

**MAHARASHTRA**  
GOVERNOR RATTLES THE GOVERNMENT

**PRAKASH JAVADEKAR**  
MAKE IN INDIA HAPPENED IN FOUR MONTHS

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**CYCLONE AMPHAN**  
TRIGGERS POLITICAL  
HEADWINDS FOR MAMATA

**CARMAKERS TAKE THE**  
ROUTE LESS TRODDEN

**RTI TAKEN ILL DURING**  
THE LOCKDOWN

# THE WEEK

JUNE 7, 2020



**TENSION ON INDIA-CHINA BORDER**

## WHAT XI WANTS

Land link with Pak-held Kashmir through Ladakh?



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FOR THE WEEK JUNE 1 - JUNE 7

## NYAY Initiated from Chhattisgarh

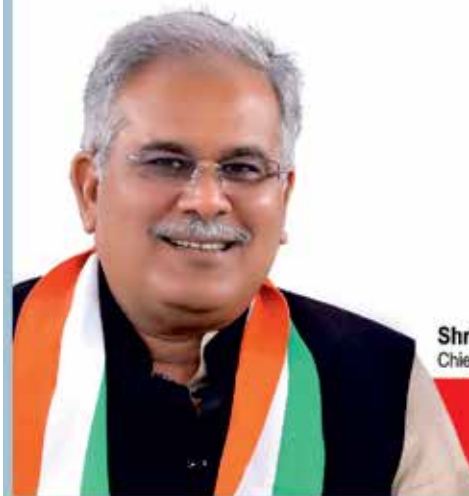


### Rajiv Gandhi Kisan NYAY Yojana

- ◆ Direct Benefit Transfer of Rs. 5700 crore into accounts of 19 lakh paddy, maize and sugarcane farmers in 4 installments
- ◆ Disbursed Rs.1500 crore of first installment on May 21, 2020, former Prime Minister Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi's martyrdom day

### Landless Agro-Labourers NYAY Yojana

- ◆ A High Level committee constituted to prepare an action plan to provide fixed income to Landless Agricultural Labourers



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■ **APERITIF** ■  
THE BIG PICTURE

# **TROUBLE IN THE AIR**

Swarms of locusts atop a residential building in Jaipur. The insects have been rampaging across western and central India in the country's worst pest infestation in three decades.

PHOTO BY AFP



POINT BLANK



When, as a creator, I make something, it helps me if I know for which window I am making the content for. There is no point in making non-veg food for a vegetarian.

**Sujoy Ghosh,**  
filmmaker

I have immense respect for PM Modi who is not only our nation's leader, but also a world leader. Even the US president is in awe of him. I will build a temple with his idol in it after the lockdown.

**Ganesh Joshi,**  
BJP MLA in Uttarakhand

As sportsmen, we are used to dealing with a lot of uncertainty during our careers. Everything doesn't fall into place. You tend to get scared and worried about stuff.

**Rahul Dravid,**  
former cricketer

The 24x7 saturation coverage of the spiky virus and the casualties around the world spooked people. While the middle class and the rich retreated under the beds, the poor baulked and decided to get home to the safety of their villages and communities.

**Manish Tewari,**  
Congress leader

BJP is the richest party not only in the country but also in the world. Its leaders only care for the rich people and not the poor.

**Tejashwi Yadav,**  
RJD leader



The planet is our home and we have to learn to coexist with every single species that exists on earth. Why do human beings feel they are invincible? We share our planet with millions of other species, but we feel only we have a right on the planet. That is ridiculous.

**Bhumi Pednekar,**  
actor

WORD PLAY

Recently, during an anti-lockdown protest in Toronto, Canada, protestors carried signs that read "covexit". Covexit refers to the strategy for exiting the lockdown forced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Apparently, governments and policy experts are now busy working on their covexit plans. And, this exit would be harder than the Brexit, for sure.

MILESTONES

**TOP SPEED**  
Australian researchers from Monash University have recorded the world's fastest internet speed of 44.2 terabits per second from a single optical chip. The technology has the potential to connect billions of people around the world at peak periods.



**AWARD GLORY**  
Major Suman Gawani became the first Indian to win the UN Military Gender Advocate Award. Formerly deployed to the UN Mission in South Sudan, Gawani is known for mentoring around 230 UN military observers on conflict-related sexual violence.



**INDIAN RACE**  
India's venture capital-backed fintech investments overtook those in China in the first quarter of 2020 in terms of deal value and volume. Indian fintech start-ups attracted VC investments of more than \$330 million in the March quarter against China's approximately \$270 million.



POWER POINT | **SACHIDANANDA MURTHY**



Reactionary regimes

Even as the lockdown is easing, there are doubts whether the new-found initiatives of several Central ministries will sustain when normalcy returns. The much-hyped claim of the human resource development ministry on the switch to online education has got a reality check as schools and colleges are reporting that they are not able to provide substantial coverage, especially in villages and impoverished urban centres.

The Centre's BharatNet programme has claimed near-total optic fibre connectivity in the country, but its next phase—covering every home and individual—has a long way to go. In Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party government's promise that the city would be a 'Wi-Fi metropolis' remains unfulfilled, with only a small part of the city having dependable connectivity. Even cities known as tech hubs—Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and Gurugram—do not have cheap or free connectivity for all residents.

While bureaucrats advised schools and colleges to switch to online classes during the lockdown, the experience of government and corporation-run schools has not been encouraging in many states. Teachers themselves have not been trained to give their classes online and managing a remote class scattered across multiple locations has been challenging. Even several universities have said that they have not been able to achieve maximum reach, and have advocated opening physical classrooms.

Though demonetisation increased digital currency, the dependence on cash has not come down. Similarly, if online classes increase, experts feel a huge budget and time would be required to move education online. Apart from connectivity issues, there is a lack of affordable and compatible hardware across the student spectrum. Some experts feel that relying on the internet for education may widen the social gap, unless the government supplies computers to needy students.

The UPA government had launched a programme for supplying a tablet, costing ₹10,000, to each student, but the project did not take off. The NDA government did not think of it as a viable option. Similarly, the enthusiasm of some state governments to supply free laptops, like the Akhilesh Yadav government in Uttar Pradesh, was not followed up by successive regimes. There is an argument that smartphones can do the job, but school managements and teachers' associations are sceptical.

There are also doubts about the overall development of children if they are confined to homes, and lack contact with teachers, who inspire, guide and correct. The demand for a total switch to digital education would need a national debate, as the recent Kasturirangan report on national



education policy did not consider in detail the pros and cons of switching over to digital education. Even this one-year-old draft report is yet to be considered and adopted by the government. There are concerns about the commonality of digitally prepared curriculum, providing remote laboratories for science subjects for every student, and extracurricular activities.

Another issue is the extreme enthusiasm for keeping labour laws in abeyance in some states in the wake of the lockdown as the governments did not hold extensive dialogues. While some of the laws have become antiquated because of the fast changes in manufacturing, services and society itself, the migrant crisis has exposed the perils of multi-layered subcontracting, especially in construction and road-building projects. There is a clamour that such far-reaching changes should not come as reactions to a pandemic, but after informed and time-bound public discussion, including debates in Parliament and the Lok Sabha. The haste to strike when the country is in lockdown can make the hammer miss its mark.

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

sachi@theweek.in



## BUNGLED TAKE-OFF

After a botched plan to restart air travel resulted in about half the flights getting cancelled at the last minute on May 25, online trolls tore into Union Civil Aviation and Urban Development Minister Hardeep Singh Puri. They even compared him to a certain leader who also loves making sudden announcements. Puri, however, has nonchalantly moved on to his next project—restarting the Delhi metro. Thankfully though, the metro has been ready with protocols in place for weeks now, and is just waiting for the green signal.



### MONEY MATTERS

Some ministries think organising webinars is an effective way to fight the distress caused by Covid-19. The textile ministry claimed that it had organised, in “solidarity with handloom weavers”, 200 video conferences to sensitise them on the Aarogya Setu app and other health precautions. But, former BJP MP and handloom expert Ananda Bhaskar Rapolu was not amused. Through tweets, he asked the ministry under Smriti Irani to show “solidarity” by giving ex gratia payments to those with government-issued weaver cards.

### BIRTHDAY BOYS

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and state Congress president Ramesh Chennithala are like chalk and cheese. If one is a strict disciplinarian, the other can never be accused of that. If one is hardly friendly to journalists, the other revels in media attention. If one measures every word he speaks, the other one talks up a storm. But the fact that both have their birthdays on adjacent days—May 24 (Vijayan) and May 25 (Chennithala)—has come as a surprise to many in the state. With the two leaders being so different, some said they had stopped believing in zodiac signs altogether.

### TWEETING TROUBLE

Sincerity on social media might get you likes and followers, but it can also annoy the bosses. At least two bureaucrats learnt this the hard way. Sanjay Kumar, the Bihar health secretary, and Manivannan P., principal secretary of Karnataka’s information department, were recently shunted to low-profile jobs. Apparently, their chief ministers did not appreciate their engagements on social media. Kumar, for instance, would regularly post Bihar Covid-19 data on Twitter, and, at times, also respond to specific queries by citizens. Manivannan, on the other hand, was reportedly vocal about the rights of workers at a time when labour laws were being relaxed.

Perhaps this is why Lav Agarwal, joint secretary in the Union health ministry, has kept his Twitter usage to a minimum. After January, his first tweet came on May 17, about attending his daughter’s graduation online.

### REACHING OUT

Days after he met a group of migrant workers in Delhi, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi hit the streets once again. On the morning of Eid, May 24, Gandhi met with a taxi driver at a roadside stall in Delhi, and discussed the problems drivers had faced during the lockdown. The Gandhi scion has been in outreach mode throughout the pandemic.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

### BREAKING COCONUTS, AND RULES

At an official event on the outskirts of Hyderabad, social distancing gave way to social fighting. As Telangana Rashtra Samithi MLA M. Kishan Reddy arrived for a ground-breaking ceremony with his followers, K. Sukanya, a mandal praja parishad president and BJP member, asked why she had not been invited. Reddy ignored her and tried to break the ceremonial coconut, but Sukanya intervened. Soon, a scuffle broke out between their supporters and Sukanya fell down in the melee. She later complained that Reddy had hit her hand with the coconut and had called her by her caste name. The police has registered a case against Reddy.

Interestingly, all this happened during the lockdown, and at a time when Greater Hyderabad accounts for a large part of the total Covid-19 cases in the state.







# Triple trouble

SALIL BERA

**NATURE'S FURY**  
People leaving their houses through the flooded fields

Cyclone Amphan has left West Bengal devastated. With Covid-19 cases on the rise and the BJP biding its time, Mamata Banerjee has her hands full

BY RABI BANERJEE

**F**or five days now, Shova Mondol, a resident of Sonarpur town in South 24 Parganas district, has been living without electricity and drinking water. The district, along with North 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur, was the worst affected after super cyclone Amphan lashed the south Bengal coast on May 20. What makes matters worse is that these districts are also Covid-19 hotspots.

But Amphan has made people throw caution to the winds. Ignoring physical distancing norms and the fact that her husband works for the state health department, Mondol joined her neighbours in blocking the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, which connects Kolkata's north to the south, on May 24. The police used force to disperse the crowd. "We wanted water and electricity, instead we

got lathis," said Mondol.

Not far away from Sonarpur, where many people lost their houses in the cyclone, lies Baruipur. Local resident Kanak Mukherjee, an employee of a public sector undertaking of the Central government, is a harried man. The approach road to his house is gone, so is the roof shed of his terrace. The toilet, too, is a shambles. But what worries him the most is the lack of drinking water. His mother suffers from a kidney disease and requires pure drinking water. All she gets now is a bottle of water from a pond. Though Kanak filters the water, nephrologist Aveek Barman said that it was dangerous to give that water to a kidney patient. "Her creatinine level would jump manifold and that would hit her heart," he warned.

## INTERVIEW



**Jagdeep Dhankhar**  
governor, West Bengal

## Chief minister's political antenna was in disabled mode during chopper ride

BY RABI BANERJEE

**WEST BENGAL** Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar, along with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, accompanied Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his aerial survey of the state's cyclone-ravaged districts. The trio was the first to witness the destruction, as government officials were unable to access the districts even four days after Cyclone Amphan hit the state. In an exclusive chat with THE WEEK, Dhankhar talked about the devastation he witnessed and the difference in Banerjee's demeanour during the chopper ride. Edited excerpts:

### Post the aerial survey, what is your assessment of the destruction?

Such fury of nature has not been seen in West Bengal in recent times. The rains and heavy winds caused massive damage to crops and infrastructure. Kolkata happens to be one of the five severely affected districts. Our scientific predictions were helpful in timely evacuation of lakhs of people. Eighty lives have been lost. Sixteen districts have been impacted in varying degrees.

### The prime minister announced

**₹1,000 crore advance assistance. But the chief minister said it might be part of the devolved Central taxes due to the state, which would be later adjusted.**

This is no time to engage in hair splitting or taking a political stance. While the state presentation indicated a scenario, it also reflected that due to inaccessibility, assessment is yet to be done. Only after ground evaluation can there be a rational way forward.... I would, for sake of efficacy and efficiency and to curtail mismanagement, favour that all assistance finds its way to the intended beneficiaries.

### Five lakh people were evacuated and rehabilitated by the state government. Is that not commendable?

During this crisis, I was in active touch with Central agencies. The state, however, could not be persuaded for such engagement. The Indian Coast Guard performed in an exemplary manner, (and ensured) no death on sea. The Border Security Force played a significant role in the Sundarbans.... Our defence forces were ready to provide relief. Evacuation was tough, given the Covid-19

situation. This was achieved effectively by state and Central agencies working in tandem. At the level of prime minister and home minister, there was action mode approach much before the landfall of Amphan. All agencies need to be appreciated for their commitment.

### The biggest challenge now would be ensuring physical distancing even as Covid-19 cases are on the rise in the state.

In the review meeting (at Basirhat), the prime minister reflected on this dilemma. On one hand, all are being exhorted... to stay put at home, while lakhs had to shift out of their homes due to Amphan. He called upon all to do the difficult balancing act so that our Covid-19 combat is not compromised. Covid-19 combat has to be unabated, otherwise we will face a scary scenario. All precautions need to be fully adhered to.

### As you mentioned, there should be no politicisation over relief work. Do you think that is possible?

The chief minister's political antenna is ever in peak form. I have flagged her on numerous occasions, saying that in matters of development or in dealing with the Centre [her political approach] was inappropriate. This has led to a confrontational stance with the Centre, which has adversely impacted the people. For example, farmers all over the country are benefiting from the PM-KISAN scheme except in West Bengal. Our 70 lakh farmers have so far been denied ₹7,000 crore while all others have got ₹10,000 per head.

### Was the confrontational stance evident during the chopper ride?

During the recent visit of the prime minister, I noticed that the political antenna of the chief minister was in disabled mode. I, for the first time, saw a ray of hope in the confrontational dark tunnel. Continuance of this will benefit all. ●



Amphan, however, first hit the green lungs of the state and of neighbouring Bangladesh—the Sundarbans in South 24 Parganas. All 103 islands in the Sundarbans were flooded. When the cyclone made landfall in the Sundarbans and Digha in Purba Medinipur, the wind speed was around 260km/h. The speed dropped as the cyclone pushed inland into North 24 Parganas (over 230km/h), Kolkata, Hooghly and Howrah (all three at around 140km/h). And, it raged on for eight hours and more, crushing everything that stood in its path.

More than 100 old houses in Kolkata were reduced to rubble. Mighty old trees were uprooted (6,000 in Kolkata alone), as were slender electric poles. Five districts of Bengal were in complete darkness for more than five days. Roads were inundated. Bungalows and luxury apartments were damaged. The middle class and the upper middle class, too, took to the streets, but no lathis rained on them.

Their protest, however, made the state blame the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC), a private company owned by the RPG-Sanjiv Goenka Group. “CESC is squarely responsible for the electric mess in Kolkata,” said acting mayor and Municipal Affairs Minister Firhad Hakim. “They could have done more than what they did.” A top CESC official, however, said that power substations, too, were damaged, and they were working with limited staff owing to lockdown.

The meteorological department had alerted the state about the cyclone four days in advance. So far, the official death toll is 85 (unofficial: 120). Hospitals are struggling to treat them as they are overburdened with Covid-19 patients. Kolkata, Howrah and Hooghly, too, are emerging as Covid-19 hotspots.

Following criticism, Bengal had upped its testing to 8,000 individ-



SALIL BERA

**HITTING HARD**  
Some 6,000 big trees were uprooted in Kolkata

uals per day. But only 3,000 tests were done on May 20. And while it touched 5,000 tests on May 24, it was clear that combating the pandemic had taken a back seat. Banerjee’s priority has been to restore water, power, communication lines and transport in six districts. That is when she reached out to Modi. “I want the prime minister to come to our state and see the damage,” she said.

Within half an hour, the state secretariat was informed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would visit the state on May 22. While the ruling Trinamool Congress said that the visit was at Banerjee’s behest, the BJP said it was based on the briefing by the National Disaster Response Force. “Perhaps lack of communication facilities were the reasons that the state administration received the communication late,” Bengal BJP chief Dilip Ghosh told THE WEEK.

Modi, Banerjee and Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar did an aerial survey of the cyclone-ravaged districts, and were the first to witness the damage as these districts were cut off from the rest of the state. Sour-

es said that Modi was seen making notes on his iPad. Later, he held a review meeting at Basirhat in North 24 Parganas and sought a presentation from the chief secretary. However, Modi, Banerjee and Dhankhar had more information about the situation than the presentation. Modi reportedly told the chief secretary: “Don’t forget the Covid-19 situation while carrying out relief works. Be prepared for a spike in all these areas.” Modi also announced an advance assistance of ₹1,000 crore and said that a Central team would visit Bengal and more aid would be provided.

A day later, Banerjee again visited the Sundarbans with officials. On her return, she was greeted by the protests over non-restoration of services. With the assembly polls just 10 months away, Trinamool leaders are worried about the public unrest as Kolkata, North 24 Parganas and Howrah are the party’s major support bases. While the BJP won 18 seats across the state in the last Lok Sabha polls, it drew a blank in these districts.

Banerjee is aware that this is the

toughest period in her 10-year rule, and that the BJP is waiting in the wings to step in. She is, therefore, careful to avoid mistakes she made during the Covid-19 crisis. She did not hide the death toll this time, nor the number of people affected—one crore. She also told the local administration to cooperate with the NDRE, and warned party leaders against interfering in the rationing system. In the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, Trinamool leaders had tried to grab major rationing stores in rural Bengal for their party relief programme. As a result, ration dealers had to cancel ration distribution.

A Trinamool leader said that Banerjee has categorically told party men that rescue operation should be the primary focus, not politics. The BJP, however, is not buying it, with Ghosh asking why she would then attend the videoconference with Congress president Sonia Gandhi and non-BJP chief ministers soon after the cyclone had hit the state.

Banerjee’s critics said that her excessive reliance on bureaucrats instead of ministers would delay the relief work. “Administration must empower officials and public representatives at the lower level,” said B.K. Patra, a retired official who has handled many relief initiatives in Odisha. “People on ground understand the situation better. So, relief should be monitored at the block level, and not by the state secretariat.”

The Central team is expected to visit Bengal soon, and Banerjee has to ensure that she gets maximum aid from Delhi. Banerjee knows that Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah are waiting to wrest the state from her in 2021. Therefore, they cannot be seen as going back on their promise. But the BJP has its own strategy. It will make sure that the people of Bengal know that the Centre had come to their aid in this dark hour.

