

The political ascent of Rahul Gandhi: Miles to go before...



BY VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

Rahul Gandhi's real fight will begin after the Gujarat elections

In its August 12-18, 1990 issue, the now-defunct Sunday magazine ran an interview with Rajiv Gandhi, months before his assassination in 1991, with the introduction that while "face-to-face it is impossible not to like Rajiv Gandhi," in his public interactions he tended to be indiscreet and rash, which frequently landed him in trouble.

However, in the interview, the then Leader of the Opposition came through as a politician mellowed by defeat and possessing the humility to accept that, "Yes, I made mistakes." Rajiv Gandhi wondered why people were now more appreciative of him when he hadn't "changed a bit." "When I say or I do something now, suddenly I'm told by media and by other people, 'It's fantastic. Why didn't you do this before?'"

Behind the transformation

Twenty-seven years later, it is his son, Rahul Gandhi, who might have been transformed from "a nice guy prone

to gaffes" to someone suddenly winning appreciation. The best that was said of him was that he appeared to be sincere but somewhat dull. As against this, there were the endless Pappu jokes triggered by his seeming gift for saying absolutely the wrong things.

In 2007, he bragged that his family had broken Pakistan in two, which thankfully did not set off a diplomatic crisis. In 2013, to the bewilderment of all, including the Congress, he spoke of Dalits needing the escape velocity of Jupiter to succeed. Mr Gandhi's January 2014 interview to Times Now's Arnab Goswami had Twitterati wise-cracking that Mr Goswami ought to have been sued for harassing a minor.

In recent months, Mr Gandhi's public appearances have made people sit up and take notice — and for the entirely different reason that nearly everything about him has changed for the better. The transformation was first noticed on his tour of the United States, where on his campus interactions, he came across as sober, self-assured and able to convey ideas, if not with scintillating intellectual depth, then certainly in a commonsensical way. However, he has been a revelation on the Gujarat campaign trail; indeed if anyone has made a splash in this election, aside from the young caste leaders who have shored up the Congress, it is Rahul Gandhi himself. Gujaratis are talking to him and talking about him.

Although nowhere in the league of the phenomenal Narendra Modi, Mr Gandhi has developed a distinct style of his own. On the stump, he looks relaxed and confident, slow-delivering his lines to make them uncomplicated and effective. His speeches are direct hits at the Prime Minister and his Gujarat model, and there are frequent digs at the now dying Tata Nano, which he says was part of Mr Modi's agenda of "transferring wealth from the poor to the rich." To much giggling from the audience, he asks, "Any of you here seen a Nano on the road? You? Bhaisaab you?"

His Gabbar Singh Tax for the Goods and Services Tax (GST) broke the Internet and the other runaway hit, vikas gando thayo che (development has gone crazy) is apparently also a surrogate from the Congress stable. If there is a light, fun quality to these coinages, what has earned Mr Gandhi respect is the line he has drawn at abuse and uncivil language in the face of coarse, low-level personal attacks from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Mr Modi.

And yet in a striking parallel with Rajiv Gandhi earlier, Rahul Gandhi's team insists that he is what he always was, believing in the same things — pro-poor, pro-farmer — he did earlier. And that people are warming to him and his ideas in a changed environment. Not really. The evolution of Pappu to First Congressperson is best seen via his earlier videos where he ap-

pears stiff and distracted, struggling to compose his thoughts, and beginning every sentence with "Bhaiya — in short, the stand-up comic's delight and quite the contrast to the easy camaraderie evident in his recent outings.

Dents in the image

It is true, however, that this change would not have created the buzz it has, had it not coincided with the people's own willingness to look away from Mr Modi, if ever so slightly, to a possible, tentative alternative. Up until now, Mr Modi was a god in Gujarat. When he became Prime Minister, the rest of India was awestruck by the power and authority he exuded, magnified by his victory with an absolute majority and the decimation of the Opposition. Today, while the fascination with Mr Modi undeniably remains, the first murmurs can be heard, among traders, among the unemployed and in middle-class households. The constant adjustments to the demands of demonetisation, and now GST and Aadhaar, have devastated small businesses, the poor and the old, many of them living in a blighted world beyond the dips and spikes in the national GDP.

