

EYEBALL-TO-EYEBALL WITH CHINA
WHERE THEY HAVE THE EDGE

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH | www.theweek.in |  TheWeekMag |  TheWeekLive | ₹50

EXCLUSIVE
MORE CASES DON'T MEAN
POOR GOVERNANCE,
SAYS GUJARAT CM RUPANI

ANITA PRATAP
WHY DONALD TRUMP
IS A LIAR

SPORTS LEAGUES
NO ACTION, NO MONEY

THEWEEK

JUNE 14, 2020

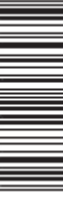
M U M B A I

DREAM CITY'S NIGHTMARE

CLOSE TO THE BRINK: JERRY PINTO

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9 770975 227702



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THE HUMAN TOUCH WINS BOTH WAYS

According to the latest IRS, THE WEEK is the only general interest English newsmagazine to grow in both Average Issue Readership (AIR) and Total Readership (TR) while Outlook and India Today have not.

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Source: IRS 2019 Q4 AIR/TR

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HIGH ALERT
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Despite an almost three-month lockdown, the outbreak in India's financial capital has exposed its already broken medical infrastructure, leaving patients in a crisis. There is an acute shortage of beds, ventilators, ambulances and staff, and the ever-changing policies have only added to the despair. THE WEEK looks at how Mumbai is battling the pandemic

Plus

- ◆ Author Jerry Pinto says the question is not of survival, but of learning
- ◆ We cannot go about testing randomly, says Dr Sanjay Oak, state task force chief
- ◆ How the pandemic has affected Mumbai's economy
- ◆ Bollywood is cautiously returning to work, but challenges remain

COVER DESIGN **BINESH SREEDHARAN** COVER PHOTO **HITMAN H./SHUTTERSTOCK**

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Printed at Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam, Print House India Pvt Ltd, Mumbai, M P Printers, Noida, and Rajhans Enterprises, Bengaluru, and published from Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi-682 036, by **Jacob Mathew**, on behalf of the Malayala Manorama Co.Ltd., Kottayam-686 001. Editor **Philip Mathew**

• Focus/Infocus features are paid marketing/PR initiatives



Give them money

The Centre's economic package will help restart the economy ('Selective treatment', May 31). Both the state and the Central governments were already under immense fiscal stress, and this was the right thing to do.

India is showing initial signs of emerging from a slowdown. But the workers' livelihood crisis will persist for some more time, and one cannot expect instant solution there.

In India, ₹20 lakh crore is big. But this has to be used primarily to help those at the receiving end of the lockdown. The money should be there in the hands of the people, and not in the air.

The migrant labourers suffered the most during the lockdown, followed by people who did various menial jobs for survival. At least 50 per cent of the benefits of the economic package should go to such people—directly or indirectly.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Your cover story helped in diluting the general feeling that the economic package was a case of 'too little; too late'.

The concept 'there are no free lunches' is stamped all over the package, including on the enhanced borrowing limits of states. The ham-handed manner in which the migrant crisis was—and is being—handled by the Centre is inexcusable.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

I agree with D. Subbarao that a crisis is the right time to make a commitment to reforms. The Central government did the right thing by announcing the economic stimulus package. The government claims that the package is 10 per cent of the GDP, but much of it, I suppose, is already injected.

Mobility of migrants requires a carefully considered framework and it should be constantly overseen by the Central government. All migrants should be given fixed cash when they are unemployed. The same applies to other weaker sections

of society. Nobody should suffer during the lockdown.

Vismay Mathur,
On email.

Prepare for it

The decision of the Army to introduce the Tour of Duty scheme is a welcome move ('Three-year hitch', May 31). While the intention here has to be appreciated, there are bound to be problems.

While the short stint in the Army may inculcate a sense of discipline among the inductees, most of them may see it as a stepping stone to other lucrative positions and may not take their job seriously.

Some may demand extension of Canteen Stores Department, which offers items at concessional rates. In the normal course, a person undergoes two years of rigorous training before being commissioned into the Army. In the proposed move, the training period is only six months. This may lead to two types of commissioned officers within the force, leading to internal rivalries. The 'Tour of Duty' officers also may try to dodge postings

in difficult centres. I hope these issues are addressed before the scheme is launched!

During my younger days, I had a dream to join the military as a commissioned officer. But, back then, the forces were not as keen as they are now in inducting new faces, and the vacancies were not properly advertised as they are done now. So, I ended up in the banking sector. Though I did not lose much, I hope young people today will take full advantage of the Army's latest move, and, with that exposure, will excel in their second assignment.

B.C. Unnikrishnan
Nair,
On email.

A stint in the Army will bring in discipline, confidence, teamwork and a sense of patriotism in young people. This is a right move. Many countries in the world are already following such a system. Once they leave the Army, these young people will get so many benefits. I am 40 now. How I wish the government had brought this scheme a decade earlier.

Nandagopal G.,
On email.

Feed them please
I felt sad to see the plight of saddle horses during the lockdown

('Starving steeds', May 31). Whether it is stray dogs, cows or horses, they are all suffering today.

Hats off to organisations like the People for Animals that are feeding these horses and keeping them alive. It is true that the lives of humans matter more than animals. But we should never shy away from feeding animals in our vicinity after we make sure that humans are fed.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

I blame parents

The Bois Locker Room is a sheer disgrace and I blame the parents of these boys for not inculcating the right values in their sons ('Virtual, vile', May 31). Men fantasise about women, and women fantasise about men. That is all perfectly fine. But none of us should demean ourselves to such extent.

Vrinda Gopi,
On email.

Great service

Last Word by Shashi Tharoor (May 31) was a stark reminder that all of us owe a deep gratitude to the fisherfolk, who are in distress during the lockdown. This community has rendered yeoman services time and again. We cannot thank them enough.

P.M. Gopalan,
On email.

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— APERITIF —
THE BIG PICTURE

LOCKS DOWN!

The nationwide lockdown may have slowed economic growth, but it did aid the growth of hair on many heads. Now, as the nation unlocks, salons have started welcoming eager customers, albeit cautiously. This team of stylists in Kolkata, for instance, dons PPE while working on each patron.

PHOTO BY SALIL BERA

POINT BLANK



We can take a leaf out of the their [RSS and BJP] book.... The Congress has failed in marketing itself at the national level. We believed that the people of the country would assess us by seeing what we did.

D.K. Shivakumar, Congress leader

People might think that I am arrogant because sometimes it's not their way of life. I am too straight. A lot of people, in the last 10-11 years, have given me the feedback saying that you should try and be a little diplomatic because straight trees are cut first.

R. Ashwin, cricketer

Under the shadow of the glitzy malls, the upward mobility of middle-class Indians, and stories of India's emergence as a global economic power, there is the harsh truth of millions of the poor hovering precariously just above levels of absolute poverty, living in unliveable slums, part of an unmapped unorganised sector, bereft of a social safety security net, and eking out a living from one meal to another.

Pavan K. Varma, author and former diplomat

The first figure that comes to mind while describing the achievements of the first year of the second Narendra Modi government is zero. The people of this country will remember the functioning of the first year of the second Modi government as zero.

Derek O'Brien, Trinamool Congress leader

WORD PLAY

This is the age of **hyperleaders**, and digital media is responsible for their creation. Hyperleaders are those politicians who are more popular than the party they lead, and who use social media aggressively to widen their political influence. A hyperleader may have a far larger social media base than his party, and this may even help him float above the party.



As an actor, I feel like a child left in a playground to play and explore. A good director and team won't let you fall off that swing. There's a sense of both freedom and challenge. It's like working in wonderland.

Aditi Rao Hydari, actor

MILESTONES

GO PAPERLESS

On June 1, a three-member bench led by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud held the first-ever paperless proceedings in the history of the Supreme Court. The judges used laptops to go through cases instead of paper files.



ANUSH GOEL

GREAT INDIAN STORY

Writer Kritika Pandey, 29, became the regional winner (for Asia) of the 2020 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. Her award-winning story, The Great Indian Tee and Snakes, explores the romance between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man.



MATTER SOLVED

Researchers from Curtin University found the universe's "missing baryonic matter"—which amounts to half of the total matter in the universe—hiding in the vast space between stars and galaxies. The researchers used mysterious fast radio bursts for the discovery.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Political porcupines

As the Covid-19 and migrant crisis grips the country, the ruling parties at the Centre and in the states are becoming very sensitive to criticism by the opposition parties. If the BJP at the Centre complains that the Congress and left parties are weakening the morale of the fight against the twin national crises of health and economy, the ruling Shiv Sena in Maharashtra is attacking the BJP for the same reasons.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury have been caustic in their remarks about how the Union government has handled the pandemic. The Shiromani Akali Dal, which is part of the National Democratic Alliance, has flayed the Congress government in Punjab. The Congress, which invited left parties for an opposition conclave in Delhi, has been lambasting the Left Democratic Front government in Kerala. In West Bengal, it is the ruling party at the Centre versus the state ruler—Chief Minister

Mamata Banerjee complains she is being targeted particularly by the Centre, while the BJP alleges that her Covid management is poor. Interestingly, in Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party is keener on attacking a fellow opposition party, the Congress, than the Yogi Adityanath government.

The ruling parties insist that the claims of mismanagement, for example, of the migrant crisis are a direct attack on frontline workers like the railway workers. But the critics argue that the railway workers were ready to move migrants from day one of the national lockdown, but the rail links were shut by an order of the political executive. Ministers and leaders of ruling parties of all colours and ideologies argue that it is the

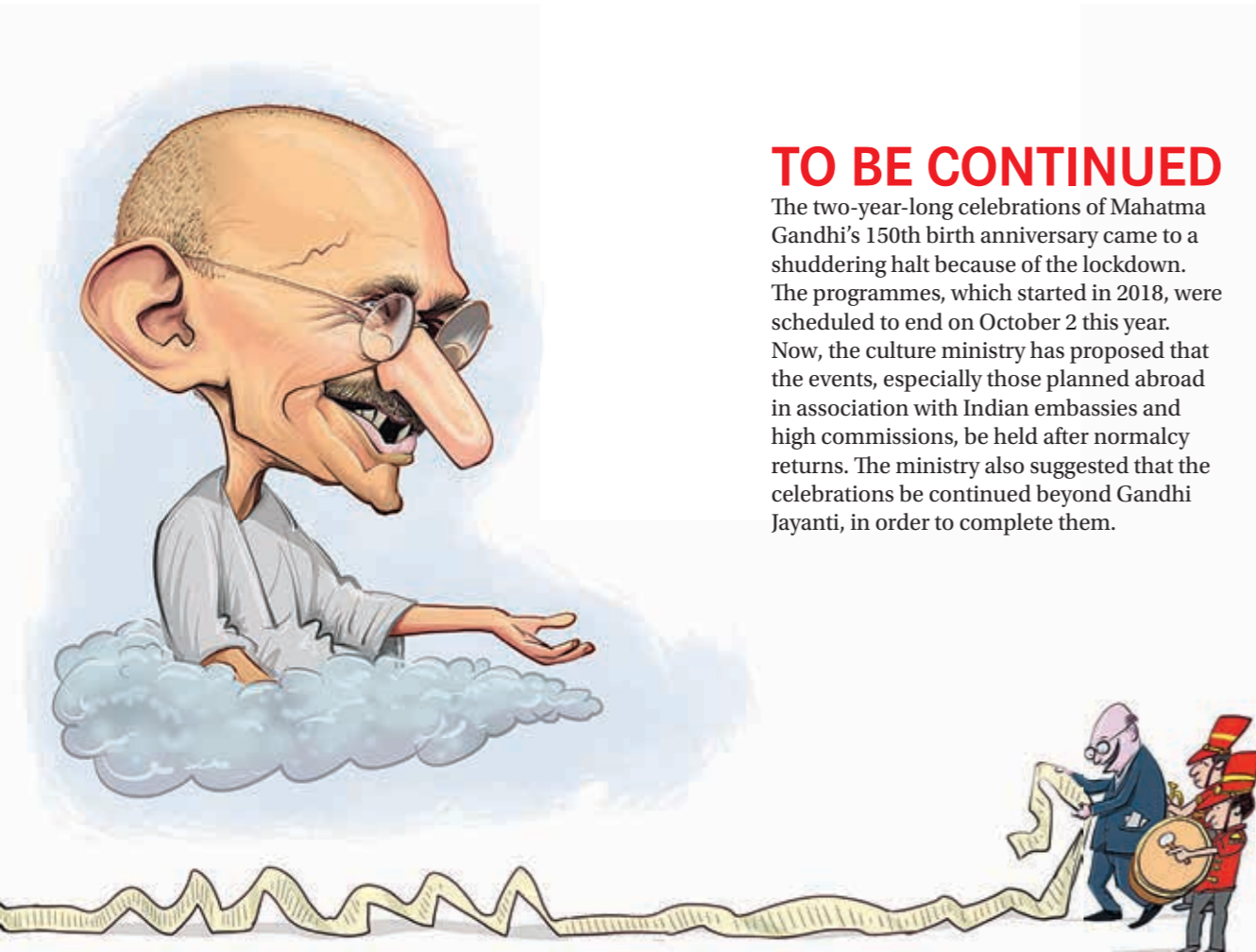
duty of the opposition to cooperate during a national or state crisis, rather than criticise. This is not the first time that ruling parties are taking exception to opposition criticism. When United Progressive Alliance ruled at the Centre, Modi, who was chief minister of Gujarat, was accused of playing politics during the 2008 terror attack in Mumbai and the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand. Though the parties in power argue that there is a broad convention that the opposition does not criticise the government in critical times, the same parties, while in opposition, do not consider it an ironclad rule. Normally during tense

military confrontations, the Congress and the BJP say that as the government has all the information, it should take the decisions. But this principle has been honoured more in the breach than in the observance during both UPA and NDA regimes.

Another convention is that the prime minister should not be criticised when he is

out of the country, but this old British precedent has been abandoned. While Manmohan Singh was criticised by the BJP for his discussions with Pakistan, Modi, too, came under criticism for his impromptu visit to Lahore to meet Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Suave prime ministers like A.B. Vajpayee and P.V. Narasimha Rao used to brief the opposition leaders much more intensively than Modi and Manmohan Singh. After the national lockdown, Modi held an all-party meeting via videoconference. Several chief ministers also held all-party meetings. But the coronavirus has not stilled the political noise. The clamour has only grown day by day, as in most other democracies around the world.





TO BE CONTINUED

The two-year-long celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary came to a shuddering halt because of the lockdown. The programmes, which started in 2018, were scheduled to end on October 2 this year. Now, the culture ministry has proposed that the events, especially those planned abroad in association with Indian embassies and high commissions, be held after normalcy returns. The ministry also suggested that the celebrations be continued beyond Gandhi Jayanti, in order to complete them.

BACK AT THE HELM

Home Minister Amit Shah had kept a low profile during the lockdown, leading to various theories, including about "health problems". As the rumours fell thick and fast, he even issued a statement about being in perfect health. Now, as the Centre makes the transition from lockdown to phased reopening, he is back in the limelight. Shah had telephone conversations with chief ministers, addressed media conclaves, and even attended the BJP's virtual rallies. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is busy with international engagements, Shah is holding the fort at home.

AIR VOLUNTEER

Rajiv Pratap Rudy, BJP MP from Saran, Bihar, has been flying commercial planes for a decade. During the lockdown, he flew a cargo flight to Dhaka, Bangladesh, carrying raw material for personnel protective equipment. He even carried food for his six-member crew. Before the charter, Rudy took the time to tweet a video from an eerily vacant Delhi international airport; dressed in his pilot's uniform, Rudy reassured people that all efforts were being made to tackle the crisis.



POSTER CHILD, NO MORE

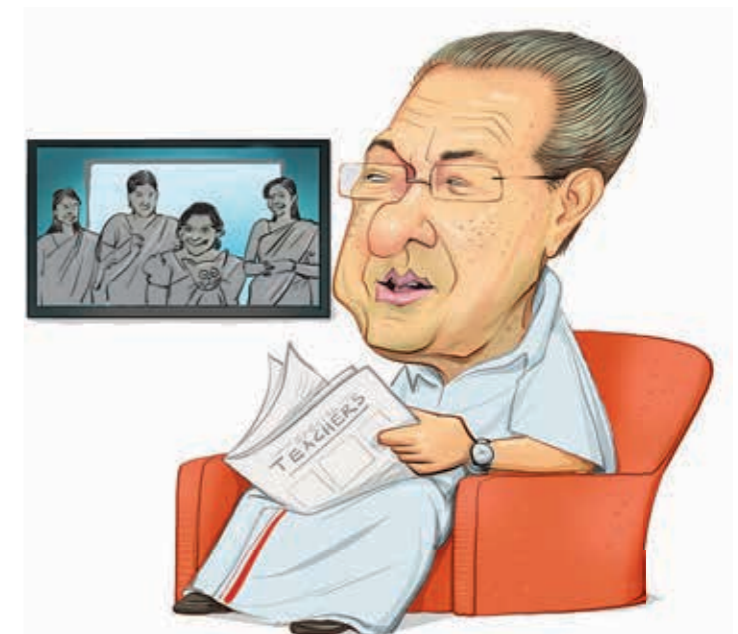
A Congress leader in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, was arrested for putting up missing posters of Jyotiraditya Scindia. But, perhaps, the BJP posters in his hometown may have given Scindia more heartburn. The BJP's Gwalior unit, like all other units, came up with publicity material on the first anniversary of Modi 2.0. Photographs of all prominent and local party leaders were included, but new entrant Scindia's photographs were missing. Later, the district president expressed regret, but, by then, the rumours that Scindia was unacceptable to the BJP cadre had started making the rounds.

PERSONAL TOUCH

More than two dozen journalists had requested the Telangana health department to test them for Covid-19 as they were on the field covering the pandemic. After the first batch underwent tests in Hyderabad, there seemed to be only one question they wanted answered—whether they were positive. Surprisingly, Health Minister E. Rajender himself broke the news to the journalists who were positive and counselled them to not worry.

CLASSES FOR THE MASSES

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's Covid-19 news conferences have been among the most watched TV programmes in the state during the lockdown period. But now, he seems to have some competition from unexpected quarters—government school teachers. After the state education department started online classes on June 1, the teachers taking classes in the government-run channel have become the talk of the town. Many of them got dedicated social media fan pages on day one itself.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.



TALKING HEADS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with the heads of Indian missions abroad through videoconferencing; (below) Australian Prime Minister with 'Scomosas' and mango chutney

Virtual turns real

Being cost-effective and climate-friendly, digital diplomacy is here to stay, but challenging relationships still require traditional platforms

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

DECLASSIFIED documents from the British foreign office on the 1942 Moscow summit between British prime minister Sir Winston Churchill and Soviet premier Joseph Stalin show that the breakthrough came in the wee hours of August 16. After hours of tortuous negotiations failed to bear fruit, Stalin invited Churchill to his apartment in the Kremlin to continue negotiations over dinner, which featured copious amounts of alcohol and food, including a suckling pig. Finally, at around 1am, Churchill summoned his permanent undersecretary, Sir Alexander Cadogan, and gave him the good news.

In comparison, the virtual summit

between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, scheduled to be held on June 4, will be a staid affair, despite its historic nature. The summit will certainly be a success, but there will be no drinks, food or photographs, only a joint statement. The warmth in bilateral ties, however, will be felt across the digital divide. "Covid has brought about disruption in all aspects of life. Diplomacy is no exception," says Australian High Commissioner Barry O'Farrell, who digitally presented his credentials to President Ram Nath Kovind last month.

Welcome to diplomacy 2020, where the rules of engagement have changed. The virtual has replaced the real. Diplomats have learnt to adapt

to zero physical interaction to enhance cooperation and even to signal displeasure. India, for instance, issued a virtual demarche to Pakistan in April over the killing of civilians on the border. It involved a terse phone call to the Pakistani high commission, followed by an email. And, now, the MEA is all set to virtually host the Australian prime minister.

"While this may be the first time we are hosting a virtual summit, engagement with world leaders over digital platforms is not new for us," say MEA sources. "Our leadership has virtually connected with our partners across the globe in the past few weeks."

Between March 1 and May 11, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has had 52 conversations with foreign leaders over telephone or via

videoconference. Modi, meanwhile, has held 42 such meetings. "Virtual diplomacy will be the new normal in post Covid times," assert sources in the MEA. "We are fully prepared to use technology and innovative tools to ensure business as usual."

Gopal Bagley, the Indian high commissioner to Sri Lanka, became the first Indian to present his credentials virtually. Syed Akbaruddin, one of India's most illustrious permanent representatives to the United Nations, retired from service with a virtual namaste.

Multilateral interactions, too, are happening virtually. From the extraordinary G20 summit held on March 26 to the World Health Assembly held on May 18 and 19, multilateral engagements have moved online. Diplomats have realised that prickly conversations and lobbying can happen without leaving the comforts of their seats and offices. The UN is looking at a virtual General Assembly meeting this year with pre-recorded speeches. India's election to the non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council, which

involves hectic lobbying, seems a certainty, with diplomats working the phones.

