

On joining the dots

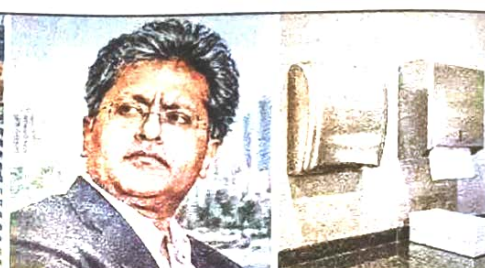
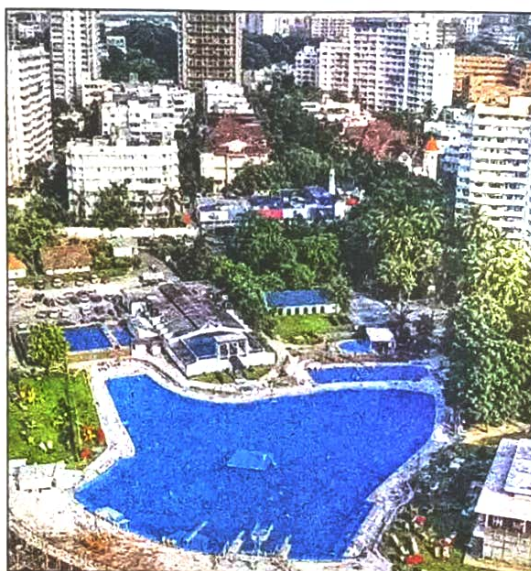
THE WEB BENEATH THE WAVES
AND OTHER REPORTS FROM OUR
TANGLED WORLD

By Samanth Subramanian,
Context, ₹799

Editors and publishers often insist on a 'theme' for anthologies. They argue that it serves as a compass, giving direction to seemingly unruly pieces of prose, binding them into a disciplined — thematic — unit. Yet, a theme can be tyrannical too, ridding miscellaneous anthologies of their eclectic, eccentric flavours. One of the pleasures of this collection of essays by the journalist, Samanth Subramanian, is its arbitrary character. But, as Mukul Kesavan writes in the Foreword, this randomness is garnished by the richness of Subramanian's curiosity that is expansive and quirky.

Jostling on the pages is a diverse set of characters — animate and otherwise — a testament to Subramanian's interests as well as sharpness as an analyst. We thus encounter an ambitious and bashful Lalit Modi as he climbs the ladder of fame; the deceptively benign intrigues of the Breach Candy Swimming Bath Trust; some of the talking heads of a 1967 documentary analysing the then 20-year-old India's chequered report card; the stains of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka; Judaism's imprint in Nigeria; even the 'conflict' between paper towels and hand dryers and so on.

Subramanian, like many a seasoned journalist, has this uncanny ability



to reveal invisible but interconnected threads. For instance, it may seem incredulous that the world of Lalit Modi, a creature of modernity and its mercantile warts, would share spots with those of the (Jurassic?) members of the Breach Candy Swimming Bath Trust. Yet they do. Subramanian unravels these convergences dexterously — turf wars, ambition, corruption, and profiteering. Again, identity, exclusion and religious strife, the author shows, have sprouted roots both in Sri Lanka and Nigeria. Similarly, vulnerabilities in global communication, local ecological challenges, geopolitical tensions, corporate irregularity, among other forces, coalesce in the exploration of a disruption in Tonga's underwater cable, an incident that, Subramanian correctly points out, could be prescient in nature.

Not all the pieces in this collection are even in terms of their engagement. That is to be expected. Some themes are familiar: such as the analysis of the existential crisis threatening India's vultures and the impact of the crisis on Zoroastrian rituals. Others — Subramanian's reflections on beauty in cricket — lack depth. Still others, for instance, the essay on quizzing, would be of interest to aficionados only.

What lingers, though, is Subramanian's ability to offer a bigger, complex, compelling view of the world and its attendant challenges through moments that are diminutive in terms of scale but intimate in flavour. This ability to surprise and sustain attention marks the strength of Subramanian as a chronicler of consequence.

Uddalak Mukherjee