But as everyone agrees, pitted against the combination of Mr Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party national president Amit Shah, and the humongous election cum public relations machinery they have created, Mr Gandhi could be a toddler taking his first

steps to indulgent applause. Though his elevation to Congress President is imminent, the challenges before him are immense. The Congress organisation is in tatters, its votes are shrinking, and the haze around the party's vision often makes it indistinguishable from the BJP. It is true that the Congress has always held a range of ideas within it. But the party as a whole was conceived as centrist with a strong liberal core.

The Left and the right co-existed in Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress but his absolute commitment to the idea of a progressive, enlightened nation ensured that the centre prevailed. The innumerable unethical compromises the Congress made thereafter are not Rahul Gandhi's doing. But having inherited them, he has to find a way to reassert the party's founding philosophy and, more difficult still, make it saleable to voters swayed by the BJP's enormously attractive Hindutva appeal. Recently, the student-wing of the Congress, the National Students Union of India (NSUI), fought and won the students' union election in Delhi University (DU) on the slogan, "Take back DU." The NSUI promised a progressive vision based on gender equality and the freedoms to eat, wear and go out as the students pleased, without being shamed as immoral.

Road Ahead

The election the Congress fought in DU was tiny but the party went to the

heart of what is wrong with India today. Maybe Mr Gandhi can start with a "Take back India" campaign. But that requires courage and the conviction that the right way is the best way. That is not going to happen, judging by the Congress's embarrassingly uneducated response to the recent questions on Mr Gandhi's religion. The BJP's multiple spokespersons amplified the noise that television spat out: "Hindu or Catholic?". Instead of asking why it's wrong to be a Catholic, the Congress produced photographs of Mr Gandhi wearing the Janevu (sacred thread).

With all the anti-incumbency, such is the Modi legend that few in Gujarat will bet on the verdict. In any case, Mr Gandhi's real fight will begin after Gujarat which is a two-party state. The rest of India is more complex with a bunch of regional leaders, all ambitious for themselves. If this is problematic, consider the twin tags that hound the Congress: dynasty and corruption. On dynasty, Mr Modi is unbeatable. He is self-made and has ostensibly shed his family in the service of Bharat Mata. Whether Mr Gandhi or indeed even the entire Opposition, can summon the cleverness to turn the tables on corruption, only time will tell.

Vidya Subrahmaniam is Senior Fellow at The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She can be reached at vidya.subrahmaniam@thehinducentre.com

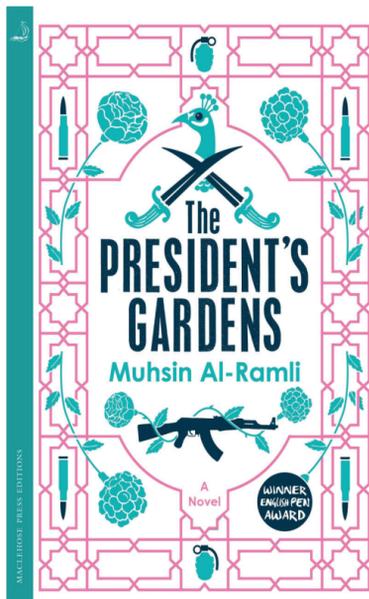
The President's Gardens by Muhsin Al-Ramli



BY WAJEEHA MOHSIN

It is seldom that a book translated from another language maintains its 'feel' without compromising the prose-like quality of the original. Luke Leafgren manages to achieve this daunting task in his translation of this epic novel by Muhsin Al-Ramli. Priced at a high price of PKR 1875 while purchasing I wondered whether or not the book is truly worth this amount. However, to my great surprise, the Al-Ramli not just met my expectations but in fact exceeded them.