Politics aside, what remains to be seen is how Covid-19 will be tackled in a post-cyclone Bengal. ❶

## ■ INTERVIEW



**S.N. Pradhan**  
director general,  
National Disaster Response Force

# Bengal has not seen such kind of devastation in years

BY RABI BANERJEE

## What were the difficulties you faced in Bengal?

Initially, people were reluctant to step out. For example, the people on Sagar Island in the Sundarbans wondered how they could leave their houses and belongings. The local administration advised us to let them take their time. But we said if we allowed that they would not be able to pack up. Finally, they did step out. People in rural Bengal were less aware than people in rural Odisha. The awareness was so low that fishermen wanted to go to sea in the morning despite the warning.

## Did you see the resistance only in Bengal or in Odisha as well?

The people and the administration in Odisha are primed for cyclones as they are habituated to them. Bengal has not seen such devastation in years. For instance, Odisha had designated cyclone centres, so it was easy for us to shift people there. In Bengal, relief centres were made Covid-19 centres. But we were lucky that schools and colleges were closed owing to lockdown. So we could use them. Also, other buildings were used as temporary relief centres.

## How many teams were on ground?

We had around 47 teams ready, of which 36 were used in Bengal (around 60 members in each team). They were

divided into four or five sub-teams, and had 300 sophisticated items (like diving and fire-fighting equipment, and boats). Each team had a vehicle. Our protocol does not allow us to use vehicles of state governments or any other agencies.

## Did you get enough support from the local administration?

I do not like to create controversies. But I must say that the prime minister set the tone by talking to everyone. [Then] the path was cleared for us to coordinate with the local administration and they fell in line.

## People in Kolkata did not take the cyclone warning seriously.

I was told that this was because Kolkata had never witnessed such a cyclone. During my pre-storm briefing, I maintained that Kolkata was in the path of Amphan and everyone would have to take this cyclone seriously as it was different from past ones.

## What should the state learn from this?

People must understand that Kolkata is not too far from the coast. And, it is in a vulnerable location. In future, we need to plan the city accordingly. Because of lack of urban planning we had to face huge problems. ❷



# INFORMATION GAP

Experts are worried that citizens' right to information has not been upheld during the lockdown

BY SONI MISHRA

**ON THE MORNING** of April 24, activist Raghvendra Dubey received a WhatsApp message that left him pleasantly surprised. It was the Rewa district food controller's reply to his application under the Right to Information Act; he had wanted to know how many people in Rewa's Kot village had received free ration under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

Dubey was surprised not only because he got his response through WhatsApp, but also because he had submitted the RTI application just the previous night. It was probably a first for the instant messaging service to be used to respond to RTI queries.

Mentioning this incident, Madhya Pradesh Information Commissioner Rahul Singh said the alacrity displayed by the food controller was perhaps because he had been previously penalised by the commission for not giving information related to distribution of ration. "This episode showed the importance of RTI in times like the Covid-19 pandemic, when information, especially that which pertains to life and liberty of the individual, has to be provided," Singh said.

The information commissioner put out a message on Twitter, urging people who had any complaints about distribution of food grain to file RTI applications under Section 7(1) of the Act, under which information has to be provided by the relevant authority within 48 hours. He said that transparency was essential during

the lockdown.

The Rewa incident made clear the importance of RTI for holding the state agencies accountable for the measures taken to deal with Covid-19. However, the virus has had a debilitating effect on the transparency framework put in place under the 2005 law, especially affecting the functioning of a majority of the state commissions.

Of the 28 state information commissions, seven had resumed functioning after a brief pause because of

the lockdown. Arunachal Pradesh is hearing matters online, while Chhattisgarh is hearing cases both through video-conferencing and in person. Telangana has been conducting hearings over phone. Punjab, Rajasthan and Manipur have made it clear that they will, for the time being, hear only urgent matters that pertain to life and liberty. The Andhra Pradesh commission is hearing only those appeals where the applicant has been denied information either by the public information officer or the

ILLUSTRATION: JOB P.K.



first appellate authority.

A few other commissions sprang back to life after further relaxations were announced for after May 17. The Uttarakhand commission began hearing matters through audio- and video-conferencing on May 22. The Kerala commission resumed hearings over phone on May 21. The information commission in Gujarat is conducting audio-visual hearings from May 26. In nine states, matters stand adjourned till the end of lockdown—it was either declared on their website or found out on enquiry by THE WEEK. The Madhya Pradesh commission had reopened on April 29, but hearings have not been taking place, barring the efforts of Rahul Singh on an individual basis. The Haryana commission, too, has reopened but some benches are not functioning.

As for the remaining commissions, it could not be ascertained when they would resume functioning. The Bihar commission does not have a website, and its office number went unanswered; RTI activists say the commission is not hearing matters. With Sikkim, the number listed against the name of the state chief information commissioner M.B. Gurung turned out to be a wrong number.

Experts say the state commissions have failed to safeguard the citizens' right to information during the pandemic, when it was even more essential to protect their interests. "It is pathetic that the state commissions have not functioned during the lockdown when every section, be it government or private institutions, has embraced technology. They have all begun online meetings and projects," said RTI activist Vinita Deshmukh.

RTI specialists say the state commissions ought to have followed the lead of the Central Information Commission, which resumed hearings on April 15 using both video-conferencing and audio means. According to

the minutes of a meeting Central Information Commissioner Bimal Julka had with the state commissioners on April 29, he urged them to think of innovative measures in these times so that the information seeker is provided all possible relief. In April, during lockdown, the CIC disposed of 548 second appeals.

"If nothing else, hearings could be done over the phone," said RTI activist Commodore (retired) Lokesh Batra. "While not everyone is expected to have smartphones, even a basic phone would have done the job."

A rapid phone survey carried out by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) during the first two phases of the lockdown found that while the CIC had a system in place to hear matters during the Covid-19 restrictions, the state commissions had largely failed to cope. "The situation now is somewhat better, with the commissions at least opening offices and issuing circulars on what is the status of hearing," said CHRI researcher Shikha Chhibbar, who conducted the survey.

In a meeting with the CIC, the state bodies brought out the practical difficulties with online hearings due to lack of infrastructure at the state level—like poor internet connectivity in rural areas. Another issue is that of the phone numbers and email IDs of the applicants not being provided in their pleas. There are other constraints, such as public information officers—against whom appeals are taken up—finding it difficult to access files since government offices are closed or are open only to a limited extent, or they are pre-occupied with Covid-19 duty.

"For all commissions, it is an unprecedented situation; it was never envisaged, not even while the Act was drafted," said Punjab Chief Information Commissioner Suresh Arora. "However, we cannot say that the fundamental right to information





**FOR THE PEOPLE**  
Bimal Julka (right) was sworn in as chief information commissioner by President Ram Nath Kovind on March 6. During the lockdown, he has urged state commissioners to think of innovative measures to resume hearings

is suspended. So, our commission decided to take up pleas that deal with life and liberty.” He said the commission’s effort is to be a facilitator in getting justice done in matters pertaining to health, police or food distribution by taking it up with the concerned departments in an informal capacity.

Referring to the Rewa administration’s anti-encroachment drive that has resulted in families getting displaced amidst lockdown, Rahul Singh said: “If the government has enough resources to carry out an anti-encroachment drive, the officers should also be able to provide information within 48 hours to an application made under Section 7(1).” He said an RTI application in this regard has been taken up by him.

Filing applications is also proving to be difficult as postal and courier services have been affected, and only a few governments have online submission facilities. “The lockdown has turned the citizenry into passive consumers of information that the administration releases on a need-to-know basis,” said Venkatesh Nayak, programme head, access to information programme, CHRI.

“It is very disappointing that the commissions have downed shutters like this, especially since the pendency of appeals is so huge,” said former chief information commissioner Shailesh Gandhi. “There are cases pending for one, two or three years. There is no sense of urgency to deliver to the citizens on

their own,” he said. There are over two lakh cases pending in the information commissions.

RTI activists also say the current situation points to the deeper problem of lack of political will to empower commissions, which begins from delay in appointing commissioners to arbitrariness in the selection process and dilution of the law to take away their autonomy.

Seven state commissions—Assam, Bihar, Goa, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh—are headless. RTI activists also questioned the Centre’s compliance report filed recently in the Supreme Court with regard to filling up of vacancies in the CIC. In the status report filed on April 24, the Centre claimed that “the process of appointment in respect of information commissioners in Central Information Commission has been completed within three months” as directed by the Supreme Court in its order of December 16, 2019. But four posts of information commissioners are still vacant.

The activists, meanwhile, have formed a pressure group to try and coax the state commissions to resume functioning. “We are writing letters to all the state information commissioners with the appeal that they should rise up to the occasion,” said activist Vijay Kumbhar. “Why do the commissions have to spring into action only if there is a rap from the court or if there is an agitation?”

## Self-reliance; third edition

IVORY TOWER

SANJAYA BARU



Though the phrase ‘self-reliance’ does not appear anywhere in the First Five-Year Plan (1951-56), it is commonplace that the very idea of planned development, with the public sector occupying the commanding heights of the economy, implied that post-colonial India would seek to pursue self-reliant economic development. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi put forward his version of self-reliance, with a view to build an Atma Nirbhar Bharat, many thought he was saying something new. He was, in fact, enunciating a third variant of a concept that has its roots in India’s freedom struggle.

Between Jawaharlal Nehru’s version of self-reliance, as it evolved through the first three five-year plans and eventually turned into import-substituting industrialisation, and Modi’s recent articulation of it, there is an intermediate second variant that Prime Minister PV. Narasimha Rao articulated in his famous presidential address to the Tirupati session of the All India Congress Committee in April 1992. Each variant captures the reality of a changing India in a changing world.

Rejecting criticism that the economic liberalisation and reform policies unveiled between June 1991 and March 1992 were a departure from Nehruvian self-reliance, Rao told the AICC that, “a country of India’s size has to be self-reliant”, but the concept of self-reliance has to evolve in step with the country’s own development and the changing global context. “While we are redefining self-reliance,” Rao assured the AICC, “we are not abandoning the basic principle.”

Enunciating his own version of *atmanirbharata* relevant for an India at the turn of the century Rao said, “The very level of development we have reached has made us independent of the world economy in some respects, but more dependent on it in others. This is an important aspect of the complexity of modern development.”

He then went on to define self-reliance for the world of the 1990s, how it was different from the self-reliance of the 1950s. Given the context of 1991-92, when India was dealing with a mounting internal and external debt and repayments crisis, Rao summed up, “One way of describing self-reliance would be to say that we should be indebted only to the extent we have capacity to repay.”

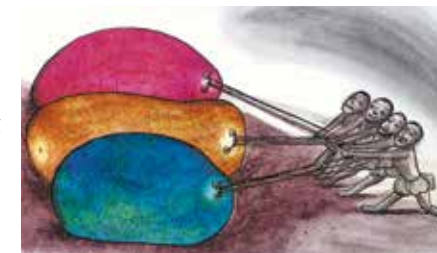
Rao’s address to the 1992 AICC is, without doubt, the best post-Nehruvian statement on economic policy in the past three decades. Its detailed enunciation of India’s economic priorities and policies and the spelling out of a new theory of a mixed economy

and of self-reliance, relevant to a more globally integrated and self-confident India deserves wide reading even today. It is a pity that in its pusillanimous sycophancy towards Sonia Gandhi, the Congress does not make available Rao’s historic AICC address on its website.

Those interested can read the full text reprinted as an appendix to my book *1991: How Narasimha Rao Made History* (2016).

If Rao re-defined the Nehruvian idea of self-reliance for the 1990s, Modi has tried to do so for an India of the 2020s that would have to deal with a very different post-Covid global context. So, rather than suggest that Modi has expounded something new, merely because he has used a long Hindi word, it would be more appropriate to recognise that he, too, is re-defining an idea that has been intrinsic to India’s freedom struggle and post-Independence development.

Like Rao, Modi too has taken care not to confuse self-reliance with inward-oriented autarky. Referring to the oft-quoted concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (whole world is one family), Modi clarified, “India does not advocate self-centric arrangements when it comes to self-reliance. India’s self-reliance is ingrained in the happiness, cooperation and peace of the world.” Clearly, the appeal of some mantras endures.



Baru is an economist and a writer. He was adviser to former prime minister Manmohan Singh.

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN



# Bolts from the blue

With assembly polls less than a year away, the DMK is beset with a series of unexpected challenges

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

**NEWS IN THE** past few days has been bad for the DMK.

On May 23, the party's organising secretary and Rajya Sabha member R.S. Bharathi was arrested from his Chennai residence for allegedly belittling dalits. In a speech at the party's youth wing office in Chennai on February 14, Bharathi reportedly said many dalits could become judges because of alms given by the dravidian movement. He was booked under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, after a dalit activist lodged a complaint in May. A local court later granted him interim bail till June 1.

Hours after he was released, party MPs Dayanidhi Maran and T.R. Baalu rushed to the Madras High Court seeking anticipatory bail in a similar case. Maran and Baalu had met Tamil Nadu chief secretary K. Shanmugam on May 13 to discuss the party's Covid-19 relief initiative, *Ondrinaivam Vaa* (the togetherness campaign). After the meeting, they alleged that Shanmugam had treated them like "third-class people." "We were treated like oppressed people," Maran told reporters. "People like you—are we oppressed people?"

The comments provoked a furious backlash. Maran was criticised for

comparing his meeting with the chief secretary to the plight of dalits. Five days later, first information reports under the SC/ST Act were registered against the leaders across several districts. The High Court later restrained the police from taking "coercive action" against Maran and Baalu, and gave a week for the government to file a detailed reply on the FIRs.

The same day, a case against DMK legislator Senthil Balaji—for allegedly threatening Karur district collector K. Anbalagan—was transferred to the crime branch criminal investigation department. A former AIADMK minister, Balaji defected to the DMK in 2018 and is now close to the party chief and opposition leader M.K. Stalin and his family.

The series of setbacks began after rebel DMK leader V.P. Duraisamy met state BJP president L. Murugan on May 18. Duraisamy said the meeting was a "courtesy call" and that he was not planning to join the BJP. "But you cannot predict anything in politics," he said.

Both Duraisamy and Murugan are dalits, and they had contested the 2016 assembly elections against each other. Duraisamy was deputy speaker in the assembly from 2006 to 2011. He was replaced by Andhiyur Selvaraj, who is also dalit, as the DMK's

deputy general secretary. Four days after he was stripped off the post, Duraisamy joined the BJP.

Sources say the DMK's troubles are part of a larger game plan for the assembly elections due next year. "The political game has begun," said party

spokesperson I. Paranthamen. "The AIADMK has money, manpower and other paraphernalia. And, of course, the support of the ruling BJP at the Centre. The BJP, which played the caste card in states in the north, does the same in Tamil Nadu now."

BJP leaders, however, say caste politics is entrenched only in the DMK. "There has always been casteism in the DMK, even though it calls itself the party of social justice," said state BJP secretary K.T. Raghavan.

The state government and the

## SEASON OF WOES

The anti-dalit narrative against the DMK is a major worry for party chief M.K. Stalin

AIADMK have denied that Bharathi's arrest was politically motivated. "The police took action against Bharathi based on a complaint," said Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami. "The complainant, Kalyanasundaram, was hurt by Bharathi's comment about the judges."

Dalits constitute 13 per cent of the electorate in Tamil Nadu. The BJP, which appointed Murugan as state party president in March, appears to be eyeing the vote bank. Incidentally, Murugan was vice chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes when it began hearing a case related to the allegation that the office of the DMK mouthpiece, *Murasoli*, was built on panchami land. (Panchami land, which the British had distributed to dalits in 1892, cannot be reclassified or sold to non-dalits.) The case, which was filed last year, is pending.

"[Appointing Murugan as president] is part of the BJP's dalit strategy," said D. Ravikumar, MP, of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK). "It is just tokenism to say that they have made a dalit the state president of the party. It cannot be construed as dalit representation."

The VCK, which describes itself as a party of the marginalised, is part of the DMK-led coalition. The anti-dalit narrative against the DMK, which has been building up since the *Murasoli* issue, is troubling the alliance. With assembly polls less than a year away, the party is struggling to project its pro-dalit credentials and its history of anti-caste struggles.

Apart from external challenges, the DMK is also facing the fallout from its internal dynamics. Critics say the Duraisamy issue showed that Stalin was not as inclusive as his father and former DMK president M. Karuna-







PHOTOS: R.G. SASTHA

nidhi. Insiders say he takes counsel from his inner circle and often ignores inputs from others.

“When a person like Duraisamy felt aggrieved, Stalin should have called him,” said senior journalist S.P. Lakshmanan. “Party insiders have long been saying among themselves that Stalin doesn’t talk to everyone who has grievances; he talks with only select people. He has to talk with everyone in the party.”

Zealous workers, too, have been causing trouble. Members of the DMK’s youth wing have been alienating political allies by voicing support to Tamil nationalism and the

erstwhile Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Besides, many young leaders are focusing on social media, rather than on building grassroots support like Karunanidhi had done.

“The 2021 elections will not be a cakewalk for the DMK, given the political developments in the state,” said author and political commentator Aazhi Senthilnathan. “The BJP has begun its political game in Tamil Nadu, and the DMK is falling prey to it. Its new set of youth leaders continue to alienate friendly forces.”

Also, Stalin is no match for Karunanidhi in political acumen. The day Bharathi was arrested, Stalin

#### IN AND OUT

R.S. Bharathi, MP, after his arrest on May 23; (below) V.P. Duraisamy accepting BJP membership from state party president L. Murugan

came out with two statements. DMK propaganda secretary A.Raja, too, issued a statement. But their responses made it clear that the arrest and the backlash had caught the party off guard. “The DMK needs to gear up for one of the worst elections it has ever fought,” said Lakshmanan. “New forces, too, might come in to challenge the DMK.”

For the first time, the DMK will go to the polls next year under the guidance of a political strategist. Prashant Kishor of the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), who helped the BJP win the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, has been working for the DMK since February. In fact, *Ondrinaivam Vaa* was the brainchild of Kishor’s team.

Senior DMK leaders and workers, however, are not happy with Kishor’s entry. In a videoconference on May 16, a party district secretary reportedly said that he and his supporters could not be “subservient to a PR team”. Sources said several other participants supported him, saying they could “follow the words of Stalin as their leader, but not a PR team that does not know the ground”.

Sunil Kanugolu, a former McKinsey consultant who was DMK strategist in the 2016 and 2019 elections, quit after the party leadership decided to rope in Kishor. Once close to Stalin, Sunil has strong links with several district secretaries of the DMK. He worked for Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa for a brief period, and was later asked by the BJP’s national leadership to work for the AIADMK coalition.

“The DMK has to equip itself to face political attacks from multiple fronts,” said political analyst A. Shankar. “Otherwise, it will face obliteration.”