"The digital [era] is also transforming the space for track-1.5 and track-2 diplomacy," says Sanjay Pulipaka, who has co-authored a paper with Mohit Musaddi on digital diplomacy. "These initiatives have all moved online." With digital platforms being

more cost-effective and climate-sensitive, virtual engagement is likely to be the way forward. The decision to hold a digital summit with Australia has shown that concrete outcomes with like-minded countries do not always require in-person interaction.

Pulipaka and Musaddi point out in their paper that digital diplomacy existed and thrived even before Covid-19. "Ever since the telephone found its way into diplomatic conversations, it has remained indispensable," says the paper. US president George H.W. Bush made 35 calls in the first 10 days after Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. President Barack Obama went ahead with the now-dead nuclear deal with Iran following a telephone conversation with president Hassan Rouhani.

Handling trickier relationships, however, will continue to be a challenge. "Virtual diplomacy works for normal, day-to-day affairs," says retired diplomat Ashok Sajjanhar. "But where there are critical and vital issues, whether it is trade or security, you need to see the person and look him in the eye to make a judgment."



COURTESY: TWITTER

Hard negotiations almost always happen behind closed doors, often with a little help. The Russians believe in vodka diplomacy, with the liquor helping in loosening tongues. The Chinese rely on their unending banquets. The Finns are proud of their saunas. Back in 1960, Finland's president Urho Kekkonen mended ties with the Soviet Union by hosting a birthday party for Nikita Khrushchev in a sauna. Indira Gandhi used to send Alphonso mangoes to the shah of Iran. Modi, too, has used gifts as a diplomatic tool. The shawl sent to Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif's mother was a perfect gift in a less than perfect relationship.

When diplomacy turns digital, such tools, however, may not be available, especially while dealing with challenging relationships. "It is certainly successful in the case of India and Australia where there is commonality of views," says Harsh Pant of the Observer Research Foundation. "I am sceptical how effective it will be when there are divergent views, and diplomacy is really needed." The 2018 Wuhan summit between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, which helped bring down temperatures after the Doklam crisis, could not have taken place in a virtual format.

Tough situations, even now, need old-fashioned diplomacy. As the Afghanistan situation seemed to be getting out of hand, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad flew down to Qatar, India and Pakistan in early May to salvage the situation. While in Delhi, he suggested opening a channel of communication with the Taliban. Such a conversation could never have happened over a screen. But for now, digital diplomacy might just be the way countries engage with one another. **■**

INTERVIEW



Barry O'Farrell, Australian high commissioner to India

Can't believe China wants to be an unreliable partner

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Q / India and Australia have come closer militarily. How do you see this space evolve, especially after the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement is in place?
A / The India-Australia defence relationship is overlooked sometimes. In the past few years, we have seen the number of defence engagements quadrupling. We have AUSINDEX, which is Australia's largest and most complex [defence exercise] with India. I think it is going in the right direction.

Q / Faced with the threat of Covid-19, how do you assess the potential of economic ties between the two countries? Is the door to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) still open?
A / The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of resilient supply chains. The Indian government is looking to encourage more common investment, with many companies seeking to diversify their production bases to make sure they are not crippled by being caught in one country in the midst of a crisis. There are natural commonalities between India and Australia. There is potential in education, energy resources, biotech, advanced manufacturing, health, water and agricultural services. The door remains open for India to join the RCEP. But that decision is to be made by India.

Q / Australia has demanded an independent inquiry into the origins of Covid-19.

A / The call for an independent review came from the conviction of the global community to know how we got Covid-19 and as an attempt to improve international institutional response to future pandemics. We welcomed the resolution of the World Health Assembly, committing to an impartial, independent and comprehensive review, supported by 138 member states, including India. Australia shares an economic and strategic partnership with China. But our decisions are guided by common sense and national interest. I am not unmindful of the issues that India is facing on its borders in the north. But those are for India to resolve.

Q / Your views on an increasingly assertive China?

A / I find it hard to believe that China wants to be seen as a less than reliable trading partner. Many countries including Australia and India have engaged in trade with China for a long time. We have seen actions that have been characterised in particular ways. But in the long-term, it makes no sense for any country to get the reputation of being unreliable.

Q / Australia has been quite passionate about the India-US-Japan-Australia Quad.
A / The Quad is developing as a good forum for like-minded democracies to coordinate approaches towards important issues such as maritime security, cybersecurity and counterterrorism. Those issues are real today. We share a commitment and responsibility for maintaining a secure and stable Indo-Pacific region.

Q / The dates for the Indian cricket team's Australian tour have been announced.

A / Cricket is the shared passion of both countries. The series will lift spirits as we keep fighting this terrible virus. It can assist in repairing mental health and morale in both countries. **■**



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Vijay Rupani,
Gujarat chief minister

Recovery rate in Gujarat is higher than the national average

BY NANDINI OZA

A LOT SEEMS to be wrong with Gujarat's fight against Covid-19. Cases continue to multiply, with more than 17,000 infections and 1,000 deaths. There are complaints of negligence at the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, one of the largest Covid-19 hospitals in Asia, while the row over the alleged poor quality of Dhaman-1 ventilators, developed by a Rajkot-based company, rages on. Even the expertise of Dr Randeep Guleria, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences director who was flown in a special Air Force plane last month, does not seem to have had an effect.

Chief Minister Vijay Rupani has his back to the wall. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, he talked about the challenges faced by his government and how he plans to tackle them.

Excerpts:

Q/How has your government tackled the Covid-19 crisis?

A/Before the first case was reported on March 19, we had screened and quarantined over 20,000 international passengers. A core team was formed and we announced dedicated Covid-19 hospitals in four megacities with a total capacity of 2,200 beds.

As an added measure, we set up Covid-19 hospitals in all districts with a minimum capacity of 100 beds. Gujarat is the first state in the country to set up such dedicated hospitals. We have also

collaborated with 31 private hospitals to treat patients. We run 3,500 tests per day; we have tested more than 2.16 lakh people.

Q/Gujarat is one of the top three states in cases and deaths.

A/In Gujarat, a large number of cases [were because of] people who entered the state after attending the Tablighi Jamaat markaz in Delhi. This was a challenge for us, as these people not only hid their travel history but also met a large number of people after returning to Gujarat. A large part of those who returned are in the 600-year-old walled city of Ahmedabad, a densely populated area. In Ahmedabad, 75 per cent of cases have originated from 25 per cent of this area.

The recovery rate in Gujarat is above 45 per cent, which is higher than the national average. It does not matter whether Gujarat is at number three or four. What matters is the strategy adopted by the government to control the spread.

Q/In Tamil Nadu, which has more cases than Gujarat, the death toll is less than 200. In Gujarat, it is more than 1,000. How do you explain this high number of deaths—especially in Ahmedabad?

A/The recovery rate in Gujarat stands at 48.13 per cent, which is higher than

the national average. (Around 10,000 patients have recovered, and about 5,800 are being treated now.)

I agree, Ahmedabad has a high mortality rate. But our analysis has revealed that a large number of Covid-19 patients who lost their lives were people aged 60 or above, with co-morbid conditions like blood pressure, hypertension and heart ailments. We also found that a major share of patients were already critical when they were admitted.

Q/Do we have an adequate number of beds in Gujarat?

A/Gujarat has three types of Covid-19 facilities—dedicated hospitals, health centres and care centres. Currently, the state has 133 dedicated hospitals with more than 12,000 beds; there are 2,200 ICU beds and 1,200 ventilators. Additionally, we have 68 dedicated health centres with 4,700 beds and 125 ICU beds.

Q/There are allegations that doctors and paramedics are not being tested, despite many of them showing symptoms.

A/We are following the testing guidelines and protocols prescribed by the Indian Council of Medical Research. Doctors and other medical staff involved in treating Covid-19 patients are provided with all necessary safety

apparatus. We have created separate lodging facilities for doctors, nurses and other medical staff who come in contact with patients. In case any of them show symptoms, a complete checkup is conducted, which includes testing, quarantine and treatment.

Q/But why is there a shortage of safety equipment?

A/The state government has sufficient stock. We have also engaged additional manufacturers to increase production capacity. The administration has enough PPE (personal protective equipment) kits for not just government medical staff, but also doctors and medical staff at private clinics and hospitals.

Q/We knew that Dhaman-1 was not efficient. Why did we wait until a few days ago to ask for quality ventilators?

A/We were in talks to produce PPE kits, masks and ventilators in Gujarat. The idea was to get ventilators manufactured immediately, using expertise available within the state. A Rajkot-based firm took up the challenge. They successfully developed a ventilator, and we named it Dhaman-1. The first model is efficient in supplying oxygen; ideal for patients who require a steady supply of oxygen. Dhaman-3, an advanced version, is now ready to be used for treating critical cases. We have 67 patients on ventilator in Gujarat at the moment. We have sufficient high-end ventilators and we are upgrading others in a phased manner.

“

I agree, Ahmedabad has a high mortality rate. But our analysis has revealed that a large number of Covid-19 patients who lost their lives were people aged 60 or above, with co-morbid conditions like blood pressure, hypertension and heart ailments.

”



JANAK PATEL

“
The Puducherry government had ordered Dhaman-1 from the Rajkot-based company. However, after the Congress politicised the matter, Puducherry cancelled the orders. It has been done to further the agenda of the Congress.”

Q/The Puducherry government has cancelled its order for Dhaman-1. Is Gujarat going to continue using it?

A/The Puducherry government had ordered Dhaman-1 from the Rajkot-based company. However, after the Congress politicised the matter, Puducherry cancelled the orders. It has been done to further the agenda of the Congress, which rules the Union territory.

Q/Spitting in public is a major reason for the spread of Covid-19. Was it advisable to let paan masala and gutkha shops reopen?

A/There are a large number of people earning their livelihoods through these small shops. So a decision was taken to reopen such shops in a phased manner. We have ensured that they are open only for takeaways.

Q/Migrant labourers have gone back to their states. As industries reopen, will there be a shortfall in manpower?

A/A large number of migrant labourers wanted to go home to meet their families. It was an emotional need for them. We understood their concerns and facilitated their journeys by arranging Shramik trains. Gujarat has sent the maximum number of migrants—more than 14.25 lakh—back home through 966 Shramik trains. That is, we have operated one-third of the total trains in India.

There are around 3.25 lakh industrial units that have resumed operations with 27 lakh workers. As of today, industrial electricity consumption in Gujarat has reached 85 per cent of its full consumption capacity of 7,500MW. I am hopeful that, as the situation improves, the migrant labourers will come back and resume work.

Q/What is the action plan to bring Gujarat back on track in six months?

A/A special economic revival committee headed by Hasmukh Adhia has been formed. The committee will submit a comprehensive action plan with necessary inputs within a month. An interim report will be submitted in two



SPREADING CONCERN

Patients at a quarantine facility at the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital

JANAK PATEL

weeks. The committee will assess sectoral and sub-sectoral losses and provide necessary measures for revival.

The committee will also review the fiscal and budgetary position of Gujarat and provide suitable suggestions for improvement. This will include revising fiscal deficit estimates and the current tax administration. It will also analyse labour availability and provide recommendations to improve it. It will devise a strategy to create an ambient environment to attract foreign companies looking to relocate their base from other countries.

We have also introduced the Aatmanirbhar Gujarat Sahay Yojana, wherein we provide a loan of up to Rs1 lakh to small traders and self-employed people at a nominal interest rate of 2 per cent. The remaining 6 per cent interest for it will be borne by the state government. In addition to that, a core committee for Covid-19 conducts regular meetings to assess the situation across Gujarat. I am hopeful that such measures will gradually put Gujarat on the path of fast-paced development in a post-Covid world. ●

Model of mishandling

Covid-19 has exposed the systemic ills plaguing the BJP's model state

BY NANDINI OZA

DEVRAM BHSIKAR, 70, died of Covid-19 on May 29, a day after he was admitted to the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital. His grieving family collected his body, wrapped from head to toe in opaque plastic sheets, and headed to a nearby crematorium. They did not have a last look at him because of the fear of the virus.

The morning after the funeral, the family received a call from the hospital. They were told that Bhisikar had tested negative for Covid-19 and that he was being shifted to a general

ward. Shocked and confused, two relatives rushed to the hospital, only to be informed that the call was a mistake and that the body they had cremated was indeed Bhisikar's. They returned home crestfallen. But in the afternoon, they received another call. Bhisikar was in recovery, apparently. Their hopes were rekindled, but once again cruelly dashed. It was finally confirmed that Bhisikar was dead, and that the goof-up happened because of a miscommunication

among hospital staff.

Gujarat's battle against Covid-19, too, seems to have become a tragedy of errors. Gone are the rosy stories of the initial days of the fight, when there were viral videos of patients praising the quality of medical care at the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, and the state government regularly briefed the media on the measures being taken to contain the outbreak.

Things went south in barely a month. The briefings stopped and stories of apathy and mismanagement at the Civil Hospital began doing the rounds. There are more than 5,300 active cases in Gujarat now—4,000 of them in Ahmedabad. Nearly 1,100 people have died, with Ahmedabad accounting for 80 per cent of the toll.

The pandemic has exposed the failings of the BJP's model state, which Narendra Modi had run for 14 years before he became prime minister. As the number of cases soar, the government appears clueless about how to restore normalcy. Businesses have been allowed to reopen, except those in containment zones, but there seems to be no detailed, longterm roadmap for recovery.

The only silver lining, one that is highlighted by the state government, is the rate of recovery from Covid-19 in the state, which is higher than the national average. But then, questions are being asked about whether the rate shows the real picture. Recently, a patient collapsed and died hours after he was discharged from the Civil Hospital; the apparent cause of death was lung failure.

The government's response to the outbreak has been error-prone. Poor coordination, a flawed testing strategy, lack of quality care, overburdening of junior doctors, late reporting of infections and patients with co-morbid conditions have made matters worse. The situation is so grim that the Gujarat High Court recently flayed the government for its inept

response. Apart from taking up a batch of public interest petitions, the court is also looking into an anonymous letter from a doctor at the Civil Hospital, detailing the systemic problems affecting treatment.

More than 200 doctors in the state have contracted Covid-19. The Civil Hospital recently lost its head nurse. She had fever for days apparently, but was given proper attention only after she developed breathlessness.

The failure to scale up tests and the violation of social distancing rules have accelerated the spread of the virus, especially in cities. Carriers from urban areas have been spreading the disease in small towns and villages across Gujarat. Even people in power have been lax in taking precautions. Ahmedabad Mayor Bijal Patel has made public appearances and given interviews without wearing a mask.

Dr Hariprasad Iyer of Ahmedabad, who is on Covid-19 duty, said people became overconfident and broke social distancing rules. "People are educated, but not disciplined



ROCKY ROAD

In early May, some residents of Shahpur area of Ahmedabad pelted stones at the police who were enforcing the lockdown

JANAK PATEL

“**People from Europe and the US landed in western and northern India. In Kerala, people mainly landed from Gulf countries, where the strain was less potent.**”

Dr Parthiv Mehta, an Ahmedabad-based pulmonologist

enough,” he said. “Prevention is better than the cure. See the example of Kerala, Karnataka and Assam. In these states, primary health care facilities are also good.”

Gujarat spends very little on health care. This year, it allocated ₹11,243 crore for health and family welfare, which is just 5 per cent of the total outlay. “As per the National Health Policy of 2017, the health budget should be 8 per cent of the state budget,” said Prof Hemant Shah

of H.K. Arts College in Ahmedabad.

Himani Baxi, assistant professor of economics and public policy at Ahmedabad University, said decentralisation was an issue. “Health care is primarily the responsibility of urban bodies,” she said. “Over the years, the state government kept certain financial powers with it and did not let the urban bodies grow.” This, she pointed out, is completely different from the Kerala model, which empowers civic bodies.

The prevalence of co-morbid conditions among patients is also a challenge. Jayanti Ravi, principal secretary at the health ministry, told THE WEEK that 84 per cent of patients who died of Covid-19 had co-morbid conditions. “In Gujarat, the mortality rate of seasonal flu has also been high. Probably, this is the same in Covid-19 as well,” she said.

One reason for the high mortality rate, say experts, could be that most patients have contracted the L strain of the virus, which is more virulent and aggressive. “People from Europe and the US landed in western and northern India,” said Dr Parthiv Mehta, an Ahmedabad-based pulmonologist. “Looking at the graph of progression, the virus seems to be following the trajectories in Italy and the US. In Kerala, people mainly landed from Gulf countries, where the strain was less potent.”



Support, don't mindlessly criticise

The economic stimulus package of ₹20 lakh crore, announced by the Narendra Modi government is one tight slap on the faces of all his critics. The package was followed up by a series of announcements intimating how and where the funds will be utilised for the four Ls—land, labour, law and liquidity. It is a comprehensive package that has touched upon major sectors of the Indian economy, along with encouragement to supporting sectors. It is a clearly defined leap towards economic reforms that will help India become self-reliant and resilient.

The Covid-19 virus has changed the face of the world economy. Import and export sectors have experienced a cascade effect. Self-reliance or 'Atmanirbharta' is the only way to be now. The prime minister is hell-bent on realising a dream that any economy strives to achieve, a sense of self-sufficiency and least dependency on imports.

When the first case of Covid-19 hit the country, not even a single PPE kit was being manufactured in the country. But, within a span of less than two months, an average of 1.5 lakh PPE kits was manufactured locally. This impossible task was being realised by the hard work of the Central health ministry, with support from local industry. The critics, backed by the opposition, are trying hard to paint a dreaded picture, concentrating on a few negative cases.

Due to the monetary help provided by the government, crores of poor, directly or indirectly, are being free-fed on a daily basis since the beginning of the lockdown. Financial assistance of ₹34,800 crore, using digital payment infrastructure, was provided to some 39 crore beneficiaries. The 20 lakh crore package includes ₹1.7 lakh crore for providing free foodgrains to the poor and cash to poor women and the elderly.

The medium, small and micro enterprises are the backbone of Indian economy as they not only

constitute 24 per cent of the GDP from service activities, but also provide employment to approximately 120 million people. They promote inclusive growth by providing employment opportunities in rural areas, especially to the weaker sections of society. The finance minister has announced ₹3 lakh crore emergency working capital facilities for businesses, including 45 lakh MSMEs.

In another step towards Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, no global tenders will be allowed in the government sector for up to ₹200 crore. The Centre also announced a scheme to provide homes to



migrant labourers and urban poor at affordable rent. It has extended the interest subsidy scheme for middle-income families till March 2021 to boost housing demand. The Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme was also extended up to March 2021 and it will benefit approximately two lakh middle-income families. There was also the announcement of the one-nation-one-ration-card scheme to allow migrant workers to access public

distribution system benefits from any fair price shop across the country. The schemes have proved that the government has its heart in the right place, caring for all with utmost sensibility and sensitivity.

Apart from these, there is a series of other schemes and benefits that have been announced by the government, like a booster for animal husbandry and fisheries department for the holistic growth of the nation. The sad state of affairs is that the opposition chooses to stick to little loopholes it can find in the larger good of the country and spread make-believe stories against the Modi government in a constantly failing attempt to revive its sunken ship. It is high time the opposition realises that working with the Modi government to rebuild the nation in these testing times will be a smarter idea than to mindlessly criticise the policies and make oneself a laughing stock.

Enough is not enough

The optimism of the Palaniswami government cannot hide its mismanagement of the pandemic

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

ON MAY 31, the last day of lockdown 4.0, as the Tamil Nadu government issued orders for phased unlocking, 1,149 fresh cases and 13 deaths were reported in 24 hours. The daily count had touched a four-digit number for the first time. The 804 fresh cases from Chennai continued to worry medical professionals. But with the increased testing, high recovery rate and low mortality, the government indicated that all was well in Tamil Nadu.

“There is nothing to panic,” said J. Radhakrishnan, special nodal officer for Chennai corporation, appointed to coordinate Covid-19 efforts. “The situation is completely under control.” He emphasised that the spike in cases was because of increase in testing. But the situation is contrary to what Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami predicted, on April 17, when he said that “the number will come down to zero” within three days, and called it a “disease of the rich”. Tamil Nadu now has over 23,000 cases, of which over 10,000 are active. The government might deny it but epidemiologists say there is “widespread community spread” in parts of Chennai.

“What we are seeing now is that the cases are increasing at a linear pace. We might not see a declining trend as in Italy or China, in the next few weeks,” said Dr Shanthi Ravindranath, a senior gynaecologist and secretary of Doctors Association for Social Equality. In the last two weeks, people tweeted about the poor levels of testing. Their posts suggested that only one person per family was being tested, even if the others had symptoms. For instance, a 58-year-old woman in Royapuram, one of the most affected areas in Chennai, died just a day after she developed symptoms. While her son, who had tested positive, was shifted to the government hospital in Omandurar, she was turned away from the testing centre.

