

Seriously satirical

Most of the 58 articles in this book tackle one problem at a time and Avay Shukla keeps smiling even as he rips through its abdomen for the world to see... A review

JAWHAR SIRCAR

Few bureaucrats are endowed with a great sense of humour, or else they would not be bureaucrats in the first place. And a profession that claims to be the world's second oldest surely lacks the excitement of the first.

There are, however, certain similarities and Avay Shukla's *PolyTicks, DeMockKrazy & MumboJumbo* lifts the hemline to reveal saucy bits but leaves it to the reader to fantasise. We benefit from his insider's ring-side views about "babus, mantris and netas (un) making our nation". His wit has surely not deserted him even after cohabiting for 35 years with dull, dusty and musty files. Behind his satire and flippant delivery, however, he displays his utter seriousness with facts and figures, as is expected from a senior administrator.

Shukla's blog, *View From (Greater) Kailash*, is immensely popular among his former colleagues and a large band of other readers. They love his flippantly serious dissection of Earth-shaking problems and eagerly wait for their weekly fix. One is reminded of R K Laxman's apparently innocent but sarcasm-loaded gaze as he spoke for the common man whose one-liners were more devastating than gnashing one's teeth or tearing precious hair.

Most of Shukla's 58 articles tackle one problem at a time and he keeps smiling even as he rips through its abdomen for the world to see. His collection begins with those he wrote just after the persuasive leader who has an MA degree in "entire political science" arrived in mid-2014. They end in 2020, a year that we thought would never end.

Let us sample his fare. Discussing the growing trust deficit, his opening comments are, "Many decades ago when I was growing up in a simpler era when crooked people were called cheats, not 'ethically challenged'; when a 'face lift' was generally given to a building, not to a visage ravaged by time; when 'silicone valley' was understood to refer to Pamela Anderson's cleavage, not to a techie wonderland, it was easy to have trust in people or things. The only objects that were universally not trusted were politicians, bureaucrats and shopkeepers, something, by the way, which holds good today." He plunges thereafter into the serious business of analysing some notable professions to show how "the trust factor gets more invidious" with time. "Beauty", he sighs, "does (not) lie in the eye of the beholder, it lies in the scalpel of

the plastic surgeon."

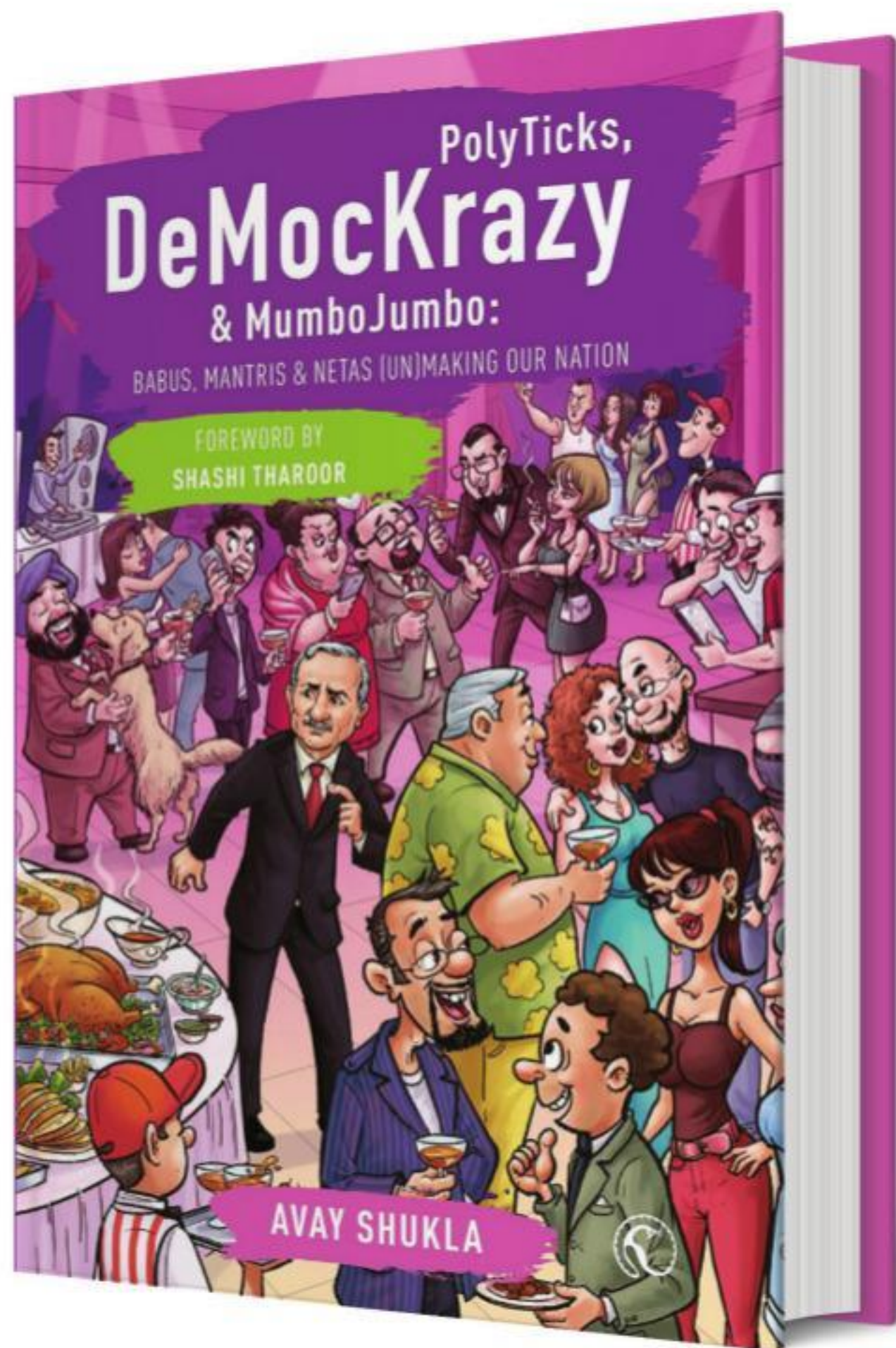
Delhi's forever upwardly mobile society and its inescapable humbug are obviously targets of Shukla's acid tongue. He tries to figure out why nobody but a nobody ever arrives on time. "To do so ensures you will not be invited again (because) such aberrant behaviour reveals... that you are unemployed or (God forbid) retired, that you have no other place to visit that evening, that you are trying to save on your AC charges in your home, that you are unimportant flotsam". Then, after listing a long series of mandatory fake behaviour that one has to suffer and keep grinning, Shukla explains that