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\* Source : Alexa ranking on "Top 50 Sites in India" as on 18 May 2020



# MOTHER OF ALL JOURNEYS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

Homebound and abandoned, these migrant labourers have come to represent the bruised, tear-stained face of our motherland

A nursing mother is seated among rock slabs in a crowded truck at the Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka border as she heads for her home in Chhattisgarh



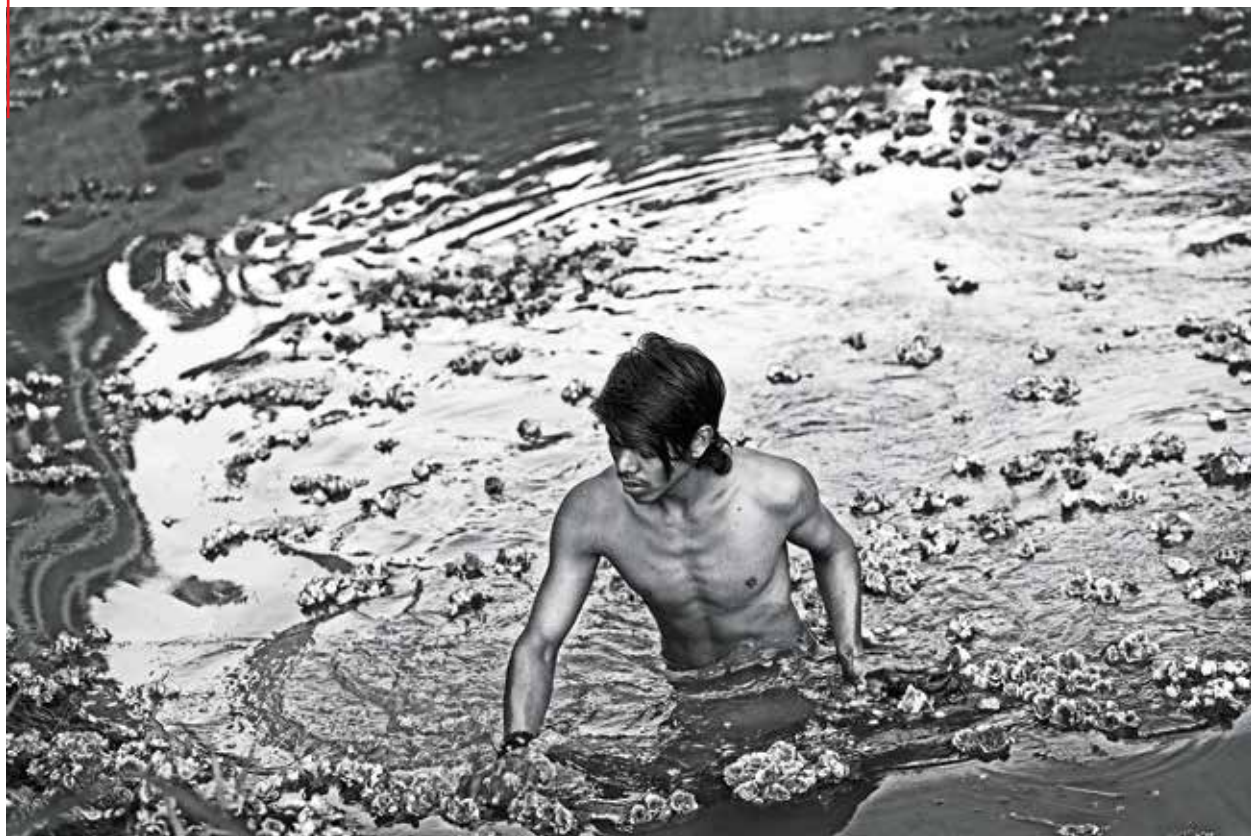
While most of us binge-watched movies or web series from the comfort of our homes during the lockdown, the workers who built those homes were abandoned by their employers, far from their own homes. Not having work or cash, they suffered without food and shelter. But more than these basic needs, they yearned to be with their loved ones. When the government started trains with limited seats for migrants to return to their home states, they flocked to the stations in their thousands and struggled to fill application forms. When the trains left with some, the remaining camped outside police stations day and night, hoping to get the clearance to proceed homeward.

A few chose the path of self-reliance, taking the long walk home, carrying bags and sacks of utensils and clothes. Children sat on the shoulders of their fathers or clung to the

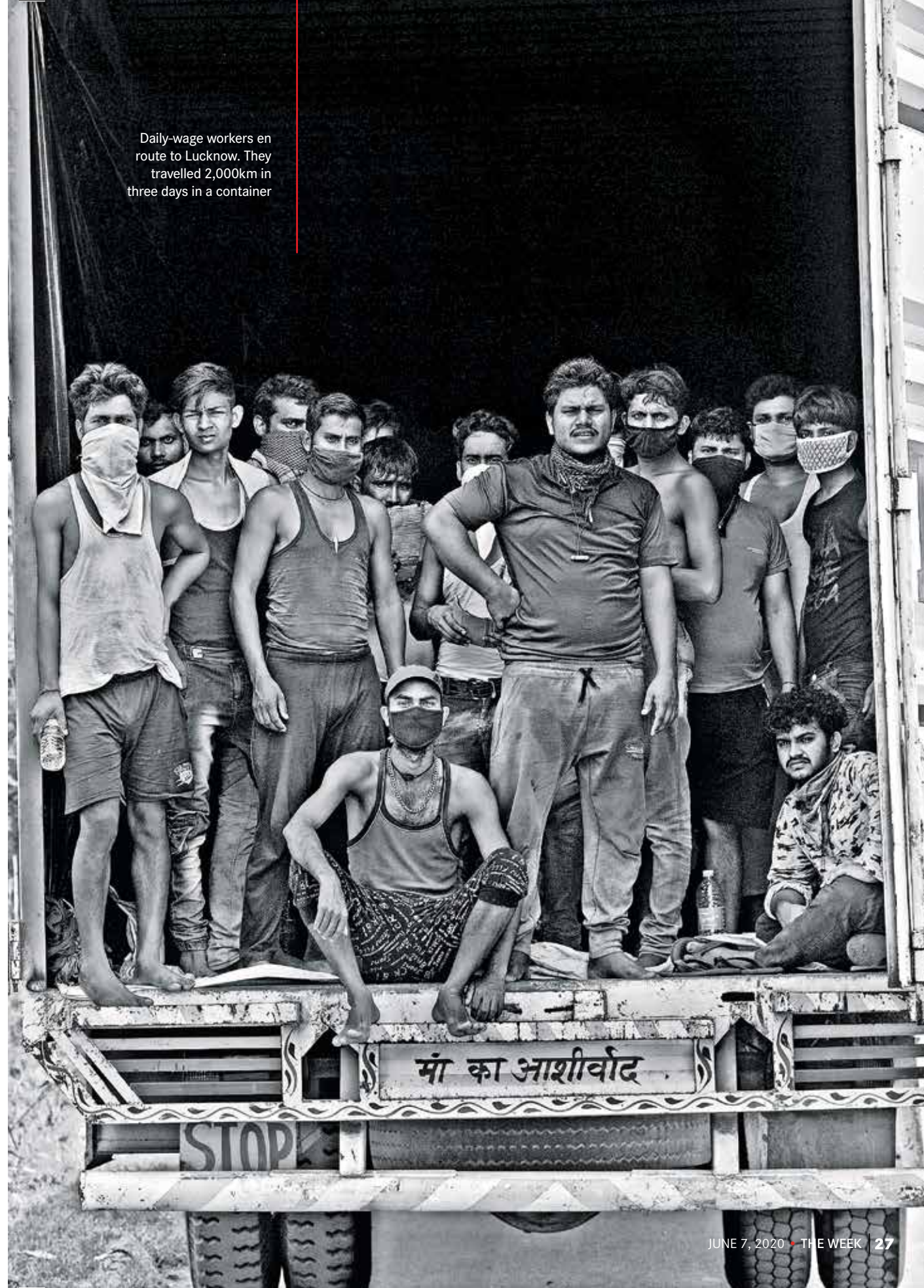
hips of their mothers. Grown-up kids walked barefoot with their parents in the scorching summer sun. Their long journeys are filled with fear—of authorities and of road accidents. The heart-rending scenes moved a few good people to help the migrants on their way. Some gave food and water, a few offered lifts in their vehicles and others donated money.

Youngsters who used to send money home were forced to ask their families for money. They bought bicycles and peddled for thousands of kilometres. Groups of boys walked on train tracks, through forests and farm fields to evade police checkpoints on the highways. “If we all leave the city, it will come to a standstill, that is why they don’t want us to leave,” said a boy who worked as a helper at a construction site. After years in the city, he wants to return home and never come back. ❶

Roshan, an out-of-work construction labourer from Begusarai, Bihar, fishes for catfish in a sewage pond in Bengaluru. Workers like him struggled for food after construction ceased everywhere



Daily-wage workers en route to Lucknow. They travelled 2,000km in three days in a container

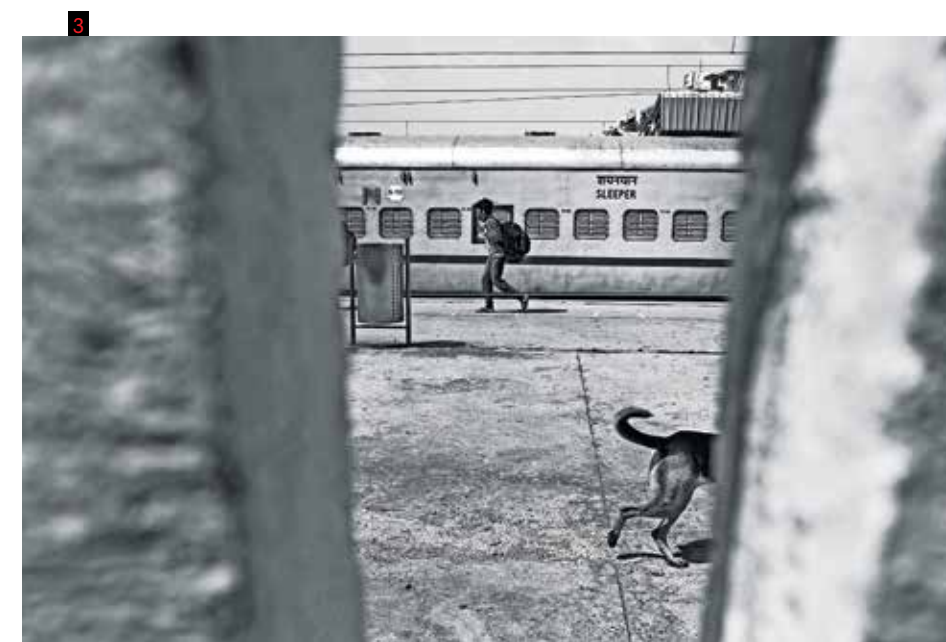




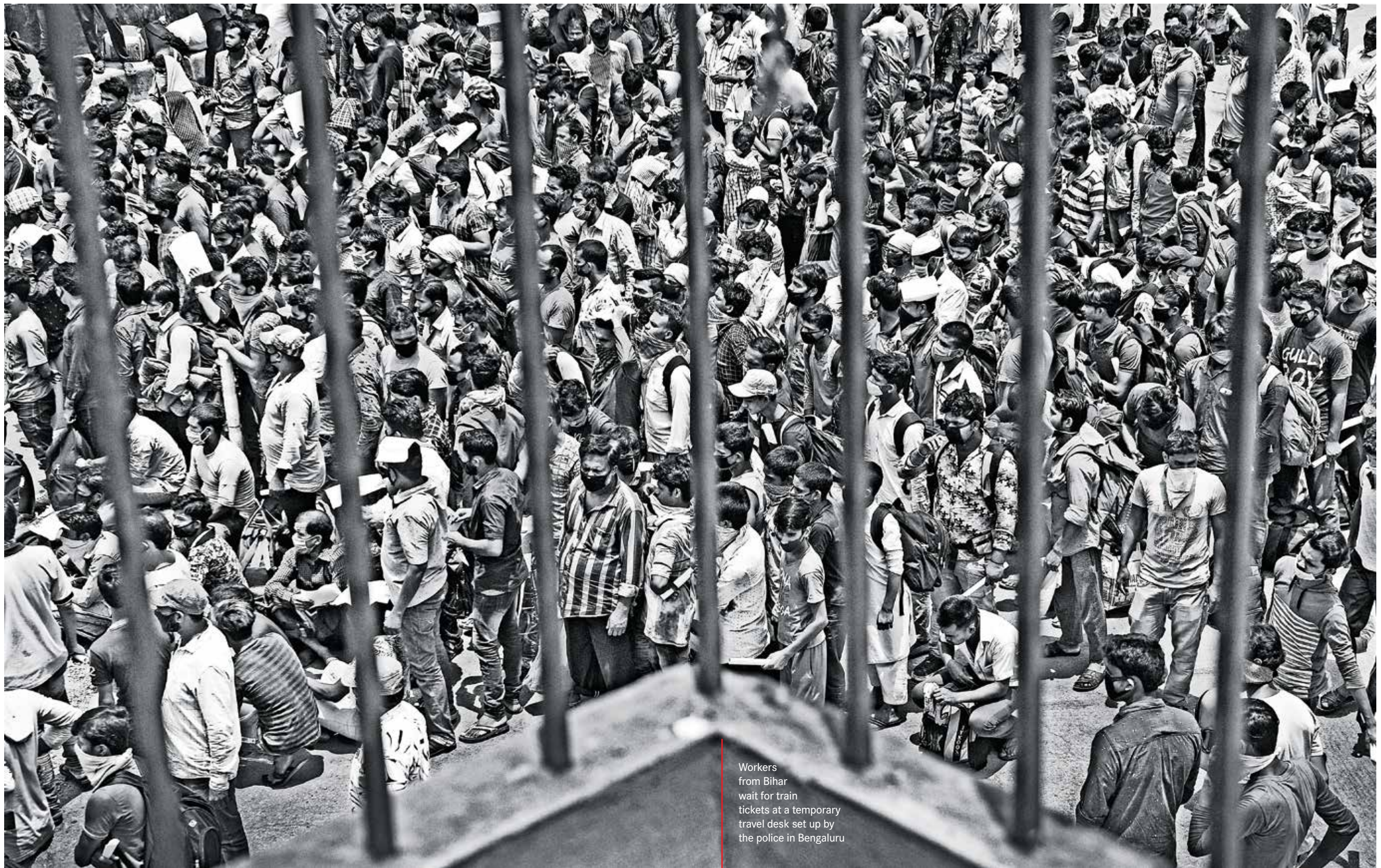
Jagannath, a construction labourer from Cuttack, Odisha, walks on a railway track in Chikkaballapur district, Karnataka, to avoid police checkpoints



1. Workers of a juice factory in Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu, take a break from their walk to Chandrapur, Maharashtra, on the outskirts of Bengaluru. They were unable to get seats on the trains to Maharashtra
2. An Assamese child, whose parents work at a coffee plantation in Chikkamagaluru, Karnataka, reaches out for food being distributed in Bengaluru
3. A migrant worker about to board the Shramik Express to Lucknow from the outskirts of Bengaluru. He was among the lucky few to get a seat







Workers from Bihar wait for train tickets at a temporary travel desk set up by the police in Bengaluru



Prakash Javadekar,  
Union minister

# Self-reliance does not mean exclusionist policies

BY PRATUL SHARMA

**AS THE TWO-MONTH** lockdown was eased, the Union government came out with an economic stimulus package of ₹20 lakh crore and initiated many reforms.

In an exclusive interview, Union Minister (of environment, forest and climate change; information and broadcasting; and heavy industries and public enterprises) Prakash Javadekar articulates the government's position on the economic stimulus package, reforms, migration crisis and governance. Edited excerpts:

**Q/Many people say the stimulus package may not help revive demand.**

**A/**There are two views—whether you need to address the supply side or the demand. It will create inflation if there is no proper supply. People were saying that we should give ₹7,500 to everyone. Eighty crore people were given 25kg of rice or wheat, 5kg of pulses; additionally, 10 crore people (migrants and people without ration cards) were given 10kg rice and 2kg of pulses free of cost. Twenty crore women got ₹1,500 each [₹30,000 crore total] in their Jan Dhan accounts. Eight crore families have got three gas cylinders each, free [of cost]. Three crore senior citizens got ₹1,000 each in their account. Eight crore farmers got ₹2,000 in their accounts. So, basically, the bottom 10 per cent have got more than ₹7,500.

**Q/Will the prime minister's mantra of self-reliance lead to protectionism? Make in India has had only**



SANJAY AHLAWAT

limited success.

**A/**We have to see how India responded when there was a need. Take the pandemic. We had no Covid-hospital, now we have 800; we had only one lab in Pune, now we have over 300 labs; we had no manufacturing capacity for masks or personal protective equipment or swab stick, now we are making everything including ventilators. Make in India happened in four months. When we say self-reliance, that does not mean exclusionist policies. Lessen our import and increase our export—that is the simple definition of Atma Nirbhar Bharat.

**Q/Will you compare the latest economic reforms with the 1991 reforms?**

**A/**In 1991, we were on the verge of defaulting. Today, the situation is not bad. We have \$482 billion in forex reserves, so situation is not comparable in that sense. We have done something basic, like in case of defence where we banned imports of certain goods and spares which India can produce. As we were importing, we were living in hypocrisy. We were importing 100 per cent in weapons, but not allowing foreign direct investment. We have changed the definition of MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) to make it more inclusive. ₹3.7 lakh crore is the package in credit line—liquidity without guarantee—which is a very important development. ₹75,000 crore for NBFCs (non-banking financial companies) has also been [declared].

We have given ₹1 lakh crore for the MGNREGA scheme. [When] it was a UPA government scheme, the maximum expenditure was ₹30,000 crore. In last five years, the Narendra Modi government spent ₹50,000 crore to ₹60,000 crore [on it]. Now, in one go, we will spend ₹1 lakh crore, as an additional ₹40,000 crore has been given in the package. We have given ₹1 lakh crore for agriculture infrastructure, a ₹90,000 crore discom package, and ₹70,000 crore as credit-linked subsidy.

**Q/Cash transfers could have stopped migrant workers.**

**A/**No, even the cash transfers would not have stopped workers from migrating. Because once you feel there is a threat to life, you would wish to be with your family. By May 25, we had run 2,800 special trains, which carried 42 lakh migrant labourers to their homes. Buses carried more than 10 lakh labourers. Fifty to 60 lakh migrants have already reached their homes. Rural areas do much better when it comes to taking care, having home quarantine.

**Q/Environmentalists have criticised the draft Environment Impact Assessment notification, saying businesses are being helped at the cost of environment.**

**A/**This is absolutely wrong. We are not making any change to the Environment Protection Act. Secondly, we are making a compendium. So many changes have been made in the last 14 years (of the Act). We are bringing all the changes together.

From 2008, how many projects were cleared by the UPA government, how many have we cleared? The number is the same. But the method has changed, so has the time lag. But that does not mean we are compromising with the environment norms.

**Q/Automobile sector is suffering because of the lockdown. Do you see the growth returning soon?**

**A/**Within two months the demand will revive. Unfortunately, two things happened. They experienced a slump last year, and then January onwards the customers thought they would wait till April when the new Bharat [stage] VI-compliant vehicles became available.

The high incidence of Covid-19 is in 11 cities. The major sale of autos is also in these 11 cities. Two-wheelers have no problem; four-wheelers have a little problem [of sale]. By next month, we should be able to see the sun rising again.

**Q/How will the government conduct census and the National Population Register exercise this year?**

**A/**Census work may be a little delayed, but it will not be postponed indefinitely. You have to live with Covid-19 till a vaccine is found. It will be the new normal.

**Q/Bihar assembly election in October is expected to pose a challenge.**

**A/**Elections in Bihar will be conducted according to the schedule. Campaigning will depend on the prevalence of the disease at that time.

**Q/The lockdown has brought the Centre-state relations in sharp focus.**

**A/**In our politics, there is doublespeak. You witnessed it when domestic flights were started. Every state has come up with its own protocol and is applying different quarantine rules. They are deciding independently, depending on their own assessment, yet people accuse the Centre of centralising power. It is not concentration of power. It is cooperative federalism at its best. ①



# Vanity fair

The power tussle between the governor and the Thackeray government could lead to a fresh political crisis

BY DNYANESH JATHAR

**ON MAY 20**, Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari called a meeting with Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to jointly review the government's response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Thackeray, however, skipped the meeting and sent Shiv Sena secretary Milind Narvekar instead. Since the ministers, too, gave the meeting a miss, Koshyari was briefed by chief secretary Ajoy Mehta and other bureaucrats.