The government maintains that the health department is doing more tests than other states (11,300 on an average per day), but experts feel it is not enough. “There is no point in [arguing] about the presence of community trans-



HOME, BOUND

Migrant labourers wait near the Chennai railway station, looking for a way to return to their native states

mission,” said Dr J. Amalorpavanathan, former director, Institute of Vascular Surgery, Madras Medical College. “The focus now should be on testing asymptomatic patients, tracking their contacts and isolating and treating them. The government has to focus on increasing the testing inside the containment zones.” He says the very purpose of introducing more testing centres in the state in May has not been served.

“The virus will take its own course,” said Dr Jayaprakash Muliyl, epidemiologist and former principal of CMC, Vellore. “At the moment, there is community transmission. I don’t think the government has to feel embarrassed about it. This is not their failure, because this is the nature of the disease and this is how an epidemic grows.”

On March 7, when Chennai detected its first Covid-19 case, the chief minister and his colleagues maintained that only children and the elderly were vulnerable, and the infection would not spread. Three days after Palaniswami said that the number would come down to zero, the number of cases per day was in three digits. And since May 3, the number has exceeded 500.

“This was the result of an unplanned lockdown,” said Ravindranath. “The chief minister calling for a strict lockdown within a lockdown led to the Koyambedu cluster and then came the increase in numbers.” The state first blamed the people who returned from the

Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi for the rise in cases, then the Koyambedu cluster. Then, on May 20, the health department’s bulletin pointed fingers at those coming from other states.

The government also kept changing its stance on announcements. TASMALC liquor stores were reopened on May 6 but closed the next day as social distancing was not followed. Later, Kamal Haasan’s Makal Needhi Maaiam went to the Madras High Court, which then ordered for closure of the shops. The state government appealed to the Supreme Court and the shops were opened again, except in Chennai. Another major incident was regarding the Class 10 public exams. The government first scheduled the exams for June 1 and later postponed it to June 15, when even public transport will not have opened in full swing.

The state has denied permissions for flights that would bring in Tamils living abroad, unlike what neighbours Kerala and Karnataka did for their stranded residents. Highly placed sources in the state health department

say that this is because of lack of quarantine facilities for non-resident Tamils.

The state constituted 18 expert committees to handle the pandemic but none of those have released a proper set of recommendations till date, except for the medical expert committee. On the other hand, Palaniswami is growing insecure of his own people. When Health Minister C. Vijayabaskar started becoming popular for dealing with the crisis, he was sidelined. The responsibility was given to health secretary Dr Beela Rajesh; but when her press briefings drew praise, the chief secretary was asked to take over. Eventually, Palaniswami delivered the daily briefings himself. The early announcement of the opening of the Mettur dam for irrigation in the Cauvery delta was allegedly staged to cover up the poor handling of the pandemic.

Despite growing concerns, on June 2, Palaniswami once again said that the government is working hard to contain the pandemic. He highlighted the fact that the death rate was less than 0.80 per cent. “We need not panic,” he said. “The infected are being treated and we ensure that they go back home.”

“
“
There is community transmission. The government need not feel embarrassed. This is not their failure.

—Dr Jayaprakash Muliyl,
epidemiologist and former principal
of CMC, Vellore

Caring in crisis

During the pandemic, civil society groups are walking the extra mile to assist those in distress

BY SRAVANI SARKAR



DOORSTEP DELIVERY

A volunteer of Vikas Samvad and Rewanchal Dalit Adiwasi Samaj Seva Samiti distributes ration kits to residents of a remote village in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh

ON THE AFTERNOON of April 23, Devendra Ujle, 26, stood forlorn in front of Prakashchandra Sethi Government Hospital in Indore. He had been frantically trying to find a vehicle to shift his pregnant wife, Asha, to MY Hospital. An anaemic Asha was close to her due date, and had been at the government hospital for two days. But as her condition worsened

even after blood transfusions, she was referred to MY Hospital for delivery. Being a Covid-19 hotspot, Indore was totally shut down, and Devendra could not find any mode of transport. That is when Lalita Ujle (not related to the couple) arrived. Lalita, 31, is a driving instructor with Samaan Society, an NGO. She was on her way home when she spotted the couple.

“Lalita *didi* not only took Asha and me to MY Hospital, but also persuaded the blood bank officials to give a bottle of blood to Asha,” says Devendra. “She was with us till 11pm when my daughter was born. But for Lalita *didi*, I don’t know what would have become of my wife and daughter.”

When the Ujles were discharged, Lalita drove them home, about 10km

from the hospital. “As part of Samaan Society, we do relief work in the city and therefore have curfew passes,” says Lalita. “So I simply helped when I saw them in trouble.”

Lalita is part of Samaan Society’s ‘Sakha Cabs’ for women. She and three other women drivers now deliver relief material to those in need. The organisation has been working

in the most affected areas of Indore like Palda and Malwa Mills, providing ration kits to people who lost their livelihood during the lockdown. “We distributed grocery kits along with soaps to about 600 needy families,” says Rajendra Bandhu, executive director of Samaan Society.

The organisation essentially works for women empowerment, but has now busied itself with relief work. Several such organisations have reached out to those in need during the pandemic, going beyond their usual area of service. Apart from NGOs and people’s networks, these civil society groups also include informal groups that were formed during the Covid-19 crisis.

Sachin Jain of Vikas Samvad, a Bhopal-based advocacy group, which is documenting such efforts across India, says that not everyone had access to big donors; they funded their relief work jointly or through contributions from friends. While there were attempts to weaken and vilify civil society groups by closing funding avenues and using laws against them, he adds that the work that is being done by these groups needs to be discussed.

Take, for instance, the work being done by Sangram Sanstha, which has distributed grocery kits to 689 sex workers in Maharashtra’s Sangli, Miraj, Karad, Satara, Ichalkaranji and Kolhapur districts. Meena Seshu of the Sanstha talks about a 27-year-old sex worker who immolated herself in March after she developed fever. “She did not test positive for Covid-19,” she says. “She was probably anxious, distressed about the loss of livelihood, of having to send her six-year-old child to her parents’ place and her lover stopping his visits. We did counsel her, but she took the extreme step. Her case is typical of the situation that most of them are in.”

Like other daily wage earners, sex workers, too, were deeply affected by the lockdown. But organisations like Sangram Sanstha, that are part of

the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), have managed to provide relief to more than 5,000 families in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. Apart from providing groceries and other essentials, the NNSW has been creating awareness about the pandemic among the community. “Having suffered from HIV, sex workers are quick to understand the threat of viruses,” says Seshu. “They were told about the contact spread of Covid-19, asked to use face mask and sanitisers and keep buckets of water and soaps for clients, even before the pandemic threat peaked in the country.”

The help from NNSW has been much appreciated by Prema from Kanyakumari. “I am not infected by Covid-19, but affected by mental stress and anxiety due to loss of income,” she says. “This help from NNSW has been a great support during such difficult times.”

Cut to Kalyani in West Bengal, where students of Bidhan Chandra Agricultural University came together to help migrants. In the early days of the lockdown, they got distress calls from villages that they had visited for field work. “The villagers initially sought information about Covid-19,” says Julekha Perveen, a third-year student at the university. “Slowly, they started telling us about the situation faced by their kin who had migrated across the country for work. So, my friends, Tamonath Roy and Chandan Bhattacharya, and I decided to do something concrete.”

The trio collected ₹60,000 from friends, family and teachers and bought groceries for the needy. With help from other student volunteers—now around 60—they contacted migrants from West Bengal scattered across the country. Thus was born the informal Joint Forum Against Corona Crisis.

“We started connecting migrants with local organisations so that they could get food and other help. If

we did not find anyone, we would transfer some money to them," says Perveen. One such beneficiary is Sushanta Sarkar, a jewellery artisan from Burdwan, who is stranded in Jaipur. Sarkar says he and his five friends are surviving on the money provided by the forum as none of them have been paid their salaries. The forum also introduced migrants to apps of government schemes that could help them financially or return home. "It was not easy to explain it to them, so we made small videos using screenshots of these apps and sent them," says Perveen.

Technology has been an effective tool to provide help during the pandemic. When incidents of violence against Covid-19 workers took a communal colour in Indore, members of Aim for the Awareness of Society (AAs) realised that people were anxious because of the pandemic and the unavailability of medical staff to treat other ailments. So, AAs compiled a list of a dozen doctors who were ready to provide free telemedicine services. Posters were put up with phone numbers and availability hours of the doctors. Volunteers also visited homes of patients to facilitate phone calls to doctors and delivered medicines.

"I was already helping people through phone counselling, but when AAs contacted me, I thought this could formalise my work," says Dr Azhar Qureshi, who continues to work as an intensivist at a local hospital. "Now I get 20-25 phone calls every day and suitably guide them. People with anxiety as well as the kin of critical patients contact me. I also call them for followups."

Also, AAs has created videos and text messages, inclusive of religious teachings, to encourage people to undergo tests, if needed, and not confront the administration in this regard, says Waseem Iqbal of AAs. Since it handles Child Line in Indore, AAs is keeping children in shelter homes engaged through online



“ Lalita didi not only took Asha and me to MY Hospital, but also persuaded the blood bank officials to give a bottle of blood to Asha.

Devendra Ujle (above) with wife, Asha, daughter and Lalita (in blue kurta)

classes in dance, yoga, aerobics and Japanese language. "We also helped send children stranded in different educational institutes including madrassas, back home," says Iqbal.

In Jammu & Kashmir, which was under lockdown long before the pandemic, Koshish has been using technology to create awareness and carry out relief work. Audio and video messages in local languages have been circulated on social media and are also being played at mosques.

Likewise, local mosque committees were activated for Covid-19 relief work. "They already engage in relief work from time to time, but we activated them and connected them with each other to create a wide network," says Dr Rauf Malik of Koshish.

In the tribal-dominated villages of Rewa, Satna, Umaria, Panna, Niwari and Shivpuri of Madhya Pradesh, people are pleasantly surprised when they receive grocery kits, including nutritious items like jaggery, *sattu* (powdered, roasted gram) and *laai* (rice product), at their doorstep. Bhopal-based Vikas Samvad Samiti and its associate organisations are undertaking relief work. They have already delivered grocery kits to more than 3,000 families. Also, the kitchen gardens set up by the organisation at community and home levels have helped villagers get fresh vegetables and fruits during lockdown.

A widow with two daughters, Pan Bai Gond of Kataria village in Umaria is grateful for the help from groups. She was forced to seek alms during the lockdown. "But one day, two persons came to our house with a bag of rice, wheat, pulses, oil, jaggery, spices and other things," she says. "Now we have enough to eat for a month." ❏



MUKUL VASHISHT
DIRECTOR



How do you think enterprises are coping with the lockdown and the current crisis?

In the last decade we have seen all sorts of things. This unprecedented crisis has acclimatized us and taught us to appreciate opportunity. Such is the pull of a fall that you are more determined to push yourself back up.

We are only witnessing a period of silence before our workforce storms past the gates of development with unrelenting activity and dynamism. With the financial package announced and as movement and restrictions ease, we feel the time to gear up and transform the way we do business is now.

As an example of India Inc's fortitude and sense of social responsibility, many businesses have felt the need to serve and assist institutions in need of their acumen. Success is synonymous with our ability to adapt.

And when all the books you've read have already been read by other people, it's up to you to write a new story.

There has been much talk of the shortfall in PPE kits and other protective equipment. How do you think enterprises are addressing that?

Numerous businesses have evolved to support the flux in demand, and one such transformation happened at One Stop Creativity as we collaborated with our stakeholders in pharma and health care industries to help close the supply-demand gap, ensuring accessibility of masks, PPE safety kits and infrared thermometers.

Success is synonymous with our ability to adapt

Way back in 2007, my grandfather—Mr Raj Rajendra Vashisht—taught me the three questions any business would and should ask itself:

WHAT [the product]

HOW [factory manufacture, source and import]

FOR WHOM [clients]

The supply-demand problem arose because we didn't ask the right questions at the right time.

" Any successful enterprise would need to manufacture, source or import their products at a price that gives them a competitive advantage in the value chain. Such benefit can only accrue if our institutions allow reform and build efficiencies of scale. "

We need to identify our core strengths—whether it is manufacturing, sourcing or import—and ensure that we stay competitive in that. Only on this basis can we think of increasing our exports and serving the international market.

What do you think about the PM's new slogan of being 'vocal for local'?

From what I understand the slogan essentially means that we should be our own biggest ambassadors. This is true for anything that we do—whether it's manufacturing, services or an enterprise of any form, shape and size.

Also, do you think credit advances by the government will increase the contribution of manufacturing?

While the stress on manufacturing is much needed, domestic industry has always been driven by its people. According to the India Skill Report of 2019, only 45.6 per cent of youth graduating from our educational institutions is employable. We need more investment in skilling our workforce. Also, existing suppliers need an incentive to start manufacturing locally. Collateral-free loans can help, but may not always be consistent with the ways a profitable business works.

To know more about One Stop Creativity, visit: www.onestopgifts.in
Write to Mukul on onestopshop625@gmail.com or call +91-9818867921



Dr B. Ekbal,
chairperson, expert committee on
Covid-19 management, Kerala

This is just intermission in our fight against Covid-19

BY CITHARA PAUL

DR B. EKBAL wears many hats. He is a neurosurgeon, an academic, a public health activist and an established tabla player. He is also the chairperson of the expert committee that advises the chief minister of Kerala on all matters related to Covid-19. "I have learnt a lot more in the last three months than I did in my entire life," says Ekbal in an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, referring to his experience of leading a team of experts drawn from all fields to fight the pandemic. But he warns that the battle is not over yet. Excerpts from the interview:

Q/ Kerala is gradually phasing out the lockdown, although the number of infections and deaths are going up.

A/ Kerala's Covid story is at a turning point as we are entering the third phase of the fight against the pandemic. We could manage well till now because of our well-planned contact tracing, stringent quarantine measures and effective implementation of quarantine. But as the lockdown is going to be lifted, we are entering a new phase which is going to be very challenging. At the same time, it is only realistic that the lockdown be phased out. There is an extent to which any government can hold on to lockdown as a protective measure. Kerala must expect a huge inflow of non-resident Keralites (NRKs) from red zones

across the world and this is bound to increase the number of positive cases dramatically. It is unavoidable and we are prepared to deal with it. Our focus at this juncture is to contain the spread of the disease from NRKs to others, which could lead to community spread.

Q/ How much more worse can it get?

A/ I don't want to give numbers, but it can be really bad. We are entering a phase where all restrictions are being lifted and it is bound to increase the risks. There are many variables that determine whether one succeeds or not in the fight against Covid and system efficiency is one crucial factor. It can improve or deteriorate as challenges increase. We all must be conscious that the system is not fatigued as the fight against Covid is



BACK HOME
Indians who were stranded in the UAE arrive at the Kozhikode international airport

not going to end soon.

Q/ How long will it last?

A/ We have only reached the intermission. The second half of our Covid story need not be similar to the first half. It can be totally different. If one goes by the history of other pandemics, I would say that it can take up to one year to 18 months for the virus to mutate and to become an epidemic and then an endemic. But it need not mean that the virus will be this virulent for such a long time and that is a relief. I am also hopeful that a vaccine will be found in between.

Q/ What are the key factors that helped Kerala in its successful fight against Covid-19?

A/ Kerala's success story is also the success of its unique social capital—its decentralised and robust public health care system, its vibrant local governance and its educated and informed community involvement. In fact, Covid has come at a time when our primary health centres and

district hospitals have been witnessing dramatic improvements in infrastructure and funding. This vibrant and robust health care system in turn boosted the morale of our health care staff to fight the pandemic. Equally crucial is the role played by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Health Minister Shailaja Teacher. The chief minister anchored the whole thing and led from the front. This gave the entire system the much-needed confidence. So it is this combination of a good system and a good leadership that helped Kerala in its fight.

Q/ What are the key strategies that Kerala adopted in fighting Covid-19?

A/ Kerala, with its high density of population, high percentage of the 60-plus population and a large number of people with comorbidities is among the riskiest states in India when it comes to Covid-19. So our fight had to be extra aggressive. We can divide Kerala's fight into three phases. The initial phase was when

the state reported the country's first set of cases. We had our war room ready under the chief minister, quarantine cells in all district hospitals and rapid response teams in all districts as early as January, while for other states, Covid-19 was something that was happening in far away China. This phase of early preparation was a game changer. By the second phase—the lockdown phase—the system was very much in place and we ran it effectively. Now we are entering the third phase—the post lockdown phase—which is going to be very very tough. But with our past experiences and with a proper system in place, we will be able to overcome this, too, I believe.

Q/ Was the lockdown effective, considering the human cost involved?

A/ From a medical point of view, I am certain that the lockdown has definitely helped in reducing the number of infections and deaths.

But I personally feel that had it been delayed by one week, the distress it caused to the population, especially the migrants, could have been avoided. But I feel there is no point in judging something in hindsight.

Q/ What impact do you think the monsoons will have on Kerala's fight against the pandemic?

A/ Kerala is yet to recover fully from the shock caused by two consecutive floods. The monsoons will naturally bring back all the scary memories. Along with it, a gamut of communicable diseases like dengue and leptospirosis will also come. The management of non-Covid cases, which have been ignored till now, is equally important. The fact that only Covid deaths made it to the front pages does not mean that non-Covid deaths have disappeared. All those illnesses are still around. As the lockdown is coming to an end, the reporting of comorbidity cases is bound to escalate. All these are going to be huge challenges. ●

The city of perils

HIT BY COVID-19 AND AN EARLY MONSOON, MUMBAI HAS NEVER SEEMED SO CLOSE TO THE BRINK

BY JERRY PINTO



JAMIE MANSABDAR

TWISTS AND TURNS FOR MUMBAIKARS
At the Bandra-Worli Sea Link

M

y aunt, Celine Coelho, is a retired teacher. She lives on her own in a studio apartment

with a patch of carefully tended garden. Over the last six weeks, she has been looking after herself, washing her clothes and ironing them, cooking her meals and eating them alone. She has no smartphone, no computer, no laptop, no Netflix. She has books and her writing. She is 84 and for me, she is a hero of the lockdown. But even heroes have lessons to learn. "I have always valued my independence," she said to me over the phone. "What the lockdown has taught me is how dependent I am on other people."

It is a lesson every Mumbaikar is learning quickly. This is being written as Cyclone Nisarga begins to sweep inland and netizens are reading Amitav Ghosh's warning message about stocking up on candles and drinking water. It is being written just after we were told that the locusts were coming. The locusts are now in Maharashtra and eating up the crops. We have never seemed so close to the brink.

One of the phrases I use to describe my city is "an emergency in slow motion"; another way is "anarchy with a veneer of functionality", and over the last couple of months, this has been demonstrated again and again. We thought we would not get our fresh veggies in Mahim where I live when the Gopi Tank Market—famed across the city for its produce and its fish—closed down when a

Covid-19 case was confirmed. A market sprang up on the street; it began at 7am and was done two hours later when the first police vehicles and municipality vans began to scour the streets. Security staff turned into entrepreneurs. A Gorkha family went from standing ornamentally in front of shopfronts to selling onions, potatoes, tomatoes and the occasional bunch of coriander. Meanwhile, the news went from worries about citizenship to being intensely local. Everyone wanted to know where "cases" had been located. Friends inaugurated calls with: I hope you are okay? And then went on to: And your building?

But no one was sure about what happened next. In a building nearby, a doctor tested positive. The hazmat suits appeared and took down the names and numbers of everyone in the building, and then some municipal workers came and cleaned the staircases, and that was it. Life went on as usual. The building was not locked down leaving the residents feeling slightly let down and deeply relieved. Since there was never any clear information about what to expect, and newspapers were not being delivered, everyone became an expert. Everyone could tell you what the chief minister was going to do until he went and did something else.

Otherwise, the city functions as it always did. The rich have left. They have incarcerated themselves in their farmhouses and post pictures of themselves doing chores. The rest of us are supposed to respond to this virtue signalling by being charmed at the sight of beautiful people doing the sweeping and swabbing. This, as we get on with the sweeping and swabbing, which we never did either.

Thus, the middle class has less time for its favourite pastime—privileged complaining. The food porn pics on Instagram continue. There are loads of memes in which we en-

courage each other not to feel bad if we have not been productive today. If you have money in the bank, you can skip a day because you are feeling blue. If you are a daily-wage earner, not being productive means, you go to sleep hungry.

As for the poor, they have been the target of our twin sins—a besetting apathy and a lack of empathy. While we tell each other that there is no shame in not learning something new, the poor have learned how to live on one meal, if they are lucky, handed out by a passing NGO. While we show off the ham and cheese croquettes we baked, and our friends post drooling emojis, migrant workers leave the city, walking, cycling or on trains that lose their way. (A train loses its way? How does that happen? On second thoughts, do not tell me. I do not want to know.) While we put together Twitter storms

to get our children back from the United States, where they have been studying, migrant workers die of starvation.