The President's Gardens is a saga about friendship, love, war and betrayal in Saddam Hussain's Iraq. Iraq stayed in the headlines throughout the world in the 1980s and 1990s which subsequently generated a lot of references to Saddam in books, literature and movies. However, few are able to provide an insiders' view of this era. Those of us who have grown up reading about the Iran-Iraq war through the viewpoint of American or Iranian writers this book provides a brand new perspective. This multi-generational story takes us on a journey with Abdullah Kafka,



lived through turmoil for a great part of their lives. Abdullah and Ibrahim get conscripted for military services just as Iran-Iraq war breaks out. Abdullah is captured by the Iraqis while Ibrahim returns only to face the horrors of war once again as Saddam makes a disastrous decision to invade Kuwait. The writer is direct in his narrative and does not shy away from describing the horrors of war. At merely 400 pages, the book is fast-paced yet philosophical and deeply introspective.

As much as I have enjoyed reading The President's Gardens the book is not without its flaws. The most glaring flaw, in my opinion, is that of structure — there are parts that don't fit in as well as the others while some pertinent information is revealed to the reader a bit too late thus disrupting the wonderful flow that author has created.

Overall I would rate it at 4 stars out of 5. It is only recently that the books narrating the life in Iraq have started to be translated into English especially since the downfall of Saddam Hussain making The President's Gardens a rare gem. Though rooted in the context of Iraq, the book deals with some universal themes even if you are not interested in this region's history I would recommend that you give it a try.

Wajeeha Mohsin is an HR professional from Lahore, Pakistan. She has done her master's from London School of Economics and Political Sciences. She enjoys reading, travelling and binge-watching crime shows.

Tariq the Befuddled and Ibrahim the fated. Born in 1959, the three are fast friends. Together (although each in a different way) they are a representative of a generation that has

which should be checked on roads. There is a lack of implementation of road safety rules. The overcrowded public transport and overloaded trucks are commonly seen going unchecked on national highways. There is an urgent need to implement road safety regulations to evade accidents and loss of precious human lives.

Malnutrition in Tharparkar

ASMA BALOCH
KECH

I request the higher authorities of Sindh to pay attention to the miserable plight of the people of Tharparkar who are suffering from serious health and food problems. Due to lack of food and clean water, they are dying. The situation is very alarming for poor newborn babies, who are dying due to malnutrition. So please pay attention and show your concern for them.

Peshawar needs expansion

ENGR SHAHRYAR KHAN BASEER
PESHAWAR

Peshawar is in need of urgent expansion. After so many decades of unorganised growth of Peshawar, the city has turned into a muddled jungle of uncontrolled construction and expansion. An international airport is located in the middle of the city which forces all traffic to go around in circles, while also stopping new high rise building construction in the middle of the city. There

is no proper organisation to check the construction, zoning or other rules of the city. For example, Hayatabad, an area of Peshawar, was developed by a temporary organisation called the Peshawar Development Authority (PDA) that was assigned the planning, design and construction of Hayatabad town a few years ago. But even after completion of the task, PDA is still looking after the town while no proper organisation with rules and authority has been created for this town. Another interesting aspect of Peshawar is the severe shortage of commercial areas. The city authorities have not developed or allocated any area for commercial activities. Therefore, thousands of commercial organisations, including government offices, schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, offices, non-profit organisations, hostels, storage areas and even factories are operating in residential areas, using residential power and gas, while at the same time creating security threats for local residents and destroying infrastructure like roads, etc, of residential areas. By developing Peshawar into a metropolitan city, the government of KP will also help improve the security, traffic and other facilities of Peshawar, while also increasing the economic activities of the region which will provide more prosperity to the people of KP.

Remembering Dr Faqir Husain Saga

JAVAD BASHIR
LAHORE

S Faqir Husain was an artiste par excellence. He perfected his passion and first love for dancing at an early age, despite resistance from his

parents. He hailed from a Syed family and studied veterinary medicine at the Premier College of Veterinary and Animal Husbandry, Lahore. So he was a vet by profession. He fell in love with dancing at an early age and practised classical dancing. He later opened a dance academy on Lawrence Road, Lahore. His forte was classical dance. He used to enthral crowds with his performance. He performed all over the world and won acclaim for his artistic ability. The legendary dancer was well received in India and China. I had the honour to watch his "Peacock Dance", which he performed in his unique style. He was awarded with many awards and trophies including the Pride of Performance award. I thought it better to pen down the memories of the great artiste. We must never forget such dedicated professionals and artists.