The absence reflected the widening rift between Koshyari and the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi government led by Thackeray. The Aghadi's three main constituents—the Sena, the Nationalist Congress Party and

the Congress—feel that the governor is showing too keen an interest in affairs of the state, and that Raj Bhavan is trying to trouble the government.

The rift was first seen barely a month after Thackeray took charge last November. Koshyari refused to accept the government's decision to nominate Aditi Nalavade and Shivajirao Garje of the NCP to fill the governor's quota of seats in the legislative council, saying the tenure of the seats would be over in six months.

Then, on April 7, the cabinet met in Thackeray's absence and resolved that he be nominated to the legislative council through the governor's quota. This provoked a question: How could the cabinet pass a resolution in the chief minister's absence?

Since Uddhav had to become a legislator before May 27 to continue as chief minister, the full cabinet met two weeks later, passed the resolution again and sent it to the governor. But Koshyari sat on it, prompting several leaders to accuse him of playing politics.

A Congress leader, however, said Raj Bhavan was in a dilemma. "The governor was doing everything as per the Constitution," said the leader. "He doubted whether it would be appropriate to nominate the chief minister through the governor's quota. He strongly felt that a chief minister had to be elected, rather than nominated, to the legislature."

The leader, however, said the governor went too far by calling a joint Covid-19 review meeting. "This

was a way to send a message that the government is not handling the crisis well. Such meetings are normally held to build a case for imposing president's rule," said the leader.

Imprudent ministers have only aggravated the situation. Higher Education Minister Uday Samant recently recommended to the University Grants Commission that final-year university exams be cancelled because of the pandemic. Raj Bhavan took strong exception to Samant's action, saying he had not discussed the matter with the governor, who is chancellor of all universities in the state. "Not conducting the final-year exams amounts to breach of UGC guidelines," Koshyari wrote to Thackeray, terming Samant's action as an "unwarranted intervention".

Raj Bhavan also wants the government to consider it as a separate establishment, on the lines of the legislature and the judiciary. It wants to have complete control in appointing staff and managing funds. The government, however, has not accepted the demand.

A Sena leader close to Thackeray said the governor was bent on troubling the government. "Our leadership feels that Koshyari is making a case to impose president's rule again," said the leader. "He is building a case that the government is a failure. The BJP is trying to lure the NCP away. Koshyari is acting as per

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's instructions."

There have been efforts for a truce. Sena MP Sanjay Raut, who had long been a vocal critic of the governor, went to Raj Bhavan on May 23 and bowed before Koshyari in greeting. Raut later told journalists that it was a courtesy call and that he bowed because Koshyari was his elder. "The relations between the governor and the chief minister are very cordial," he said.

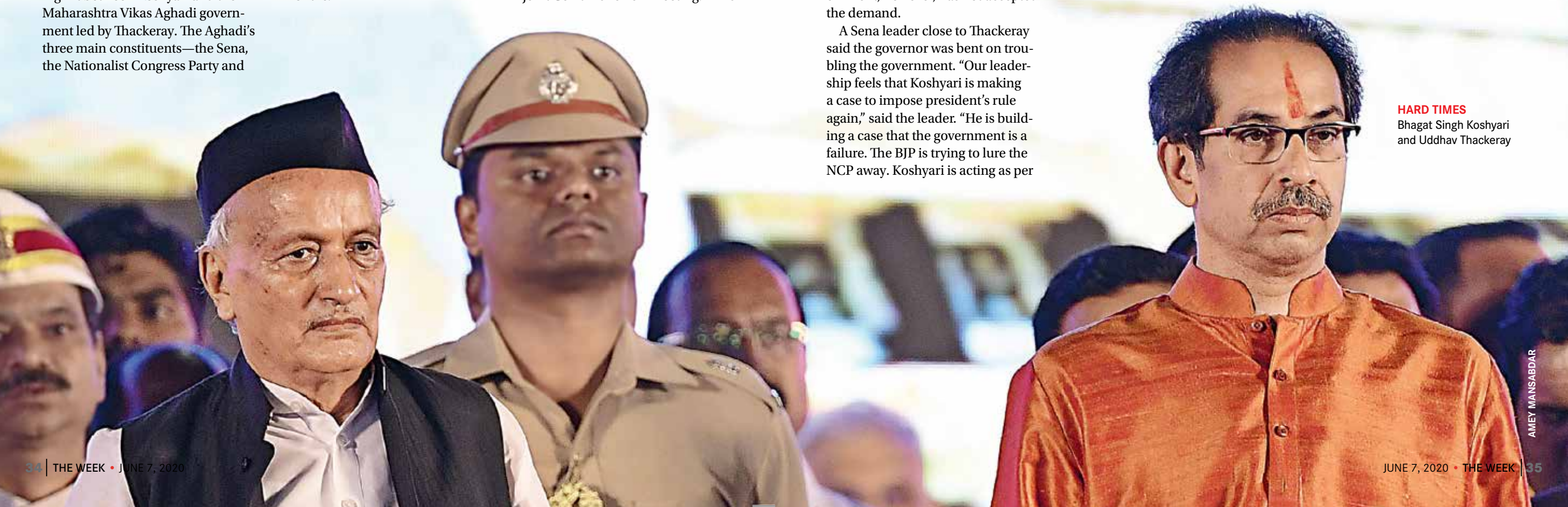
Two days later, NCP leaders Sharad Pawar and Praful Patel also met Koshyari. Pawar followed it up with an hourlong meeting with Thackeray and Raut. Later, Raut said the opposition's efforts to destabilise the government would boomerang on them. "Our government will complete the five-year term," he said.

BJP leader Narayan Rane, too, met the governor the same day and demanded that president's rule be imposed. Opposition leader and former chief minister Devendra

Fadnavis, however, said the BJP did not want it. "Rane is a very senior leader. He does not like injustice, so he speaks his mind. The BJP is not at all interested in destabilising the government and playing politics when the state is fighting an epidemic. This government will fall because of its own inner conflicts," said Fadnavis.

There are rumours that a storm is gathering in the ruling coalition. NCP leaders say Thackeray takes unilateral decisions and is overdependent on bureaucrats, especially chief secretary Mehta. The Congress leadership is reportedly unhappy about not being consulted on key issues.

When Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was asked about the Covid-19 situation in Maharashtra in a recent virtual media conference, he tried to distance the party from the government. "We are supporting the government in Maharashtra, but we are not decision-makers," he said. "There is a difference between running a government and supporting one." ●



**HARD TIMES**  
Bhagat Singh Koshyari  
and Uddhav Thackeray



# Battle for Mumbai

With hospitals and their staff stretched to the limit, Mumbai struggles to cope with the rise in Covid-19 cases

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

**ON THE EVENING** of May 23, a family from Mumbai's suburban Andheri ran from one end of the city to the other to find a hospital bed for a 58-year-old who complained of increasing breathlessness. They visited five hospitals, but were told that no beds were available in the critical care unit. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, they managed to admit the patient in the general ward of a dedicated Covid-19 hospital. The patient was diagnosed with pneumonia, but the oxygen support came too late. He died at around 6.30am.

This is not an isolated case. As of May 26, Covid-19 cases in Maharashtra have crossed the 50,000 mark. Mumbai alone has more than 30,000 cases. The city is struggling to cope with the surge in cases. Its hospitals are stretched to capacity and there is an acute shortage of beds, especially in the ICUs. Frontline health workers are facing emotional and physical exhaustion. Dead bodies are left behind in wards for hours on end, and ambulances take hours to reach critical patients. And, there are lapses, like the one recounted by Malini Shinde (name changed), a resident of Prabhadevi. Her neighbour tested positive and was hospitalised, but none of his close contacts were approached by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) nor

were they quarantined.

Dr Anant Bhan, a public health expert, said that the rise in cases indicated that the control efforts had limitations, and that the existing spread in the community, especially in densely populated urban clusters, could have been averted by "more proactive and expanded testing early on, and by developing strategies that responded to the unique challenges of a metropolis like Mumbai." Also, monsoon will bring additional health challenges, like dengue, malaria and leptospirosis, he said. "Health professionals are also in short supply and this could be a major issue in mounting an effective response," said Bhan. In Mumbai alone, 300 medical workers have tested positive for Covid-19.

Likewise, more than 700 policemen in Mumbai and close to 2,000 in the state have tested positive for Covid-19; 18 of them have died across the state. Forty-four policemen from JJ Marg police station, located inside the compound of JJ Hospital in Mumbai, are under treatment for Covid-19, while five others are in quarantine. Assistant Commissioner of Police Avinash Dharmadhikari, who is in charge of the Dongri division, said that the virus could have spread because of the common route shared by patients visiting the hospi-

AMEY MANSABDAR



**CALL OF DUTY**  
A health care worker checks a policeman's temperature in Mumbai

tal and the policemen. "We have now locked the gate that gives access to patients and hospital staff from our side of the compound," he said.

But Assistant Commissioner of Police Santosh Walake, who heads the Azad Maidan division that includes posh areas of South Mumbai like Cuffe Parade and Colaba, said that the rise in cases among cops was because they were "forgetting to police themselves, rather care for themselves." "Also, given that the infection spreads fast, a number of police officers may have contracted the disease while working with their colleagues who first tested positive," said Walake. "We are supposed to get tested only once the symptoms begin to show. I think that also contributes

in infection transmission."

What has health experts worried is that the virus, which was earlier limited to a few civic wards like G South that includes Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum, has now spread to other densely populated areas. Eighty-six per cent of the cases now being reported are from these areas. According to officials, eight wards have a case growth rate of more than eight per cent. N ward (Ghatkopar) has the highest—13.7 per cent—followed by T ward (Mulund) and P North (Malad)—11.9 per cent. G South, which had the highest growth rate a month ago, has the lowest—3.4 per cent.

The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has now divided its 24 wards into seven zones, each

headed by an IAS officer. Prajakta Lavangare, who is in charge of Zone V that covers Deonar, Chembur, Kurla and nearby areas, said that they are doing "aggressive house-to-house surveys" in the new hotspots. "We are proactively testing and tracing people. That is why the numbers are high," she said. "We will proactively find high-risk contacts, at least ten people per patient, and break the chain of infection."

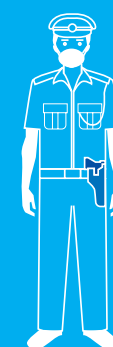
Even as the numbers rise, there is an acute shortage of hospital beds. While there are 73,000 hospital beds in the city, the number of ICU beds is limited. As per a civic official, around 20 per cent of patients require ICU care and five per cent critical care. "There is shortage in critical care because many patients want to go to major hospitals and not the peripheral ones," said a doctor at Nair hospital, which is the biggest government facility for Covid-19 patients in Mumbai. "Patients are not seeking treatment on time, but only when they feel very ill. And, people are coming in with raised anxiety levels."

Recently, BMC took over 80 per cent of beds in private hospitals to treat Covid-19 patients. Additionally, 'jumbo facilities' like the National Sports Club of India Dome are being converted into special observation units, with at least 10,000 beds added. Fifty per cent of these will have oxygen points and 10 per cent will be reserved for Covid-19 patients who need dialysis. St Xavier's College is readying its hall and canteen foyer to accommodate beds for Covid-19 patients. The BMC, under new municipal commissioner Iqbal Chahal, has set up a live dashboard on the availability of beds. All the patient has to do is dial 1916 to get the information. The BMC is also looking at turning buses and school vans into ambulances to increase its fleet.

But, would all this be enough? ●

## STRESSED FRONTLINE

**300**  
MEDICAL WORKERS  
IN MUMBAI TESTED  
POSITIVE FOR  
COVID-19



**700**  
POLICEMEN IN  
MUMBAI AND  
**2,000**  
IN MAHARASHTRA  
TESTED POSITIVE

**18 COVID-19**  
DEATHS AMONG POLICEMEN  
IN THE STATE





# DISPARATE MEASURES

The Centre is batting for HCQ, even as the WHO's review of the drug's safety is causing concerns

BY NAMITA KOHLI

**THE HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE** (HCQ) story got a major plot twist on May 25. Two months after US president Donald Trump waxed eloquent on the benefits of the antimalarial drug in treating Covid-19, the World Health Organization paused the HCQ arm of its multi-centre, multi-drug randomised clinical trial. (Patients who were getting the drug would complete their course, though.) The pause to review safety data from other trials signals that the hype over HCQ was misplaced, and that there is concern about its safety.

The decision, the WHO said, was taken in light of a large observational study published in *The Lancet* on May 22. The study showed that among one lakh patients from various countries who took the drug (alone or with an antibiotic), the death rate was higher and an

increased frequency of irregular heartbeats was observed. Also, the researchers could not confirm any benefit from the drug in Covid-19 patients.

On the same day, the Indian government issued an advisory to expand the pool of personnel who would receive the drug as a preventive measure against the pandemic. The advisory said that cardiovascular side-effects were rare. The basis on which the Centre's joint task force took this decision included three studies—a retrospective case control study, an observational study at AIIMS and another investigation from three Central government hospitals—which, as per the advisory, indicated some benefits from taking HCQ for those with high exposure to Covid-19 patients.

The Indian Council of Medical

Research (ICMR) has started an observational study for HCQ at five sites—Jodhpur, Patna, Delhi (two hospitals) and Chennai. “About 1,200-1,300 health care workers will be followed up for 12 weeks and we will be comparing the effect of the drug [by observing] those who are taking it and those who are not,” said Dr Suman Kanungo, senior scientist, ICMR-National Institute of Cholera and Enteric Diseases, Kolkata. The results would be out in about two months, said Kanungo, the coordinator of the study.

Though the government is conducting an observational study, experts said that the best option to assess the efficacy and safety of a drug was a randomised controlled trial (RCT). An ICMR epidemiologist said that observational studies can bring in several biases, such as in se-

lecting cases and confounding—the possibility that an observed association is totally or in part because of the effects of differences between the study groups. For instance, in a study on alcohol consumption and risk of coronary heart disease, smoking would be a confounder.

However, Kanungo said that the ICMR study has no selection bias as the health care workers are recruited irrespective of their HCQ status, and potential confounders like use of personnel protective equipment would be taken care of. The WHO trial that was paused, Kanungo said, was a clinical trial for treatment, while the ICMR study was for prevention. He said that an RCT was the best option, but added that if a drug had shown some benefit, it would be unethical to deny it to those in a control group. “In such a scenario, a study of this type (observational) is the best option,” he said.

Given the low quality of evidence that was available for HCQ as a preventive measure, experts said that the government should have gathered more robust evidence before issuing the first advisory. “It might be that HCQ has some [small] protective role, but all evidence so far is in the treatment domain,” said Dr Anant Bhan, Bhopal-based researcher in bioethics and global health. “It would have been ideal to do a smaller RCT in select institutions for prophylaxis (preventive) indication and get reliable data first. Data from an observational study will always be questioned. Why can't the Centre do a similar review of evidence [like the WHO] in India transparently, and then revise the advisory accordingly? That would be good science.”

Covid-19 is an evolving field, and we do not know which drug is working, said Dr Balram Bhargava, ICMR director general, and secretary, department of health research. Bhargava said that the drug is safe, and the government had recommended

it as a preventive measure for health care workers based on in vitro studies that showed antiviral properties and “biological plausibility”. He said that studies also indicated no major side-effects, “except nausea, vomiting and occasional palpitations”. For the nausea, “we recommend that the dose be taken with food,” he added.

Bhargava also referred to the “popularity” of the drug after the US government's emergency authorisation of its use in March. However, in April, the US Food and Drug Administration had also advised caution on the use of the drug, with or without antibiotics, due to reports of serious heart rhythm problems.

Doctors working in Covid-19 wards said that the news of conflicting evidence on the drug had created confusion and apprehension. Some said it was not worth the risk and decided not to take it, despite the recommendation of superiors. Dr Vijaya Kumar, 70, an independent physician in Delhi, said he had started taking the recommended dose in March after checking in with his peers. “Some of us are of the view that since there are no major risks associated with the drug, based on

our clinical experience with patients of rheumatoid arthritis, it is okay to take it,” said Kumar.

Apart from prevention, the HCQ plus azithromycin combination has been allowed as an experimental treatment by the Centre. “Several hospitals are giving Covid-19 patients the combination of HCQ and azithromycin without taking informed consent,” said Malini Aisola, co-convenor, All India Drug Action Network. The group has been assisting Covid-19 patients access health services across the country. Aisola said that an analysis of hospital bills for Covid-19 treatment shows how rampant the trend has been. “Recently, a mildly symptomatic patient in a metro city suffering from an immunocompromised condition and mild Covid-19 was compelled to take the combination despite her reservations about the experimental treatment,” said Aisola.

Globally, over 100 clinical trials on HCQ have been registered. Over the next few weeks, as more evidence emerges, the HCQ debate will start to resolve, and the Centre's enthusiasm for the antimalarial drug shall be put to the test. **■**





# UNQUIET HEIGHTS

The latest wave of Chinese aggression on the border seems to be in response to India's recent territorial reassertion in the Himalayan belt. China wants to take over the tiny sliver of territory between Aksai Chin and the Shaksgam valley controlled by India, which will result in enhanced military and territorial links with Pakistan and provide a big boost to its Belt and Road Initiative

## WALKING THE TALK

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Army chief General Bipin Rawat at the inauguration of Col Chewang Rinchen bridge connecting Durbuk and Daulat Beg Oldie in Eastern Ladakh on October 21, 2019. DG of Border Roads Organisation Lt Gen Harpal Singh, commander of Northern Command Lt Gen Ranbir Singh and Ladakh MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal are also seen

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA  
AND PRADIP R. SAGAR





Arguably, no one serving in the Indian Army knows Ladakh and China better than Lieutenant General Yogesh Kumar Joshi. He served in Ladakh during the Kargil war, was military attache in Beijing, was on the China desk at the directorate-general of military operations in the Army headquarters and now heads the Northern Command. So when he told his chief, General M.M. Naravane, on May 22 that the Chinese incursion in eastern Ladakh was an act of aggression, that was that.

Joshi had three arguments to differentiate the current intrusion from routine transgressions that take place on the 4,057-km Line of Actual Control. First, the number of Chinese troops in the area was much larger than a patrol party. Second, patrols are usually not aggressive; these men were. Third, the Chinese did not respond to local Indian commanders' call for a ceremonial border meeting on May 1 to mark Labour Day.

On May 5, patrolmen from both countries clashed in the Pangong Lake area. A Chinese military helicopter came close to the area and the Indian Air Force responded by scrambling a Sukhoi-30 fighter. Soon, intrusions were reported from Demchok and Galwan valley in the Ladakh sector and Naku La in Sikkim.

Satellite images have shown 800 to 1,000 military tents set up by the Chinese in at least three locations on

the banks of the River Galwan, which was a flashpoint in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. There are 4,000 to 5,000 Chinese troops around Galwan, Pangong Lake and Demchok in the Ladakh sector and in the Harsil area of Uttarakhand. The Indian Army, too, has moved in strength, and the troops have been told that they are in for the long haul.

Patrolling intrusions are common from May to September, when snow is not a major concern. "This is the patrolling season for troops in this area and when patrols happen, the chances of a face-off increase," says Lieutenant General (retd) S.L. Narasimhan, a member of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB),

**The standoff at Point 14 has been continuing for more than three weeks, with China openly asking for the removal of a bridge on the Shyok river.**



PIB

who had commanded a corps in the eastern sector. He says the latest standoff is marked by the presence of a higher number of Chinese troops, the increased aggression shown by the Chinese and the use of the Galwan valley as a "new front for confrontation".

