviour leaves much to be desired. A boisterous celebration does not guarantee continued fine performance; it may only backfire leading to avoidable and ugly retaliation from the opponent. Sourav Ganguly was far better.

We need to observe very closely how mega tennis stars remain composed after winning the majors. Their "celebration" is highly subdued. They lift the atmosphere with their dignified deportment. The spirit of a sport depends on the finesse with which it is played.

V. LAKSHMANAN,  
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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