"exiting a South Delhi dinner is also an art which needs a lot of practice and panache". He suggests a good exit line like "Sorry, I must rush - Mr LK Advani is waiting for me". He has no qualms about this fast one, as "the poor guy has been waiting for years now for anyone to call on him".

His remarkable wit notwithstanding, Shukla is deadly serious when examining his issues - that range from police excesses, bureaucratic idiosyncrasies, citizenship disasters to smartphones, smart cities and India's rapidly plunging GDP and international ratings. He lays bare hard, internationally acknowledged

data for his readers to mull over. Like "One per cent of Indians own 55 per cent of its wealth" or how "10 per cent have collared 74 per cent" of the country's resources. But even those need updating, as in two quick years, they have become worse and more skewed.

Berating the regime-encouraged or caste-inspired agitations and violence against certain films, launched mainly by uninformed goons, Shukla laments that "all film production will cease". And he rues, "Sunny Leone will regrettably go back to Canada, Amitabh Bachchan will become Baba Ramdev's brand ambassador and Salman Khan will resume shooting



Spot Light

POLYTICKS, DEMOCKRAZY & MUMBOJUMBO: BABUS, MANTRIS & NETAS (UN) MAKING OUR NATION

BY AVAY SHUKLA
PIPPA RANN BOOKS & MEDIA, UK
263 PAGES, RS 599

black bucks and *chinkaras* which is a far safer occupation in India than shooting films."

Lamprooning Rahul Gandhi's sudden hugging of the Prime Minister, Shukla comments, "I don't think he was expecting any reciprocal cleaving to the bosom by the PM. It is well known that Mr Modi never, but never, hugs an Indian: his expansive embraces are reserved for foreign dignitaries, preferably on foreign soil." One is, of course, not sure whether PM Modi will continue to do so now that he has cultivated a prophet-like white beard that is somewhere between Leo Tolstoy's and Charles Darwin's.

Shukla's take on the Indian Administrative Service is quite true, mercilessly so, and he aptly compares their service years with Russian dogs, who are "well fed but not allowed to bark". "When the muzzle comes off after 35 years", he notes that "they tend to be a rather chatty lot". Thank God, he left it at that, instead of pursuing those of us who take extra steps to make up for their lost decades with swashbuckling post-retirement activism.