The immediate provocation, Indian officers believe, is the renewed construction by India in Daulat Beg Oldi and the Pangong Lake area. "Road construction in areas where there are differences of alignment on the LAC triggers crises. The other reason is patrolling," says former northern Army commander Lieutenant General (retd) D.S. Hooda. "Because of different perceptions of the LAC, both sides patrol up to their perception and it leads to a problem.

Like in Pangong Tso, patrolling was blocked and it led to tension."

Usually, patrolling intrusions are sorted out quickly, but it did not happen this time. The standoff at Point 14 has been continuing for more than three weeks, with China openly asking for the removal of the Col Chewang Rinchen bridge on the Shyok river. Colonel Chewang Rinchen Setu was inaugurated by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in October. "They are objecting now, because they were not patrolling then," says an officer. Strategically located on the 255km road between Leh and the Karakoram pass, it is 4.5m wide and can take vehicles weighing up to 70 tonnes. Most importantly, it cuts travel time between Leh and the pass by half.

On May 7, scuffle broke out between Indian and Chinese soldiers in which approximately 10 Indians, including two officers, got injured. At Point 15, there was no clash, but Indian troops spotted the presence of Chinese personnel and some tents. Tactically, the Indian side is at a disadvantage. The Chinese have fairly good roads and they can quickly reinforce their formations from their camp in Samzungling.

There have been certain protocols between the two armies regarding patrolling. Both freely patrol the LAC in most places, including the disputed areas, but take care not to stay or leave infrastructure.

Such was the case in the Pangong Lake area, too. Here, the northern bank protrudes like a palm, and the

**BRINGING IT CLOSER**

Rajnath Singh inaugurating the 80km road from Ghatiabgarh to Lipulekh in a video conference in New Delhi on May 8, 2020

various locations are identified as fingers to demarcate territory. While India insists that the LAC extends till Finger 8, the Chinese say that it extends only till Finger 4, making the area between Finger 4 and Finger 8 disputed. Earlier, troops from both sides used to patrol the disputed territory. Now the Chinese are not letting Indian troops patrol beyond Finger 6.

The Chinese seem to be indicating that they have come to stay this time. They are bringing fabricated tents, heavy construction equipment and are building bunkers. Perhaps for the



first time since 1962, there has been movement of armoured vehicles near the Galwan valley.

India, too, is determined to stay. The Army has moved 10,000 to 12,000 troops of the Leh-based 3rd Infantry Division forward, mostly as a preventive measure. All the same, “the effort is to resolve issues through local military level talks,” says a defence ministry official. “The ball is in China’s court to de-escalate. If they choose not to, then we are ready for a long face-off.”

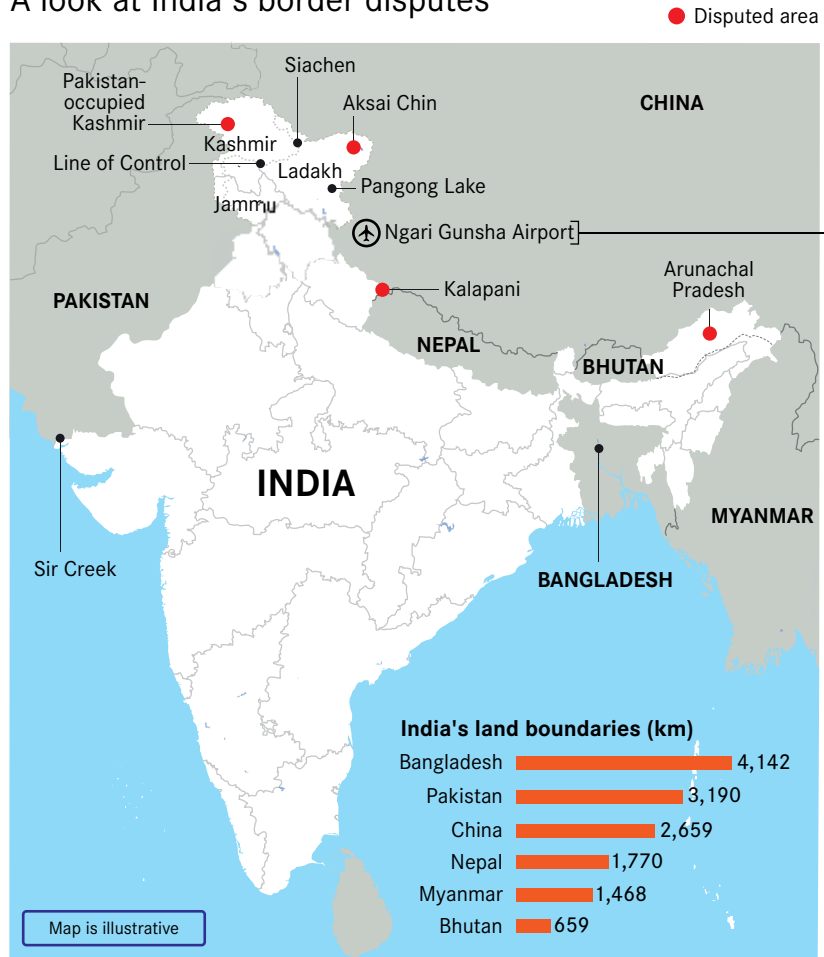
Many senior officers, however, believe that the Chinese are not making a tactical threat, but a strategic one. A great game is being played out between India and China under a “new normal” created by New Delhi. India made a territorial reassertion in the Himalayan belt with the abrogation of Article 370 and the creation of the twin Union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh last year. It was followed by New Delhi releasing a new political map showing its boundary stretching

from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan to Aksai Chin (which is under Chinese occupation) up to Kalapani and beyond.

China responded by uploading a new map on Sky Map, its official authority on digital maps, showing parts of Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory. On April 29, the World Health Organization, which was accused by US President Donald Trump of being a Chinese puppet, published a map that showed parts of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir

# NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

A look at India's border disputes



As per reports on May 26, satellite images showed massive construction activity at this high-altitude Chinese air base, just **200km** from Pangong Lake, Ladakh—the site of the skirmish between India and China on May 5 and May 6. The images also showed fighters on the tarmac

<b>BANGLADESH</b>
All maritime and land disputes settled in 2014 and 2015, respectively
<b>BHUTAN</b>
No border dispute
<b>CHINA</b>
Claims ~90,000sqkm in Arunachal Pradesh
Occupies ~38,000sqkm in Jammu and Kashmir
<b>MYANMAR</b>
No border dispute; but sectors of the boundary are yet to be demarcated
<b>NEPAL</b>
400sqkm disputed because of confusion over the source of the Kalapani river
<b>PAKISTAN</b>
Occupies ~78,000sqkm in J&K; 5,180sqkm in PoK illegally ceded to China
Sir Creek area and international maritime boundary not demarcated



PTI

as Chinese territory.

As former ambassador P. Stobdan says, the removal of Article 370 and the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir have changed the geopolitical dynamics of the region. India’s renewed claim over Gilgit-Baltistan and PoK has raised concern in China about the diminished negotiating power it would have with Pakistan and other neighbours. “It is now China’s turn to try and create a new normal by pushing the LAC using Ladakh as the latest flashpoint,” says Stobdan.

The area is strategically vital, and is not just a piece of land for tactical military manoeuvres. In 1962, the Chinese advance was halted at Chip Chap Valley-Depsang Plains-Daulat Beg Oldi- Karakoram pass area by a combination of the Indian Army’s death-defying resistance, the Chinese army running out of steam at this point of operational extremity and the approaching winter, says

Many senior officers believe that the Chinese are not making a tactical threat, but a strategic one. A great game is being played out between India and China under a “new normal” created by New Delhi.

Lieutenant General (retd) Gautam Banerjee in his book *China’s Great Leap Forward-II*. “This left in India’s possession a strategically vital territorial wedge between Aksai Chin and the Shaksam valley.... Subsequently, as India reiterated her sovereignty over the Siachen glacier located on the western flank of this wedge, China-Pakistan’s capacity for uninterrupted terrain domination over this region was contained to much extent,” says the book.

In other words, the Indian wedge between Aksai Chin and the Shaksam valley is what is preventing a military and territorial link up between China and Pakistan. This wedge did not matter much earlier when India, Pakistan and China were simply holding on to what they controlled. But India altered the status quo in 1984 by capturing Siachen. It has done so again by altering the status of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. China, too, is





**PRECARIOUSLY  
PLACED**

Xi Jinping with  
Narendra Modi in  
Mamallapuram dur-  
ing Xi's India visit in  
October 2019

no longer satisfied with the status quo, which is hampering its Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese President Xi Jinping now seeks to get this wedge removed by capturing the land north of Pangong Lake, or at least the Galwan valley, and linking Aksai Chin with Karakoram and Gilgit-Baltistan. It guarantees China land access to Pakistan and denies India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

"Gilgit-Baltistan also has vast freshwater reserves and is home to many of the glaciers which provide water to the Indus River System," says Tilak Devasher, a member of the NSAB. "It also enables China to link Xinjiang with Tibet. Of late, it is the entry point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, BRI's flagship project. Without Gilgit-Baltistan, China will not have access to the Arabian Sea."

Author, historian and China watcher Claude Arpi says the action in Ladakh should not be seen in isolation from China's other military-diplomatic adventures. "Beijing's aggression is equally visible in the South China Sea, where it has continued to push its military objectives despite the Covid-19 pandemic," says Arpi. "In April, a Chinese vessel allegedly sank a Vietnamese fishing

boat, leading to a diplomatic spat. The Philippines joined Vietnam in denouncing the incident. Later, China declared two archipelagos in the South China Sea as its administrative districts, which Vietnam termed as a violation of its sovereignty."

Such moves have made New Delhi suspicious that China is behind Nepal's newfound aggression vis-a-vis India. Nepal reacted sharply when

Rajnath Singh inaugurated a new road from Dharchula to Lipulekh near the Chinese border, opening a new route for the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage. After the 1962 war, India has found high strategic value in posts in Lipulekh, which allow it to monitor the mountain passes to Tibet. "China is aware of it and it was at China's behest that Kathmandu released a map showing the disputed Kalapani area, including Lipulekh, as Nepalese territory," says an Army officer. Avinash Godbole, Chinese expert at O.P. Jindal Global University, says, "It is clear that China has taken advantage of the strained India-Nepal relations." India-Nepal relations have nosedived after K.P. Sharma Oli took charge in 2015 as prime minister. India's decision to stop the supply of oil and other essential commodities to Nepal, too, played a part. Nepal had blamed India for the subsequent humanitarian crisis.

China is wooing Nepal with huge investments. "Nepal has started work on the Dharchula-Tinkar road project which will help border trade with China. India must keep a watch over it," says Godbole. "China has also been busy in buying off various businesses in Nepal, including a few of its

media houses which now collaborate with Chinese media and reprint their material. That may be influencing domestic politics in Nepal. Moreover, China is now a major source of development funds."

Vijay Kant Karna, executive director of the Centre for Social Inclusion and Federalism in Kathmandu, however, says New Delhi chose a very wrong time to inaugurate the road via the Lipulekh pass. "The K.P. Oli government has been under intense pressure for its mishandling of the Covid crisis, economic losses and preferential treatment to China. The government has been treating China as a colonial monarch. When Xi visited Nepal last October, Oli lined up tenders and projects. Even the hiring of Chinese language teachers in schools was offered to Beijing on a platter." And when the Oli government faced a domestic political crisis, the Chinese ambassador to Nepal is learnt to have defused it by speaking to former prime ministers Madhav Nepal and Prachanda.

Now the big question is how long will the stalemate continue? The Depsang standoff of 2013 lasted five weeks, which ended after both sides decided to revert to their previous positions. The Chinese removed their tents and went away. But it may not happen this time. There could either be a showdown or the Chinese could be sending just a signal to India and the world rather than aiming for real aggression on the border, according to Srikanth Kondapalli, professor of Chinese studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. In the latter case, "the face-off could last till September", when snowfall begins.

India is taking care not to seek big power intervention. The US, which is keen to corner China on issues ranging from the Covid pandemic to the crisis in the South China sea, is ready to play a part. Trump tweeted that he was ready to mediate. Outgoing US principal deputy assistant secretary

**The Indian  
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Pakistan.**







**IN BETTER TIMES**  
Indian and Chinese soldiers jointly celebrate the New Year at Bumla on the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh

of state Alice Wells, meanwhile, offers a word of caution, saying China's aggression is no longer rhetorical. "Whether it is on the South China Sea or whether it is along the border with India, we continue to see provocations and disturbing behaviour by China that raises questions about how it seeks to use its growing power," she says.

Wells spoke about like-minded nations coming together to reinforce the principles of the post-World War II order. M.V. Rappa, a senior analyst with the Institute of Chinese studies, however, warned against going too far with Americans. "India decided to side with the US against China at the WHO, but it did not work," he says. "We must know that there is a quid pro quo in such matters. China is investing in startups in India, its telecom major Huawei entered the 5G trials, so we should do a cost-benefit analysis before we take a decision to use military power or demonstrate a tilt towards America."

New Delhi is following the road of caution, leaving the matter in the hands of its generals and ambassadors. Moreover, India has its own trump cards, like the Dalai Lama.

China has always been worried that devotees of the Dalai Lama on the Nepal-Tibet border may become a springboard for creating unrest in Tibet. "Beijing has always leaned on Kathmandu to curb activities of Tibetan expatriates, whether it is celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday or other events related to the Tibetan struggle," says Amitabh Mathur, former adviser to the home ministry on Tibetan matters. India could also create trouble for Pakistan with renewed focus on the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan's poor handling of the Covid-19 outbreak in Gilgit-Baltistan has embarrassed Islamabad. "It has taken the locals of Gilgit-Baltistan more than six decades to find out that they are not Pakistani citizens," says Senge H. Sering, who heads the Institute for Gilgit-Baltistan Studies in Washington, DC. "They want Pakistan to treat Gilgit-Baltistan like Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, with its own constitution, president, prime minister and separate flag. India could launch a campaign over these issues, embarrassing Pakistan, which is controlling the territory, and China, which wants to build its Belt and Road project through the territory."

## INDIA-CHINA DISPUTES

**July:** Chinese troops encircle an Indian post in the Galwan River valley; clashes in the Pangong Lake area

**Aug:** India suggests discussions to resolve tensions; China demands that India withdraw troops from all sectors of boundary

**June:** Second meeting; maps of western sector reviewed, and withdrawn, as they showed maximalist positions of both sides

**April:** A platoon of the Chinese army sets up camp 30km south of Daulat Beg Oldi, Ladakh

**August:** IAF lands a C-130J Super Hercules transport aircraft in Daulat Beg Oldi; a demonstration of capabilities

**June:** Doklam standoff; India aids Bhutan against Chinese construction of a road in the area disputed by China and Bhutan

**Aug:** Scuffles in the Fingers area north of the Pangong Lake

India completes the 255km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi Road, close to the LAC

India opens new road to Lipulekh. Chinese intrusions in Sikkim; clashes at Ladakh



**Oct:** China launches attack supported by artillery; 36 Indian soldiers martyred and 32 taken prisoner

**March:** First meeting to clarify and determine LAC in all sectors of the boundary; maps of middle sector exchanged

Process of map exchange collapses; eastern sector maps never seen

**Sept:** Chumar standoff; India finds China has deployed heavy machinery to construct a temporary road inside Indian territory

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.\RESEARCH NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA





**MAKING WAY**  
A worker clearing snow near Kalapani

BRO

# Road rage

With India planning more roads along the border, there could be fresh flashpoints in future

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

**A**fter years of dilly-dallying, India has completed 75 per cent of the project, approved in 1999, to build 73 strategic roads along the India-China border. The plan is to complete the remaining by the end of next year. This progress has reportedly annoyed Beijing, which seems to view the road construction as “combat”. “The Chinese always make a noise about our infrastructure on the border with them,” said Lt Gen (retired) D.S. Hooda, a former commander of the Northern Command. “And it is only to retain the tactical advantage that they have had for long.”

From a 21-day stand-off in Depsang in the summer of 2013 to fierce clashes in southern Ladakh that coincided with President Xi Jinping’s maiden visit to Delhi in September 2014, China has frequently objected to India’s road construction along the Line of Actual Control. Reportedly, the current troop build-up by the Chinese army at multiple locations in the Galwan valley is against India constructing roads and bridges to connect the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) road in eastern Ladakh (which India’s Border Roads Organisation completed last year) to

forward areas. The 255-km road provides access to the Depsang plains and the Galwan valley and ends near the Karakoram Pass. It also gives India smooth access to DBO, its highest airstrip, from where the Air Force operates the Super Hercules transport aircraft. The India-China Border Roads, or ICBRs, were conceptualised in the late 1990s by a consultative panel called the China Study Group. These were then cleared by the Cabinet Committee on Security and given the go-ahead for construction in 1999. Till then, Indian forces were following an old military belief that if roads were metalled, they would provide easier mobility to the enemy in the event of hostility. Hooda, however, said enough attention was not paid to infrastructure because of a lack of focus and funds. Also, because of the terrain, building roads on the Indian side was harder. “Now we have speeded up, and the Chi-

nese are not liking it,” he said. The current tensions began on May 5, when troops from the two sides clashed at the Pangong Tso lake in Ladakh. The Chinese were reportedly peeved with an Indian road construction project, which defence officials say was well within Indian territory. In another controversy, Nepal protested India inaugurating a road that it said passed through Nepal territory. General M.M. Naravane of the Indian Army hinted that Nepal’s protest was at “someone’s behest”, but did not name China. Said Lt Gen (retired) S.L. Narasimhan, currently a member of the National Security Advisory Board: “Some of the roads run into areas closer to our perception of the LAC. The Chinese become uncomfortable as they feel that [these roads] are encroaching into their perception of territory. That creates anxiety and leads to confrontation. Both sides work as per their interests. And when these interests coincide, you will see such skirmishes.” A defence ministry official said that the BRO was constructing 61 ICBRs, of a total length of 3,346km, spread across Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. “Of these, 75 per cent is black top and over 99 per cent is trafficable. Only 40km is yet to be connected,” said the official, adding that the Central Public Works Department was building another 12 strategic roads along the Chinese border. The 73 roads measure a total of 4,643km. Said a defence ministry official: “It was only in the wake of the 73-day Doklam stand-off with China in 2017 that we realised with shock that most of those roads had remained on the drawing board.” Till then, only 22 roads had been completed, the official said. Apart from the roads, the BRO has

also built a steel bridge, 19 airfields and two tunnels in remote locations near the border in the past one year. In another significant move, last year, the BRO completed the 19.72km Bheem Base-Dokala road, which reduces the time to reach the Dokala base (near Doklam) from seven hours on a mule track to just 40 minutes. “In April 2018, 28 [more] roads were completed,” said an official. “Thanks to recent concerted efforts, especially after the Doklam episode, five roads were completed in 2019 and 11 will be completed in the next six months. Another nine roads are targeted to be completed in 2021, and six more by March 2022.” Notably, the overall budget allocation of the BRO, which had been stagnant at around Rs4,000 crore between 2009 and 2014, has seen a huge jump in the past few years, said an official. For 2019-20, the BRO has been allotted ₹8,000 crore, which is expected to cross ₹10,000 crore in 2020-21. “Border roads have been our major talking point with the Chinese,” said Lt Gen Hooda. “If you have built up your infrastructure, then why do you object to our building infrastructure? They have the infrastructure advantage and they want to retain it. We always call Chinese objection ‘unjustified.’” He said the infrastructure advantage not only gave China the edge in operations, but also made routine peacetime patrolling easier. Knowing this, India has ignored Chinese objections and would go ahead with the construction. Though the nationwide lockdown has halted the process, the government is planning to run more than a dozen special trains from Jharkhand to carry 20,000 labourers to different locations in Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Officials in the South Block said

if it was the road-building that had irked China, then India should be prepared for more flashpoints soon. On May 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Chief of Defence Staff Bipin Rawat and the three service chiefs to discuss the trouble on the Chinese border. The details of the meetings are not known. Notably, the Cabinet Committee on Security had, last year, cleared the construction of 44 more “strategically important roads” along the India-China border, which would cost ₹21,040 crore. “We are aiming to match infrastructure on the Chinese side of the border by 2024-25,” said a defence ministry official. ●

**61** India-China border roads being built by Border Roads Organisation (BRO)

**12** strategic roads being built along the Chinese border by Central Public Works Department (CPWD)

**4,643km**  
total length of the 73 roads

**~75%** of the roads have been completed

**BRO's budget**

2009-2015  
**₹4,000 crore**

2018  
**₹5,400 crore**

2019-2020  
**₹8,000 crore**

2020-2021 (estimate)  
**~₹10,000 crore**

**44** additional “strategically important roads” along the India-China Border cleared for construction at a cost of ~₹21,040 crore





# Himalayan folly

**NO COMPROMISE**  
Members of Nepal Student Union staging a protest against India inaugurating a road through the disputed territory

India's habit of taking Nepal for granted has allowed K.P. Sharma Oli to play the ultranationalist card and vitiate bilateral ties

BY REKHA DIXIT

India shares a 3,400-km border with China, mostly disputed. Of the 1,751-km border with Nepal, only two per cent is disputed. An even smaller portion of this disputed border has strained bilateral ties lately, so badly that Nepal released a new map, showing parts of Indian territory as its own, even threatening a constitutional amendment to ratify the map. It subsequently cooled down the map debate.

