

EXCLUSIVE FROM BRAZIL
PANDEMIC EXPOSES RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

MIGRANTS' EXODUS
A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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COMMUNAL TENSION
FOLLOWS SECOND COVID
WAVE IN BHATKAL

ACTOR JYOTHIKA
CHALLENGES MALE
DOMINANCE ON RETURN

AAROGYA SETU
THE BUGS THAT NEED FIXING

MAY 24, 2020

THE WEEK



COVID-19

THE CURIOUS CASE OF WEST BENGAL

**EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW**

SUKUMAR MUKHERJEE
CHIEF MINISTER'S HEALTH ADVISER

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Stop supporting China

The World Health Organization could have done a lot more to contain the virus in the initial stages, when it was spreading in China. Why is it so scared of China? The WHO’s biased attitude towards China is completely unacceptable, and it should stop parroting China’s stands once and for all (‘All ill, no will’, May 10).

There should be an independent, international inquiry on the handling of the Covid-19 crisis by the WHO. Like everyone else, the members of the WHO have to be concerned about China and the reckless manner in which it has handled Covid-19.

T.K. Krishnan,
On email.

We cannot believe everything that Donald Trump says, but there is no denying the fact that the WHO should have intervened at the right time. It should not have

trusted all that came from China in the beginning of the year. Yes, the WHO needs a comprehensive makeover, and at the earliest. China will continue

to hide things and will not cooperate with any international body, and that is a dilemma that the world faces. It is time India and other superpowers of the world intervened and cornered China. The government of India’s decision to make prior clearance mandatory for foreign investments from countries like China is a step in the right direction. Tit-for-tat, isn’t it?

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

At the time when the WHO has been dragged into an avoidable controversy by supercilious member-countries like the US and China, it is appropriate that your cover story brought out a calibrated story of what’s what and who’s who of the WHO. When the whole world is reeling under an unprecedented health hazard, the blame-game against the world health body is suicidal.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

Your cover story has, rightly, underlined the lack of autonomy,

the skewed funding system of the WHO, and the need for urgent strengthening of the body. Had the WHO informed and sounded an early alarm, the course of the crisis would have been quite different.

Owing to the influence of developed countries and undue political pressure, platforms like the WHO are found wanting in delivering the results expected of them.

Vijay Singh Adhikari,
On email.

I went through your cover story on the WHO in one go. If not for your cover story, a person like me who comes from a tier-two city can never judge the working of such a big name institution. I feel people should continue to ask questions to the WHO.

I must thank your team for bringing clear facts in such a grave situation. I look forward to more such fantastic cover stories.

Bhanwar Purohit,
Raipur, Chhattisgarh.

Open to the public
It is good to see higher

judiciary in the country turning digital, but security concerns have remained a cause for concern (‘Order online’, May 10). The Supreme Court and the high courts should have online hearing more often, and the judges and lawyers should get used to it.

More virtual courts should be set up in the days to come as that will help in bringing greater professionalism into the proceedings. It is important to open up such hearings for the public as they can keep a track of all important hearings.

Vrinda Gopi,
On email.

Enjoyable read
I enjoyed reading the column by

Swara Bhasker where she mentioned about her pets. I could relate to her (‘Bitter chocolate’, May 10). There are so many people that I know who are enjoying the lockdown in the company of their pets. Pets definitely keep you engaged, and you will never feel bored. For some, pets are like their children and they take care of them so much.

So many people, these days, mourn the death of their pet dogs on social media platforms. Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli had informed recently that his pet dog had passed away.

But, it is wrong to show the same emotions for both pets and family members.

Anuja
Chandrasekharan,
On email.

A poignant read
Last Word by Barkha Dutt was straightforward (May 10). The truth is there for all to see. Migrant workers were left to fend for themselves, until they decided to rally in different places in the country.

On numerous occasions, these people were treated as second-class citizens, which was unacceptable. The employers, agents and sponsors of these marginalised people reacted as if they did not exit. What a pity!

Venugopal,
Kollam, Kerala.

Just hype
Your story on online classrooms emphasised the need for the technology and its reach, but I feel schools are hyping up virtual classrooms (‘Screen taught’, May 3). Virtual classrooms are okay for high-school and college students, but it does not suit small children, who are known to even bond with their teachers.

A teacher not only guides students in their studies, but also helps shape their character.

K. Aravinda
Upadhyaya,
On email.

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■ **APERITIF** ■
THE BIG PICTURE

SAVING LACE

As the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the norms of social interaction and hygiene, masks are likely to remain a part of attire for a while. The mother and the child in the sculpture in Kolkata wear masks to create awareness.

PHOTO BY SALIL BERA

POINT BLANK



People want to move out of China. However, it is up to us to cajole, beg, attract and do whatever it takes to bring people here. We have to make business free from the clutches of ten-circulars-a-day babus, else nobody will come here.

Chetan Bhagat,
author

I think we might go back to the good old days when fielders would still stand in their designated positions after the fall of a wicket and clap.

Ajinkya Rahane,
cricketer, on matches post Covid-19

Epidemiologists morphed into economists. While the former could not flatten the disease curve, the latter flattened the economy....

Manish Tewari,
Congress leader

The treasurer of the world's wealthiest party [BJP], Mr Piyush Goyal, is the [Union] railway minister. Can't his party fund the migrant workers' journey back home?

Derek O' Brien,
Trinamool Congress leader

The ways of the prime minister must radically change. He needs to listen more attentively, and consult more widely. He must never again rush unilaterally and without thought into decisions whose consequences he has not anticipated.

Ramachandra Guha,
historian

WORD PLAY

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the relationship status and family life of many. Reports from China suggest that **covidivores** are soaring in the country, as the first wave of Covid-19 eased there. Covidivorce is a divorce initiated as a consequence of the couple spending a long period of time together in lockdown during the pandemic. Seems like covidivores also will not remain a problem limited to China.

MILESTONES

HEART FOR CHARITY

Tennis star Sania Mirza became the first Indian to win the Fed Cup Heart Award for her successful return to the court post pregnancy. Mirza announced that she will donate the award amount of \$2,000 to Telangana Chief Minister's Relief Fund.



FEMALE LEAD

Bank of Japan, the Japanese central bank, appointed Tokiko Shimizu, 55, as its first female executive director in its 138-year history. Japan ranks at the bottom among the G7 countries for gender equality, according to the World Economic Forum.



NEW EARTH

Researchers at the University of Canterbury have found a "one in a million" super-earth planet—both size and orbit comparable to that of Earth—towards the centre of Milky Way. The planet's host star is about 10 per cent the mass of the sun.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Ministers vs super-bureaucrat

People get "high" after consuming good quantities of alcohol, but ministers and the top bureaucrat of Punjab are in high temper over a discussion on liquor policy. Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal, who has led the ministerial revolt against Chief Secretary Karan Avtar Singh, however calls it a "high" policy debate, not an ego clash.

But the row over liquor licenses between ministers and Avtar Singh—who was heading the excise department—has given light entertainment in a state hit by lockdown. Chief Minister Amarinder Singh gently chided Badal and his colleagues for walking out of a liquor policy meeting. During the meeting, Avtar Singh felt that ministers were supporting liquor sellers, while the ministers accused the bureaucrat of owning a distillery through his son. The chief minister felt that the ministers should have asked the chief secretary to leave the room, as he is below the ministers in protocol.