Deplorable NADRA

MOHSIN BASHER
TURBAT

I would like to draw the attention of the authorities concerned towards the sorry state of affairs at the National Data Registration Authority (NADRA) office in Turbat. The staff members of this office misbehave with the citizens who come to receive their identity cards. It is sad that when I visited the said office, I found no specific area for the sitting of women, who were feeling very uncomfortable. Many women face embarrassment while standing with men. I request the concerned authorities to streamline the working of the NADRA office in Turbat.

Jinnah said...

Reminiscences of early days

Yes, I am Karachi-born, and it was on the sands of Karachi that I played marbles in my boyhood. I was schooled at Karachi, proudly declared the Quaid-i-Azam.

The Quaid-i-Azam said that he then found himself in London from where after passing law, he returned to India. He was undecided what to do. But fate took him to Bombay, where he waited and waited for a long time for a brief. At last he got a brief. He went on in his own way not knowing what fate had in store for him. He now found himself in Karachi and was glad to be here.

The Quaid-i-Azam asserted that the new Sovereign State of Pakistan which had been won by peaceful methods and without dropping a single drop of blood, afforded him some satisfaction. In the course of his arduous work in that connection, it was the masses who came to him instinctively to help him and the intelligentsia came last.

The achievement was without parallel in history. He accepted the Governor-generalship of the Dominion because he knew he was not the agent of an alien power but was the chosen representative of the people.

Continuing, the Quaid-i-Azam adverted to what he characterized as the sacred duty cast upon them for solving the problem of poverty of the people. He was no believer in the mission of making the rich richer and the poor poorer. The task was difficult, of course, but they must make earnest efforts to pro-

mote the interests of the masses without necessarily disturbing the equilibrium in the bargain. "We must be just to both." He added. Adverting to the minority question, the Quaid-i-Azam declared that he was no believer in formulae and paper resolutions. They were capable of being interpreted and misinterpreted.

"Let us trust each other," roared the Governor-general designate and added: "Let us judge by results, not by theories. With the help of every section — I see that every class is represented in this huge gathering — let us work in double shift if necessary to make the Sovereign State of Pakistan really happy, really united and really powerful."

Concluding, the Quaid-i-Azam acknowledged with gratitude the kind words said of his sister by the host of the evening, "Miss Fatima Jinnah is a constant source of help and encouragement to me." He revealed that, "In the days when I was expecting to be taken as a prisoner by the British Government, it was my sister who encouraged me, and said hopeful things when revolution was staring me in the face. Her constant care is about my health". He was gratified by the good words said of her by Mr. Ghulam Hussain to whom he expressed his thanks for his hospitality.

—Speech at a Dinner Party given by the late Mr. Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah at the Karachi Club on 9th August, 1947

READERS' VIEW

The school that runs Britain

DR. MUKHTAR ALI
KURRAM AGENCY

The true spirit of seeking knowledge from cradle to grave is being practised by every nation but not Muslims elsewhere. I will quote only one example of an educational institution of UK called Eton. Someone has rightly commented that Eton is the school that runs Britain. This school has been a breeding ground for UK leadership since long. The power of an educational institution can be over one can count. An old Etonian comment holds the great truth that Eton is a very British formula for dominance. So far, 19 students from Eton have rose to the high profile position of British prime ministers. We have to re-examine our belief of the power of education, knowledge at national level. I owe my all sincere best wishes for every school going child who opts for seeking knowledge in these moments of unprecedented terror, fear and panic.

Need to implement road safety rules

SHAIKH ABDUL RASHEED
SHIKARPUR

The accidents on national highways and superhighways are often caused due to negligence of unskilled drivers and Motorway Police. The police are not performing their duties well. The most accidents take place due to overcrowding and overloading of vehicles,



Security at our own risk

ZAFARUL HAQ
KARACHI

Instead of relying on police, we have to take security measures for our own security. Recently, a former bank executive was shot dead by robbers when he was returning after offering Isha prayers on foot. He might have tried to resist the snatching of his belongings, which included a cell phone and a little money, but he was strangled. So nobody is safe here in Pakistan and we should arrange our own security. Now, this is the way to live and die in this country.