Meanwhile, its prime minister KP Sharma Oli takes nasty digs at India, terming the coronavirus strain in India deadlier than the Chinese one and wondering whether India's motto was *Satyamev* or *Simhamev Jayate*

(truth or might prevails?)

The dispute is largely over the definition of the Mahakali river, which The Treaty of Sugauli between British India and Nepal defined as the border. Mahakali originates from several streams, Nepal's definition of which is to be termed its source is at the root of the dispute, which flares up periodically.

This time, however, the Nepal's reaction is unprecedented. Some days ago, it made a big show of air dropping security personnel in the Kalapani area, a region it had left unpatrolled for decades. It pointed towards Indian troops in the area, which both sides know is because

of China in the trijunction, and not Nepal. India's new envoy to Kathmandu, Vinay Mohan Kwatra, was summoned to the foreign office to express their displeasure at the new road India built via Lipulekh to access Kailash Mansarovar. For an Indian envoy to be treated as such, is unheard of.

Discontent has been simmering ever since India released its new map on November 2, 2019, post the internal rejigging in Jammu and Kashmir. Nepal said India put the disputed territory within its boundary, though India says international borders remained as before. "There were heated discussions on Nepalese tel-

evision channels on the subject and anti India protests, some politically pushed, many spontaneous," recalls Major General (retd) Ashok Mehta, an expert on Nepal.

Within weeks, the Covid-19 pandemic overtook the world and the issue was on the backburner. But when, on May 8, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated via videoconference, a 75-km road from Dharchula to Lipulekh near the Chinese border, Nepal saw red, claiming 19km of that road was through its sovereign territory.

Indian Army chief General M.M. Naravane's allegation that Nepal is acting under pressure from a third country has done nothing to soothe ruffled feathers, though his reasoning was valid. "The Chinese ambassador to Nepal is overtly holding meetings with leaders of Nepal's ruling

coalition and opposition, something which was not done earlier," says Mahendra P. Lama, Jawaharlal Nehru University professor and member of the Empowered Persons' Group (EPG) set up to look into enhancing bilateral ties.

It is no secret that Oli and his Nepal Communist Party lean towards China. Oli's history of engagement with India has always been strained. Things looked good for a while after Oli attended the March 15 virtual SAARC summit called by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Covid-19. The summit was held barely days after Oli's second kidney transplant. But his domestic political situation unravelled in May, and India provided the needed deflection. "He is a master at playing the ultranationalist card against India," says Mehta.

India, however, has allowed Oli to get away, largely because of its habit of taking Nepal for granted. "This is not the Nepal of the 1970s, when the country's elite were educated in India and the rest of the country had no access to communication. Today's Nepal is well informed and exposed to the world," says Lama. Nepal hasn't forgotten being pulled up by India over its new constitution in 2015.

Bhiku Bahadur Thapa, the Nepal coordinator of the EPG, says India needs to understand its sensitivity.

The EPG report, was finalised in mid-2018, but Modi has not yet given the group an appointment. "It was agreed that border talks would happen at the foreign secretary level, but the foreign secretary, too, has not given time," says Thapa. India saying talks will happen after tackling the pandemic made Nepal feel slighted, given India's overreach elsewhere in virtual diplomacy.

"The border issue is not such a big one, but when we have been telling India about the Kalapani issue since November, wouldn't some consultation have been appropriate announcing a new road through the territory? Not just in parliament, civil society also feels slighted regularly by India," says Deep Kumar Upadhyay, former Nepal envoy to India.

"Prolonging this dispute is bad for both of us, we have to lower temperatures," says Thapa. India could make a gesture with receiving the EPG report, says Lama. "It does not have to be implemented; simply receiving it would be graceful, it was prepared at the behest of Modi and Oli."

India could also tackle the issue of Indian currency in Nepal that was rendered useless after the demonetisation drive of 2016. Importantly, India needs to understand that China's growing influence in the Himalayan nation is to its detriment.

"We need a gesture from India, that it is willing for dialogue," says Upadhyay. India had said Nepal needed to create the right environment for dialogue. Now that Nepal has toned down its map rhetoric, India is carefully monitoring the larger debate in Nepal on the issue. Boundary issues, says India, are sensitive by nature and need trust to be resolved to mutual satisfaction.

India resolved a much trickier boundary issue with Bangladesh some years ago, gracefully ceding 80 percent of the disputed 25,000 hectares in a complex delta landscape. Will India and Nepal let a rivulet jeopardise a unique relationship? ❶

**Discontent has been simmering ever since India released its new map on November 2, 2019.**







## Bayonets from Lhasa to Ladakh

Which is India's southernmost point? Most people would say, Kanyakumari. Don't we say, Kashmir to Kanyakumari?

Quiz buffs and trivia tyrants know it is not. The southernmost point, they will scream, is Indira Point in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

OK. *Lock kar diya*. Now, which is India's northernmost point? Going by 'Kashmir to Kanyakumari', it must be in Kashmir.

No longer. After the statutory coup executed by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah last August, the northernmost region over which the Union of India's writ runs is Ladakh. Ladakh is now a Union Territory, not part of Kashmir.

OK. Ladakh *ko lock kar diya*. But where in Ladakh? Answer: Indira Col.

Before anti-Nehruvians and WhatsApp historians take to troll, twitter and digital drivels, let me make it clear. Indira Col is not named after Indira Gandhi. The name was given in honour of Goddess Lakshmi, by Fanny Bullock-Workman, a doughty American who explored Siachen in 1911-12 along with her husband, long before Indira was born to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Col means mountain pass or la, as in Nathu La, Chorbat La and Bilafond La. There is even a Colonel's Col, further west of Indira Col. Turkestan La is sometimes called Colonel's Col, after the legendary Colonel Francis Younghusband who explored the region in 1889.

All our current strategic games with China started with Younghusband whom Lord Curzon sent with "bayonets to Lhasa" in 1904. Historians and strategic thinkers are still divided over the gains accrued from that mission, but the Chinese still get nightmares about it. They think that India can still invade Tibet as easily as Younghusband did a century ago with just about 3,000 troops. It is another matter that we, in India, don't think so.

The latest round of the Sino-Indian strategic game is being played in two places in Ladakh, on the banks of Pongong Lake and in the Galwan Valley. (Galwan is named after Gulam Rasool Galwan who guided Younghusband and several other explorers in the late 19th and early 20th century.) The stand-off at Pongong may well be a diversionary tactic; the real threat could be to Galwan Valley and beyond, up to Indira Col. If he gets it, Xi Jinping's belt-road will roll around Siachen, which the Pakistanis are also coveting, and farther to central Asia.

This is not the first time the Chinese have tried to take Galwan. It was here that Major Shaitan Singh and his 140 brave Kumaonis fell in the battle of Rezang La, the fiercest of 1962.



Tailpiece: In the last instalment of this column, we had met William Moorcroft, who had explored Kailas-Mansarovar and sent he-goats and she-goats separated in two ships to England. According to mountaineer-writer Harish Kapadia, Moorcroft was also the first to explore Siachen.

In 1821 he passed near its snout and acknowledged its existence, writes

Kapadia. In 1835, G.T. Vigne approached it from the west trying to reach Bilafond La, but never guessed the existence of a large glacier across the divide. In 1848 Henry Starchy ascended 'Saichar' for two miles. In the same year, Dr Thomas Thompson reached the glacier, followed by F. Drew in 1849-50. E.C. Ryall sketched the lower part in 1861.

In 1889, Younghusband approached the area over the Urdok valley, looking for a crossing into the Indian subcontinent. Following a side valley of the Urdok glacier, he reached the foot of Turkestan La. "He felt that this was the main axis of the Karakoram. His explorer's instincts were correct but, in [the] absence of maps, he was not sure where he was standing. His belief was finally confirmed by Dr T.G. Longstaff in 1909."



## Insensitive diplomacy at its peak

The current stand-off between India and Nepal is over an isosceles triangle-shaped area covering a mere 32sqkm—its base line running eastwards from the town of Kalapani on the main Kali River to the Lipulekh Pass. At the apex of the triangle lies another pass, Limpiyadhura.

The India-Nepal border was demarcated not by any domestic Indian ruler but by the colonial East India Company which concluded its aggression on Nepal in 1815 with the Treaty of Sugauli. Under this treaty, the Company filched Kumaon and Garhwal from Nepal. Article 5 of the treaty compelled "the Rajah of Nepal" to "renounce for himself, his heirs, and successors, all claims to or connection with all countries lying to the west of the Kali River".

Since this was an Anglo-Nepal Treaty, its presiding deity was not Mother India but Mother Victoria; it should be dealt in such a way that Nepali sovereignty is respected even as India's security interests are safeguarded. This is the way in which previous governments have dealt with this tiny wedge of territory since the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Thus, 78 joint posts were created after China entered Tibet in 1951, and 18 Indian military posts, including Kalapani, were established after the India-China war of 1962. All except Kalapani were withdrawn by 1969 under an India-Nepal agreement.

Then, a 1997 India-China accord on pilgrimage to Lake Manasarovar stipulated the Lipulekh Pass as a principal entry point into Tibet. Nepal objected that it had not been consulted by either India or China, although the pass fell in Nepalese territory. There were huge demonstrations. The crisis was defused when prime minister I.K. Gujral accepted in 1998 that all boundary disputes with Nepal, including Kalapani, would be settled through bilateral talks. To this end, a joint technical-level

working group was constituted and later, under A.B. Vajpayee, a Joint Boundary Commission.

However, in two decades, it has not proved possible to resolve the key issue of whether the headwaters of the Kali River lie in the rivulet called the Pankha Gad, that descends from the Lipulekh Pass and joins the main Kali River at Kalapani (as India contends), or the Kuti Yangti, that descends from the Limpiyadhura Pass and takes the name of Kali from Kalapani onwards (as Nepal contends).

In August 2019, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Kathmandu, and it was agreed that a "joint mechanism" would be established at foreign secretary level to resolve matters. But the issue was aggravated by the publication of Nar-

endra Modi's "new map" of India in November 2019, which showed the disputed triangle in India, as our government has been dragging its feet about talks with Nepal. So, Nepal retaliated with a map of its own in January 2020 that showed the triangle in Nepal. When India still prevaricated, Nepal threatened to incorporate their "new map" in their constitution.

So, we thundered through our spokesman that Nepal's new map,

was "not based on historical facts and evidence", and asked Nepal to "refrain from such cartographic aggression". The chief of army staff was then unleashed. He began by claiming that he did not know "what exactly they were agitating about". In the face of 22 years of intense disputation on this issue, he said: "There has never been a problem in the past." Moving to his punch line, he claimed there were "reasons to believe that they might have raised these problems, issues at the behest of someone else". Hint, hint, China!

Is this any way to conduct sensitive diplomatic relations with a small neighbour? Even if it is Covid time, why cannot the two foreign secretaries take to Skype or Zoom?





# Untrodden ROUTE

Carmakers are trying to beat the slowdown with new ways of selling and attractive financing options

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

In 2018, India became the fourth largest automobile market in the world, racing past Germany. But the industry hit multiple speed bumps in the following year, and the sales slowed down. This year, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the industry to a screeching halt. In April, not one vehicle was sold in the country.

As the government has started easing the lockdown, the industry is beginning to rev up, albeit slowly, hoping that there will be some recovery by the beginning of the festive season.

In the financial year ended in March 2020, passenger vehicle sales declined 17.82 per cent from the previous year, according to data from Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers. Two-wheeler sales fell 17.76 per cent, truck and bus sales were down 28.75 per cent and three-wheeler sales dipped 9 per cent. Various factors hurt demand last year. New safety regulations pushed up prices, mandatory long-term insurance led to higher cost of ownership and the new Bharat Stage VI fuel emission norms caused uncertainty about the sale of BS IV vehicles. The Covid-19 pandemic hit harder, as the nationwide lockdown forced companies to suspend manufacturing, sales and service.

The month of May, however, has given some hope for automakers. Factories started reopening, although in a limited capacity, and dealerships and service stations have also started functioning. Hyundai, the second largest car manufacturer in the country, restarted operations at its Sriperumbudur plant near Chennai on May 8. Maruti Suzuki, the

country's largest carmaker, restarted production at the Manesar plant in Haryana on May 12 and at the Gurugram plant on May 18. Volkswagen said 70 per cent of its dealerships had opened and dispatches from its production plant had begun. Most other manufacturers have also resumed their operations.

And, they are all following a new set of guidelines for a safer work environment. Companies have also issued new standard operating procedures and safety initiatives for their dealers, which include minimal interactions and maintaining prudent social distance in customer engagements.

Many key automobile markets, however, are in the red zone and cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Ahmedabad continue

to remain under strict lockdown. Automakers have devised innovative ways to tackle this. "There has been a noticeable shift in the recent past where digital models of retail and sales are garnering traction among buyers," said S.S. Kim, managing director and CEO of Hyundai Motor India. The company was among the first movers, launching an online sales platform called 'Click to Buy' in January.

Tata Motors recently launched its 'Click to Drive' online platform connected to all its dealers. Customers get to see video brochures and can pay the booking amount online. The car will be delivered at home, if the

customer wishes so. "The lockdown was an opportunity to accelerate our digital journey and evolve new ways of working while servicing and supporting our customers," said Guenter Butschek, managing director and CEO of Tata Motors.

Maruti had already started working on making vehicle purchases easier. According to Shashank Srivastava, executive director (sales and marketing), a customer has to go through 28 touch points for buying a vehicle. "Last three years, we have worked very hard on digitalisation. Twenty-one points are already digitalised," he said.

Interestingly, luxury carmakers,

#### SAFETY FIRST:

Carmakers have issued new standard operating procedures and safety initiatives for dealers

who excel in customer relations, are also focusing on eliminating contact points. Mercedes-Benz recently launched the 'Merc From Home' digital sales platform, which enables customers to select and buy from across the product range. "This lockdown has opened floodgates for digital and online venture for high-value items like automobiles," said Martin Schwenk, managing director and CEO of Mercedes-Benz India.







There has been a noticeable shift in the recent past where digital models of retail and sales are garnering traction among buyers.

**S.S. Kim**, managing director and CEO of Hyundai Motor India

BMW has launched a platform called 'Contactless Experience', where customers can explore and buy a car without visiting a dealer. "Since its launch in April, we have seen a tremendous increase in customer engagement, configuration requests and virtual product presentations on this platform," said Arlindo Teixeira, acting president, BMW Group India. "As business dynamics evolve post the Covid-19 pandemic, the BMW Contactless Experience will play a crucial role in offering seamless sales and after-sales services to our customers."

Companies are also offering attractive finance options to lure buyers. For instance, you could buy a Mahindra SUV now and start paying monthly instalments from next year under its 'Own Now, Pay in 2021' plan. "The bedrock of each one of our schemes is to provide financial

flexibility and peace of mind to our customers," said Veejay Nakra, CEO, automotive division, Mahindra & Mahindra.

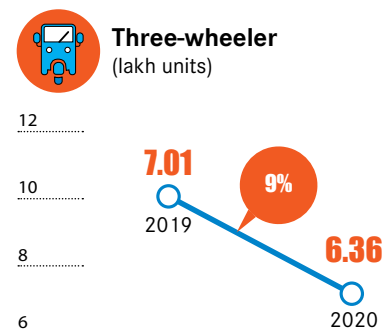
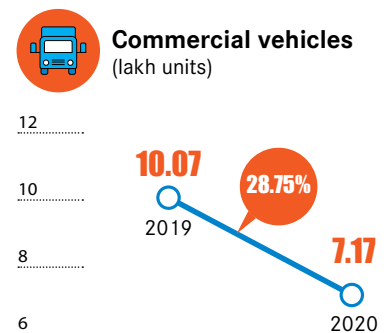
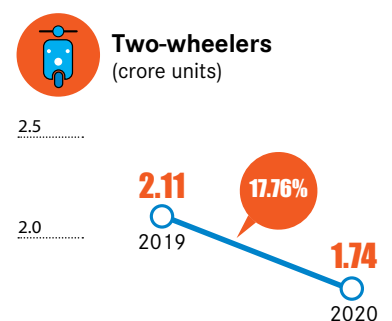
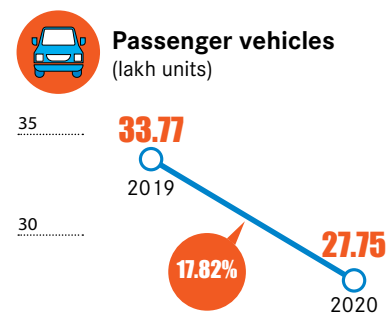
Hyundai has launched an EMI assurance programme, which would cover three car loan EMIs of customers under uncertainties such as a job loss. Many companies are offering attractive incentives for Covid warriors like doctors, health care workers and policemen.

Despite these efforts, the road to revival is long and uncertain. "The Covid-19 crisis has intensified the already prevalent pressure on the automobile industry, but the challenges this time are multi-dimensional," said Naveen Soni, senior vice president, sales and services, Toyota Kirloskar Motor. "The resumption of full-fledged operations and recovery will be gradual as the industry's whole value chain revives."

As the lockdown has led to layoffs and salary cuts, many customers have postponed discretionary purchases. According to a survey by consulting firm Deloitte, 46 per cent respondents said that they were planning to keep the current vehicle longer than originally expected. Credit ratings agency CRISIL's base case scenario indicates that sales of consumer discretionary products, which includes automobiles and consumer durables, will decline 12 per cent this year, compared with their long-term average of 12 per cent growth. If the situation gets worse, sales could fall 22 per cent.

Automakers are hoping that the pandemic would make more people commute to work in their own vehicles rather than using public transport, which could give the industry a lift. "I think, all researches indicate very clearly that people would prefer personal

## AUTOMOBILE SALES



SOURCE SIAM

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.

transport over public transport and going forward we see that becoming a trend. Our projection is that it is going to remain for quite some time as far as the fear of Covid remains," said Maruti's Srivastava.

Steffen Knapp, director of Volkswagen Passenger Cars India, said there had been increased interest in the used car business as people are on the lookout for accessible individual mobility solutions. "We are looking at doubling the business in the used car segment," he said.

