

Keeping it sweet & simple



TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

IRA PANDE

THE last fortnight has been so miserable that I will have to drag out some happy memories from the past to write with any joy. Delhi has had an unrelenting spell of such cold, foggy and bleak weather that stepping out is impossible. Each morning, when I open my front door to bring in the new papers, I wonder if I've opened the fridge door by mistake. The icy blast that enters the house takes hours to dissipate. Working on my computer in my freezing little study is like a punishment for past sins. Reading inside a warm quilt is only possible if one is wearing gloves, which makes turning pages impossible. Those who are returning from vacations have horrifying tales to tell of delayed flights and innumerable wait times at airports unable to handle the angry crowds.

Turn on the TV and what greets you? The rising hysteria about the ceremony that is going to take place in Ayodhya. Each colony has been inundated by the devout distributing consecrated rice (akshat) and '*niman-taran*'. Huge banners and posters have sprung up everywhere proclaiming eternal devotion to Lord Rama. This gentle incarnation of Lord Vishnu, along with his faithful brother Lakshman and devoted wife Sita, adorned every praja room once upon a time. Most of them had the famous Raja Ravi Varma portrait of the trio, with the faithful Hanuman kneeling in front of them. This picture, titled *dilipadyapati Rama*, had Rama and Sita in the *abhaya mudra*, blessing their worshippers. Come now to the present-day avatars that have replaced this gentle and beautiful depiction of Ram Rajya. Rama is now a bow-

wielding warrior-king and Hanuman the Hindu version of Superman. His snarling visage is proudly displayed on the backs of cars, where he seems more of a lion than a monkey.

The transformation of our religious iconography fills me with dread for our future. Thankfully not many subscribe to this militant religion, but who can say what will happen after a few decades of exposure to such angry gods? I hope I am proved wrong but if the majority of worshippers prefers battles to bhakti, then Rama save us all.

Transformation of our religious iconography fills me with dread. Thankfully, not many subscribe to this militant religion

That said, let me now turn to a brilliant talk by Javed Akhtar that we had the privilege of attending. An articulate and compelling speaker, Javed spoke of the relationship between the two prominent languages of north India: Hindi and Urdu. He has spoken on this subject several times and his appearances at the Rekhta festival attract thousands of listeners. Google him or find him on YouTube and you will be struck how easy it is to follow him because he is so well-versed in the spirit of both these languages. Like Siamese twins, these are inextricably intertwined but just as the cult of Ram bhakti has been displaced by politicians to use for carving out constituencies, these beautiful tongues have become divided between one community and another.

I grew up in UP a large part of my girlhood was spent in Lucknow and I am in love with well-spoken Urdu. We spoke Hindustani, the language that blends Hindi and Urdu and never realised how much of what we spoke had come from the languages that were brought

into our land by other cultures. Today, if someone compliments my clean diction, I have to thank an exposure to the courtly civilised language that I heard all around me in school and the university. Alas, fewer and fewer people now speak anything but English. No wonder, we are excising those registers of our daily discourse in languages that brought graciousness and elegance into our speech. The coarse, rough language that you encounter in the *bazaar* is light years away from the sweetness of what we heard previously.

Let me now talk of a phenomenon that has become all too familiar. Young people, in the prime of their lives, just chugging dead. Many of them are fitness freaks who go to gyms for a regular workout or run every day before or after work. So, obviously, it is not a careless submission to unhealthy food and drink that is always responsible. Nearly all of them battle inordinate stress: either at work or in their daily lives. Long commutes through traffic that is insane, irregular work styles since many work for corporate houses that are based abroad and are forced to keep tight schedules at complete variance from ours. This means a reversal of the Circadian cycle that our bodies are programmed for. Add to that frequent air travel through time barriers that play havoc with one's natural rhythms and the stress of always running to keep pace with demands from bosses who feel that a fat salary gives them the right to own your time. These are such a toxic combination that it is not surprising that many collapse by the time they reach 50 and have severe burnouts or mental disorders.

At the risk of sounding like an old aunt (can't help it as I am one now), I think food and drink are also responsible for heart problems that are claiming so many young lives. Weekends for most of these driven workaholics mean frantic rounds of parties where they eat and drink to excess.

Always remember Rahim's *doha*, *Ati ka bhala ma bolnai Ati ki bhali ma & up/ A ti ka bhala ma barsumal Ati ki bhali ma dhocrp'*, that best encapsulates the wisdom of moderation.