The ministers said they would boycott the cabinet meeting if Avtar Singh is present. Amarinder Singh asked his favourite bureaucrat to take leave for half day when the cabinet was meeting. When the ministers attended but protested the behaviour of Avtar Singh, the leader asked them to dictate an "unofficial" resolution of their intention to boycott. But he also asked them to pass an "official" resolution that the chief minister alone will decide on liquor policy. Within an hour, Avtar Singh was back at the side of the chief minister. However to keep peace in cabinet, Avtar was divested of excise and taxation departments a day later.

In several states, bureaucrats close to chief ministers have caused resentment among ministers. In Odisha and Bihar, chief ministers Nitish Kumar and Naveen Patnaik have favoured such "super bureaucrats" with Rajya Sabha memberships.

In Haryana, Home and Health Minister Anil Vij—who has had differences with chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar—finds himself being overruled by the chief secretary on orders from above.

Under the government business transaction rules, if there is an irreconcilable difference on a subject between a minister and a departmental secretary, then the subject should go to the cabinet. At the Centre, the cabinet secretary is never the secretary-in-charge of a ministry and does not report to a minister. But in states, the chief secretary sometimes handles a department, and can have more than one boss. That is what has happened to Avtar Singh.

But there have been clashes in the Union cabinet, too. Deputy prime minister Devi Lal used to complain that prime minister V.P. Singh was using the cabinet secretary and other officials to thwart proposals from the agriculture ministry.

In 1994, there was a fierce exchange of words between the Union minister of state for food, Kalpnath Rai, and cabinet secretary Zafar Saifullah. The abnormal rise in sugar prices had become a crisis for the P. V. Narasimha Rao government. The civil supplies ministry proposed procurement of sugar at lower prices, which Rai opposed. Saifullah argued against Rai. The high-tempered Rai stormed out of the cabinet saying Saifullah and other officials were chaprasis (peons). The top bureaucrats were incensed and started a signature campaign.

Rao appointed a retired bureaucrat to hold an inquiry; when the uproar died down, he dropped Rai from the government. By then Saifullah, too, retired. In subsequent governments, food and civil supplies have been brought under one minister to avoid policy clashes supporting the producer and the consumer. Amarinder Singh would find his own solution to the "high" dispute at the pinnacle of the Punjab government.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

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FIGHT FOR REDEMPTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Gandhi siblings seem to be focusing on Amethi. In an effort to win the perception battle against MP Smriti Irani, Rahul has provided the constituency with 70,000 masks, 20,000 sanitisers, 10,000 soaps and ration. He also had a videoconference with the local unit of the party, where he inquired about the well-being of the people and said he would visit once the restrictions are lifted. Priyanka has offered to pay the travel fare for migrants from Amethi and Rae Bareilly constituencies. A political slugfest is in the offing, with the Congress running a social media campaign saying Irani has been busy playing Twitter *antakshari* during the lockdown.



EVASIVE MANOEUVRE

When Taiwan offered to gift one million masks to India, combined with a request to sponsor the entry of the tiny nation—which is at odds with China—into the WHO, the external affairs ministry found a diplomatic way out. As India does not deal with Taiwan on a government to government basis, the state-funded Indian Red Cross Society was asked to accept the masks and allow photos to be taken. Taiwan was informed there would be reciprocity through trade and industry, and not by immediately supporting its WHO membership. Meanwhile, Taiwan's anti-China government was happy with this 'deal' as Taiwan's goodwill gesture got publicity and mileage.

TRENDING TEACHERS

The trolls are having a field day in Kerala thanks to an order by the Kannur district collector, deputing school teachers for supervision at ration shops. It was done to ensure the proper distribution of ration to the deserving especially because more and more people have been flocking to ration shops amid the lockdown. The trolls are celebrating the order with memes based on scenes and characters from Malayalam movies.

Language teachers have been shown as correcting the customers' grammar and reciting poetry, while chemistry teachers refuse to dole out kerosene unless the cardholder can tell its pH value. Not surprisingly, mathematics teachers have been targeted the most.

SPIRIT OF ENTERPRISE

On May 7, liquor shops in most of Tamil Nadu reopened. But the tipplers in Chennai were disappointed as the shops in the metro remained closed. Those who tried to buy liquor from neighbouring districts found that the police were manning the district borders. But, that did not stop tipplers from trying to smuggle booze into Chennai. The cops stopped a car which claimed to carry "essential commodities". Strangely, all four men in the car were wearing overcoats in the sweltering heat. On inspecting the driver's overcoat, the cops found four quarter-litre bottles concealed in the inside pockets. Sure enough, the other three, too, had stuffed the 'essential commodity' in their jackets.

PRESENT AND OVERLOOKED

Mizoram Chief Minister Pu Zoramthanga cannot be blamed if he is feeling a bit left out. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's videoconferences with chief ministers, everyone except Zoramthanga and the Tamil Nadu and Kerala chief ministers speak in Hindi. The two southern chief ministers do not mind as they understand Hindi; they just respond in English. But, Zoramthanga does not understand Hindi. So, how does he cope? When his ministers asked him what was discussed at the latest videoconference, the jovial chief minister conceded: "I did not understand a thing; they were all talking in Hindi."



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

FORCING THE HAND

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has finally been elected to the legislative council. There were a few tense moments when the Congress decided to field two candidates. That would have taken the total number of candidates to 10 for the nine seats, necessitating voting by the 288 MLAs to choose the MLCs. The Shiv Sena wanted the chief minister to be elected unopposed. When Thackeray came to know about the Congress's plan, he said that he would not contest at all. It worked and the Congress withdrew one candidate.





Summer of terror

Indications are that Pakistan will continue to sponsor terrorism in Kashmir to keep the dispute alive internationally

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

THESE DAYS, PAKISTAN Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa is busy shuttling between the military offices in Karachi, the country's financial capital, and the army headquarters in Rawalpindi. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only hit Pakistan's economy but also turned international attention away from its favourite subject—Kashmir. Its army, therefore, has taken centre stage to meet the two challenges.

Even before the pandemic, Paki-

stan's economy had been witnessing a slump. There was pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global terror financing watchdog, which put Pakistan on the grey list and threatened sanctions. At the same time, terror outfits were growing desperate after India abrogated Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir on August 5, 2019.

Last October, Bajwa met business leaders and government finance officials in Karachi to discuss ways to

tackle the economic slowdown. The growing role of the military in the country's economic management became clear when the military issued a statement after the meeting.

National security was intimately linked to economy, said Bajwa, and to prosper, there should be a balance in security needs and economic growth.

In Rawalpindi, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence met top terror commanders like Jaish-e-Mohammed's operational commander



BACK TO BAD DAYS

(Left) Officers and soldiers carrying the coffins of slain CRPF personnel; (above) slain Hizbul Mujahideen commander Riyaz Naikoo

Mufti Abdul Rauf Asghar, brother of JeM founder Maulana Masood Azhar, in December. The commanders were told that the government will ease restrictions on terror outfits.

Months later, when the world was busy fighting Covid-19, Pakistan quietly removed around 1,800 terrorists from its watch-list. As the pandemic threatens to disrupt Pakistan's economic revival plans, Bajwa and his men are desperate to succeed in their military plans to safeguard the military budget. Recently, Pakistan's military spokesman tweeted that the "voluntary cut" in the military budget would not be at the expense of security. For a country that has long been using terrorism as an instrument of state policy, it did not take too long to put those plans into action.