Given that the auto industry has faced headwinds in two consecutive years, analysts expect companies to go slow on capacity expansions. "If at all companies had some budgets and plans for expansions, we should expect that some of those expansion plans could be suspended," said Rajeev Singh, partner at Deloitte India.



This lockdown has opened floodgates for digital and online venture for high-value items like automobiles.

**Martin Schwenk**, managing director and CEO of Mercedes-Benz India

Companies may also cut down on their expenses in areas like new platform development and research and development. "Some organisations had very large business plans for alternative power trains, like electric. They may look to cut down on some expenses," said Singh. Maruti has reduced its capital expenditure plan for the current financial year by 16 per cent to ₹2,700 crore. It spent ₹3,248 crore last year. However, no project-related long-term plans are being deferred.

The Covid-19 crisis had brought along numerous other challenges. "The initial months will be utilised to understand the market trends and the demand curve. There are other factors such as low consumer sentiments, rebuilding of disrupted supply chains, including return of workforce, which will act as bottlenecks for the industry," said Toyota's Soni.

French auto giant Groupe PSA has said that the launch of its debut vehicle in India, the Citroen C5 Aircross SUV, would be pushed to the first quarter of 2021. Some other companies, however, are going ahead with their launch plans. Skoda launched the Karoq SUV and Rapid and Superb sedans on May 26. Mercedes launched the AMG C63 Coupe and AMG GTR on May 27. Schwenk said that the company would continue with its investments planned for 2020, but would "calibrate the situation" and take actions accordingly.

The stimulus package announced by the government earlier this month had nothing specific for the auto industry. SIAM has warned that the sector could see de-growth of 22 per cent to 35 per cent this year if India's GDP growth is in the 0-1 per cent range. The industry employs about 3.7 crore people and contributes 15 per cent of Goods and Service Tax, amounting about ₹1.50 lakh crore a year.



The resumption of full-fledged operations and recovery will be gradual as the industry's whole value chain revives.

**Naveen Soni**, senior vice president (sales and services), Toyota Kirloskar Motor

Rajan Wadhera, president of SIAM, said there was a need to reduce base GST rates from 28 per cent to 18 per cent for a limited period to boost demand. He has also called upon the need to provide liquidity support to dealers and for the government to include them under the MSME Act.

An incentive-based vehicle scrappage policy has also been a long-standing demand of the industry. Union Minister Nitin Gadkari had recently said that a policy would soon be introduced. "One of the best ways of reviving demand at this point would be to come out with a scrappage policy, so that you incentivise those people who have vehicles more than 12-14 years old to change and buy a new vehicle," said Singh of Deloitte. Additionally, a scrappage policy would also tackle the air pollution issue in the metros. ■



**T.V. Narendran,**  
MD and CEO of Tata Steel, and vice president,  
Confederation of Indian Industry

# New ways of customer engagement are required

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

**Q/How hard has the lockdown hit the economy?**

**A/**The near-complete shutdown of economic activity has impacted industry majorly, especially the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector. The key challenge is of liquidity as cash flows have been disrupted. Businesses are unable to pay regular fixed charges such as wages, electricity charges, rent and other fixed costs. The second challenge is the operation of the entire supply chain; some inputs and raw material are not reaching factories, or have been delayed. The third challenge is the shortage of labour.

**Q/What are the ways to adapt to the 'new normal'?**

**A/**Given the disruptions in supply chains, there are a number of adjustments that businesses will need to consider. New ways of reaching and retaining customers may be required. Technology solutions could be a higher priority with machine learning, internet of things and other new platforms being given more importance. Strategies may relook at inventories to be maintained, transport and movement of inputs, sourcing from different areas and so on. Remote working options would also be an option. Fundamentally, I expect this experience to encourage all of us to look at how we can make a step change in the productive use of people, space and time.

**Q/Do you think the remaining months can make up for the deficit caused by the lockdown?**

**A/**I do not think the demand in the rest of the year can compensate for the deficit in consumption. While necessities will definitely be sought as soon as markets reopen, deferment of non-essential large purchases is likely.

PTI



**Q/Can we look at 'business-as-usual' by Diwali?**

**A/**The Confederation of Indian Industry poll indicates that most businesses are expecting normalcy in the economy after a year or so. Some sectors could pick up earlier. We have to note that India has a strong outward engagement and in the world as a whole, the Covid-19 situation has not yet peaked. Therefore, supply chains across the world will be affected. Diwali is about six months away and that would be a best-case scenario, if the exit from lockdown goes well and the global supply chain movement reverts to normalcy.

**Q/What are the steps to be taken by the government?**

**A/**The government must first stabilise the situation for people at the lower income scales. We have suggested an additional ₹2 lakh crore of public expenditure towards this. Further, the government debt-to-GDP ratio is low, and there is a lot of space available on this count for further spending on enterprise support. A key challenge is to ensure that the stress in the real [estate] sector does not filter into the financial sector. Banks and other financial institutions must be protected and have adequate capital for onward lending to enterprises.

In the medium term, the country must go in for land reforms, changing the labour regulations, and lowering the cost of doing business through a range of actions. ❶

BITTER CHOCOLATE

SWARA BHASKER



## Put yourself in their shoes

**F**or me, the first 56 days of the national lockdown was a housebound saga of domestic and feline crises, heartache, pandemic-induced anxiety and social-media-addiction. Basically, a comatose mind. I also undertook a two-day long road trip, from Mumbai to Delhi, to see my mother who had fractured her shoulder. Once I got my bearings at home, free from my single-existence angst in Mumbai, I could no longer ignore that nagging feeling I had been having since the day reports and images of migrants walking home surfaced. I felt ashamed to be in the safety and comfort of my home when lakhs of people were being forced into hardship and arduous barefoot journeys to their villages. I decided I must participate in some relief effort and I scoured social media to see what kind of work was being undertaken.

I made a few calls and spoke to some on-ground volunteers to see what kind of intervention I could help in. What did they need? Donations to arrange buses, food packets, grains, sanitary napkins, train tickets? "Ma'am we have all that," said Nitesh Pandey of Pushti Foundation, "But there is one thing you can do!"

"What?" I asked in anticipation.

"Arrange for slippers."

The migrant crisis is the most shameful story of our time, and the broken slippers and blistered feet of lakhs of migrant workers expose the negligence of the state toward its most vulnerable citizens.

I can do this, I thought. I began to look for leads to reach the marketing teams or owners of shoe brands. Contribute shoes, slippers, or any footwear suitable for walking, in mixed sizes, for men, women and children, I requested. #DoOurBit, I put hashtags in text messages.

Action Shoes, Athleo Shoes and Relaxo (upon Salman Khan's recommendation) kindly agreed to supply us with footwear. The first stock came from Action and Athleo. I joined the committed volunteers of Karwan-e-Mohabbat in distributing the shoes.

On a hot Delhi summer afternoon we set out in

search of migrants. "I got a message that there are 3,000 migrants waiting in Lajpat Nagar for fitness test," said a volunteer. "But we have only 500 pairs of shoes." So, debating and discussing, we began to search for smaller groups. Our first stop was outside Khanpur bus depot, where a hapless group of 40 had been squatting on the pavement for the past four days because they had heard (wrongly) that buses for UP were departing from there. The moment we asked them a few questions, one of the chattiest of them teared up and said, "*Koi nahi aayaa* (No one came to ask after us.)" We began to distribute some food packets, drinking water and shoes.

Our next stop was under a flyover near Anand Vihar Bus Terminal. Scores of suitcases and bags lined the edge of the pavement and hundreds of people sat in small groups. We unloaded our boxes of shoes, sanitary napkins and food packets. Within minutes a curious crowd gathered. Women and men started angling for shoes. Sizes didn't fit. We pulled out more shoes. A little girl, aged 11 or 12, came up—her current slippers one desperate vulcanised bind away from tatters. "Chappal," she held out her hand. I handed her an approximate size. She tried it on, it didn't fit. It is big, she stated firmly. One of the sweating volunteers turned to her and said, "*Thheek hai* (It is fine.)"

She crossed her arms and shook her head and said emphatically, "*Nahi. Thheek nahi hai. Hum gir jaayengey* (No, it's not fine. I will fall.)" I looked at the girl, turned back to the boxes and dug out another size. "*Yeh dekh* (Check this.)"

The girl took the shoes and laid it on the dusty pavement, then delicately slipped her feet into them. I waited. It fit! She looked at me with bright black eyes. We both smiled. She skipped away and melted into the crowd.

I looked around at the desperate people, let down by a state criminally negligent of their fragile existence and I marvelled at the girl's spirit.

Never settle for less, my little one. Find the shoe that fits. Be your own Cinderella. Instead of a prince, find your dream.

The writer is an award-winning Bollywood actor and sometime writer and social commentator.





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# Deal or no deal

The Saudi sovereign wealth fund's interest in English football may be more about profits than propaganda

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

**IT WAS IN** the summer of 1996 that Newcastle United Football Club signed striker Alan Shearer for a world record fee of £15 million. In the previous season, the club had squandered a 12-point lead and finished as runners-up in the Premier League. The champions, Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, also had pursued Shearer, but the goal machine

rejected them in favour of Newcastle—his boyhood club—managed by double Ballon d'Or winner Kevin Keegan. It was time for redemption, and Shearer would lead the charge. But, despite topping the table early on and giving Manchester United a 5-0 thrashing, the Magpies came second again. Keegan—King Kev to Newcastle fans—resigned halfway through the season. Since then, Newcastle has made it to the top four in the Premier League only twice. It has not won a major domestic trophy since 1955. The lack of success has

ranked its fans, who are known as the Toon Army, and they showed visceral hatred for its owner because of his perceived lack of interest in running the club.

Billionaire retail entrepreneur Mike Ashley bought the club in 2007, and there has been unrest ever since. Keegan, who was reappointed as manager in 2008, resigned the same year, openly criticising the board for not giving enough financial support. After massive fan protests, Ashley put the club up for sale three times, but a deal never materialised. The grim Ashley years dragged on. But the new deal has created as much interest as shock. For the majority investor in the consortium that made the offer of £300 million is

someone who cannot be ignored.

The consortium is composed of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, British financier Amanda Staveley and Mumbai-born British billionaires Reuben brothers. Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman is the chairman of the PIF, which would reportedly own 80 per cent of the club. Salman was accused of ordering the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in 2018 and Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz has implored fans of the club to unite against the takeover. Amnesty International has written to the Premier League against allowing sportswashing (use of sports to launder reputations).

But it is the Saudi government's alleged link to a piracy network that has put the deal in serious doubt. According to *The Guardian* newspaper, the World Trade Organisation has found that Saudi Arabia is

behind a network that offers illegal access to sporting events, including the Premier League. Now the question is whether the Saudi-backed consortium can pass the Premier League's owners' and directors' test. Prospective owners can fail the test if they are proven to be involved in a crime overseas that is also a crime in the UK.

This could be another near-miss for Newcastle. Journalist Oscar Paul, who covers football for *The Sun*, said most Newcastle fans were excited about the takeover. In fact, 96.7 per cent of 3,400 respondents to the club's supporters' trust survey welcomed the takeover. Paul said the fans had been asking the despised Ashley all 13 years to sell the club. "Bit

by bit, Ashley sucked the life out of the club, leaving the fan base weary and disillusioned," he said. "Hope and ambition evaporated long ago, the departure of idolised [manager] Rafa Benitez [in 2019] was the final straw for many. Avoiding relegation and banking the millions that come from Premier League football was all that seemed to matter."

He said some fans had concerns over the Saudis, but if the deal were to happen, they would "get right behind it". The consortium's plans to oversee the regeneration of the city would also help in winning over the fans.

There has been huge Middle East investment in European football, as in the case of Manchester City, which was purchased by the Abu Dhabi United Group and of Paris Saint-Germain by Qatar Sports Investments. Aravind Reghunathan, assistant professor in the department of sport and event management at

Billionaire retail entrepreneur Mike Ashley bought Newcastle United in 2007, and there has been unrest ever since.

## MONEY BALL

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with FIFA president Gianni Infantino and Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the 2018 FIFA World Cup



FRAYED  
TIES

A protester dressed as Newcastle United owner Mike Ashley, outside the club stadium

Bournemouth University, the UK, said if Newcastle's takeover is completed, a stronger brand than other Gulf-funded clubs can be created. "Because Newcastle is a club with a longer and richer history," he said.

He felt the new owners would invest heavily in the squad and coaching staff, immediately. "They will have an eye on the renewed interest towards football after [Covid-19]," he said. "So, playing exciting football to leverage that interest might be the first objective for new owners."

No matter what happens in Newcastle, surely the larger concerns of sportswashing and the fast emerging inter-Gulf rivalry in football cannot be ignored. Muddassir Quamar, an expert on Middle East studies at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Delhi, said he would not take the term sportswashing seriously. "I don't think the primary motive for rich capitalists anywhere in the world to invest their wealth in an enterprise is to simply buy some good press for a short term," he said. "Although this might be an added advantage, it certainly is not the primary motivation. The capitalists go after profit and lucrative return. The rich Gulf businessmen, including members of the ruling families and their close associates, are no different." He said there was an effort in Saudi Arabia to diversify the economy. In fact, the Saudi Vision 2030 is a framework to reduce the country's dependence on



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oil. And an investment in the world's richest football league thus makes sense.

Quamar said the question of human rights violations, though valid, should be seen within the regional context where few states have a stellar record. "Within Saudi Arabia, the situation has certainly improved,

“

I don't think the primary motive for rich capitalists to invest in an enterprise is to simply buy some good press for a short term....

The capitalists go after profit and lucrative return.

Muddassir Quamar, expert on Middle East studies

”

but a lot needs to be done for legal reforms and judicial autonomy," he said. He said Qatar-based beIN Sports opposed the takeover citing the piracy link more because of business concerns than geopolitical rivalry. "I have not come across any evidence that the Qatari government or ruling family is involved," he said.

Sports has always been a lucrative investment option. Apart from profits, it also has the potential to help the image of the investor, thanks to the community's involvement as well as the raw emotions associated with the outcomes. It follows naturally that the rulers would also want their share of the pie. But, should there be rules prohibiting at least heads of states from making (directly or indirectly) such investments? As Quamar put it: "Politics, including global politics, is intertwined with business and business of sports and sporting events, and I don't think it can be completely separated, even by enacting laws." •

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## EATS, SHOOTS AND TWEETS

Anurag Kashyap is in an intense space right now—politically and cinematically

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI







Anurag Kashyap has much to say. And his followers on Twitter have been listening intently over the last two months in lockdown. Most of the time, the Bollywood director tweets to express his disappointment with the Central government's action (or inaction) over various issues. Occasionally, he praises the "surprisingly" good governance of Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray. And then there are times when, like a true cinephile, he suggests good movies to watch. From the classics of Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, Josef von Sternberg and Martin Scorsese to the 2019 Spanish film *The Platform*, a range of genres finds space on his Twitter profile.

It is only fitting then that his next film, *Choked: Paisa Bolta Hai* (a Netflix original streaming from June 5) seems like a confluence of many films while still having the Kashyap stamp. It is the opening score that strikes. Inspired by Federico Fellini's *8½*, the track sets the tone for the story of a bank cashier, Sarita (Saiyami Kher), who is often cash-strapped and frustrated with her unemployed husband, Sushant (Roshan Mathew). When she discovers a stash of cash flowing out of her kitchen sink every night, it brings new meaning to her life. But things take an interesting turn when the demonetisation is announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016.

One wonders if the film is too personal for Kashyap, who has been a vocal critic of the demonetisation as well as the Modi government. "For me, it is a very emotional film," Kashyap tells THE WEEK on video call. "A lot of people would think that it is personal, but it is not." He

adds that *Choked* was inspired more by films like *The Lunchbox* than anything else. "We wanted to tell the story of this couple in love. The script had come to me in 2014-2015," says Kashyap about the story presented by Nihit Bhave at FICCI Frames' Script Bazaar. "By the time we got to making it, demonetisation happened and it had to be a part of the film. We brought that into the script."

But he did not want to thrust his political ideologies into his characters, but rather explore the humane aspect of two lower middle-class people struggling to survive. "I have seen so many stories of couples coming to Mumbai to live their dreams," says Kashyap. "Sometimes they make it, most times they don't. What happens then? Have you seen *Abhimaan*? I love that film. Those films have been the inspiration, and then I tried [making] it like a thriller. It is about love. It is about the power equation in a marriage when a wife is working and is let down by the husband, who holds on to his artistic ego and does not want to be lesser than what he thinks he should be. I call it a Sai Paranjpye thriller."

It is a surprise, however, that the trademark Kashyap angst, prominent in most of his films, is not the driving force of this one. "I think you find humour at some point in your life.

**I THINK YOU FIND  
HUMOUR AT SOME  
POINT IN YOUR LIFE.  
THAT IS THE CASE  
WITH *CHOKED*. I WAS  
VERY OBJECTIVE  
WHILE MAKING IT.**

—Anurag Kashyap, director



That is the case with this one. I was very objective while making it," he says. Getting a new perspective on life and finding newer stories are also the result of his collaboration with other writers, something he seems to have embraced in the last five years, starting with *Manmarziyaan* that was written by Kanika Dhillon. "I thought I was making one kind of film all the time, because of which everybody expected one kind of a film," says Kashyap. "Like you said, the angst was missing. I wanted to explore ideas that go beyond me. So, I had to find writers who are socially aware and always in context to tell a whole lot of stories."

The film has turned a new chapter in Kashyap's life in another way, too. It is the first from his new production house, Good Bad Films, after shutting down Phantom Films in 2018. But nothing much has changed in terms of its functioning. "I am not



in a zone where I want to make a studio," Kashyap says. "What it does is it lets me explore all kinds of genres that I want to do as a filmmaker without the fear of having to run a studio. It also has to have some value. It is all about what I want to do. The whole idea of making a big company and ruling the world [does not interest

me]. It is [rather] a place of convenience for like-minded people to come together and do things in whatever scale, small or big. *Kaam karenge, acha karenge*. (I will do my work and I will do it well.)"

The director gives a sheepish grin on the mention of his recent acting stint in *Ghoomketu*. He plays a rather

#### LOVE AND THRILL

Roshan Mathew,  
Saiyami Kher and  
Amruta Subhash in  
*Choked: Paisa Bolta Hai*;  
(below) Kashyap and  
Nawazuddin Siddiqui in  
*Ghoomketu*

amusing character in the Nawazuddin Siddiqui starrer that released on May 22 on ZEE5. Kashyap has made on-screen appearances in films such as *Akira*, *Happy New Year* and *Luck By Chance*, but it is not something he likes. "I keep getting pushed for acting and I am also emotionally blackmailed into acting. I try to keep the power in my hands so that nobody does that, but then somebody like Vikramaditya Motwane comes and says you will have to do AK versus AK... and you have no way out," he says about Motwane's upcoming film starring Anil Kapoor and him.

Right now, he is focused on his health regime, cooking and writing. "I have content for the next five years. I have been able to spend enough time thinking of ideas that can be fleshed out," he says, even as one wonders how he manages to make time for work, personal life and his regular Twitter activism. "I have limited my time on social media," says Kashyap. "I have very strict rules. I work, write and do a lot of other things. I only go on Twitter when my friends draw my attention to a certain issue." He adds that on the political front right now, everyone is under a cloud of uncertainty, trying to figure out what is going to happen. "Everybody is struggling," he says. "Some places you see intention and some places you see self-preservation. That is the politics going around the world." ●





# THE JOE ROGAN REVOLUTION

A podcaster is rewriting the traditional media norms

BY VAISAKH E. HARI

On Tuesday, audio streaming service Spotify announced a licensing deal for US-based comedian Joe Rogan's podcast. Joe Rogan Experience (JRE) will be available on the platform starting September 1; it will become a Spotify exclusive later in the year. Post the announcement, Spotify's shares surged eight per cent. Neither the platform nor the podcaster have released the contract details, but the multi-year deal is estimated to cost the streaming company around \$100 million.