What keeps us going is *schadenfreude*, a German word that means the joy we feel in the pain of others. I hear of a colleague whose father suffered a stroke on the second day of lockdown. She got him to hospital, she got him home, she got him a bed and carers, she also got Covid. Then began a saga of fever and pills, and the discovery that living in a single room on your own is solitary confinement, and can break the bravest soul. But if she steps out of that room, and passes on the infection, her father, who is in his late eighties, will be put at risk.

At the beginning of the lockdown, we assured each other that the summer would burn the virus

to death and we would get on with our lives. That does not seem to have happened.

Last night, I woke up to a familiar sound—the thunder of rain on the weatherboarding. This has always been a special moment. Practically the only poem I responded to viscerally in the daffodil-strewn English language curriculum was *How Beautiful is the Rain (Rain in Summer)* by Henry Longfellow. "Like a river down the gutter roars, the rain, the welcome rain," he wrote.

I got up and walked into a night newly cooled. I let myself breathe deep of petrichor—the smell of earth wetted by rain. I let myself be transported back to a childhood of bouncing into puddles with my Duckback raincoat heavy on my back. I allow myself this moment every monsoon before I remember that these three months will be very trying on the

marginalised of the city—the homeless and the poor. This year, with Covid-19 out there, it will be much, much worse.

Will the city survive this? "Oh, the city has had its obits written again and again," says Naresh Fernandes, editor of *Scroll.in* and author of *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay*. "In our lifetimes, the city was pronounced dead after the riots of 1992, the bomb blasts, the great deluge, the terrorist attack on the Taj..."

The question is not of survival, I believe. The question is of learning. Can we learn to connect? Can we learn to reach out? Can we demand decent living conditions for the least of our citizens, without asking what religion they follow or what caste they belong to? Can we hold the nation's richest municipal corporation accountable? Or, will we go back to the joys of social media posturing? ●



AMEY MANSABDAR

LONG ROAD AHEAD

Migrant labourers on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad highway, en route to their homes in Dahanu, in Palghar district of Maharashtra

Maximum damage

Thanks to the broken medical infrastructure, policy flip-flops and dense population, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought Mumbai to its knees

BY DNYANESH JATHAR AND POOJA BIRAIJA JAISWAL

Inspector Amol Kulkarni, 33, collapsed in the bathroom of his house in Sion on May 16. He was immediately taken to hospital, but was declared dead on arrival. He had got himself tested for Covid-19 three days earlier, when he went to a hospital with cold and fever. His test results, which were positive, came a few hours before his death. Kulkarni's last rites were done by the officers and constabulary at Shahu Nagar police station, as his family was quarantined. "You are our family," Kulkarni's wife told his colleagues. "Please perform Amol's last rites."

Another death that hit the headlines was that of Dr Chittaranjan Bhawe, an acclaimed ENT surgeon. He died on June 2 of complications that followed Covid-19 infection. Doctors and nurses are getting infected in droves, and at least two

policemen succumb to the disease every week.

The city of Mumbai is reeling under its biggest health care crisis since the plague of 1896. Reports say on average 30 people died of Covid-19 every day in the city in May. The lockdown might have helped in limiting the numbers, but the disease's unrelenting spread has scared the people like never before. Reports of frontline health care workers being stopped by housing societies from returning to their homes are a manifestation of how deep the fear has set in.

The total number of Covid positive cases in Mumbai crossed 42,000 on June 3, which is about one-fifth of the total reported cases in the country. The emergency ward of the Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital in Sion is a heart-wrenching picture. Two patients share each of the 15 beds and the attached oxygen tanks in the ward. A staff of four—nurses



AMEY MANSABDAR

SYSTEM OVERLOAD

Bharatratna Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Municipal General Hospital in Kandivali, Mumbai. Most civic hospitals in the city are overburdened

and residents—jostle for space with relatives of patients. Buckets of used masks and gloves are kept alongside trolleys of fresh medical equipment. People walk in and out as they wish, some even without protective masks. "We cannot keep a tab on everyone," said a nurse. "There is only so much we can do."

Balu Khade, 58, got admitted to the hospital a few days ago with fever and breathlessness, but his swab was yet to be collected for testing (at the time of going to print). "I will also get infected with him," says his wife,

Sunita, tears streaming down her eyes. The Khades live in Dharavi, one of Mumbai's worst hit areas with around 3,000 cases and 71 deaths. "It has been so long, but the disease does not seem to abate," she said. "We have no work and no dignity left. We do not want charity and we do not care for this disease. This is the reason many people in our neighbourhood are afraid of coming out to even get tested or report the disease—the fear of quarantine, lack of beds and ill treatment. Nobody wants this."

A few kilometres from the Sion hospital, stands the 95-year-old

KEM Hospital, an institution which has been at the forefront of Mumbai's battle against the pandemic from the beginning. Now it looks like a battered soldier who has given up the fight. Dreadful images of dead bodies of Covid-19 patients in body bags lying in the corridors of the hospital have been doing the rounds on social media. "We see 100-150 suspected Covid-19 patients every day. I have administered IV lines, catheters and oxygen tubes to patients lying on the floor. Some of those who died could sure have survived had they been transferred in time to the ICU. But we just did not have the beds or

the ventilators. Neither do they have an option nor do we," said Jay Savla, an intern. Ten of her batch-mates have been quarantined after testing positive.

Kirit Somaiya, vice president of the BJP in Maharashtra, described the chaos at KEM through the story of Sudhakar Khade. A resident of Lalbaug, Khade, 70, was admitted to KEM on May 14. He was shifted to the ICU on May 18 and was put on ventilator. The following day, the hospital informed his family that he was missing. The hospital authorities and the police failed to trace Khade, and his family was running from

pillar to post. On June 1, Khade's body was found in the mortuary of the hospital.

Yet another case of mismanagement was that of Constable Deepak Hate. He was treated for Covid-19 and discharged from the facility at the National Sports Club of India on May 31. He died in a few hours. "His son and daughter are admitted at Seven Hills Hospital and both are corona positive. His wife is awaiting a test report. I entirely blame the government for this misery of the Hate family," said Somaiya.

The crisis has exposed Mumbai's broken medical infrastructure, which suffers from an acute shortage of beds, ventilators, ambulances and medical staff. And the ever-changing policies have only added to the despair.

Antony Jolly, a resident of Andheri, recounted the horrific experience of an elderly woman who had to wait for hours to get an ambulance to take her husband to the hospital and later to take his dead body to the burial ground.

The man was a suspected Covid-19 patient and no Christian burial ground was willing to take the body. "He should not have died in the first place," said the woman over phone. "The moment he was feeling breathless, I took him to Seven Hills, but

Our homes are not so big that we can be expected to stay indoors at all times. If not of the virus, we will die of suffocation.

Mamta Tanshikar, who lives in a hut in Wadala with eight others



LONE STRETCH

Usually Shivaji Park sees a lot of people—cricket players to joggers and walkers—in the morning, but these days very few people step out to exercise

AMEY MANSABDAR

they sent us back home. From the next morning I was trying for an ambulance, which finally came four hours after he passed away."

A report by the Maharashtra Medical Education and Drugs Department, which analysed data for 2,315 deaths, says 69 per cent of Covid-19 patients who died had comorbidities. "There is no doubt that a comorbidity makes the immune system weak, but there have been so many instances when non-Covid-19 patients, who had other medical conditions such as brain haemorrhage, stroke, kidney diseases and diabetes, have died because of the inaccessibility to medical infrastructure and unavailability of timely treatment," said Dr Sudheer Ambekar, a neurosurgeon at Jaslok Hospital. "There have been instances when I could not find a bed for my own patients. A stroke patient I treated succumbed at a small nursing home when I found it impossible to get a hospital bed for him."

The dense population makes it a huge challenge to control the disease in Mumbai. Those living in the slums in the Wadala area, one of the 717 containment zones in the city, have been demanding a long-lasting change in their living conditions and better facilities to fight the virus. "Our homes are not so big that we can be expected to stay indoors at all times," said Mamta Tanshikar, who lives in a hut in Wadala with eight others. "If not of the virus, we will die of suffocation."

The authorities have not developed a Mumbai-specific response to the pandemic. "Adequate contact tracing is still not happening. We need to test aggressively, especially in urban slums and poor settlements, because community transmission has stepped up in a big way," said Brinelle D'Sou-



INTERVIEW

Dr Sanjay Oak, state task force chief, Maharashtra

We cannot test randomly

BY POOJA BIRAI JAISWAL

Q/Asymptomatics are not being tested. Is this not dangerous for a high-density city like Mumbai?

A/ We have to treat those with symptoms, not [just] positive tests. The UK has completely done away with tests. There are cases where the person tests positive for up to four weeks, but was completely asymptomatic within six or seven days. After seven days, the test may continue to remain positive but the patient may no longer be infected. So, he cannot pass on the virus to others. If someone is in the second or third day of the infection and is feeling unwell, but the test shows negative, I will admit him because of the symptoms.

Q/Why are we not testing aggressively in Mumbai?

A/ Because the material for testing kits is imported. We cannot go testing randomly. Two months ago, we had only two testing centres, now we have 77 and we are scaling it to 100. We have requested the chief minister that once we buy this machine, we can use it for diagnosing tuberculosis and for oncology and infections.

Q/You recommended HCQ despite conflicting evidence. The task force itself is divided on its use.

A/ I leave it to the discretion of the individual doctor. Personally, I would give it to my health care worker who is less than 55 years of age, does not have a comorbidity or a cardiac histo-

ry. Dr Zarir Udawadia (researcher) says that as there is no concrete evidence [of its effectiveness], we should not use it. But, in a pandemic we try to cling to every last straw.

Q/Mumbai is facing an acute shortage of hospital beds.

A/ We were not prepared for this. The government is taking over 100 per cent of ICU beds in private hospitals and 80 per cent of general beds. We will have sufficient numbers soon.

Q/What about access to Remdesivir and Favipiravir?

A/ We have made applications to the ICMR to quicken permissions and conduct trials.

Q/ The contribution of private hospitals has been low. Why?

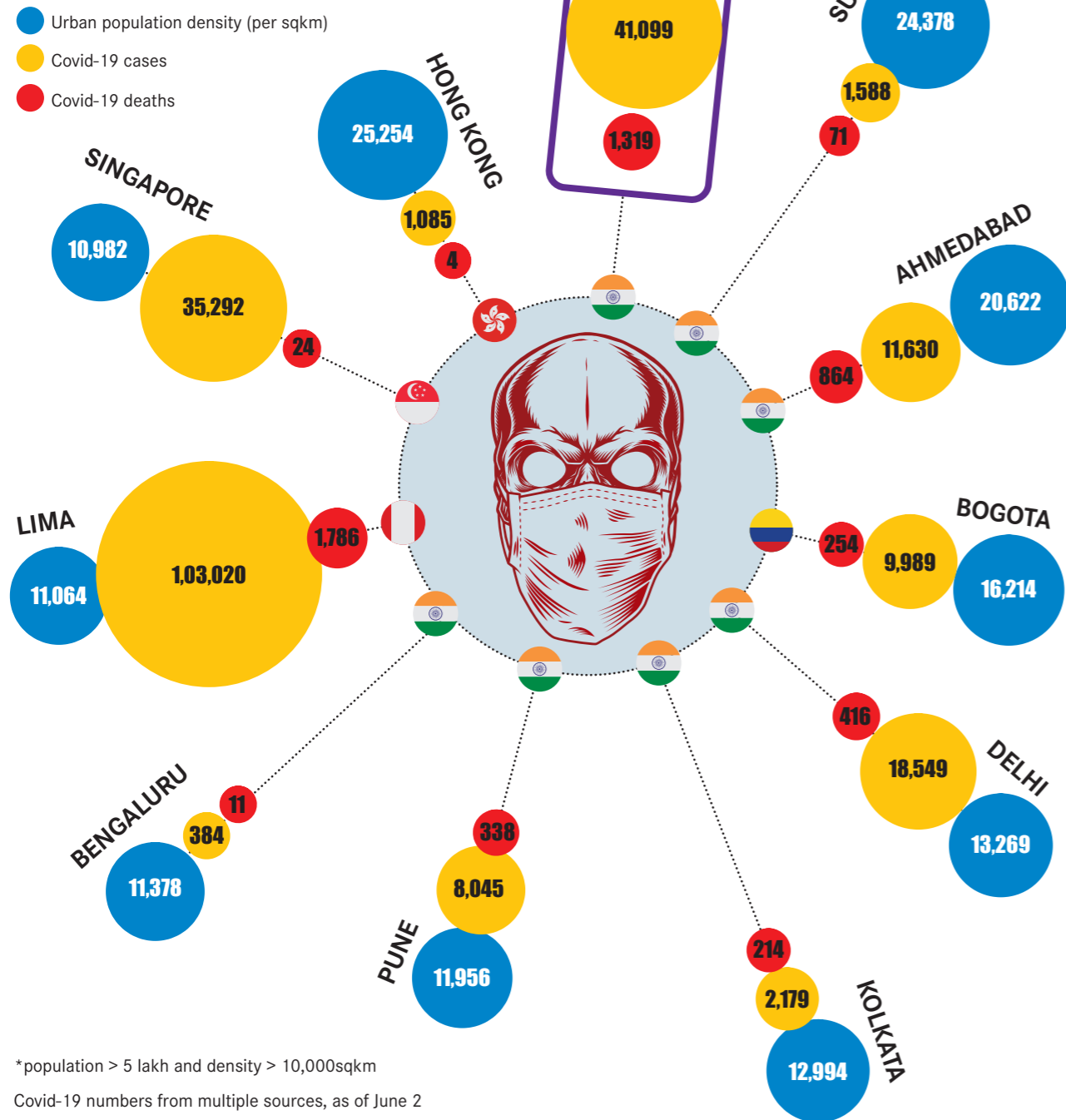
A/ These hospitals have to decide. We have made the recommendation. I don't believe in taking punitive action. As of now, resident doctors have been at the forefront of the fight.

Q/Hospital-acquired infections are currently high in Mumbai.

A/ The task force discussed adding a high degree of antibiotics in our protocol just to take care of secondary bacterial infections. And we have advocated that. If someone is admitted in the ICU and stays there for about a week or in the ward, we will give an antibiotic to keep the patient from contracting nosocomial (hospital-acquired) infections. ●

DENSE CITY WOES

How Mumbai's Covid-19 numbers compare against a few similar urban areas*

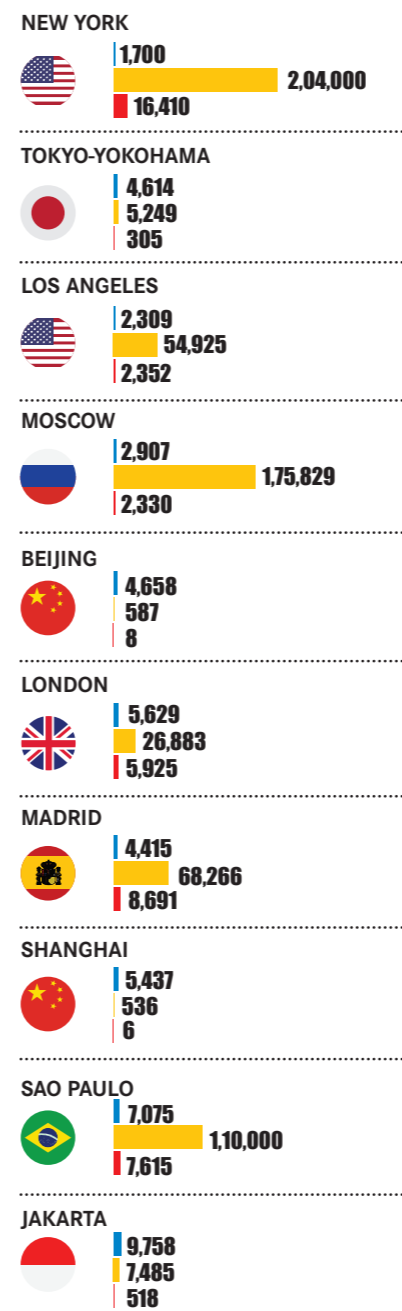


*population > 5 lakh and density > 10,000/sqkm
Covid-19 numbers from multiple sources, as of June 2

SOURCE DEMOGRAPHIA WORLD URBAN AREAS, 16TH ANNUAL EDITION, 2020

...and some other major urban areas

Urban population density (per sqkm)
Covid-19 cases
Covid-19 deaths



GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.,
RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

za, faculty member at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and co-convenor of Jan Swasthya Abhiyaan in Mumbai.

On May 27, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation set up a dashboard to map real-time availability of hospital beds for Covid-19 patients. D'Souza said the information on the dashboard was inconsistent. "It does not mention how many beds are available and occupied at private hospitals." The BMC claims to have taken over 80 per cent of the beds in private hospitals. But it is not yet clear if these beds are a percentage of the hospitals' total capacity or just a part of a certain number of available beds.

To add to the confusion, certain private hospitals have not been cooperating with the government and have been reluctant to hand over the beds. Health Minister Rajesh Tope carried out an inspection of the private hospitals in the city to make sure they were complying with the order. "The state government has issued show cause notices to Bombay Hospital, Jaslok Hospital, Leelavati Hospital and Hinduja Hospital for failing to adhere to rules and regulations issued by the state government for coronavirus treatment. Strict action will be taken against the hospitals who are not following the rules issued by the state government," tweeted Tope.

Nothing explains the situation in Mumbai better than the steady outflow of migrant labourers. Home Minister Anil Deshmukh said that more than 1.1 million migrant labourers had been sent back to their home states in the last month on 822 Shramik special trains. Amit Tiwari, a businessman

“

Adequate contact tracing is still not happening. We need to test aggressively, especially in urban slums and poor settlements, because community transmission has stepped up in a big way.

Brinelle D'Souza, faculty member at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and co-convenor of Jan Swasthya Abhiyaan

”

from Kalyan on the outskirts of Mumbai, has been running a community kitchen for migrant workers with the help of his trader friends. "We organised 2,000 meals every day from the first week of lockdown," he said. "Now the numbers have come down to 600 meals a day as many of workers have left for their hometowns."

Mumbai has a long history of bouncing back from the worst. And Mumbaikars know that this too shall pass. But the coronavirus has had them pinned to the wall. And they are a bit worried that they have not yet found a way out. ●



AMEY MANSABDAR

UNHAPPY HOURS
The Post Office
Bistro & Bar in Vasai
wears an empty
look these days

Capital crisis

Restricted cash flow and labour and supply chain problems block Mumbai's long road to recovery

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

Covid-19 has done to Mumbai what the 2005 floods, the 26/11 attacks and the global economic crisis in 2008 could not—force the city to a grinding halt. In the past two months, only essential services like hospitals, banks, pharmacies and grocery shops have been open in Mumbai. Restaurants, cafes, shopping malls, multiplexes, clubs,

gymnasiums and other places that enlivened Maximum City remain closed.

Brokerages and credit-rating agencies expect India's GDP to contract as much as 5 per cent this year. As India's financial capital, Mumbai accounts for nearly 7 per cent of the national GDP. Investment bank Barclays said in April that Mumbai and Delhi were likely to see economic losses of \$1.5 billion or more every

week because of the lockdown.

"It is painful to describe the sudden stoppage of the wheels of business in the city that never sleeps," said Niranjan Hiranandani, managing director of the Hiranandani Group. "The new set of restrictions that came into effect on June 1 focuses on the revival of the economy. But, with Mumbai and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region remaining in the red zone, it means no major

restart of economic activity yet."

The gross state domestic product (GSDP) of Maharashtra, India's most industrialised state, is nearly ₹29 lakh crore. The Mumbai and Pune regions account for almost 65 per cent of the GSDP; so the situation in Mumbai will have a wider impact.

The service sector—hotels, banks, media, education and entertainment—drives nearly three-fourth's of Mumbai's economy. Almost half of India's top 50 companies are headquartered in Mumbai. In most sectors, companies have allowed employees to work from home. Banks and stockbroking houses have ensured that services remain unaffected, even as they operate with skeletal staff.

The retail sector, however, has taken a big hit. Mumbai sees sales

of non-essential goods worth nearly ₹400 crore every day. Essential goods account for another ₹500 crore daily. "If you look at non-essential retail, there were zero sales in April and May," Kumar Rajagopalan, CEO of Retailers Association of India, told THE WEEK. "In June, too, we may end up with just 30 per cent of [normal] sales. Even sales of essential items were down around 40 per cent in the last two months."

Real estate has also been hit hard. Mumbai's housing sector, especially the premium and luxury segments, had been battling low demand even before the outbreak. According to the research firm Anarock, 15.62 lakh housing units launched from 2013 to 2019 were in various stages of completion in the top seven cities in India, before construction was delayed because of the lockdown. The Mumbai Metropolitan Region alone accounts for 30 per cent of it. Launches are expected to decline this year, as sales are likely to take a hit because of the lockdown.

Demand for commercial real estate is likely to change as companies rework office spaces. Demand for data centres is likely to see a spike. "Lifestyle-related commercial spaces—gyms, multiplexes, food and beverage outlets and retail zones—and hospitality- and tourism-related real estate are likely to see the slowest return [to recovery]," Hiranandani told THE WEEK.