Intelligence reports revealed that a dozen launching pads were kept active in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir during winter to facilitate early entry of terrorists into the Valley. The pads, reportedly, are: Halmatn, Nekrum, Taobat, Suti, Ziarat, Sonar,

Dakki, Sharda, Rata Pani, Dudhnial, Kasim-2 and Leepa Chham. The ceasefire violations since last August were reportedly being used to infiltrate terrorists. Official records showed that there have been 17 ceasefire violations this year (one in January, seven in February, three in March and six in April).

Latest intelligence inputs, accessed by THE WEEK, revealed that the launch pads housed 450 terrorists, of which 380 were Pakistan nationals. It is also learnt that Bajwa visited the Line of Control on April 30 to take stock of the preparations and weapons.

Official sources say that most of the terrorists have already made their way into Kashmir. According to latest inputs, there are around 240 terrorists in Kashmir; 120 are Pakistan nationals, with 60 each from the Lashkar-e-Taiba and JeM. On May 2, two militants engaged security forces for 12 hours in Handwara in north Kashmir, resulting in the killing of four Army personnel and a police sub-inspector. Two days later, three CRPF personnel were killed in another encounter in the same area. While security forces avenged the Handwara horror by killing Hizbul Mujahideen commander Riyaz Naikoo, it might not ensure a lull in violence in the Valley.

"It is unlikely that Pakistan will give up using terrorism as an instrument of policy, and as long as that continues it will be difficult for India to maintain peace in the Valley," said Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former ambassador to the US.

Security sources said that the ISI was sending terrorists from various tanzeems (outfits) as a single group to increase infiltration. A case in point was the encounter in Dangerpora in which two terrorists, one from Hizbul and the other from JeM, were killed. Also, keeping in line with the Rawalpindi plan to underplay the "state support" in terror attacks, new

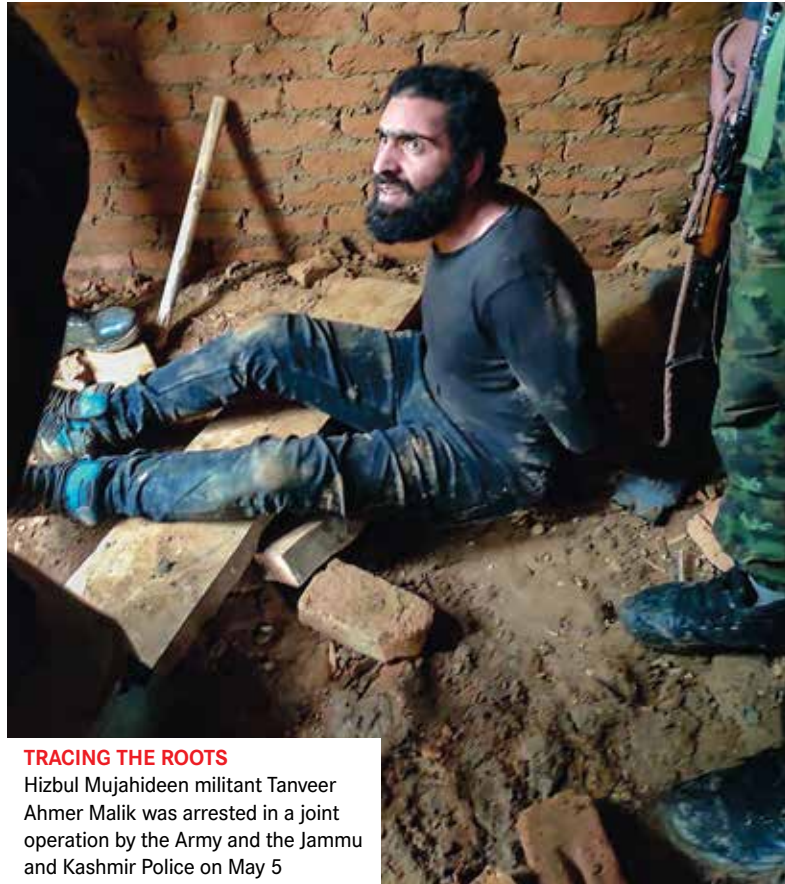
local outfits like The Resistance Front and Tehreek-e-Millat-e-Islami have been floated to mislead the FATF and the international community, said an intelligence official.

"The irony is that while Pakistan cannot attain its objective of internationalising the Kashmir issue without giving up terrorism, India also cannot settle things in Kashmir without winning over the people of the state that has been downgraded to a Union territory," Haqqani told THE WEEK.

While the Modi government and security forces are trying to win the hearts of Kashmiris through political and humanitarian efforts, Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane said, "The onus remains with Pakistan to bring peace in the region. Unless Pakistan gives up its policy of state-sponsored terrorism, we will continue to respond appropriately and with precision."

Intelligence reports revealed that the Pakistan army has deployed heavy artillery regiments close to the LoC and is not shying away from targeting civilians. Their use of mortars and artillery guns during ceasefire violations is keeping Indian security forces on their toes.

However, the Indian Army has chalked out a summer offensive. It has activated the anti-infiltration grid, which involves reoccupying posts along the LoC that were vacated in winter owing to the heavy snow. Local formation commanders have been tasked to take the lead in intelligence-based operations. While the terrain makes it impossible to physically monitor and prevent infiltration, intelligence-based interdiction and real-time coordination with the police are proving to be effective. While the resumption of internet and mobile services in Kashmir has provided security agencies with good intelligence inputs, it has also helped terrorists communicate with their handlers in Pakistan. Another



TRACING THE ROOTS

Hizbul Mujahideen militant Tanveer Ahmer Malik was arrested in a joint operation by the Army and the Jammu and Kashmir Police on May 5

challenge is the overground network that provides logistical support, safe houses, funds and weapons for attacks.

“The counterterrorism response by the Indian Army is not in isolation, but an aggregation of capabilities of all agencies involved directly or indirectly. Options short of war are available to us to provide a befitting response to our adversaries,” said an officer.

Moreover, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval is not just watching the developments in Karachi and Rawalpindi but also Islamabad. The recent appointment of Lt Gen (retd) Asim Saleem Bajwa as information adviser to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan is being seen as a sign of the growing trust deficit between the military establishment and the civilian government. The military es-

tablishment is still licking its wounds from the diplomatic humiliation at the United Nations General Assembly last September, as Khan failed to garner any support against India’s decision to abrogate Article 370.

New Delhi is also keenly watching the growing unrest in PoK. Home ministry sources said that the people of PoK are appealing to the Indian government to intervene and safeguard their human rights.

“Under the guise of controlling the law and order situation, the Pakistani army has decided to send heavy contingents of troops to Gilgit-Baltistan,” said Dr Amjad Ayub Mirza, a human rights activist. Mirza, who hails from Mirpur in PoK and now lives in exile in the UK, expressed worry over the April 30 order of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, which allowed the federal government to set up a care-

taker government in Gilgit-Baltistan and conduct provincial assembly elections.

“In anticipation that a general election will pave way for the formation of a pro-Pakistani military establishment, the doors to declare Gilgit-Baltistan the fifth province of the country through a parliamentary bill will be wide open,” Mirza told THE WEEK. He added that it was time for the Indian government to reclaim its territories from Pakistan. “It can only be done by bringing the Pakistani military to the negotiating table,” he said.

And, New Delhi is upping the ante. The Indian Meteorological Department recently included Gilgit-Baltistan and Muzaffarabad under PoK in its forecast list, a move that miffed Pakistan. “This is another mischievous Indian action in support of a spurious claim and further evidence of India’s irresponsible behaviour,” said Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson Aisha Farooqui in a statement on May 8.