It is hard to overstate the impact of Rogan's move. Apple, with iTunes, has a virtual stranglehold over the nascent podcasting industry, which is expected to grow in advertising revenue to over \$1 billion by 2021. Spotify hopes to overturn the monopoly by signing Rogan, who is the biggest name in the field by quite a distance. JRE started a decade ago and has since transformed into a behemoth—the show is downloaded in the millions each month and constantly features among the top podcasts on Apple's charts. On YouTube, he has over 8 million subscribers, and every podcast hits at least a million views within a day of release.

"A musician would need to generate 23 billion streams on Spotify to earn what they're paying Joe Rogan for his podcast rights," wrote music writer Ted Gioia on Twitter, adding that this means "Spotify values Rogan more than any musician in the history of the world".

The deal catapults Rogan—a trained martial artist, former Fear Factor host, Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) commentator, marijuana

enthusiast, and, now, a man with enough influence to make or break a US presidential candidate—reportedly to the position of the highest paid broadcaster in the world. That too without the backing of a single major corporate or production house.

## WHAT IS THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE

When it was launched a decade ago, the Joe Rogan podcast had an informal tone to it, like a conversation between two close friends—full of inside jokes and private moments. As it evolved over the years, spanning 1,000-plus episodes, it was the same format—one he personally emphasised as "listening and learning"—that elevated him to superstardom. Each episode spans anywhere from two to three hours, and Rogan owns an additional channel where clips of the long-form conversations are uploaded.

On his show, Rogan was a regular, mild-mannered "bro"—armed with an almost naive enthusiasm to understand how the world worked—and his audience were crafted in his image. The conversations were mostly thoughtful and intimate; he rarely pushed back against his guests who ranged from politicians, academics, philosophers, comics, journalists and your garden variety internet cranks. There were no gotcha moments. There was no artificial conflict. He spoke, sometimes high under mind-altering stimulants, on an ocean of topics ranging from alien abductions, martial arts, elk meat, cooking steak, DMT experiences, the universe being a simulation, fellatio and crazy ex-girlfriends.

He criticised feminism and bemoaned the destructive nature of "identity politics". He lashed out against lying politicians and the fraudulent 'left-right' political systems, he listened enthusiastically (often agreeably) to every single guest on his show, and bashed mainstream

media as "biased, agenda-driven and divisive".

For his disaffected male viewers, Rogan was nothing less than a cult guru—an internet father figure who sternly told them to clean up their act, work out, prepare for the harsh realities of life, and embrace "personal responsibility" as their lord and saviour.

If, one day, Rogan engaged patiently with a guest who claimed that earth was flat, and that inter-dimensional child molesters were on the prowl, the next day he would listen wide-eyed to the Many Worlds Theory and the intricacies of quantum physics with Caltech Professor Sean Carroll. The same malleability is a feature that defines most of his audience. And this is what makes Joe Rogan one of the hottest internet commodities on the face of the earth. For advertisers, Rogan commanded an army of ultra-loyal young viewers; for politicians, there was a unique, open-minded demography—ones who defined their ideology as 'Joe Rogan's politics'—that they could "reprogram to their wavelength".

In September 2018, Tesla founder Elon Musk smoked marijuana with Rogan on his show; days later, Tesla shares fell nine per cent.

In 2019, US presidential candidate

**"A MUSICIAN  
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FOR HIS PODCAST  
RIGHTS."**

—Ted Gioia, music writer, on Twitter



Andrew Yang, then a marginal figure, credited an appearance in Rogan's podcast with a massive surge in popularity and fundraising. "After the appearance in the Joe Rogan podcast," said an aide of Yang, "everything went right."

In 2019, the then US presidential candidate frontrunner Bernie Sanders made an appearance on his show, promising to tell Rogan the truth about aliens if he is elected president; the episode currently has around 12 million views on YouTube. In a subsequent show, Rogan hinted that he supported Sanders and that he would vote for him. The Sanders campaign shared a clipping of the "endorsement" on all their social media platforms.

Rogan is also a highly controversial figure. When Sanders touted the comedian's endorsement, the former faced a lot of backlash; several trans-rights groups came out against Sanders, pointing out Rogan's problematic comments on transgender athletes.

He has been called everything from a purveyor of toxic masculinity to a white nationalist and a racism enabler. He has addressed most of the criticisms on his show, explaining that his politics was to the "left of centre" and that he was a supporter of policies ranging from universal healthcare to free college education.

Usually, whenever a big independent broadcaster switches platforms, the conversation revolves around how much audience the broadcaster stands to lose. But, in Rogan's case, the often-asked question is how much YouTube stands to lose, such is the devotion that he commands from his massive base. And how much Spotify stands to gain.

What the future holds for the podcasting industry, Joe Rogan, Spotify and YouTube remains to be seen. For now, only one thing is for sure. A media revolution is on the horizon, and, be assured, it will be televised. ①

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# Bond on AIR

Ruskin Bond makes lockdown days bearable with a new book and a new radio show

BY MANDIRA NAYAR



ANUSH GOEL

**H**ello, Bond here." There are very few sentences that have an ability to instantly lift spirits. The voice of Ruskin Bond—clear, warm and calm—rings out from a chilly afternoon in Landour in Uttarakhand, bringing with it the whoosh of fresh mountain air. He has just woken up. "I am the world's greatest sleeper," he chuckles. "I sleep at all times of day and night." It is exactly four o'clock. The heater is on even in the middle of May in the hill station that Bond calls home. Vividly recreated in his writing, Bond has transported children for decades to his world—filled with ghosts, small gestures of kindness, of birds, walks, flowers and forests. Bond turned 86 on May 19. But, he has the energy of a three-year-old. The frequent naps aside, he has just finished reading the biography of Edgar Allan Poe. A new book, *Miracle at Happy*

*Bazaar*, is out. And he will also be waking up children and putting them to bed, courtesy All India Radio. The series, called 'Bonding over Radio', will be broadcast at 7:10am and 10:10pm every day.

"All I have to do is to pick up the phone as I am doing now in my right hand and hold the book in my left hand," Bond says. The radio, which had been part of his childhood, is no longer his companion. "But I am getting a lot of feedback," he says. "A lot of kids and older people are writing back, which are relayed to me. I have been enjoying it. I like reading out aloud. I do it at noon."

The lockdown has turned him towards TV. He "roams the news channels," he chuckles. "You want to keep up with what is happening. I used to watch television, but sports mostly. But, now there is not much sport, unless you want to watch Mohinder

Amarnath in the 1983 World Cup."

Bond's life, however, has not altered much. "As a writer, I have always worked from home," he says. "Most of my adult life I have written sitting at my desk in the bedroom," he says. But the quiet has brought alive a different world. Even in Landour, which in a way has defiantly survived the onslaught of the fast-paced world, the odd horn outside his window has become silent. "Early morning there are all sorts of birds coming," he says. The view from his window in his bedroom is familiar to anyone who has read him. A bit of everything: road, the valley, the hills and the rivers. Birds, that used to stay away, are no longer shy and find their way to his window. "The birds are having a great time. So, we have been seeing orange minarets," Bond says. "All kind of small birds, wagtails."

Bond has this ability to use the everyday ordinariness of life to turn it into philosophy. His writing, like his conversation, is peppered with humour, gentle observation and his childhood. "I have a good memory of the childhood," he says. "Of growing up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, in Delhi during World War II."

*Miracle at Happy Bazaar*, published by Rupa, is a peek into his childhood again. He writes about his father, his death, the relationship with his mother and "Breakfast to Baroque" to create an enchanting world. In the foreword to his book, Bond writes, "I grew up too quickly. By the time I was 13, I was no longer a boy. By the time I was 16 I was earning a living—and a year later I was living on my own."

His childhood, brief as it may have been, has allowed millions to be forever young. His memory is still vivid.

Bond has not visited Shimla or Baroque for 20 years. "I like to recall those days and recreate the atmosphere. The older you are the more you have to write about," he says. Bond, certainly does. **●**

# Forbidden love

A delicious take on a forgotten romance

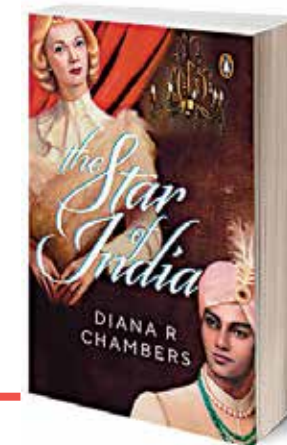
BY MANDIRA NAYAR

**I**t was a scandalous love story. With independence from the British just a breath away in 1947, the single, well-educated and dashing maharaja of Cooch Behar—Jagadipendra Narayan—fell in love with and married Hollywood actress Nancy Valentine. There was opposition not only from Narayan's mother, Indira, but also from the government.

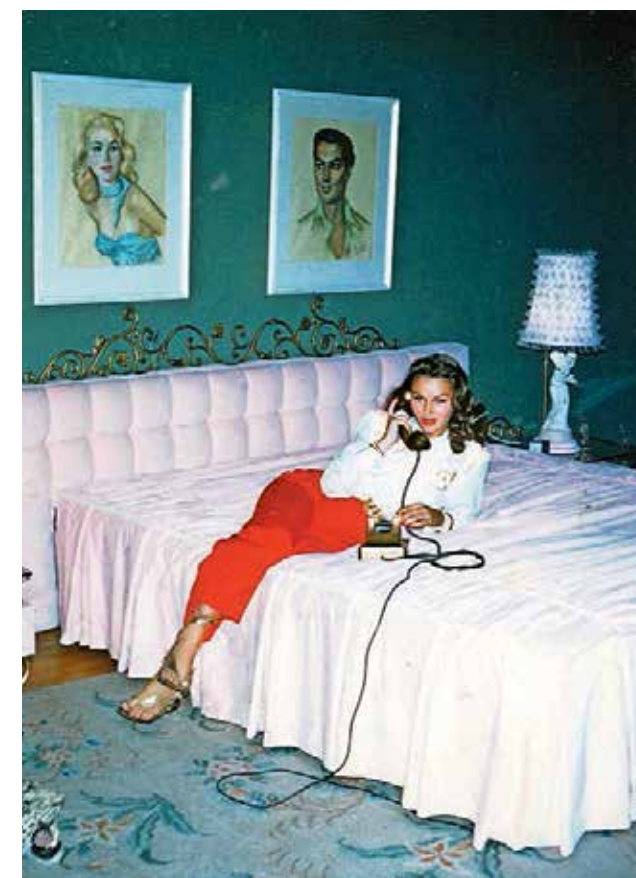
All this and more makes *The Star of India* a delicious and racy read. Set in one of India's most tumultuous periods, the book is by Diana R. Chambers, who has been living with the story in her head for decades. "The government was very afraid that Valentine as a foreigner could transport a lot of valuables out of the country," says Chambers.

Buried in gossip columns is this story that shocked India and delighted America. Valentine was ambitious and beautiful, and swept off her feet by a real-life prince. "She was the product of the studio system," says Chambers. "They took these unsophisticated young people and trained them. She came out of it a more sophisticated, worldly person that met the maharaja."

Chambers conjures up the glamour, the dazzle, the intrigue, the danger and the seamier side of the period in this lush fictional version of the story. It is the decaying world of the Indian royals with all its stereotypes colliding with the ultimate Hollywood fantasy that Chambers brings alive with descriptions. "I think there is an arc in Nancy's character," she says. "She was a young woman thrust into a world way beyond her background. For her to come all the way to the royal world and the expectations she had to meet, she had to really grow into that. I admire her for that."



**THE STAR OF INDIA**  
Author: Diana R. Chambers  
Publisher: Penguin Random House  
Pages: 424; price ₹399



The romance of Valentine and the maharaja is true, but to add to the texture, Chambers added other elements: a communist plot, a cursed Mughal ruby and palace intrigue. At the heart of the book, however, is the impossible love story and a woman who never forgot. Chambers spent considerable time with Valentine before she died. She left Chambers her memoirs and photographs as well.

Valentine left India pregnant. Her daughter was stillborn. She and Narayan never met again. Letters were exchanged, but they both knew when she left India that their fate lay elsewhere. Valentine married again, but hung the prince's portrait above her bed. Even the skin of the tiger that Valentine had shot in India was kept in her closet. "These were the most precious memories of her life," says Chambers. "Despite having two daughters later, she loved him." **●**



## Tale for the times



Dusting off a decade-old story, **J.K. Rowling** is publishing a book for “children in lockdown”. *The Ickabog* was planned to be published soon after the last Harry Potter book, but then she decided to “step away from children’s books for a while”. Besides, she saw it as a story that belonged to her two children—she had read it aloud to them when they were little. But now, Rowling is publishing the book online in free instalments. The first two chapters are already up on theickabog.com, and the rest will keep coming till July 10.

## Penning glory

In the last six months, lyricist, writer and former video game artist **Neeraj Pandey** has done quite a bit in independent cinema, including Prashant Nair’s *Tryst with Destiny*, which won the award for ‘Best Screenplay in an International Narrative Feature Film’ at Tribeca Film Festival 2020. He was the lyricist for Hardik Mehta’s widely praised *Har Kisse ke Hisse: Kaamyab*, starring Sanjay Mishra. Pandey’s next work as a lyricist is for a family drama called *Ramprasad Ki Tehrvi*, the filmmaking debut of actor Seema Pahwa.

CONTRIBUTORS / PRIYANKA BHADANI AND SNEHA BHURA  
COMPILED BY SUSAMMA JOY KURIAN



Aahana Kumra,  
actor

**A**ahana Kumra started with theatre before making her debut in the limited edition series, *Yudh*. She moved on to the big screen, finding fame with *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016). Kumra, who stars in the recently released Netflix show, *Betaal*, has had a long journey as an actor. There have been struggles on the way, but she would not have it any other way.

**Q/What drew you to Betaal?**

**A/** It is a genre that I have never done before. I have never been part of a zombie-horror-thriller series and I think it is extremely fascinating that India has made its first. [Also] I have never played an army officer. And, I was thrilled to go through the training process. I was also excited to work with everyone in the show, especially with Suhani Kanwar (co-writer), who has also written *Lipstick Under My Burkha*.

**Q/Do you like the horror genre in general?**

**A/** I absolutely love horror... I have watched a lot of horror films in theatres because I want the sound system, the darkness around you that is kind of eerie for a horror film. Zee Horror Show, I think, ruined my childhood—the signature tune still haunts me. Chucky from Child’s Play, [too]. I removed all the dolls from my room. Then, there was *Evil Dead*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*. Why am I even talking about these films? I am not going to sleep tonight (chuckles).

**Q/You have had your share of struggles in the industry. Have things changed over the years?**  
**A/** Things have not really changed, but they have become streamlined. With over-the-top services

## Inspiring act

coming in, things happen through auditions. That is how I got *Betaal*. People are ready to work with new talent.... It is a fantastic time for all content creators.

When I started working in this industry, I realised that there was so much struggle even for writers and directors.... But now, with the advent of OTT, so many new and young directors are getting their break.

I had my struggles, but they are something I am proud of. I am going to talk about it for years to come [in the hope] that some girl from Lucknow or Kanpur [gets inspired]. Even if one girl is able to make the kind of choice I have made, that, for me, will probably be the greatest compliment.

**Q/What has been the effect of the lockdown?**

**A/** It has affected me in a way that I do not have a social life. I was travelling a lot in the last few years and that has come to a standstill. I miss being in different places, eating different food, meeting different people. My life has been on sets. Man, I miss that. I miss the rehearsals, my co-actors, directors, producers, everyone. It feels like a hollow situation. But I have had two releases in this period, *Marzi* for Voot and *Betaal*, and I am really grateful for the love that I have got.

— Priyanka Bhadani



RUSKIN FELIX

## Croon, groom



This Eid, **Salman Khan** released ‘Bhai Bhai’, his third song during lockdown. Like the first two songs, the latest one, too, was sung by him and shot at his farmhouse in Navi Mumbai. A day earlier, Khan had launched his grooming and personal care brand, FRSH. Under the brand, he had planned to launch a deodorant first. Instead, he came out with a sanitiser, keeping “the need of the hour” in mind.

## Unconventionally funny

Almost two years after *Nanette*, which won the Emmy and Peabody, Australian standup artiste **Hannah Gadsby** is back with another Netflix special, *Douglas* (named after her dog). Breaking the conventions of comedy as she did with *Nanette*, Gadsby in *Douglas* talks of patriarchy, her recent diagnosis of autism and a dog park story, and takes on her critics who dismissed *Nanette* as “not comedy”. Gadsby, if anything, is more self-assured and funnier this time.

GETTY IMAGES







## No eyes to see, no heart to feel

As I write this I have just entered the state of Kerala after a 72-hour road odyssey that has taken me through the states of Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Telangana and, then, Kasaragod in Kerala.

After clocking 14,000 kilometres and tracking migrant workers on their long journey home, certain facts have become indisputably evident to me.

The humanitarian crisis of the migrant workers has come to be bigger than the challenge of the pandemic. In part, this is because the national lockdown was announced with four hours' notice and failed to anticipate the biggest mass exodus of people since Partition. An absence of empathy, efficiency and basic coordination between the Centre and states also cost us. For the first 72 hours, as the workers walked, often barefoot, their children on their shoulders, they were treated as invisible by the Centre and states alike.

Then there was a hasty, unplanned attempt to put them on trains, but without anyone to even organise queues before they boarded. This was a moment, frankly, for the paramilitary or military to have been called upon, used as they are to simplifying intricate and large movements of people. Instead, the sight of thousands of workers desperately jostling to get onto a train panicked the government and it issued orders that the movement of workers was a "violation of the lockdown."

The problem with this was that no government order could ensure that workers were paid wages. Policy makers also failed to understand the twin triggers of economics and emotion when it came to the exodus. While there was an intuitive empathy for stranded middle-class and upper middle-class Indians abroad (who

were not impoverished or in any danger of going hungry), there was simply no acknowledgment of the fact that the same emotional need—the need to be at home—was just as true for our poor.

Effectively, the government issued orders that were unenforceable—both on asking the workers not to move and asking their employers to keep paying them. Oddly, in March, it told the Supreme Court that there were no more migrants on the road. Workers were walking our highways, often through the desolation of the night, as recently as this week.

Every worker I have met—those walking barefoot, cycling hundreds of kilometres home, crammed in at the back of small trucks, on board trains—have all said the same thing to me. "If the virus has to kill us, we would rather die at home." Most believe that poverty will claim their lives quicker than Covid.

In Haryana I met the family of Mukesh Mandal, who sold his phone for ₹2,500 so that he could feed his family and buy them a fan. One day

later he killed himself. In Madhya Pradesh I met the widow of Ranveer Singh, who died walking home from a heart attack. In Delhi I met Fazulu, who had been locked in by his employers behind a corrugated tin sheet as if he was bonded labour. In Mumbai, at the back of a truck, I met Vinod, a science graduate, who said no one in the news media had bothered to tell their story. In Hyderabad, I met 10-year-old Sunil who was heartbroken to have to leave his textbooks behind and worried about when he may be able to attend school again. And in Bhiwani, Nitin, the 10-year-old son of a migrant worker, summed up the reality of this pandemic. What does coronavirus mean to you, I asked him. "It means I won't get food." He said it simply, in innocence, and after that he even smiled. But in a few words he had captured the tragedy of our times



## THE HUMAN TOUCH WINS BOTH WAYS

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