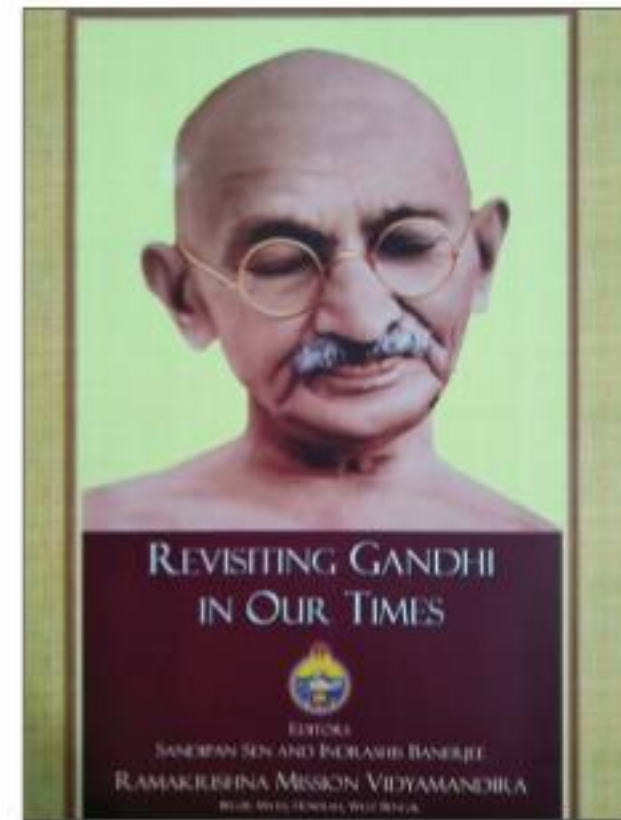
In this apparently flippant vein, he tosses various persons, societal ailments and governmental goofing around. To Shukla, there are no holy cows that can't be tickled, despite unpleasant consequences that have befallen several outspoken critics who went too far. He is, however, quite even-handed with all political parties and if ever people are curious how bureaucrats put up with the largely obnoxious political class, the answer is that they "faked it" most of the time.

Mercifully, Shukla does not pontificate or compare his bravado with the antics of the "lowly specimens" who populate his service since he left it. He laughs at himself all the time and that, by itself, proves he has achieved something that is very difficult for most of his colleagues - to remain plainly human and simply normal.

The reviewer is a former IAS officer

BOOKS RECEIVED

Strikingly relevant

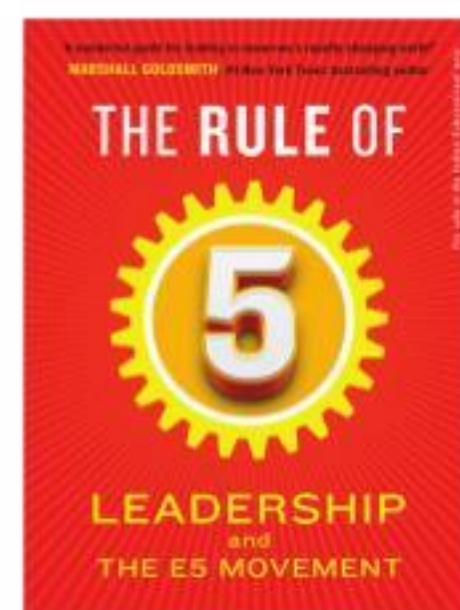


REVISITING GANDHI IN OUR TIMES
EDITED BY SANDIPAN SEN AND INDRASHIS BANERJEE
RAMAKRISHNA MISSION VIDYAMANDIRA
NONFICTION, 328 PAGES, RS 300

The underlying resemblances between the nature of the crises of our times and that of Mahatma Gandhi's are difficult to deny. The most notable among them is the crisis of human values in private as well as public lives, which he sought to restore through all his ideas and deeds. Thus, a careful study of the key ideas of Gandhi can be quite rewarding for us while facing the challenges of our times.

This volume, which is perhaps the maiden publication on Gandhi by any Ramakrishna Mission Institution, makes a humble attempt in this direction by earnestly seeking to revisit Gandhi and his ideas from the perspective of our times.

Inspiring leaders



THE RULE OF 5
BY PAUL DUPUIS
JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE
NONFICTION, 239 PAGES, RS 399

The E5 formula discussed in *The Rule of 5* is both familiar and fresh. It's a leadership model built in the spirit of "standing on the shoulders of giants", learning from leaders like Konosuke Matsushita, the founder of Panasonic, who put "empathy" and "enable" at the core of his leadership approach; Jack Welch with his 3Es, who then inspired Bob McDonald at the Procter and Gamble Company to craft his own version of the level five leadership in the book *Good to Great* with execution at the core.

The real-life anecdotes, combined with the conversational tone of the book, make this an accessible and impactful read. Thought-provoking and practical, it will inspire leaders to think about their own leadership, adopting the 5 Es on their mission to lead their teams to excellence.

Dupuis is managing director and chief executive officer of Randstad India and the former chairman of Hope International. Canadian and bilingual, he speaks both English and Japanese, and has lived and worked across Asia for more than 25 years.

Tale of belonging



CIVIL LINES
BY RADHIKA SWARUP
SIMON & SCHUSTER
FICTION, 296 PAGES, RS 499

Shocking, poignant and life affirming, *Civil Lines* is a family saga that explores belonging and an ode to every girl who dreams not of being rescued by a prince but that a brighter future lies within her grasp.