According to ratings agency CRISIL, Mumbai and Delhi account for almost half of the ₹1.5 lakh crore organised restaurant market in India. Before the lockdown, dine-ins accounted for 75 per cent of the business. With only takeaways and deliveries allowed now, analysts say layoffs and closures look inevitable.

Shopping malls also remain closed. Experts say at least 25 per cent of outlets may have to shut shop for good, as many of them will not be able to afford rent. With footfalls

expected to fall dramatically, others may find it difficult to break even.

"In many cases, retailers have no money to operate," said Rajagopalan. "Most of the retailers do not even have working-capital finance from banks. While they continue to incur expenses, there is no money available. In the next one month, around 25 per cent of them will shut shop."

Mumbai had recorded an employment growth of 2.9 per cent from 2014 to 2016. According to a Brookings study, it had added more jobs than Los Angeles, Istanbul and Dubai during this period. The lockdown, however, has resulted in 1.1 million migrants leaving Mumbai. Their absence will have a huge impact when businesses reopen.

"We have lost trained labour," said Hiranandani. "So there would be an impact as regards the pace of completion [in construction], which will be slower because of shortage of workers. In other segments, where trained persons have left, there would be a need to retrain others."

The Indian Hotel and Restaurant Association said 70 per cent of restaurant workers have left for their home states. The retail industry, said Rajagopalan, will have at least 25 per cent fewer workers available.

The recovery is likely to be slow. "We will begin to move towards normalcy in the second quarter," said V.S. Parthasarathy, president of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "Some sectors will achieve normalcy in the third quarter, while others might take longer. Currently, there are issues with cash flow, labour and supply chains."

Even though the Union government and the Reserve Bank of India are trying to ensure ample liquidity in the system, risk-averse banks have been cautious in lending. But liquidity itself would not determine the pace of recovery, said Parthasarathy. Making liquidity available will also be key. ●

Dystopian days

The hard-hit Bollywood's recovery from the lockdown-induced crisis will require a multifront fight

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

The lockdown in Mumbai has been extended. But the cameras could roll again. Lights could be set up. Perhaps, sets could be erected, too.

But all this with limitations. On May 31, the state government announced the launch of Mission Begin Again from June 3. In a three-phase removal of restrictions and introduction of relaxations to the lockdown, some relief has been given to the entertainment industry in Mumbai as well, with shootings allowed in non-containment zones—but with strict security protocols.

The security protocols include social distancing of around two metres between crew members and the use of face masks and disinfectants. There are strict guidelines limiting the number of people allowed, at a time, on the set. No shoots will be allowed in unclean or crowded places—which means no sequence that involves too many background artistes. There will be restrictions on shooting with actors above the age of 60.

Last year, Bollywood made nine per cent revenue growth, churning out around \$24 billion. According to a FICCI-EY report before lockdown, it was expected to rise to as much as \$34 billion by 2022. But it is estimat-

ed that the entertainment industry has already incurred losses of over ₹1,000 crore since mid-March.

Amid losses, there are producers who are trying to look at the positive aspects. "I am thinking of what I have gained, which is the safety and well-being of the people who work with us," says Bhushan Kumar, chairman and managing director, T-Series. "I have come to terms with the fact that 2020, in terms of earnings, is going to be [less rewarding] compared with 2019. But we cannot do anything about it."

T-Series had a line-up of 12 films in 2020, including *Mumbai Saga*, and Ajay Devgn and Sanjay Dutt starring *Bhuj: The Pride of India*. Kumar says that a few days of shoot were left for many of these films, and he is weighing the options on how that could be done. "It will take time for the bigger films, but for smaller patchworks, maybe we can restart [the work]."

Even as the industry grapples with many issues, there has been a growing

demand for content. As filmmaker Anurag Kashyap puts it: "In such times people depend a lot on art, music, cinema and shows. It keeps us sane."

And, it is a big challenge, "to meet the demands when there are valid challenges on the supply front," says Ajit Andhare, COO, Viacom Motion Pictures. "The nature of our work is such that some of the assets are just not replaceable. How do you replace certain key assets like technicians, performers and actors?"

Andhare's pending projects include *Laal Singh Chaddha* with Aamir Khan (on the last leg of production), cricketer Mithali Raj's biopic with Taapsee Pannu (in the pre-production stage) and a web series, *X-Ray*, that was scheduled to go on floors on March 28. "We had to wind up the shoot when the lockdown was imposed," he says. "We are now evaluating how we can resume shooting."

Andhare is certain that the budget delegated to projects will be slashed considerably. "There will be con-

siderable decrease in the carrying cost," he says. "There is an issue of additional cost which are coming in because of the safety measures. The unit economics is also going to change considerably."

Andhare points out that right now the shoot will be allowed only in a restricted number of places. "[For a project to be completed as per plan], you want the freedom to shoot at any location that you want," he says "Other options are being explored. For instance, Kolhapur city has emerged as an interesting proposition. Another could be Ramoji Film City, Hyderabad. We have been evaluating [shooting locations in] Karnataka and Kerala as well. The impending monsoon is another big challenge."

And, even if the projects are somehow completed, one does not know when the theatres are going to be fully functional. "Right now, the proposal is that it will open in July, but with what kind of norms? If it opens with a 33 per cent capacity, the films may not work. I will

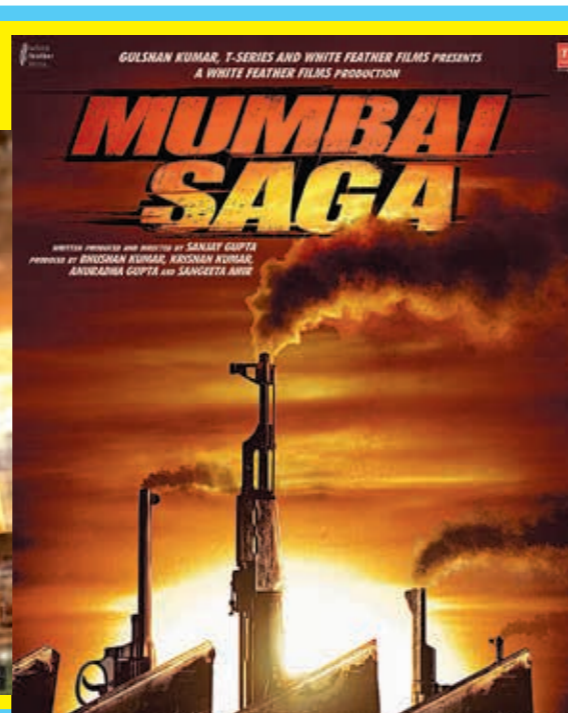
not release my films because there is no assurance that those 33 per cent seats will be occupied," says Kumar, who has been contemplating the option of releasing some of his films on digital platforms.

Content creators taking the digital route, and pushing their films on streaming platforms has got a mixed response with theatre chain owners feeling threatened. But Kashyap thinks that the only way forward is to "constantly adapt and go on." "Nobody has a solution [and thus] we have to adapt," he says. "The most important thing is seeing what is happening around us and going along with the times, surviving with our art. Some people can hold their film back, and, yet, be a support system for people around them. But not everyone can."

He adds that it is important to take care of the many daily-wage workers—spot-boys, light-men and technicians—associated with film shooting.

"The producers have sunk money; there is cost on capital, salaries that need to be taken care of," says Shibasish Sarkar, group CEO, content, digital and gaming, Reliance Entertainment. "Everyone is hit by the pandemic, the exhibitors included. But if the producers have taken a call to go straight-to-digital, probably that was required for them to do so."

Reliance Entertainment has four films in Hindi—including the much-anticipated *Sooryavanshi* and '83—and three films in Tamil, waiting for release. The shoot for all of these films, except one, is complete. "Reliance has individually spoken to all the filmmakers about what they want," says Sarkar. "Our internal take is also that we have made spectacles like '83 and *Sooryavanshi* for the large-screen experience. We will try to hold these films till it is possible for us, but it is a fact that you have to consider an organisation's ability in these times." ●



ALL LINED UP
Posters of films that are in various stages of production



RISING TENSIONS

A satellite image of the Ngari Gunsa dual-use airbase in western Tibet, where China has deployed a detachment of fighter aircraft since May

Locked and loaded

The induction of tanks and other heavy equipment by the Indian Army has brought about parity on the disputed border. China now wants to reassert its supremacy

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR AND NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

On September 16, 2019, the Indian Army's Northern Command tweeted photos of its chief, Lieutenant General Ranbir Singh, sitting atop a T-90 tank and watching the "integrated exercise of all arms" in "super high altitude area" in Pangong, Ladakh. To most people, it appeared to be another 'PR photo'.

It was not. The photo changed the military-tactical picture of Ladakh, literally! It announced to the world that India was now capable of deploying tanks on the mountains of Ladakh.

Ladakh and thereabouts on the Himalayas had always been infantry country. Tankmen have rarely ventured onto the mountains. In the 1947-48 war with Pakistan, the dashing General Thimayya took a few across the Zoji La; tanks were tried to be put to battle in 1962; and a pilot programme to deploy them in Ladakh in the 1990s was given up.

Ladakh, thus, had always been the foot soldier's domain. On the other hand, the Indian Army knew that the Chinese could bring tanks and artillery down the Lhasa-Xinjiang G219 Highway and drive them down the newly-built subroads towards several parts of Ladakh, especially in Chushul and Demchok. In other words, the Chinese had the armour advantage. India had been hamstrung by the fact that its undeveloped roads could not take tanks and most of the rivers on its side were unbridged.

The situation had been changing

since the mid-2000s when India launched a building spree of roads and bridges near the borders. Several landing grounds were prepared during the second Manmohan Singh government and the old airfield at Daulat Beg Oldi was upgraded to take military transport planes. The Narendra Modi government followed up the building projects. By 2015-16, the Army found it could actually deploy tanks and sustain armoured operations. A slow induction of tanks commenced since then.

The tactical picture changed officially last September when it was announced to the world with the photo. "We have been inducting tanks for some time, but if we have displayed them in exercise, that means we have them in regiment strength now," said an intelligence analyst. "We now have the capability to even take an aggressive posture, if we want."

Apparently, it was the completion of a bridge over the Shyok River on the 255-km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road that has now emboldened India to announce the 'arrival' of tanks. "We can now supply and sustain armoured operation there," said the analyst. "Our guess is that this has provoked the Chinese now; they are now objecting to several of our bridge- and road-building activities."

The September exercise also saw huge C-130J transport planes unloading troops and heavy equipment, paratroopers jumping from Mi-17 helicopters, foot soldiers being

carried swiftly across the plateaus in armoured vehicles, and Heron UAVs flying around. Clearly, with India's capability to deploy tanks in strength, the battle order in Ladakh is changing.

Indeed, the Chinese were also watching. In February, the People's Liberation Army carried out an even larger exercise in Tibet, where it deployed and displayed Type 15 tanks, the brand new T-96 tanks and the 55mm vehicle-mounted howitzers. China also made it known that it had developed a wheeled light infantry fighting vehicle and a new light tank that could be used in mountain warfare.

China had also been augmenting its air war machine in Tibet for the past decade and a half. Airports and airfields in Shigatse, Nyingchi and Lhasa have been upgraded, and there have been increased fighter flying over Tibetan skies. Satellite photos have also revealed early-warning planes parked in Lhasa, apart from fighter aircraft and troop-carrying helicopters, and also a new runway being built in Shigatse airport, apparently for UAVs. During a discussion held at the Delhi-based Vivekananda International Foundation on the growing capabilities of the Chinese air force in Tibet, former Indian Air Force chief B.S. Dhanoa said that over the past few years, there had been a significant induction of aircraft and aircrew into the Tibet Autonomous Region from other military regions. The deployment of Sukhoi-27, J-11 and J-10 fleets for



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

CALMER DAYS
A file photo of the Pangong Lake in Ladakh

continuous operation during winter months afforded the Chinese credible year round capability. Earlier, they only used to occupy the airfields during the summers.

China has 14 airbases in the Lanzhou and Chengdu regions, which are opposite Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. In April, a large area was developed parallel to the runway at the Ngari Gunsua dual-use airbase, where a detachment of Flankers has been deployed since May. The fighters were first seen in the area last December.

AirLand battle scenarios involving land and air forces have been tested since mid-2015 with more than 1,40,000 troops. Exercises were going on in Tibet even during mid-2017, when the Doklam crisis was unfolding. The PLA had then claimed that

the exercise “effectively tested the brigade’s joint strike capabilities on plateaus”, and at 16,400 feet.

In short, both armies have been upgrading their fighting capabilities for more than a decade now, and are now more or less evenly matched. “It is this parity that the Chinese want to remove; so they are asking us to stop building certain bridges and roads,” said the analyst.

But the Indian side seems to be determined this time. Unlike in the case of Doklam three years ago, when India had refrained from making any official statements, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh admitted that PLA soldiers had “come a little further than they used to earlier” in eastern Ladakh, making the “situation different” from earlier face-offs. He said Chinese troops were present in sizeable numbers. Unconfirmed es-

timates say between 3,000 and 5,000 troops have been deployed partly in the disputed stretches and otherwise close to the line of actual control in the Galwan valley, the northern bank of Pangong Lake and Demchok. All eyes are on the military talk between corps commanders on June 6.

In the Galwan valley, which is looked after by India’s 81 and 114 infantry brigades under the 3 Mountain Division, a few Chinese troops have come deep inside and pitched tents while their buddies are building roads to supply them. Intelligence reports suggest that the insertions took place on May 5 in Galwan, on May 9 in Naku La (northern Sikkim), on May 12 and 13 near Pangong Lake. Satellites have since picked up pictures of the Chinese moving towed artillery, trucks and infantry combat vehicles to a few kilometres

behind the LAC near the Hot Springs and Gogra. The PLA is estimated to have 2,00,000 to 2,30,000 troops under its western theatre command which envelops Tibet and Xinjiang military districts.

The problem, in case of a flare-up, may not be of numbers, but of command coordination. India still has four corps deployed against China—one in Ladakh, one in Sikkim and two in Arunachal Pradesh. “We definitely have greater numbers on the LAC,” said Lieutenant General (retd) D.S. Hoda, former northern Army commander. “We match up their strength and our total deployment on LAC is greater than the Chinese. Having said that, we must acknowledge that our infrastructure still does not match the Chinese who have roads coming right up to the LAC.”

If the current border standoff flares

up, all the operational decisions on the Chinese side will be taken by General Zhao Zongqi who, sitting in Chengdu, commands all the forces, including the squadrons of fighter jets, in China’s western theatre. He will decide the scale of operations, which units to be employed in what formation, how much force to be employed, where to strike other than in Ladakh, and where to hold territory. Under him, he has General Xu Yong, who commands the Tibet military district which is directly under the PLA, unlike other regions which are controlled politically by the Central Military Commission. This meant that operations in Ladakh, in Sikkim or in Arunachal can be synchronised under one command under Zhao, giving him a formidable advantage. There is no such one field commander on the Indian side.

STRATEGIC ROADS BEING BUILT BY BRO*

	Number	Km
Arunachal Pradesh	27	1,791.96
Himachal Pradesh	5	115.63
J&K, Ladakh	12	1,093.14
Uttarakhand	14	354.80
Sikkim	3	61.97
Total	61	3,417.50

STRATEGIC RAIL LINES BEING BUILT OR PLANNED

INDIA

Survey ongoing

	Km
Missamari-Tenga-Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh)	378
Bilaspur-Mandi-Manali-Leh (Himachal Pradesh-Ladakh)	498
Pasighat-Parshuram Kund-Rupai (Arunachal Pradesh-Assam)	256
North Lakhimpur-Bame-Aalo-Silapathar (Assam-Arunachal Pradesh-Assam)	249

CHINA

Construction ongoing (scheduled to be completed in 2020)

Yanga-Nyingchi (to Arunachal Pradesh border)
Shigatse-Yadong (to Chumbi Valley, near Sikkim)

*Border Roads Organisation

Matching wits and clashing arms with Zhao and Xu will be six three-star officers sitting hundreds of miles from one another—the northern Army commander at Udhampur, the central Army commander in Lucknow, the eastern commander in Kolkata, the western air commander in Delhi, the central air commander in Allahabad and the eastern air commander in Shillong. These six gentlemen will have to decide on the operations, coordinated, of course, by the directorate-general in Delhi.

The Chinese have also reorganised their field formations into mobile

brigades, whereas India continues with the World War II style corps-division-brigade system. "The brigadisation of the PLA is another advantage which makes the actions of the Chinese army more flexible and responsive to new and complicated situations," said French-born author, historian and China watcher Claude Arpi. India is also following suit, but again slowly. The 65-year-old General Zhao is one of the few commanders who had taken part in China's Vietnam war of the late 1970s (the last time the PLA fired shots in anger), and is reported to be quite close to President Xi Jinping. Having served in Tibet for nearly 20 years, he knows the Indian frontier like the back of his hand.

There are reports that Zhao may finally be retiring, or elevated to the Central Military Commission. Arpi pointed to reports coming from China that a newly promoted Lieutenant General Xu Qiling has taken over as the new commander of western theatre ground forces. A report of the Chinese western Army's official WeChat account on May 29 had said that a meeting of the command's standing committee was convened "to convey the spirit of learning of the third meeting of the 13th National People's Congress". Xu Qiling delivered the report at the meeting, which was presided over by the army political commissar Xu Deqing.

Xu Qiling, too, is an experienced hand at joint theatre management. As a major general, he had served as the deputy commander in the central theatre. Later, he served as the commander of the 79th Army in the northern theatre. In January 2019, he became deputy commander of the eastern theatre, and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general in December. ●

—with R. Prasannan

INTERVIEW



Lobsang Sangay,
Tibetan PM-in-exile

What happened to us can happen to you

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

Q/How do you see the growing aggression by China along the LAC?

A/China has traditionally maintained that Tibet is the palm, and Bhutan, Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and Sikkim are its five fingers. Once they took over Tibet, they had an upper hand in terms of imposing their expansionist policy. Ladakh is the latest addition to China's expansionist policy. Tibetans were its first-hand victim and we have been warning the world ever since.

Q/The People's Liberation Army can use Tibet to gain access into Indian territory. Your comments.

A/If we look at history, India never shared a border with China, but it has always shared a border with Tibet. During that period, Indo-Tibetan border was never an issue. In fact, Tibet acted as a buffer zone between India and China, which is now no longer the case.

Q/In the event of increased Chinese assault on India, what role can the Central Tibetan Administration play?

A/We stand with India on ahimsa. The CTA and voice of the Tibetan people have been at the forefront when it came to confronting China. We seek China to follow international norms, basic human rights and non-violence. We have been alerting all the neighbouring countries, including India, that what happened to Tibet could happen to you.

Q/Do you think India should support the Dalai Lama even more?

A/India has been a gracious host to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and is the second home for Tibetans. In fact, no country has done more for the Tibetans than India and its people [have] and we are extremely grateful [for that].

Q/There is growing clamour about boycotting Chinese goods and products after the pandemic.

A/This campaign has been going on for decades. Its success depends on whether citizens consider national interests over individual interests or entertainment. For me, whether the public buys Chinese goods is secondary, because they will buy if things are cheaper. If India can make better and cheaper goods then people will buy Indian products.

People and celebrities should be informed on China's strategic interests in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Bhutan and Nepal, and critically assess China's increased aggression at the border in recent years.

Q/How do you see India's reassertion of Aksai Chin in the new political map released in November 2019, post abrogation of Article 370?

A/[The] Aksai Chin problem began after the occupation of Tibet and Xinjiang. Till Tibet is resolved peacefully, such assertion will continue. ●

DETOUR

SHOBHAA DE



Superstar of the season

Sweet irony. Till about a month ago, Sonu Sood was one more Bollywood hunk—all muscles and decent acting chops—that's it. Today, he is a folk hero, after he nimbly jumped into the pandemic panic, and emerged as a Covid-superstar. His first act of kindness was to arrange 60 buses at his own expense, to send back 350 migrants to their home state, Karnataka. Apart from transport, he ensured they had sufficient food and water for the journey.

He was present to see them off, and of course, the press was briefed. In an interview after his good deed was acknowledged and publicised across social media platforms, Sood spoke with sincerity and sobriety, saying he did it as he was moved by the plight of migrants. Suddenly, Sood's popularity zoomed into stratosphere and at one point, he even managed to beat the unbeatable Salman Khan in the social media stakes! He followed up the bus initiative by another dazzling act—he chartered an aircraft to ferry 150 migrant ladies from Kerala to Bhubaneswar.



Soon, he had transformed himself from a dimpled six-footer, playing a baddie in Bollywood films, to Saviour Sood. His do-gooder fame had spread so rapidly that all sorts of helpless victims of the pandemic started to contact him directly over Twitter. Like the abandoned old mother at Mumbai's Bandra station whose son had thrown her out of the house. And another set of 1,000 migrants who were later transported from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar.