But as Taha Siddiqui, an award-winning Pakistani journalist living in exile in Paris since 2018, said, India needs to look beyond this summer as “the political and social climate in the region has changed since the abrogation of Article 370.” “Today, Pakistan is increasingly focusing on exploiting the local sentiments of the youth, especially those who feel alienated by Delhi’s recent steps,” he said. “Through social media and internet, Pakistan is brainwashing these youngsters, training them and providing funds and weapons.”

According to Siddiqui, be it summer or winter, Kashmir will continue to boil until India aligns the interest of the Kashmiri people with that of the nation. Till then, Bajwa and his military will continue to steer Pakistan’s defence and foreign policies to run its war economy.

With Pradip Sagar

MANI-FESTO

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR



Gujarat model of failure

On May 9, *The Indian Express* carried two apparently unrelated Covid-19 stories on its front page. One reports the first information report filed by the Delhi Police against Maulana Muhammad Saad Kandhalvi, head of the Tablighi Jamaat, under section 304 IPC—“culpable homicide not amounting to murder”—for “allegedly going ahead with a gathering of around 2,000 people at the mosque”.

The other, under the headline ‘Tracking India’s Covid Curve’, says Gujarat has recorded 7,013 cases of Covid-19 infections, the second highest in India after Maharashtra, higher even than Delhi and Tamil Nadu, the other badly affected states. As the same chart gives the “doubling rate” in Gujarat as 12.38 days, by the time you get to read this column, the number of Covid-19 cases in Gujarat would have topped 10,000 and be inching its way towards 14,000. The same newspaper had reported on May 6 that “Ahmedabad has approximately 70 per cent” of the state’s Covid-19 cases. Add its sister-city of Gandhinagar, and one finds that the twin cities account for some three-quarters of Gujarat’s extraordinarily high rate of infection.

Cut to Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar, February 24, 2020. Does anyone need reminding that on that day US President Donald Trump and his first lady landed at Ahmedabad expecting to be received by seven million cheering Modi-bhaks? That was a hallucination. Newspaper and TV reports of the welcome place the number of those lining the streets, pushing against each other, and cheek by jowl at around one lakh. When the Trumps eventually reached the Sardar Patel Stadium, the “world’s largest cricket stadium” at Motera, Ahmedabad, estimates of the crowd packing the overflowing stadium (damn social distancing) ranged from one lakh to 1.25 lakh plus uncounted tens of thousands milling around outside.

At this point, it would be useful to sit back and paraphrase the Delhi Police’s indictment of Maulana Saad, charged with “gathering around 2,000 people in a mosque” compared with gathering around 2,00,000 people in a stadium. Judge for yourself after looking to the timeline of the commencement and spread of the pandemic:

December 30, 2019: Dr Li Wenliang sounds earliest warning of something seriously amiss in Wuhan, China.

January 20, 2020: First confirmed case in the US

January 22, 2020: The World Health Organization delegation visits Wuhan and concludes that “human-to-human transmission” of virus is taking place in the city.

January 26, 2020: President Xi Jinping, at the highest level in China, publicly confirms the world is now in the grip of a global horror not seen since the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919.

January 30, 2020: The WHO proclaims the outbreak as a public health emergency of global concern; first confirmed case in India.

There were still 25 days to go for Namaste Trump. Would not the prudent thing have been to set an example to the whole world by calling off, or at least postponing, the proposed Motera tamasha?

Yet, Narendra Modi and Trump went ahead without heed to what would be the inevitable outcome of such a huge gathering in the midst of a “global health emergency”. Indeed, Trump was so aware that the US was in the thick of the danger zone that within 24 hours of his return to the White House, on February 25, he sent a request to the US Congress for “emergency funds for coronavirus response”.

So, is this “Gujarat model” the explanation for Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar becoming one of the reddest of red spots?



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

Aiyar is a former Union minister and social commentator.



MOUNTING TROUBLE
Tanzeem members with doctors outside the hospital

Trust deficit

A second wave of Covid-19 infections has created an air of mistrust and reignited communal tensions in Bhatkal

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

ON MAY 1, an 18-year-old woman from a prominent Muslim business family in Bhatkal's Madina Colony was rushed to the taluk hospital with high fever. Four days later, she (P659) tested positive for Covid-19 and, subsequently, 27 of her primary and secondary contacts tested positive. The sudden surge in Covid-19 cases has triggered panic as Bhatkal, in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district, had been free of cases since the first 12—who had travelled to Dubai—reported in March.

P659's infection might have originated in First Neuro hospital in Mangaluru in the neighbouring Dak-

shina Kannada district. P659's elder sister and brother-in-law had taken their son to the hospital in April; they were issued emergency passes by the district administration. At least two people who visited the hospital in April had died of Covid-19.

The second wave of Covid-19 cases paved the way for fresh communal tensions and trust deficit. It has happened before; caused by the terror links of Iqbal and Riyaz Shahbandari—the infamous Bhatkal brothers—and terror convict Yasin Bhatkal (Mohammed Ahmed Siddibappa). In 2017, Shafi Armar, another Bhatkal local was declared a

global terrorist. These developments led to the scrutiny of the sleepy coastal town by national intelligence and anti-terror agencies. The Navayath Muslim community (to which the Bhatkal brothers belong) faced hostility. Navayaths are proud of their Arab origins and preserve this link through trade and marriage. The enterprising community control the local economy and real estate and a majority of Hindus depend on them for livelihood.

Now, the "casual" response of the community to Covid-19 has upset other local communities, pushing the district administration to take strin-

gent containment measures in the town. On May 6, BJP MP Anant Kumar Hegde went into a huddle with senior officials in Bhatkal. After the meeting, the administration sealed the Madina Colony and divided the town into five zones. It withdrew passes, deployed men and drones for surveillance and made arrangements for door delivery of essentials. Other safety measures included door-to-door Covid-19 screening and the mandate that only government ambulances were allowed to ply. However, some steps were rather unusual. Like shutting down medical shops and the deployment of two constables each at the three Muslim burial grounds.

While Hegde refused to brief the media, official sources confirmed that the MP had sought a report on 22 "suspicious deaths and quiet burials" during the lockdown. He reportedly insisted that the health department should be notified about every death. As per the new directions, the throat swab from the deceased person is to be collected and

tested to rule out Covid-19 before the body is buried. The tehsildar banned all private doctors from treating patients. A homeopathy doctor was caught after a taluk officer returning from work saw a sick man on the road. He told the officer that he was being treated for fever and cough by the doctor. Soon, the doctor and 121 of his contacts were quarantined and their swabs collected. Meanwhile, locals claim the doctor is related to the Bhatkal brothers.

Dr Mohammad Haneef Shabab, Unani doctor and former general secretary of the Majlis-e-Islah-o-Tanzeem (highest religious body of Muslims in the area) defends the doctor in quarantine saying that he is a veteran who has earned the goodwill of people from all communities. "Like many across the world, he, too, might have fallen prey to a misinformation campaign saying that Covid-19 is harmless and is just like seasonal flu," says Shabab. "The Tanzeem is trying hard to change the mindset of people and has released a video warning people about Covid-19."

The saffron brigade suspects that the "lack of cooperation" is intentional. Local BJP leader Govind Naik says: "There was a sudden increase in the sale of fever, cough and cold tablets. The cloth used for burial was being secretly sold from inside closed shops. There is no smoke without fire. Local leaders also say that it is difficult to track secret burials because the Tanzeem controls the municipality."