Swarup is the author of *Where the River Parts*, which was picked as one of Amazon India's most memorable books of 2016. She studied at Cambridge University and worked in finance before taking to writing.

KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN

The late professor Purushottam Bhattacharya of Jadavpur University was a specialist in European affairs and his book is thus welcome. The European Union increased from six to 28 members, but remains a curiosity in international relations, being neither a federation nor a confederation. It has shifted from national sovereignty to union levels without becoming a state, though Union law generally takes precedence over national law. It is not supranational and is similar to other international organisations, but has a greater level of internal coordination.

With basic criteria of democracy and free market, European integration was initially an attempt to heal the French-German divide that had imposed three devastating wars on Europe. The author traces the historical path from the Coal and Steel Community of 1952 through the European Economic Community in 1958 and the development of a Common Agriculture Policy, common external tariff and customs union.

The Union came about in 1993; a slow but steady transition towards becoming supranational, with qualified voting in sensitive cases, removal of non-tariff barriers, more powers for the European Parliament (the only directly voted E U institution), creation of a foreign and security policy, a president for the council of ministers, single currency and central bank, harmonisation of legislation, free movement of people and capital, and almost automatic residence rights. But services such as banking and hair-dressing are not integrated, and have to conform to the professional standards of the host nation.

There is constant tension between widening and deepening, between the intergovernmental and supranational approach. The commission or secretariat represents the supranational, while the council of ministers, the intergovernmental. An integrated Europe became an international player with the largest free trade area and a gross domestic product equal to the U S's before the U K's exit. But a common defence and foreign

policy proves challenging since the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has a preeminent role in security, some E U members are neutral and Germany, the leading member, takes a pacific profile due to its historical legacy.

The E U's "strategic partnership" with India is based on shared values but both have a low profile in the other. Apart from France and Germany, others have little interest in India. India has annual summits with the E U though a trade agreement has been bogged down for decades on India's high tariffs and refusal to extend national treatment for investments and services like accountancy and legal services. India wants access for textiles, pharma and liberal visas for professionals in information technology and healthcare. Before Britain withdrew (Brexit), the E U exported 42 billion Euros and imported 44 billion Euros (less than three per cent of the E U imports) and was the top investor in India. Indian investments in the E U were 50 billion Euros but half of those were in the U K.

Britain joined Europe in 1973 but left it in January 2020. Its ties with the U S and the Commonwealth reinforced its confidence and its public feared domination by the E U and free movement - it had the largest inflow due to generous social welfare. The U K possessed about 19 per cent of the E U's GDP, and its financial contributions, defence capability and soft power will be lost to Europe.

The E U faces many challenges - incomplete integration, identities, terrorism, debt, refugees, migrants, rightist populism, unemployment and climate change. It sought common identity through assimilation, but national sentiments remain high on foreign affairs, defence and security. Divisions are North-South and East-West in culture and development. The E U passport, flag, anthem and logo sought to create an identity, but the monetary convergence criteria did not hold after the eurozone crisis and bailouts for Southern Europe. Immigration from outside Europe was a domestic affair till 1999, but now requires a common policy. Each first-entry state was to process asylum or deport, but this broke down, and some nations, sup-

Falls short of potential

This reads as a textbook for a student who wishes to understand Europe but will not stimulate any general reader... A review

Spot Light

STATUS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: POSSIBLE TRAJECTORY

BY PURUSHOTTAM BHATTACHARYA
MACMILLAN/ ICWA, CHENNAI
174 PAGES, RS 1,600

ported by the public, do not want Muslims and refuse to be part of any quota system.

The E U's values of pluralism, rights, tolerance, justice, rule of law and gender equality are laudable. Its objectives were to achieve peace and high living standards, but integration has been market-driven and non-ideological. Member-nations show what they don't want from the E U capital in Brussels rather than cooperate and Eurosceptics put their nation first. The E U has to reform and change, but how and when? And what are its final borders?

Bhattacharya rightly states that Europe is little studied in India. His is a textbook-style book for a student who wishes to understand Europe but will not stimulate any general reader. Its price at Rs 1,600 for less than 200 pages is outrageous. Perhaps due to his death before publication, there are repetitions, no index, no list of abbreviations, no maps; with a final chapter about the trajectories of the title comprising only 10 pages, during which no opinion emerges.

The author cites 23 of his own works in a bibliography, but is



unaware of other seminal works such as *Europe in Emerging Asia* and the e-book on the E U by the Foreign Policy Research Centre. There are also serious errors - de Gaulle vetoed the U K due to its being a Trojan Horse for the U S; Ireland is not part of Schengen free movement; British Conservatives

feared losses to the U K Independence Party, hence the Brexit referendum, and Russia seizing Crimea is not "considered an outrage by the world" judging by voting in the United Nations General Assembly.

The reviewer is India's former foreign secretary