Sood's story reads better than some of the movie scripts he has picked. He came to Mumbai with ₹5,500 in his pocket and shared a poky little flat with six other hopefuls looking for breaks; today the 47-year-old is a wealthy businessman, actor and producer. To that, one can safely add "philanthropist" after his Santa Claus act. He is the proud owner of high-end cars like the Porsche Panamera, the

Mercedes-Benz M-Class and the Audi Q7. He owns several properties, including a lavish one in Mumbai, which was in the news for some transgressions. That news has been buried for now. And, Sonu frequently pitches in to create public awareness for several campaigns launched by the Mumbai Police and other government bodies.

Sood has acted in several multilingual films, starting his career in 1999 with a Tamil film titled, *Kallazhagar*. He also appeared in a Chinese film and claims friendship with the likes of Jackie Chan. Given that he had come to Mumbai to take his chances in the competitive world of modelling, Sonu made it to the top rung of the Grasim Mr. India contest before getting his movie break.

Today, he has catapulted himself into another league. It is a coveted upgrade. In fact, those who have worked with the actor say, somewhat cynically, that the Covid-19 humanitarian work has been his best investment to date. Overnight, Sonu Sood is the go-to guy for distressed folks in India.

Industry watchers also say Sonu will no longer accept supporting roles—remember, his early break in Bollywood came with him playing Abhishek Bachchan's brother in *Yuva*. A producer commented cynically that henceforth Sonu will demand treble his fees and dictate the kind of role he feels he is worthy of, given his enhanced status. Sonu had already displayed an "attitude issue" when he walked out of Kangana Ranaut's *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*. He was pretty outspoken at the time and his views were seen as "sexist" by critics!

Oh well, today's version is a "new, improved" Sonu Sood. No doubt, he will be richly rewarded by the authorities. Do watch out for his name when the next Padmas are announced. Who knows, maybe he will join politics next and emerge as a people's hero. Anything, is possible in showbiz and politics!

Actor Sonu Sood/PHOTO PTI

www.shobaade.blogspot.com



PHOTOS PTI

Plague ground

Amid the Covid-induced crisis, the multiple waves of attacks by desert locusts may put India's food security at risk

BY REKHA DIXIT

REMEMBER THE RAINS in March, which cleaned the air much before the lockdown did and kept summer at bay from the northern plains for weeks? Humans were not the only ones who enjoyed it. Far away in the sands of the Thar, for a species of locust called *Schistocerca gregaria*, the rains were a trigger to go into a frenzy of breeding.

By April, the desert sands were

abuzz with the patter of millions of little feet. As the young hoppers rubbed their legs against each other, their bodies started producing serotonin—the same hormone, which in humans is known as the happiness or feel good hormone. The hormone converts solitary insects into gregarious ones, makes them indiscriminate feeders and strengthens their leg muscles for long distance flights in

PEST, OUT OF CONTROL

A locust swarm in Jaipur on May 25

search of food. The swarms could become several kilometres long and as dense as 150 million/sqkm.

On April 11, the Locust Warning Office (LWO), a department in the agriculture ministry, saw the first incursions of these hoppers at the Indo-Pakistan border. The desert locust has three breeding areas—the Horn of Africa is its winter breeding ground (October-February); Balochistan and the Persian Gulf for spring breeding (February-July); the Thar desert in India and south west Pakistan is the summer nursery (July-October). "By February 17, we had no locust in India," explains K.L. Gurjar, deputy director, locust division of agriculture ministry's plant

protection department, Faridabad.

"The insects, which were heading to Iran for spring breeding, saw conducive conditions in Pakistan, and stayed back to breed there. So, we have an unnaturally high population, much earlier, this year." The other nurseries are also highly fecund. East Africa and the Arabian Plateau have had good monsoon for the past few years, thanks to an active Indian Ocean Dipole, a sea surface temperature oscillation phenomenon, leading to a population explosion of the desert locust. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), they are breeding 400 times faster than usual. Africa is reeling under locust-induced famine since last year; Iran is staring at its worst infestation in 70 years. Pakistan has already declared a national emergency as locusts threat-

en its food security for the second consecutive year, bringing the worst plague in 27 years.

In India, the May swarms ate their way through the Rajasthan scrub into the alluvial fields of western Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and reached the orange orchards of Nagpur, aided by the winds caused by Cyclone Amphan. The FAO warns of several successive waves till July (from across the border) into Rajasthan with eastern surges up to Bihar and Odisha. It is even possible that swarms from Africa may come here in July, aided by the monsoon winds, says Gurjar. While Rajasthan and Gujarat are used to annual locust infestations—last year alone they destroyed 3.5 million hectares of cash crop—elsewhere, farmers are flabbergasted, using drums and shouts to scare away the insects.

The early incursions have not caused much damage, since the rabi harvest is in the granary and the kharif yet to be sown, though vegetable crops, especially around Jhansi, have been chomped up. However, subsequent swarms could threaten India's food security in a year where resources are already strained by Covid-19.

India has reacted quickly, rolling out its established contingency plan. India and Pakistan have an established process for locust warning and management, with six official meetings between June and November, during which time they even run a wireless communication between Jodhpur and Karachi.

This time, with the spring breeding grounds in Sistan-Balochistan area of Iran and Pakistan threatening incursions eastwards, India offered 20,000 litres of malathion insecticide—the most effective weapon against locusts—to Iran, which gratefully accepted it. India approached Pakistan, too, but got no response to the request to advance locust management meetings, or to

the offer of a malathion gift package. Pakistan, however, is partnering with China, which donated 300 tonnes of pesticide and 350 mounted sprayers. India, meanwhile, is planning drone spraying on the swarms.

The swarms in India right now are of immature hoppers, which will eventually return to the summer breeding grounds to mate. There, they will multiply in even larger numbers, and India can expect several waves of swarms from across the border. One female locust, in her 90-day life span, can lay three batches of around 400 eggs.

India has not seen locust plagues in a long time—the last plague cycle was in 1959-1962. The last upsurge (unnaturally big swarm) was in 2011. "We have therefore become complacent, and have not invested in research on locust control," says Jyoti Sharma, head, Centre for Environment Science and Engineering, Shiv Nadar University. "Chemical pesticides come with environment damage. During the British Raj, there were better efforts at control. They encouraged natural predation by birds; today, bird populations are dwindling. We could have done so much genetic research, found a serotonin inhibiting gene."

India is doing some research with the fungus *Metarhizium acridum*, as a biopesticide. "However, it is only effective at the hopper stage," says Gurjar. "And it takes between a week to 15 days to kill the insects, by which time they can devastate huge swathes." Malathion kills in half an hour, and is already a commonly used agriculture pesticide. It remains for a shorter time in the environment in comparison with other organo-phosphates.

However, with climate change triggering more insect attacks, there is a greater need to look for bio control. "The locust is a highly unpredictable insect. Let us not take it for granted," says Sharma. ●



HUSH AND ROAR
Atletico de Kolkata players celebrate winning the ISL by beating Chennaiyin FC; the 2019-2020 final took place without fans

Beleaguered!

With uncertainty all around, sports leagues in India are bracing for major budget cuts and loss in revenue

BY NEERU BHATIA

THE DELHI CAPITALS office on the busy Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, barely 500 metres from the Feroz Shah Kotla ground, wears a deserted look these days. Usually, around this time of the year, it would be abuzz with IPL activity. On match days, the lane leading to the ground would be dotted with vendors selling shirts and caps, enterprising face-paint-

ers would paint fans' faces in team colours for twenty bucks apiece, and a plethora of food carts would come up from nearby Old Delhi to do brisk business.

This year, however, a virus brought the world to its knees and left these vendors high and dry. Though the Indian Super League finished its season just before the lockdown (the

final was played without fans), other such leagues face uncertainty. The big question is: If sports do resume without spectators, how massive will be the impact on costs and revenues? "Globally, the sports industry will take a massive hit," said Mustafa Ghouse, CEO of JSW Sports, which owns teams in three of the domestic leagues. "There will be cuts in terms

of spending, marketing, sponsorship; plans will change. Everyone will have to pivot on the commercial side of things to really come out of it."

The Board of Control for Cricket in India is trying to get a window for the IPL in October-November; the T20I World Cup in October could be pushed to 2021 or 2022. "The IPL is 60 India games versus nine India games in a World Cup, given it reaches the finals," said an insider. "While viewership of India games in an ICC event is higher, [for] non-India games [it] is really low. What would you choose?"

Other sports federations, meanwhile, await clarity from their respective international federations. Said Hiren Modi, group vice president, Ultimate



■ INTERVIEW

Ajay Singh, president, Boxing Federation of India

Big Bout is feasible in the current economic environment

BY NEERU BHATIA

Q/ How do you see the sponsorship scene of various Olympic sports being affected in India?

A/ In unprecedented times like these, uncertainty is the only certainty. As one of the new entrants in Indian sports leagues, we have implemented some of the learnings (from others) and, as a result, Big Bout was a cost-effective model right from its inception. We have been playing in a single venue and the squad sizes have been designed considering the cost implications. So, the model is feasible in the current environment and we can still work and make it more meaningful, despite the challenges. We will be working for a more optimised format if need be, and will create more innovative avenues for sponsorship on digital and TV.

Q/ How do you see the Big Bout Indian Boxing League getting affected financially in the coming season?

A/ The boxers will continue to benefit from the league. The league has been a major source of financial stability for our boxers as well as the entire ecosystem of technical officials, coaches and referees. And the first-year numbers show how commercially attractive the league can be. We have huge untapped potential.

The league matches delivered seven times higher ratings than live Pro Kabaddi matches in the Hindi-speaking markets. This gives the boxers a much stronger playing field, and in the second season, apart from TV, we would explore a more aggressive digital and OTT plan.

Q/ How will the postponement of the Olympics affect the medal prospects of Indian boxers?

A/ As a national sports federation, we were the first to initiate online training for all our elite boxers, right from [physical] training, nutrition and mental guidance. Under the supervision of our coaches and high-performance director, and led by Boxing Federation of India officials, we have successfully involved boxers of all age groups so that they have every possible means to train at home in the best and effective manner. We are working with Sports Authority of India very closely to create an SOP that will facilitate safe passage for our boxers to resume training once the lockdown is over. The health and safety of our players are of prime concern.

Q/ Post-lockdown, do you see financial viability for all stakeholders? Do you think there will be high demand for live sporting action on broadcast and OTT platforms?

A/ A lot is still unexplored, and the changing dynamics of fan engagement can and surely will be explored. Close to three crore people had watched Big Bout live on Star Sports; about 1.6 crore saw kabaddi and 67 lakh saw the badminton league. These numbers confirm the passion for the sport and we will look for innovations in the digital platforms in a big way. Big Bout is the most viewed league after IPL (Indian Premier League), giving us the assurance that we are headed in the right direction. 📌

Table Tennis and Chennaiyin FC: "The primary concern is safety of the players; people associated with the leagues would not like to put anyone in harm's way."

All the leagues are bracing for financial pain, including the cash-rich IPL. Among other issues, the absence of fans means there will not be any revenue from sales of tickets and official merchandise inside the stadiums. Team honchos have been using the lockdown to rework budgets and draw up plans B and C.

It will be survival of the fittest, said Prasad Mangipudi, executive director of SportzLive, which organises the Premier Badminton League. "You look at every risk or challenge as an opportunity," he said. "A couple of leagues that can innovate or have deep pockets will survive; the rest will just wind up."

Stakeholders say that continuity of the leagues is essential for their survival, even if it means less or no revenue this year. Said Mangipudi: "I will look to find more sponsors, cut costs down to the last rupee. I will be looking at every aspect, from printing of banners and food to hospitality and stadium rentals. Players' salary will take a hit. The average cost of each team is ₹2.2 crore to ₹2.5 crore; there will be a 30 to 40 per cent hit in revenue." He added that he was even willing to go ahead without foreign players. "At least there will be continuity," he said.

Another option, said Mangipudi, was the renegotiation of player contracts and licence fees with the Badminton Association of India. A change of format is also being looked at, depending on the availability of quality foreign players.

Not everyone, however, is keen to push ahead just yet. Modi, for instance, is concerned about the ISL going ahead without fans even though the Bundesliga, the La Liga, and the English Premier League are doing so. "For players, performing



GOOD OLD DAYS
Fans liven up the 2019 IPL final between Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings

GETTY IMAGES

in front of fans matters," he said. "Chennaiyin FC had a late run of success and reached the [2019] final, but our fans could not be part of our story. People talk about increase in viewership. *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* recorded high TV ratings during lockdown, but where were advertisers?"

Other options being explored are the reduction of venues and the shifting of matches to smaller stadiums. Even the IPL is thinking of a city with multiple venues, like Mumbai, or playing the tournament in two or three cities, which reduces cost of television crews, and involves less travel and lower expenses.

For telecast rights of the IPL, Star Sports had paid the BCCI a massive ₹16,347.5 crore for five years. If the 2020 edition does not happen, the BCCI could lose about ₹4,000 crore.

Experts believe cricket, too, will have to start looking at non-regular sponsors and broadcasters may have to settle for cheaper ad rates. "I feel the economy will ride on domestic and retail brands," said Mangipudi. "We will now get ₹40 lakh to ₹50 lakh from our associate partners who gave us Rs1.5 crore. Same will happen with the IPL, too."

The Olympic sports and their stakeholders have additional challenges. "It is a strange situation," said JSW Sports CEO Ghose. "We plan for four years at a time. [We have to decide] what competitions we want to prioritise, at the same time not compromising on our athletes' preparation for Tokyo. Some doubling down is required on that front, which we are working on."

One league likely to be hurt less by the absence of foreign talent, or even

fans, is the Pro Kabaddi League. The stars there are mostly Indian. Plus, it is a made-for-television sport; the TRPs and interest had made the official broadcaster start two seasons a year. "It has been an interesting growth for us in the past three seasons," said Ghose. "It (the league) took a massive leap last year. It will be disappointing if the league does not happen, but there is a lot more flexibility as we are not dependent on international boards or countries. [The] challenge is [that] it is a contact sport. The IOC (International Olympic Committee) has not come out with specific guidelines related to that. Gate receipts are not a big part of our revenue. Hopefully, we can pull it off in the latter half of the year." ●



■ INTERVIEW

Venky Mysore, managing director and CEO, Kolkata Knight Riders

Having no foreign players would be a deal breaker

BY NEERU BHATIA

Q/ How do you view the current situation in terms of the sports and entertainment business?

A/ There is no substitute to live entertainment. This year, we have to put things in perspective. Safety, health and managing the risk of Covid-19 are important. The good thing is, sport is restarting in some shape or form. Live cricket will be in great demand when it resumes; it will be a premium product.

Q/ How optimistic are you of the IPL happening?

A/ Social distancing in cricket is doable. Certain developments give us reason to be optimistic [about IPL]. It is largely dependent on the desire of the government to see it take place. The BCCI is looking at an end-of-the-year window.

Q/ Some franchises are fine with a curtailed IPL; what is KKR's stand?

A/ We believe a curtailed IPL will be the last resort. I do not see any reason it should be curtailed. As long as all the stakeholders feel that the virus is under control, all agree to follow the protocols in place, and [events] like the Asia Cup and T20I World Cup are taken care of, there is a high probability there will be a full window for the IPL.

Q/ With travel restrictions, availability of foreign players can be an issue.

A/ [Having] no foreign players would be a deal breaker. The USP of IPL is the quality of the product. If there are no foreign players, it will be just another

domestic competition. The majority of franchises want foreign participation. We have to think about our squad. I am getting calls from all the players; they are looking forward to playing. My sense is, if we get the green signal, the window will allow all players to be available. Each team has eight foreign players, which makes 64 in total. If there is a way to get them here, there are solutions. They can be tested and quarantined before the tournament. The bigger challenge would be going into the competition having not played for long. They will be happy if they can come 15 days in advance.

Q/ The economy is hit, businesses are hit. Will this reflect on the revenue and budgets of all stakeholders?

A/ There is a feel-good factor about sports after months of lockdown. For teams, sponsors, broadcasters, there will be challenges. The business models will change. KKR will have, say seven home games, [and will have to] review food and beverages, and hospitality. [There will be] no merchandising stalls and no spectators. There will be a desire to hold the IPL and forgo revenue from merchandising and gate tickets. Broadcast and media rights are agreed upon by the BCCI and sealed. The broadcaster will also make money from OTT subscriptions; different screening platforms have emerged during lockdown. That is a significant amount of money. Financial challenges have to be solved creatively. The IPL should happen. If in 13 years there is one bad year, so be it. ●



A Trump of lies

Why are we still shocked by President Donald Trump, his falsehoods, distortions and exaggerations? Through the ages, in mythology and in history, Gods and men have lied. One of humankind's oldest tendencies, lying ranges from the harmless, arousing fun and laughter, to the vicious, resulting in grief and death. Literature captures the rainbow spectrum of lies, from dark to light, from hilarity to the terrors of its consequences. An enduring dramatisation is Iago's cruel lies that draw Shakespeare's Othello to suicide.

Research typically focuses on the liar—the motivations, the character flaws and the after-effects. But it does not equally analyse the “lied-to” or the victim. There is an almost predatory relationship here, with the liar exploiting the vulnerabilities of the lied-to, not necessarily abusively, but in a psychologically manipulative manner. The liar becomes the “re-affirmer”, telling what the lied-to wants to hear or already suspects. Only if it hits a fertile, receptive mind can the lie strike root and germinate into a monster of belief in the victim's head. As Othello shows, lies unleash devastating consequences when they awaken the victim's dormant demons of jealousy. Absolving himself, Iago says of Othello, “I told him what I thought, and told no more/ Than what he found himself was apt and true.”

Trump's lies, perhaps, should be seen in this context. He is talking only to his base, not to CNN, educated Americans or the world. He is not lying, he is telling what his base wants to hear, what they believe to be “apt and true”. Left behind by globalisation, digitalisation and offshoring, alienated and stressed, Trump's base clings to conspiracy theories to explain the downturn in their lives. They fully endorse Trump's attacks on the liberal establishment, the intelligentsia, Holly-



wood, mainstream media and social media giants. In daring to filter his misleading messages to his base, Twitter earned Trump's blistering wrath.

Rising like the coronavirus death toll, Trump's falsehoods are nearing 20,000. “There has never been such a serial liar in the Oval Office,” says presidential historian Douglas Brinkley. “Trump lies as a policy.” Trump appals truth-seekers, but every one of his lies cements the bond between him and his base. This explains why despite his follies, Trump's ratings never dropped below 35 per cent.

Reading between Trump's lies, his motivation appears to be to win admiration or deny failure. He is not the first or the last to lie for those reasons. “Lying politician” is a 200-year-old British phrase that still survives, though many now see it as a tautology—a repetition in terms. Lies resonate because they arouse emotions. Both literature and history unveil the drama of unpredictable outcomes when emotions run high. “Even the buses lied” is a popular British mantra to describe

the Brexiteer's campaign to leave the European Union. Boris Johnson even faced a lawsuit for his falsehoods that were plastered on London buses. The public knew these claims were false. Yet, not only did Brexiteers win the referendum, Johnson secured a landslide victory in last year's elections.

Analysts' explanation is that we have entered the post-truth age. But, could it be that voters are battling a bigger, bitter truth—a rigged system entrenched by a corrupt elite of dishonest politicians, tycoons and journalists that perpetuates disparity and discrimination? The web of inequality, injustice and deceit has spun through the centuries. Lies are the silken threads that weave the gossamer snares of deception and defeat, vanity and victory.

The age of lies is without beginning and it is without end.

Pratap is an author and journalist.

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN



Poor Indian lives matter?

My daughter came to me really triggered a couple of days ago. (That is current youth-speak for being upset, btw). She said she has a beef (i.e. issues, or a bone to pick with, nothing to do with eating cows) with most of her contemporaries on Instagram because they are all so shook (i.e. shaken/upset) by the death of George Floyd at the hands of the state police in Minneapolis.

And, I am like accha, why? Because is it not good that your friends are aware and vocal about such a ghastly incident, an incident that may go on to be bigger than the Rodney King incident back in the early 1990s?

And now suddenly, she has a beef with me, too. “Why do you know who Rodney King is?” she demands.

I say something about it being a big story back then, when I was young and her age-ish.

“Were you not all caught up in the Mandal Commission agitation then?” she demands next. “Why do you even remember Rodney King?”

I explain that I had been really ambivalent on the Mandal issue; girls from my college (Miranda House, Delhi University) had agitated against the implementation of the report. They had gone to the Boat Club lawns with boot-polish kits, and offered to polish the shoes of passersby, to symbolically demonstrate that this would be the only job regular, non-reservation kids would get after graduation, as candidates from the reserved castes would grab all the creamy layer white-collar jobs. I had found this problematic on many levels, and so had not joined in these protests, even though it had all seemed like a lot of fun and a general atmosphere of revolution had prevailed in the college corridors and so on.

She is slightly mollified. But only slightly. “What about the Babri Masjid demolition? What did you do then?”