Shabab says the right-wing activists are wrongly blaming the Muslim community for the Covid-19 outbreak. He says it was never the practice to inform the administration about deaths as soon as they happened. "The dead are usually buried and it is reported in a day or two to avail the death certificate," he says. Tanzeem members have voiced their concern over "targeting of Muslims" under the guise of Covid-19 contain-

ment measures. A Tanzeem member who requested anonymity, points out some of the administration's failures: "Why did the taluk administration not track down people who availed medical emergency passes? The doctor who is under quarantine ran the clinic in the heart of the town. Why did the police not shut it down earlier? Who stopped them from monitoring sale of over-the-counter drugs?" He adds that pass holders have been harassed at check posts.

"The community is upset to hear that the 22 dead bodies will be exhumed for testing," says Shabab. "We have locked burial grounds, but are against the deployment of beat constables. Will they deploy police at the Hindu cremation grounds?"

Sensing the trust deficit, district superintendent of police Shivaprakash Devaraju, in his appeal to people said that they should not take it as an insult if a sample is collected for testing. Bhatkal MLA Sunil Naik, also of the BJP, is a worried man. "The cases are soaring and unless the people cooperate, the containment of the virus is impossible," he says. "[But,] I feel the people are slowly getting convinced that Covid-19 is a real threat." He says that the lack of Covid-19 testing facility in the district is affecting contact tracing and isolation.

Bhatkal, which witnessed communal riots in 1993, and two high profile murders of Hindu leaders—sitting MLA Dr U. Chittarajan (1996) and Thimmappa Naik (2004)—also saw the Tanzeem grow stronger and the saffron brigade struggle to safeguard its political space. But, in recent times, the right-wing has returned strongly, resulting in a silent power struggle with the Tanzeem. Now, Covid-19 has become a stimulus for further polarisation; the hostilities have reached such a point that even relief and ration was distributed selectively. ●



Mean manoeuvre

Retired officers blame the Army top brass for the mass failure of women cadets at OTA Chennai, which came soon after women were allowed permanent commission

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

THE PASSING OUT parade at Officers Training Academy (OTA) Chennai in March was marred by an unusually high failure rate of women cadets. The number of women cadets failing the physical tests went up soon after the Supreme Court ruled in favour of permanent commission to female officers in the armed forces.

Since 1992, when women were

allowed to serve in the military through Short Service Commission (SSC) at OTA, they have nearly always cleared their physical tests—except last year, when three cadets failed the mandatory tests. However, in the last OTA batch, at least 13 women failed the horizontal rope test, while three others could not complete their 5km running task. And, perhaps for the first time, two

women are likely to be withdrawn from the academy, after failing to clear the training course in two terms. Every cadet gets a maximum of two chances to complete the training.

“It is an aberration and a matter of serious concern,” said Lieutenant General (retired) Bobby Mathew, who was commandant of OTA Chennai. “Normally, relegation is way below 10 per cent of a batch and that, too, mostly happens with gentlemen cadets. Women cadets usually fail on medical or disciplinary grounds.”

There are 1,550 women officers in the Indian Army. And the ratio of lady cadets admitted to those passing out is approximately 1:0.99, according to Army headquarters. Many serving and retired women officers

SYSTEM FAILURE

The Army is downplaying the significance of the high failure rate of women cadets at OTA

are suspicious about the timing of the mass failure and fear that it may be linked to the Supreme Court’s landmark judgment on February 17 making women officers eligible for permanent commissions and command posts. After a long legal battle, women officers are now on par with male officers in matters of promotions, benefits and pensions.

Capt (retired) Shweta Misra, who served in the Army Ordnance Corps, said the Army was trying to change its standards after losing the legal battle. “After the verdict, we have seen statements from senior officers including Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat that standards of women officers would have to be brought on par with men if they wanted to be treated equally. It must

have percolated down through official channels as seen from the results in the academy. It does an injustice to women officers,” said Misra.

An officer who was involved in training at OTA said the Army used to have a separate criteria for physical training of women cadets. “Up until two years ago, women cadets never used to fail on physical fitness grounds,” said the officer. “Generally, male instructors are lenient with women cadets.”

In response to THE WEEK’s query, the Army headquarters said there had always been variations in the numbers of men and women cadets being relegated on various grounds such as medical reasons, discipline, or not meeting academic or physical standards. “These are due to inherent variations in the physical fitness levels of the intake, different response of human bodies to stress and training environment, academic pursuits in an environment of higher stress.”

But retired officers do not agree. “Despite repeated rulings by the courts, the top hierarchy of the Army has never accepted women officers and they are finding ways to prevent women from going up the ladder,” said Major (retired) Chhavi Saxena. She also blamed poor training mechanisms at OTA for the failure of women cadets.

Maj (retired) Asha Shinde Alagappa, a fourth generation officer, said there was no difference in the training imparted to female officers. “At the academy, men and women are treated equally in everything, including their haircuts. All cadets pass physical fitness tests and people are relegated only on medical or disciplinary grounds.” She said the government was spending nearly one lakh rupee a month on a cadet and the relegations were a huge loss to the exchequer. “The Army is already short of officers and if we do such things, it is very unfortunate. I am sure the top hierarchy of the Army is behind this

move,” said Alagappa.

At the academy, there is a marked difference in the physical standard requirements of men and women. For instance, while men need to complete a 2.4km-run in 10 minutes, women get 15 minutes. In the battle physical efficiency test, ‘excellent timing’ for men is 24 minutes and 40 seconds while for women it is 31 minutes and 30 seconds. “To clear the physical fitness test, women cadets get multiple chances, including mercy attempts. And the instructors are more lenient with women cadets,” said an officer involved in training.

The Army headquarters, meanwhile, clarified that no changes were made to the physical fitness criteria of women cadets. It said significantly lower physical standards were set for women because of the “employment differences” between men and women. The Army headquarters, however, noted that the outgoing batch at OTA Chennai had close to 50 women cadets, which it said was “unusual”. Downplaying the significance of the high failure rate, it said the situation was not alarming and that the failed cadets would be given adequate opportunities to prepare for and pass the applicable physical and academic benchmarks.

An officer, however, told THE WEEK that the unusual failure rates at OTA was indeed influenced by the Supreme Court verdict. “We also get affected by what is happening outside,” he said. “The Supreme Court verdict came barely a week before the mercy attempts at OTA. There was chest-thumping on television channels by women officers with an arrogance that they were no less competent than their male colleagues. They said they underwent similar training like us. It might have changed the mindsets of the instructors.”

Bridge over troubled water

Aarogya Setu raises troubling questions about the future of privacy and civil rights in Covid-struck India

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

SUDHEER, an artist, lives in Baghban apartments in Delhi's northern suburb of Rohini. The apartment compound was declared a containment zone and sealed off after a couple there contracted Covid-19 and died on May 4. The couple's children were quarantined, but their test results were yet to come in.

A worried Sudheer downloaded Aarogya Setu ('bridge to health'), a mobile app developed by the government to trace the spread of Covid-19 and alert users when and if their contacts test positive. He walked around the compound to test the app. But, even when Sudheer was in the area where the couple had died, Aarogya Setu displayed his status in happy, verdant letters—'You are safe.' 'Many neighbours also got the same result,' he said. 'What is the point of this app then?'