“And, I have to confess that I had not ‘done’ anything then either. I had just started working in advertising, and so had spent that December writing

headline options for a combined print advertisement for the Christmas and New Year Celebrations at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Bhikaji Cama Place. I had been particularly proud of ‘25th ko Mother Mary, 31st ko Bloody Mary!’ The client had bombed it though.”

She looks at me witheringly. Very ashamed, I lower my gaze.

“And, yet, you remember Rodney King.”

In my defense, I say that I remember the Babri Masjid demolition, too. I just had had no platform on which to register my protest, those days. “You are lucky,” I conclude. “So, what exactly do you find so triggering about your friends' Insta stories?”

“Do you know who Arvina Khatun is?” she counter-questions.

“No,” I admit.

“She is the dead lady on the railway station. The one with the baby playing by her side, in that video that just went viral. Do you know how many of my so-called

‘woke’ friends made an Insta story on her? None! Or, on the migrant workers walking home, and dying on the train tracks? Or on the police beating up poor women with lathis in the name of doing their duty? None! So, according to them, American black lives matter, and poor Indian lives do not!”

The point she seems to be making is that her “liberal”, privileged friends live in India, but set their clocks to Eastern Standard Time or whatever. At this point I tell her that her slang is very Americanised too, but she waves this aside as a frivolous point.

Maybe, these kids feel safer criticising the American government than they feel criticising their own, I suggest. “Because here there could be a backlash, na.”

But she does not even think it is that.

“Poor Indian deaths are just not considered cool, mamma,” she tells me bitterly. “It is as simple as that. Nobody gafs (i.e. gives a f#@%).”



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

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The hacker, the faker and the virus

Cyber-attacks have been as viral as the pandemic itself, and India is especially vulnerable

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

THE ATTACK WAS stealthy, and quick off the blocks. As soon as Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the launch of his PM CARES Fund to fight the pandemic, online fakers hit the ground running. “Within a couple of hours, over a dozen fake UPI sites came up with similar sounding names,” says Lieutenant General (retired) Rajesh Pant, India’s national cybersecurity coordinator.

The fake IDs, with names such as ‘pmcaress’ or ‘pmcare’, were created on UPI handles of Punjab National Bank, HDFC Bank and others to mislead citizens into parting with their money. The Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), India’s nodal cyber security agency, quickly swung into action and shut down the fake handles, with help from the home ministry, the State Bank of India and the National Payments Corporation of India. But not before, as reports from the home ministry indicate, over 8,000 Indians and NRIs donated thousands of dollars into fake accounts. In fact, according to home ministry figures from April, cy-

ber attacks on Indians went up by 86 per cent since the lockdown began.

Cyber-attacks have been as viral as the pandemic, spreading across a world where people are turning to the internet more and more. And aiming at them from the dark recesses of the web are an increasingly cocky yet invisible bunch of criminals who have been coming up with newer methods of entrapment.

On May 18, Seqrite, a cybersecurity specialist, reported that it had found a new wave of Adwind Java Remote Access Trojans (RAT) hidden in coro-

navirus-themed emails that claimed to be from the Reserve Bank of India targeting certain co-operative banks in India. Names of the banks were not revealed.

“We have noticed an increase in attacks—it will only go up more,” said Trishneet Arora, who runs TAC Security, a cyber security firm that handles network security for some of India’s biggest financial institutions.

This is particularly frightening as, according to Pant, India is already the third most cyber-attacked country in the world. “People are understandably anxious about the pandemic and are more likely to access malicious links and attachments that are disguised as essential information,” said J. Kesavardhanan, founder and CEO of K7 Computing, a leading Indian cyber security firm, adding, “Working from home also creates more opportunities for cyber-criminals who wish to harvest business data and banking credentials. Covid-19 has brought out the worst in cybercriminals who are attacking when we are at our most vulnerable.”

Check Point Research, one of the



A May 22 report by cybersecurity firm Cyble said that the data of 2.9 crore Indian jobseekers was released on the dark web.

90,000 domains related to Covid-19 registered since January

3.5 times more domains registered in the week starting March 16, compared with previous weeks; this is the time the US government proposed a stimulus

16,989 registered in late March and early April; 2% malicious, 21% suspicious

Covid-19-related attacks went up by 30% in the first two weeks of May;

27,000 plus attacks a day in May



WEB OF DECEPTION

Cyber criminals and scammers are using the pandemic to their advantage

Phishing: Weapon of choice

Phishing is when hackers pose as trustworthy entities to obtain sensitive information, such as passwords and credit card numbers

94% of attacks in late March and early April was phishing

3% were mobile attacks, via dedicated mobile malware or malicious activity on a mobile device

14,000 attacks a day on average in late March and early April; this was six times more compared with the previous two weeks

20,000 a day on average from April 7

SOURCE
CHECK POINT RESEARCH

GRAPHICS
SREEMANIKANDAN S.

world leaders in cyber security, said that, in the first two weeks of May, Covid-19-related attacks went up by 30 per cent. Also, there was a 37 per cent increase in the registration of domain names that sounded like Zoom, the popular video conferencing app.

Corona caution

Be it a website offering information on the disease, a mail offering you ‘your share’ from the stimulus package announced by the government or a Telegram channel selling masks or sanitisers to get its hands on your financial details, most of these attacks have a connection to the outbreak. K7 found that, between March 24 (eve of the lockdown) and April 9, the average daily number of cyber-attacks that were stopped, and

that had a Covid-19 connection, had increased by about 260 per cent.

From just one website on January 1, today there are more than 90,000 websites related to the virus, many of them fake. Check Point said the pandemic-related attacks had increased to more than 27,000 a day in May. More than 70 per cent of IT professionals it surveyed reported an increase in attacks since the outbreak hit top gear. Barracuda Networks, a multinational network security firm, said it detected just 137 Covid-related phishing attacks in January, which went up to 1,188 next month, before burgeoning to 9,116 in March. “A growing number of (cyber thieves) are capitalising on the fear in the minds of their intended victims,” said

Murali Urs, country manager, India, Barracuda Networks.

The most popular method used is phishing. McAfee, a leading anti-virus provider, estimates a 500 per cent increase in Covid-related spam mails in the near future. The danger? “These spam mails go to millions of people, weaponised with trojans,” said Venkat Krishnapur, vice president and managing director of McAfee India.

Some of the malware the Indian government has identified include Emotet, Lokibot, Trickbot Agent Tesla and CovidLock.

These phishing emails attempt brand impersonation and try to compromise a user’s email by offering fake solutions to Covid-19. Said

Himanshu Dubey, director of Quick Heal, an IT security services provider, “The emails lure the user into opening the attachment that either claims it has some report, health advice or possible cure. The vast majority of such attachments are document files, which, when opened, drop a malicious payload on the user’s system that steals sensitive information by tapping the browser, email and FTP clients. In some cases, we also noticed remote access trojans and ransomware being dropped as the payload. Such phishing tactics intend to spread malware, extort money from unsuspecting users who fall for it and, even worse, pedal fake news and cause mass panic.”

Reports of data breaches have also risen. A May 22 report by cybersecurity firm Cyble said that the data of 2.9 crore Indian jobseekers was released on the dark web. Later in the month, Google announced in a blog post that up to 100 Indian users were targets of what it described as ‘state-sponsored’ attacks.

Worry from home

When people log into their company system from either personal devices or through home internet connections that lack protections, it is, as Arora put it, “an inherent vulnerability at the end point”.

“The hackers’ targets right now are large enterprises and financial institutions, where they know the whole focus is on seamless WFH (rather than security),” he said.

According to Shodan, a search engine that scans and indexes devices instead of websites, half a lakh computers in India have their default remote access port open for connections. “Many IT admins would have had to loosen their firewall settings to allow employees to connect to their remote computers in the office,” said Kesavardhanan.

A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers study showed that cybercriminals

Protect yourself

Watch out for spelling errors in emails or websites, and emails from unknown senders

Be cautious with files from unknown senders, especially if they prompt action

Ensure you are placing online orders at an authentic store; do not click on promotional links, instead web search for the retailer

Avoid “An exclusive cure for coronavirus for \$150” or anything similar. If a cure is found, it would not be offered to you via email

Do not reuse passwords between different applications and accounts



The hackers’ targets right now are large enterprises and financial institutions, where they know the whole focus is on seamless WFH (rather than security).

—Trishneet Arora, CEO,
TAC Security

have used the panic to infiltrate corporate networks and steal data.

Health is ‘Wealth’

A new target of web scammers is the health care industry. Multiple agencies have noticed a global trend in cyber-attacks on hospitals, health care professionals and the pharmaceutical industry. In early April, Interpol issued a ‘purple notice’ to all its 194 member countries, warning in its advisory: “Hospitals and other institutions on the front lines have also become targets of ransomware

attacks designed to lock them out of their critical systems in an attempt to extort payments.”

Said Shree Parthasarathy, leader, cyber risk services, Deloitte (South Asia), “The most targeted categories were life sciences and health care companies, the manufacturing sector, and services. These are being hunted to steal patents, processes, passwords and other information.”

McAfee also warned about the attacks, and even red-flagged an app, ‘Corona Safety Mask’, which asked for so many permissions on download that, if granted, gave it full internet access to a user’s device, allowing it to create network sockets, read contact data and even send messages!

Worries abound as India’s health care industry does have a reputation of having lax security. A few months ago, 68 lakh patient records stolen from an Indian health care website were put on sale on the dark web; in July 2018, hackers ‘locked’ the data of Mumbai’s Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital, demanding ransom in bitcoins. Keeping such instances in mind, Bitdefender, a cybersecurity firm, made its security solutions for hospitals and other health care organisations free for the next one year. As Zakir Hussain, Bitdefender’s director (India), said, “Hospitals are currently most vulnerable to cyber-attacks. During such critical times, we need to move swiftly.”

Warned Sujay Vasudevan, vice president (cyber and intelligence solutions), Mastercard South Asia: “Consumers need to be highly vigilant and guarded against scammers who are on the lookout to exploit the current situation.”

The only way out is heightened cyber hygiene and caution on the part of companies as well as individuals, especially those who work from home. “[From] the complaints and the crime reports we are getting,” said Pant, “every day it is getting more and more serious.”



THE PUPPET MASTER

Shoojit Sircar, the title of whose latest film is inspired by the puppet theatre of Lucknow, knows exactly how to bring his characters to life

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI





here have been many cyclones," proclaims Shoojit Sircar in a telephonic conversation from Kolkata, a few days after Cyclone Amphan hit West Bengal and Odisha. "The first was [the death of] Irrfan (Khan)." It was Sircar's heart-breaking tweet that intimated many about it in April. "It took me so much time to come to terms with that," he says. "I have not been able to, though. In his final days, as his health deteriorated, we were trying to figure out what was going to happen. I was still hopeful that he would fight back. I still feel his presence all around me."

Then came Cyclone Amphan which, he says, has been devastating. "You feel so helpless looking at the devastation, and you cannot do much," he says. "Villages have been wiped out completely. But people are doing their best to help, and that is what matters."

In between these two tragic events came the announcement of Sircar's upcoming film, *Gulabo Sitabo*, which is set to release on Amazon Prime Video on June 12. The news rattled multiplex owners; one chain even threatened "retributive measures". The film was supposed to have a theatrical release in January, which got pushed to April, and then it was impacted by the lockdown. "At some point, the [owners] will have to understand, and they will," he says. "We will also talk to them." He says that everyone has to adapt to the situation as no one has experienced such a pandemic in their lifetime.

"I have a habit of taking the film to the audience as soon as it is ready," he says. "We are not a big production house, we make and release one

film at a time. I did not expect the rattle that followed, but I have tried explaining to the theatre chains that this is not the only film I am going to make. There are going to be many."

The film reunites him with Ayushmann Khurrana, with whom he had worked in *Vicky Donor* (2012), and Amitabh Bachchan, with whom he had worked in *Piku* (2015) and *Shoebite* (unreleased). Also onboard were frequent collaborator and writer Juhi Chaturvedi, cinematographer Avik Mukhopadhyay and music director Shantanu Moitra. Sircar says that before making any film he gauges if the story is challenging enough for him to enjoy the process. Initially, when Chaturvedi introduced the idea for *Gulabo Sitabo*, Sircar thought it could be an enjoyable process and started fleshing out the script, still unsure whether to set it in Delhi or Lucknow. But as the story took shape, Lucknow seemed like a better fit.

The title of the film was inspired by the Gulabo Sitabo puppet theatre, an art form that is synonymous with Lucknow and revolves around two women, one older and the other younger, usually trading insults in a humorous way. The film tells the story of the conflict between an elderly landlord, Mirza (Amitabh Bachchan) and his young tenant, Banke (Ayushmann Khurrana).

Sircar says that it was not easy to get Bachchan onboard. "He takes a little time [to agree]," he says. "But I think he trusts me. You cannot go to him with simple characters. You have to go to him with ones that really challenge, steer and exhaust him. I believe this character is one of the most exhausting ones that he has done."

Bachchan is shown to be an old, bent man with a jutting nose. "The most difficult part of creating the character of Mirza was [ensuring] that nobody would recognise him as Mr Bachchan," says Sircar. "I always



FACE OFF
Amitabh Bachchan and Ayushmann Khurrana (left) as their characters in *Gulabo Sitabo*

wanted him to be recognised as Mirza. We have achieved that quite well because he really looks like a character from old Lucknow. We started by referencing the looks of [the Pashtun leader] Abdul Ghaffar Khan and a portrait by the Russian pencil artist Olga Larionova. We just kept improvising until coming to the final look in the film."

But his ultimate aim was always to create a believable and distinct world. "My films are always about the world," he says. "In *Piku*, it was

all about that. There was no plot as such. You place the camera in front of a family and just see the *zindagi ka tamasha* (circus of life)," says Sircar, who is trying his hand at satire for the first time with this film. "Watching the trailer, you might think that the film is just about property disputes and material attachments, but it goes much beyond that."

For Sircar, who started his journey with advertisements, it is the experimentation in filmmaking that keeps him going. "There is no point in doing the same thing without challenging your philosophies," he says. Maybe that is why he makes such different films, from a political one like *Yahaan* (2005) set in Kashmir, to the delightful *Vicky Donor* and

YOU CANNOT GO TO HIM WITH SIMPLE CHARACTERS. ONLY WITH ONES THAT REALLY CHALLENGE, STEER AND EXHAUST HIM.

—Shoojit Sircar, on getting Amitabh Bachchan to act in his film



Piku, to the heart-wrenching *Madras Cafe* (2013), and the solemn *October* (2018). Although he keeps juggling genres, it is not that which drives him, he says. Rather, it is always the stories. The challenge, he says, is in knowing when not to cross the line. In *Vicky Donor*, for example, it would have been very easy for it to become

slapstick humour. He had to be careful about it.

The trailer of *Gulabo Sitabo* has got more than 40 million views on YouTube, which is the most he has got for any of his films. Yet, people have told him that it was not funny enough and should have elicited more laughter. "I told them they should watch TikTok for a laugh," he says. "I cannot guarantee laughter in this film, but I can assure you that there will be a smile throughout."

His next film, *Sardar Udham Singh*, starring Vicky Kaushal, is tentatively set to release next January. For now, he is enjoying the lockdown at his home in Kolkata. "I am not in a hurry to do things," he says. [Lockdown] has given me time to be with myself without having to deal with the world's commotion. The only thing I regret is not being able to go and meet Irrfan for the last time." 🗨

Looming threat

Well... this year's Eid had been like no other Eid in my memory. In my lifetime, I hope I will never spend such an Eid. My loom was silent and sad. So was I. Our entire mohalla was silent—had been silent for two months now, after all our orders got cancelled, and the money owed to us by those who had already taken our sarees and lehengas, was not given by the middlemen. They had simply thrown up their hands and said there was none to give.

Everything collapsed overnight. Thank God I had some cash in the tin box—an advance given by a tourist—a memsaab from phoren. Imagine, this mem wanted to get married in America wearing my saree! I had sold many of my weaves to these goralog in the past, when they came to Benaras as tourists and were brought to our mohalla by guides to show how we worked. But this order was different. Her name, she told me, was Angelina—she wrote it down. But I found it hard to pronounce, so she said, 'Just call me Angie'. That was easy.

I called her 'Madam Angie', and she laughed, saying, 'No madam. Just Angie!' Such a big memsaab and so humble. She had a special request—she told me the other weavers in the gully had refused to take her order as they didn't want to deal with extra double-double work. They'd told her—'Go to Azarbhai—he is mad! He may do it for you.'

That's how Angie came to me and asked, 'Will you weave a special saree which has my love story in it? I will pay extra for the trouble.'

I immediately liked the idea, and asked my loom. Both of us agreed it was unique and a challenge we could meet if we worked very hard. She wanted it for her wedding in June. She told me it was a good time to get married in New York because the weather was always very fine at that time. We negotiated a price—I was most reasonable. I also offered her jalebis and special milk tea, which she enjoyed....

Slowly, carefully, an emotional story was created and a fresh amount fixed. I didn't overcharge her, though I could have, since this saree required months of hard work. But my loom and I were already hearing the shehnai! I started weaving Madam Angie's saree after seeking Allah's blessings and offering dua to her and her future husband, Mark Saab. After she left, we kept in touch



NO LOVE LOST & OTHER STORIES
Author: **Shobhaa De**
Publisher: **Simon & Schuster**
Pages: **51**; price **₹89**

INTERVIEW/Shobhaa De, author

Social distancing is anti-humanity

BY SUSAMMA JOY KURIAN

Q/ You wrote *Lockdown Liaisons* during lockdown. Is this your quickest book?

A/ The honest answer: it is still a work in progress. Book 1 has been launched and hit the number one spot on day 2, which was such a thrill. Book 2 will be launched on Saturday (June 6). And then on to Book 3, 4, 5, 6. I will continue to write the stories organically as they form inside my head, as the world responds to new challenges. I was compelled as a writer to document these tumultuous times in my own way. Imagine being felled by a microbe! How could I let this dramatic moment in history pass without writing about the emotional havoc it has caused in all our lives? I didn't set out to become a literary Formula One racing driver and create a speed record! But the sense of immediacy the pandemic unleashed propelled me to go ahead and keep at it. It was great when Simon & Schuster got cracking, and in under



two weeks, we launched Book 1 on the last day of lockdown 4.0. Timing is everything!

Q/ Did any specific incident push you to write the book?

A/ The world had/has turned upside down in a blink! There is turmoil, insecurity, suspicion, despair, confusion, anger and

frustration. We are re-educating ourselves, unlearning so many staples we could once take for granted. Most of us felt trapped and claustrophobic, stuck in a gigantic prison. It took me a while to realign my feelings and get into a new emotional grid. Social distancing is anti-humanity! Human beings are

social animals. We thrive on human engagement. We like the sensual aspects of our existence—touch, feel, hugs and kisses. In the post-pandemic universe, we will still be groping for answers that don't exist. There was no specific incident as such—the trigger came from listening to different voices that were all around me. Each of us carries a unique story within our minds and hearts. The more I tuned in, the more I wanted to share. It is about empathy. Nothing else is as important during these stress-filled times.

Q/ What are the issues that you deal with in the short stories? Is there a common thread that binds them?

A/ Yes, it is love. These are not conventional 'love stories', but they explore the complex nature of love itself. All the stories are written in first person. They are monologues in which the narrator replays the mysterious passage of 'love' in an unfiltered way. This level of introspection is driven by extraordinary circumstances created

by the pandemic. The representation of love in the stories varies. It goes from tender to brutal. I occupied many skins in the process. The voices are raw and authentic as protagonists question their deepest feelings. The language is frequently rough and abusive. As masks fall off, strange things happen. Marriages collapse. Sex dies. Hostility surfaces. Memory plays games.... But it is also about compassion and understanding. I would say these stories are about love, loss, longing and lust—passionate and deeply felt.

Q/ The one good thing that has emerged from the lockdown, personally and otherwise?

A/ The only good thing that has emerged is how we look at the post-pandemic scenario, with a greater emphasis on earth's limited resources.... Personally? (Laughs) so many self-discoveries, big and small. The virus can never kill human hope and imagination. My imagination is on fire! And I have finally discovered my inner Garbo! Happy to be left alone. 🙏

over WhatsApp, with me using Ali's smart phone, and sending her pictures as the saree progressed on the loom.

Throughout that period, I only listened to Ustad Bismillah Khan saab playing the shehnai as only he could. I feel a weaver's mood and state of mind affects what he creates. This was a very precious responsibility given to me by a good

woman. I wanted her saree to be a masterpiece! Nothing less.

While I was halfway through it, something terrible befell the world. At first, I ignored what I was hearing, and continued to weave. I told myself, these are just stories. In India, we are used to all kinds of diseases. In Benaras life and death have always co-existed through centuries—we take both for granted.

I had grown up seeing funeral pyres and corpses burning on the ghats all day and all night. Death did not frighten me. But what Ali was sharing with his friends and sometimes with his ammi and me, was something far worse—it was an unknown harbinger of death and suffering. Maybe he did not want to scare us by discussing this topic. But from the little I could make out from what they were

showing on television, I knew it was a major calamity... and the whole world was getting infected by... some said an insect, some said a bat, some said a chemical. But all said it came out of China.

—Extracted with permission from *No Love Lost and Other Stories: Lockdown Liaisons Book Two*, published by Simon & Schuster.

Hear, hear!

A crackling bunch of audio artists is revitalising books for stilled lives in quarantine

BY SNEHA BHURA

Vijay Vikram Singh has covered enviable ground as a voice artist. He has been the voice of the popular Indian TV series *Bigg Boss* since 2007, and provided viewers with a compelling aural experience in reality shows like *MasterChef India*, *Indian Idol*, and *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa*. Yet, nothing could have prepared Singh for the audiobook-reading gig that came his way in 2018 by way of Swedish company Storytel.

His first book was *Chandrakanta Santati*, a six-part magnum opus by popular Hindi novelist Devkinandan Khatri. The book series was a sequel to *Chandrakanta*, which inspired the blockbuster television series of the same name in the 1990s. “The sheer scale of the story, with a cast of at least 100 characters, completely blew me away. The story and writing were better than *Game of Thrones*,” says Singh, who took more than two months to complete the narration, voicing all the characters. “It was unlike anything I had done in my entire career.” He would take 15-minute power naps after every 30 minutes of narration in a tiny recording studio, just to get back a sense of control over the multiple voice textures. “I get a pittance for audiobooks compared with ad films and TV voiceovers. It is exhausting. The motivation to take this on has to come from somewhere else,” says Singh.

During lockdown, Singh managed to record *Neem Ka Ped*, another book that inspired a drama series in the 1990s. The story revolves around a bonded labourer and the neem tree that he plants as a running metaphor of his life. “I had to voice the tree too as a narrator,” says Singh, who narrated the book in sparkling Awadhi. He recorded the entire book over 20 days, starting at 6am every day, when his kids were asleep. “The thrill of doing this every morning trumped every inconvenience.”

In India, where even e-books have failed to make a mark, there should have been little hope for audiobooks in lock-



down as they are essentially commute-consumption friendly. But quarantine brought about slow, invisible changes in lives and people counted on more things to keep themselves engaged. Major English

publishing houses have ramped up their audiobook plans, and platforms like Storytel and Audible are witnessing a steady uptick in listenership. But what good is an audiobook if the storyteller is not leading listeners into the story with subtle and seamless narration? Thankfully, there are a few who have charmed listeners with their impeccable authorial voice.

Screen actor and a popular face in Mumbai's theatre circuit, Shernaz Patel has been voicing for ads, corporate films and movies since college. Audiobooks came as a natural transition. She has narrated over 20 titles for Audible such as *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte and *Panchatantra*. Fiction can be challenging when you have to voice multiple characters, while non-fiction can get dull and insipid. But Patel knows



STORY TIME
Actor Suchitra Pillai has voiced for Paulo Coelho's *Adultery* and writer Devdutt Pattanaik released the *Mahabharat* as a six-hour audio show

one thing about showing commitment to the subject and the characters. “When I was very young, someone told me that when you are on a mic, always think that you are speaking to one person,” says Patel. “Whether it is for an ad or a book, this approach will always bring greater intimacy, truth and connectedness with listeners.”

Suchitra Pillai, actor, model, anchor and former VJ, has voiced books for Audible with mostly women as powerful, central characters including *Adultery* by Paulo Coelho and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. “There are no special effects, everything depends on the voice,” says Pillai. “You learn to change between Sita and Surpanakha. You don't throw your voice out like in a drama, but learn to be controlled and get all your inflections, intonations, pronunciations correct.” Pillai recalls taking on the voice of an adulter-

SOMEONE TOLD ME THAT WHEN YOU ARE ON A MIC, THINK THAT YOU ARE SPEAKING TO ONE PERSON. THIS WILL BRING GREATER INTIMACY WITH LISTENERS.

—Shernaz Patel, actor



sound is very different from when you are narrating the story. Especially my books, which are written in a rather staccato manner. I am not like Shakespeare, which has to be read or heard.”

ess in a Hindi translation of Coelho's *Adultery* right after playing Sita for Divakaruni's book. “It was a very amusing experience reading Coelho's book in translation. It was my first ever Hindi audio-book and I had to find translations for words like orgasm (hastamaithun),” Pillai says and laughs.

But Sonal Kaushal, a voice artist for children, talks

about interesting conundrums in the world of audiobooks. Her sweet, lilting voice has vocalised characters like Doraeon, Chhota Bheem and Powerpuff Girls for long. “But [doing] books for kids is more work to keep them engaged,” says Kaushal. “You always have to be chirpy and bubbly. Even if I am [voicing] a monster, I can't be so evil that they are scared off. I can play a boy, girl, mother, father, tree and a bird... everything. But if there are three kids who are chatting away like friends... I need to be so careful about the differentiation so that kids don't get confused.”

And what happens when authors themselves read their books? Mythologist and author Devdutt Pattanaik recently released the *Mahabharat* as a six-hour audio show under Audible Suno. Pattanaik insists that his *Mahabharat* as an audio tale is very different from reading a book. “It's sort of extempore,” he says. “There are pauses, some awkwardness and mistakes too, just like when we are speaking. The whole idea was to create a natural storytelling ecosystem.”

Pattanaik condensed the 18 chapters of his book into six Hindi episodes of 40 minutes each; he recorded it in a studio he set up at home during the lockdown, with the help of a sound engineer. With this reading, his own book revealed itself to him in newer ways. “But I don't think I would enjoy reading from a book,”

Pattanaik admits. “When you write, the



JEFFREY EPSTEIN: FILTHY RICH

Available on Netflix

Rating ★★★★★

Beast of prey

BY REUBEN JOE JOSEPH

Few people know who Jeffrey Epstein really was. To the famous, he was rich. To the rich, he was brilliant. To the common man, he was a Jay Gatsby-like figure. But to his victims, he was the devil incarnate. The disgraced American financier had an obscene amount of money, enough to live recklessly as a paedophile and an international child sex trafficker, and leave his lawyers to cover up his tracks.

But *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich*, a four-part documentary, isn't so much about Epstein as it is about giving voice to the many women who were lured into his "sexual pyramid scheme". His procurers targeted vulnerable underage girls to give him massages at his various residences, and he would either abuse them for cash or pay them to bring their friends, who in turn would then bring their friends and so on.

While there is a lot of emphasis on whom the good-looking and suave Wall Street mogul hung out with—from Harvey Weinstein to Donald Trump and Bill Clinton—we also are told that many of his unnamed powerful friends were

offered illegal sexual services and later blackmailed. Only Prince Andrew's alleged crimes are spoken about. The weekend after the series released, news of Trump's alleged involvement in the Epstein sex scandal resurfaced on social media.

There are no shocking revelations in *Filthy Rich*. It lets the survivors control the narrative, bolstered by interviews of journalists, attorneys, investigators and child psychologists to give us the full picture. It depicts the extent to which Epstein's reach—from the state attorney to the FBI—could hush things for over 11 years. The failure of the criminal justice system rings loud and clear; with so much damning evidence, Epstein was still elusive for so long.

Numerous conspiracy theories sprang up after Epstein's mysterious suicide in jail in 2019. The last episode addresses that, but more importantly talks about how the battle is far from done. The question of who Epstein really is, is eclipsed by other pressing ones like when his co-conspirators will be tried and who are the ones to whom girls were trafficked. The Epstein story is not over. 🗣️



YOUNG AHMED (French, 2019)



BEYOND REDEMPTION

BY JOSE K. GEORGE

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD Ahmed is an extremely devout Belgian. He detests his mother and sister as he feels that their lifestyles are un-Islamic. He refuses to shake hands with his teacher, Ines, because he believes that such an act is against his religion. Influenced by a militant imam and the videos that he watches on the internet, Ahmed is ready to kill for his religion.

Ahmed, presented by director siblings Luc Dardenne and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, appears to have gone beyond the point of redemption at a tender age. Until a month ago, he was a regular teenager who loved his video games.

When his imam tells Ahmed that Ines is an apostate, the youngster feels that this is his chance to wage the jihad that he always wanted. His inspiration is his cousin who gave up his life for jihad. Against the advice of his imam, he attempts to kill his teacher. Ahmed ends up in a rehabilitation centre where the counsellors try to bring him back to a normal life, but his convictions can hardly be refixed.

Young Ahmed, which won the best director award at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, is a chilling tale of a teen disoriented by the doctrines that he consumed without questioning. 🗣️

Virtual vacations

BY OSHIN GRACE DANIELL

It was inevitable: Humankind has found a way to combat the Covid-induced travel hiatus—using Google Maps and virtual reality technology. So, get ready to experience the world's most popular tourist destinations from the comfort of your home. Here are five options to get you started:

- 1 NORTHERN LIGHTS**
Patience and luck were prerequisites for anyone who wanted to enjoy these unpredictable, luminous, atmospheric displays. Not anymore. The virtual tour by the Lights Over Lapland project features every detail, at your convenience.
- 2 LOUVRE MUSEUM**
The world's largest art museum has a collection of about four lakh pieces; though only a tenth of it is on display. Still, it is said that it would take three days and two nights to walk through the entirety of the Louvre, if you do it non-stop. Now, with the virtual tour offered by the museum's official website, take all the time that you need to study every exhibit, including the iconic Mona Lisa.
- 3 MACHU PICCHU**
Peru's most famous landmark; a UNESCO World Heritage Site. One of the new seven wonders of the world, Machu Picchu continues to reveal the mysteries of the Incan Empire. Be sure to check out the 360-degree street view of the Inca Trail (a 4-day, 3-night hike to Machu Picchu) by Google Arts & Culture.

- 4 GREAT BARRIER REEF**
The Australian tourist attraction is the world's largest coral reef system, made up of close to 3,000 individual reefs. Google, in collaboration with Catlin Seaview Survey, now allows people to explore some of the top dive sites. Although filmed for 3D, it is worth a watch even without a virtual reality headset.



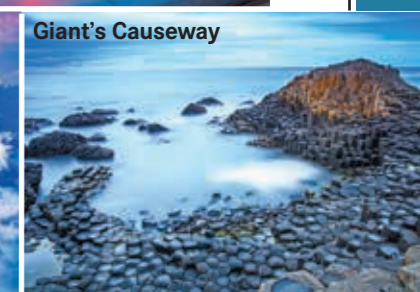
Louvre Museum



Northern lights



Machu Picchu



Giant's Causeway



Great Barrier Reef

- 5 GIANT'S CAUSEWAY**
One of Northern Ireland's best-known natural wonders, Giant's Causeway is famous for its hexagonal interlocking stone columns of layered basalt. A tourist hotspot and the only UNESCO World Heritage Site in the country, it has been called "a portal into the Earth's most ancient past". Step into the mythical land of giants with the 360-degree panoramic tour by the National Trust for Ireland.

THE MOB MINIATURIST

Painter Soma Das details the delectable in the drab

BY SNEHA BHURA



PHOTO COURTESY SHANKHARUPA BOSE, EMAMI ART

Mughal miniatures have elegant, manicured gardens. Soma Das's paintings unfold against insipid urban sprawls. Traditional Indian miniatures have kings and courtiers with their stately elephants and glittering forts. Das's paintings contain hoi polloi in their slapdash huts and tenements. Ancient miniatures portray exquisitely

bejewelled women waiting in love and longing. Das paints scruffy women all knotted up in the exhausting drama of everyday living. But there is bold, vivid imagery in both, a riotous interplay of colours and gatherings, and much handsome detailing. "I have imbibed all the techniques of detailing, arrangement, narration and aerial perspective from the tradition of miniature painting," says the

41-year-old Kolkata-based artist, who quotes the quotidian in her canvas in the style of a neo-miniaturist. Drawing inspiration from south Asian miniature art, Das has been consistently reinventing the genre to reflect her own struggles and memories with equal parts irony and pathos. Her most recent work, made in lockdown, is a simple, one-room house. It could just as

well be a shelter, crammed to capacity in a time of social distancing, with three kids, a homebound father, grandparents, utensils, furniture and a mother bent over a hot tub of oil, deep-frying batter. "I saw this scene near my house," says Das. "It is a difficult time. But still, there is a sense of elation in this family stuck at home." She recalls her own conservative upbringing.



ART IN CHAOS
Das (facing page) and her works (clockwise from left) 'Hell in the Earth', 'Shelter' and the latest one she made during the lockdown

Born in New Barrackpore, West Bengal, to a carpenter father, Das grew up with restrictions aplenty. But she was fond of drawing and sketching, and eventually found her way out of the confines of house arrest to study visual and fine arts at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata. It is in the university's library that she was first exposed to the illustrious world of miniature paintings. The fine-grained rigour and discipline of executing traditional motifs and patterns of a miniature seeped into her artistic style. "Even though I haven't been trained in the exact techniques of miniature painting, by studying the ancient folios and plates, reading and researching in museums and galleries, I have found my own language and interpretation," says Das. Hence the traditional handmade wasli paper meant for

miniatures is replaced with Nepali paper, and gilded borders of illuminated manuscripts have slipped off from Das's oeuvre. "The Nepali paper, also handmade, is just like me," says Das. "I can relate to it; it is very absorbing, and borders falling away from my paintings depict my gradual discarding of boundaries and restrictions which had earlier impeded my growth." She has been officially represented by Kolkata's Emami Art gallery for modern and contemporary painting since January 2019. Das does not yet know how the artist in her will respond to the recent super cyclone that devastated her city. She is still sifting her thoughts about it. Her previous works offer clues. She draws our attention to a canvas in mustard with a large black umbrella tipped with a stray, pillowy cloud. Under the canopy of the



giant umbrella is an assortment of strangers awkwardly huddled together. "A bonhomie is created when they are suddenly stuck in pouring rain in the middle of nowhere," says Das. In a stunning blue tableau titled 'Hell in the Earth', she translates a medical inferno into a carefree, chaotic hospital ward with harried patients splayed out in one large bed, alongside anxious

relatives, with poker-faced doctors and nurses prowling amidst corpses, cats and cockroaches. In a 2016 canvas, migrants from a neighbouring country, unable to breathe in their poky, makeshift houses, spill out on to the railway tracks and learn to cook, wash, clean, dry and dream under the arch of the summer skies. "There is delight and hope in everything," says Das. ●

A virtual act

The BAFTA TV Awards, which got postponed because of lockdown, will now take place on July 31. It will be a “closed studio, socially-distanced” show, with nominees invited to accept their awards virtually. Comedian **Richard Ayoade**, of *The IT Crowd* fame, will be the host. “I am as surprised as you are that this is still going ahead,” he quipped.

GETTY IMAGES



Sonu Sood
actor

ROLE REVERSAL

Sonu Sood, best known for his negative roles, has now emerged as a real-life hero. He has helped thousands of stranded migrants return to their homes.

How grave is the migrant crisis in Mumbai?

Migrants are looking for a means to return to their native place. More than 10,000 migrants are still stranded in Mumbai. I have sent around 35,000 people to their respective states so far.

What is your typical day like?

I am out on the field for almost 20 hours, finding out where they are, sending them food and making ar-

rangements for their travel back home. I have not slept for the last four days. I just take a nap for half an hour when I get tired. Monsoon and cyclone could spell more trouble for the migrant workers. I have to ensure that they reach home safely. I wish I had 30 hours a day.

What motivates you to help them?

The smile on their faces makes my day. It makes me work harder.

How did you raise funds for the ‘Ghar Bhejo’ project?

‘Ghar Bhejo’ was started by my friend Niti Goel and me. Initially, we dipped into our savings. Now people are coming forward and pitching in.

How difficult has it been to get the paperwork done?

It was really hard to get the paperwork done. Besides getting permissions from the police and the district magistrate, one even had to get a fitness certificate from a registered medical practitioner initially. Now medical certificates are not required. Still the process involves a lot of paperwork and it is really tiring.

A man recently shared a video on Twitter and said, ‘You are no less than a God.’ Do you find it overwhelming?

I am so touched by people’s responses.

I feel like my family has grown. Now

I have near and dear ones in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and every part of the country.

One migrant named her boy Sonu Sood Srivasthav. That was very special.

There is a man whom I helped reunite with his mother. She called me the other day. She kept crying and I was at a loss for words.

Rumours are rife that you will enter politics.

No. I don’t have any such intention. I am happy where I am now.

Does your family fear for your safety?

They are worried about me. But someone has to come forward and help these people. That’s what I tell them. I try to maintain social distancing and take all the precautions.

—Mini P. Thomas



The solo act

Nandita Das recently released a short film called *Listen to Her*. The seven-minute film on domestic violence during the lockdown was written, acted, directed and produced by Das herself at her home. Supported by UNESCO, United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, UN Women and the South Asia Foundation, the film illustrates the irony of the guideline “stay home, stay safe”.

Rebel with a cause

Artist **Ai Weiwei** has come up with several face masks to raise money for Covid-19 relief efforts. The masks are reflective of the artist’s political activism and are extremely popular. He has, for example, sold more than 4,500 of his rebellious masks with the middle finger. By June 2, he had raised \$1,084,950. “No will is too small and no act too helpless,” Weiwei posted on Instagram. The proceeds will go to Human Rights Watch, Refugees International and Medecins Sans Frontiers.

GETTY IMAGES



A muddy battle

Wrestler **Sakshi Malik** has not let the lockdown of training facilities affect her training. She now trains at an akhara at her in-laws’ house in Haryana. Wrestling in mud, though, has been challenging as she is doing it for the first time. “The speed, technique, everything is different,” she says. Apparently, husband and fellow wrestler Satyawart Kadian, who is no stranger to muddy grappling, is helping her.

PTI



PTI



CONTRIBUTOR: SNEHA BHURA
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



Winter of Warsaw 1985

Pandemic pictures have given way to visuals of spiralling protests against the brutal police killing of a black man. Pictures on instant television create quick inflexion points and change political narratives in minutes. It was not always like this: police brutality existed before today but news was not always so pervasive or accessible. For instance, in the world that once existed behind the Iron Curtain, a shadowy, snow-bound world of authoritarian regimes controlled by Moscow, it was difficult to come by hard facts. Political officers in embassies depended on BBC bulletins over the crackling short-waves and then discounted them for western bias.

In 1985, in Warsaw, Kevin Ruane of the BBC regularly analysed developments in three-minute bursts on my hardy Russian radio. Outside, the early winter days were short and gray. Cars lay hidden under piles of snow in parking lots. Tough small Fiats—the maluch—slithered and slid on the treacherous black ice. Poorly maintained heating systems croaked and cranked, tram bells clanged late into the snowy night and the Vistula began to freeze over. Virtually everything was scarce—in shops, the empty shelves stared back, pleading helplessness. Even diplomats queued up for rationed quotas of meat, butter, sugar, petrol and cooking oil. The best currency was a cheap French brandy called Martineau; the best gift a kilo of meat. People cajoled and bribed for essentials.

But political excitement throbbed just under the surface. The Soviet empire had slipped into decline; Gorbachev's arrival bore early promise of a fresh breeze from the east. Poland was a bubbling crucible of change, catalysed by the nation's particularities: Poles nurtured a historical antipathy towards Russia; the vast majority were practising Catholics; private agriculture and not collective farming was the norm.

Solidarity, led by the charismatic Lech Walesa, had thrown down the gauntlet with the Gdansk shipyard strikes of 1981. Martial law had been imposed and lifted, though leading Solidarity activists were still in custody. General Jaruzelski's regime, kowtowing to Moscow, lurched between weak concessions and repression. Anticipation lurked in stealthy whispers; coded signals were hidden in sermons.

A Polish Pope—John Paul II—sat in the Vatican and his visits, with their sharply calibrated political message, inspired the Polish nation. The Church was Solidarity's strong partner; a young priest, Jerzy Popieluszko, emerged as the poster boy of protest: thousands thronged the streets outside St Stanislaw church in north Warsaw to listen to his monthly mass. The priest's popularity got under the skin of the security services and in late 1984 he was abducted, brutally assaulted, and thrown—gagged and bound—into a Vistula reservoir. A year later, on November 1, All-Souls Day, I visited his grave. The memory is vivid: hundreds of people, thousands of candles, Solidarity banners, the inevitable plain-clothes police and a huge rough granite gravestone.

Kevin Ruane later detailed the story of Fr Popieluszko's

assassination and the consequent trial in his book *To Kill a Priest*. Marked by his keen observation, deep research and the empathy that had earned him the trust of regimes and dissidents alike, the book brings to life a world of cold repression and the indomitable human spirit and shows how the murder hastened the fall of the communist regime. Kevin, a good friend, passed away in December 2018, in Australia, but by then the grim world that he and I had shared had long vanished: the Soviet Union had dissolved, the Cold War ended, the Berlin Wall torn down. Justice too had been served: Father Popieluszko was beatified by the Vatican in 2010 and put on the path to sainthood.



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