Sudheer's story gives ammunition to supporters and critics of Aarogya Setu. The critics call it a tool for government surveillance, while supporters say the lack of complete coverage—less than 10 per cent of the population have the app—is what is limiting its efficacy.

Since its launch on April 2, Aarogya Setu has been the government's de facto tech tool against Covid-19. It has been downloaded more than 100 million times, but the news it

has been making are not all good. 'Aarogya Setu is a sophisticated surveillance system with no institutional oversight, raising serious data security and privacy concerns,' Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on May 2, a day after the Union government made the app mandatory for people in containment zones and all government and private employees who were preparing to return to work after the lockdown was eased on May 4. 'Technology can help keep us safe; but fear must not be leveraged to track citizens without their consent,' said Rahul.

A few days later, French ethical hacker Robert Baptiste, known as Elliot Alderson on social media, exposed what he said to be a series of security flaws in the app. This related to the number of times the

The app is being aggressively promoted. Some states have made it mandatory for those who want to cross inter-state boundaries.

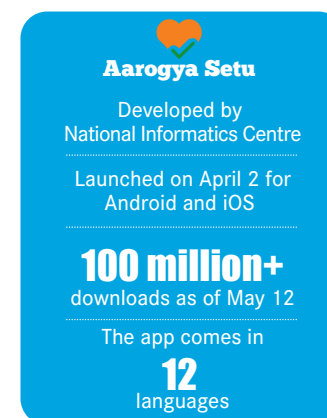
app fetched the user's location and an option that enabled users to change latitude, longitude and radius parameters to get statistics from different locations. 'The privacy of 90 million Indians is at stake,' Baptiste said.

Ravi Shankar Prasad, Union minister of electronics and information technology, soon issued a denial. He said the app was 'absolutely robust, safe and secure in terms of privacy protection and data security'. Authorities also released a six-page document detailing measures taken to protect privacy. It said every user was assigned a 'random anonymous device ID' and that all info from users were deleted after a specific time. Location data was used only 'in case you test positive, and only to map places visited in the past 14 days,' said the document.

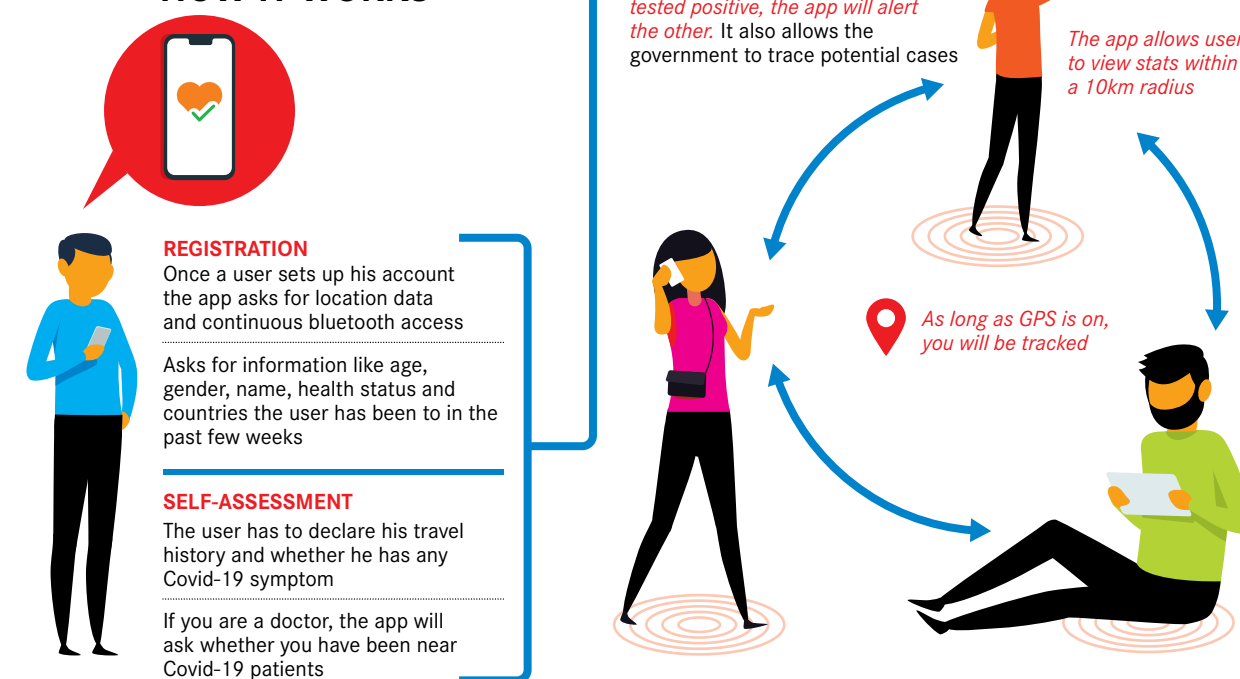
The app is being aggressively promoted. Some states have made it mandatory for those who want to cross inter-state boundaries. Authorities in Noida have ordered that anyone found without the app in a public place be fined ₹1,000 or jailed for six months. The IT department in Tamil Nadu has asked all government employees to download the app, while Indian Railways has made it compulsory for passengers boarding special trains.

But the push is not backed by any ordinance or legislation. The order making Aarogya Setu mandatory was issued by an executive committee constituted under the provisions of the 2005 National Disaster Management Act, which gives the Union government sweeping powers and

APPARENT FLAWS



HOW IT WORKS



CONCERNS

- Ambiguous privacy policy and security practices
- Not clear whether it is compliant with the Information Technology Act, 2000, and IT Rules, 2011
- Not clear what it does with the data that is collected every 15 minutes and is stored in the server. There are fears that the app will become a perfect tool for surveillance
- The app keeps its source code secret, which is not considered advisable



has been in force since the lockdown began. Justice B.N. Srikrishna, head of the committee that submitted a draft data protection bill last year, said the notifications making Aarogya Setu compulsory was “not backed by law”.

Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a Delhi-based digital liberties NGO, has taken the matter to the parliamentary committee on IT, headed by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor. “[There is a] lack of clear basis or legislative framework for contact-tracing apps such as Aarogya Setu,” said Sidharth Deb, the IFF’s policy and parliamentary counsel. “[It is a] privacy minefield.”

According to him, Aarogya Setu “by design is aligned with the Chinese model of surveillance, which is in clear contravention of existing human rights benchmarks”. “India is the only democratic country in the world to make its app mandatory,” he said. (The UK’s House of Commons does not recommend the use of such apps, while countries like Australia have not made their use mandatory.)

Though Aarogya Setu was released by the National Informatics Centre, the government calls its development a “public-private” partnership. The IFF says the IT ministry’s response to queries regarding the app has been rather vague. “For example, the source code is not open-source and there is a lack of clarity on contract conditions and service rules for volunteers developing it,” said Deb.

NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant said Aarogya Setu was India’s attempt to leverage technology to fight Covid-19. “The app is privacy-first by design,” he said.

Kazim Rizvi, founder of the think tank The Dialogue and co-chair (public policy) of the Indian National Bar Association, said the use of Aarogya Setu was warranted. “Real-time response mechanisms require real-time insights,” he said. He pointed out that even the Supreme Court’s landmark judgment in 2017 that made privacy a fundamental right had provisions to limit the scope of privacy. “The judgement lays down three key tests to reasonably restrict privacy—necessity, proportionality and legality.”

Rizvi’s suggestion: Bring an ordinance or legislation to “give a stronger legal footing to the use of this application”.

Deb, however, wants people to wake up to the dangers of letting it happen. “The public must understand that if they do not speak up, these systems can become permanent; they cannot be rolled back at a later juncture,” he said. “[We] must tell the government that it cannot have carte blanche access to our private lives.”

PMO BEAT

R. PRASANNAN



Blundering in the Himalayas

If there is one poem that all diplomats should be made to read, it is Robert Frost’s Mending Wall. It is about a wall that ran between the poet’s apple orchard and his neighbour’s pine farm. The rubble on the wall often came loose in winter, and the neighbour insisted on mending it every spring.

Frost may have inspired our first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru with his “miles to go” lines, but from Mending Wall, it appears he was as lazy as a toad. He just could not fathom why the wall had to be kept intact. After all, “my apple trees will never get across, and eat the cones under his pines.” Neither of them had cows that would stray into the other’s farm. Yet, the neighbour insisted and doggedly repaired the wall every year, always saying “good fences make good neighbours.”

India has been a bit like Frost—neglecting the work on our boundaries. And Nepal has been like the neighbour—insisting on mending them. Or so it seems from what Nepali diplomats say.

India and Nepal have been good friends most of the time (except on rare occasions such as when Hrithik Roshan opens his mouth, or S. Jaishankar dictates articles of other people’s constitutions). Like all good neighbours all over the world, the two countries have been having minor border brawls on occasions—mainly over the Kalapani issue that is now more than two centuries old. But the feud rarely came in the way of trade, travel or even troop recruitment of Nepali Gorkhas into the Indian Army.

During his 2014 visit to Kathmandu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed with his counterpart Sushil Koirala that their foreign secretaries would “work on outstanding boundary issues, including Kalapani and Susta”. The Nepalis say they have since been asking for a date, but Indian diplomats have been dragging their feet.

Meanwhile, our border road-builders, who

work under the defence ministry, have been busy as bees. Wanting to do their bit for our pilgrims’ progress to Kailash-Mansarovar, they have been building a shortcut at 17,000ft from Dharchula in Uttarakhand to Lipulekh on the Tibet border. Not only did they build much of the road, but also got their minister Rajnath Singh to e-open it on May 8.

Hardly had Rajnath signed out of the weblink when all hell broke loose in Kathmandu. The road has been built through our land, protested Nepal’s Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali. He summoned the new Indian ambassador, Vinay Mohan Kwatra, and gave him an earful. That was

quite an affront, especially since some of Kwatra’s predecessors had behaved much like viceroys, as former foreign secretary Jagat Mehta had admitted once.

For all we know, the Nepalis may be seeing ghosts where there are none. The road may actually be running through our apple orchard, and not their pine farm. Even

so, should we not have, as a good neighbour and the bigger of the two, convinced the Nepalis of that?

Now the South Block says, we will talk after the lockdown is lifted. But the Nepalis are not listening. They are thinking of sending armed guards to the disputed stretch.

A minor crisis! But one that could have been avoided.

Tailpiece: The first European who explored Mansarovar, William Moorcroft, had also taken the Uttarakhand route. He travelled all across the Himalayas, often in disguise, in the early 1800s, seeking good horses for the East India Company and pashmina goats to be taken to England.

But he blundered in his pashmina venture. Having bought hundreds of goats, he shipped the he-goats in one ship and the she-goats in another. Sadly, the ship with the she-goats sank.

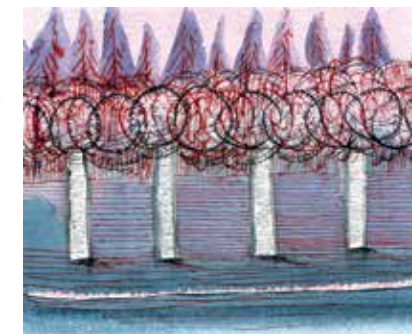


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Risk and return

Undeterred by the challenges posed by Covid-19, Uddhav Thackeray shows that he is a savvy political operator

BY DNYANESH JATHAR AND POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

ON MAY 11, while speaking at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's videoconference, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray asked the Centre to take a cautious approach while lifting the nationwide lockdown. With the number of Covid-19 cases nearing 25,000 and deaths crossing 800, Maharashtra continues to be the worst-hit state in the country and Uddhav does not want to take any chances.

Over 60 per cent of the cases are in Mumbai, followed closely by Pune and Thane. Dr Pradip Awate, state disease surveillance officer, said the very nature of the Mumbai-Pune-Thane triangle, had made it vulnerable. "Mumbai, the country's economic capital, witnesses a high volume of interstate and international movement. It has a population density of 20,000 people per square kilometre, with a huge proportion of them living in slums. So the high numbers are not surprising."

Critics say there are frequent flip-flops in testing protocols and in procedures for reporting deaths. Mumbai now tests only symptomatic patients and high-risk cases, saying it helps in better utilisation of manpower and resources. "The BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corpo-

ration) has chosen its own testing criteria, turning down the protocol laid down by the Indian Council of Medical Research. This will not only show a false decrease in the number of cases, but also spread the infection rapidly," said health care activist Dr Amol Annadate. "The BMC is not recording Covid-19 deaths which are related to comorbidities like renal diseases, diabetes, cancer and heart disease. This will lead to an 85 per cent decrease in the number of deaths as maximum deaths are from comorbid conditions."

The Maharashtra government is already under pressure with the Union government reprimanding it for the rising number of active cases inside the containment zones in Mumbai and for not following its directives about contact tracing and door-to-door surveillance. On his first day in office, Iqbal Singh Chahal, who on May 8 replaced Praveen Pardeshi as BMC commissioner, emphasised the importance of ramping up testing. Some officials and public health experts believe that the rising number of cases is the result of increased testing. "As testing is increased, with follow-up contact tracing, more cases are being reported, and we may be getting a truer picture of the actual

disease burden," said Anant Bhan, researcher on global health. Dr Om Shrivastav, infectious diseases expert and a member of Maharashtra's Covid-19 task force, said the numbers would stay high for a while before it starts getting better. "It is a new virus and it is tricky to know how it will behave. We should not be focusing on numbers," said Shrivastav.

Another problem that hurts Maharashtra's fight against the pandemic is the acute shortage of health care professionals. Resident doctors and even MBBS students are being pushed to the frontlines. "I am only a second-year student and I have been assigned to treat Covid-19 patients. I sometimes do not know what to do," said a junior resident.

The mounting troubles, however, have not affected Uddhav's popularity. He has made it clear that it is not the time to play politics, even while

proving himself to be a savvy political operator. When his chief ministership was under threat after his election to the legislative council ran into trouble, Uddhav did not hesitate to call up Modi for help. The gamble worked and the chief minister is all set to enter the upper chamber on May 21. Uddhav shunted out BMC commissioner Pardeshi after the Union health ministry reportedly expressed dissatisfaction over his handling of the pandemic. He demanded strict action against senior IPS officer Amitabh Gupta for allowing controversial businessmen Kapil and Dheeraj Wadhawan, who are facing probe in the Yes Bank scam, to travel despite lockdown restrictions. Gupta was sent on compulsory leave and an inquiry was ordered against him. In both cases, Uddhav was keen to send across a strong message to the bureaucracy.

A senior Congress legislator said Uddhav's popularity remained unaffected because the vocal middle class was not affected much by the pandemic. "Most cases are coming from slums and low income colonies. The middle class, which lives in apartment complexes, is by and large unaffected." But he has not completely forgotten the poor. When Covid-19 began spreading rapidly, he brought down the rates of the popular Shiv Bhojan meal from ₹10 to ₹5. "Uddhav's entire messaging is focused on conveying facts to people and urging them to follow the measures initiated by the government. Teamwork among three alliance partners—the Shiv Sena, the NCP and the Congress—has also improved," said the Congress legislator.

The BJP, however, is not im-

pressed. Madhav Bhandari, chief spokesperson for the party, said the people were frustrated. "The government announced the other day that it was starting transport service to send people to their home districts," he said. "But the decision was reversed overnight. People were not informed and they flocked to bus stands in large numbers." Bhandari said such flip-flops angered people and the BJP was not protesting only because it was a responsible opposition.

Senior political analyst Prakash Akolkar said Uddhav's image as a moderate, mild mannered person had helped him so far. "People think of him as an elder brother in the family. But it will not help him for long," said Akolkar. "Uddhav's speeches have started sounding empty. He needs to keep bureaucrats under control and show them who is the boss." ●



MOVING
FORWARD
Uddhav Thackeray

GETTY IMAGES

RACE OF DEATH

The pandemic has brought
to the fore Brazil's own
brand of apartheid



BY JENNIFER ALISA SANDERS



WHERE ANGELS DARE

Nurses wearing protective face masks participate in a protest with signs bearing the names of health care professionals who died of Covid-19 in Brasilia



Bats did not bring Covid-19 to Brazil, the deadly virus came through the noses, lungs and throats of revellers eager for the Carnival. It was carried by upper-class Brazilians who had the means to escape to Milan, Aspen or Rome during the world's biggest street festival. The arrival of the virus was not a surprise as we watched the news from Wuhan and YouTube videos of abandoned Italian streets, wondering if local governments would cancel the Carnival this year. They did not, and this country of 211 million saw more than 27 million people, from across Brazil and the world, take to its packed streets for seven days. And that is how Brazil, now projected to be the epicentre of the pandemic, became our collective nightmare. Added to the challenges every country is facing with lock-

downs, illness, death and economic collapse, Covid-19 has thrown us off a cliff and into the chasm that is Brazil's great social, economic and racial divide—our peculiar brand of tropical apartheid.

I am not Brazilian. I am an African American singer who fell in love with this amazing country and moved here two decades ago. I live in what many refer to as "Black Rome", the city of Salvador in the state of Bahia. Brazil received 40 per cent of all Africans who were enslaved and shipped as cargo to North America, the Caribbean and South America to provide the free labour that created great wealth for European merchants and nobles. This, unfortunately, is the story of the whole "New World".

As Brazil's first capital, Salvador and the surrounding rich farmland received huge numbers of enslaved Africans. Today, their descendants make up roughly 82 per cent of the city's population, while the national

UNMASKING THE REALITY

African descendants in Brazil are hit hard by the pandemic, which has thrown light on racial inequalities in the country

average is 56 per cent. Most of them live in poverty, and they are seeing the highest mortality rates. Covid-19 has no racial or economic divide. There is simply the opportunity for transmission and infection in the midst of poverty, malnutrition, dense population and lack of sanitation.

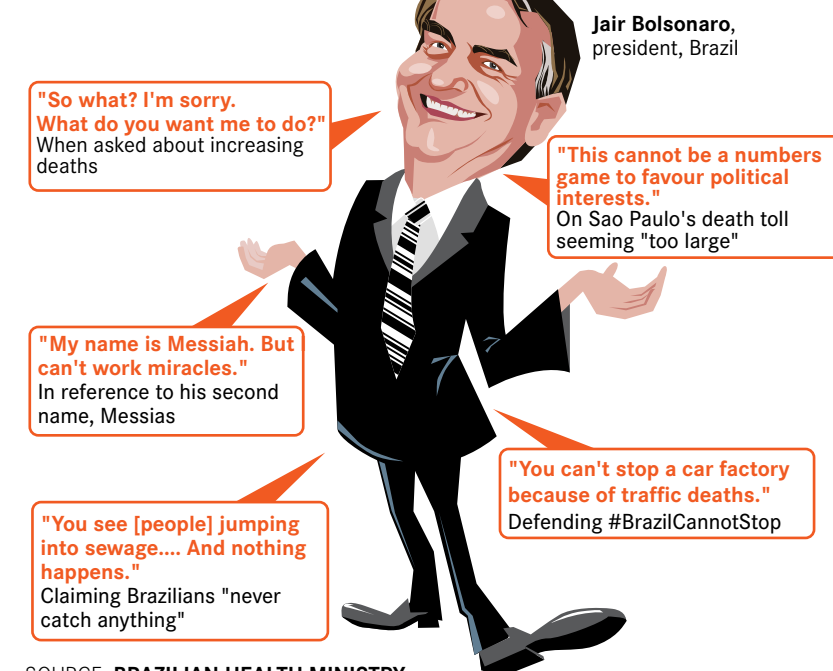
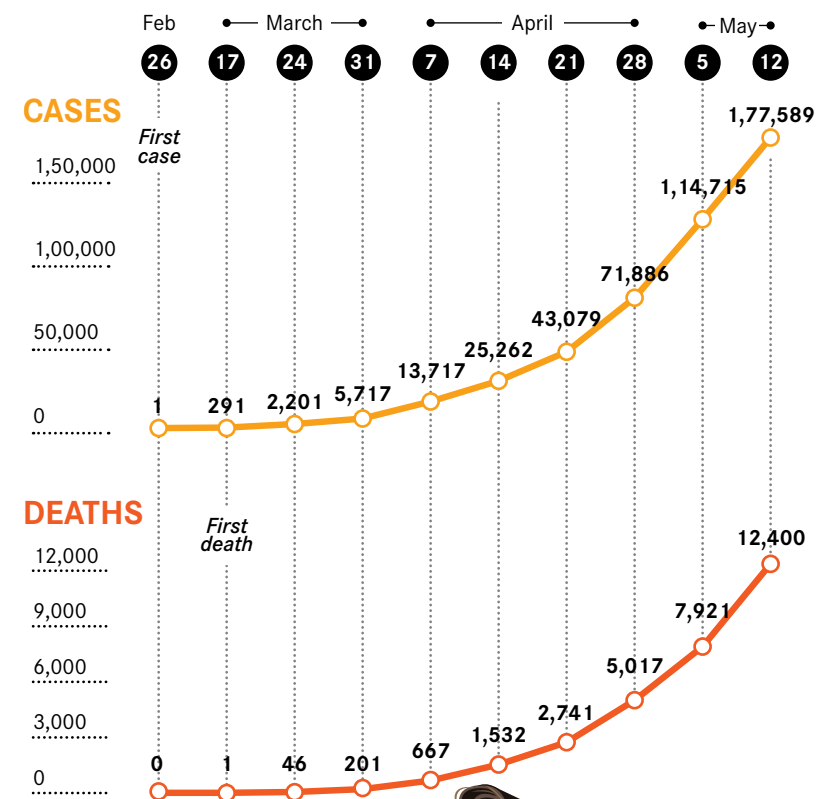
As of May 11, the Brazilian ministry of health has reported 1,62,699 confirmed cases of Covid-19 with 10,627 deaths. But researchers say the actual numbers will be 12-15 times higher. The Brazilian public health system has 2.62 beds for every one lakh inhabitants. Most of the beds are in the big cities, leaving the countryside at a big risk. Last week saw a 22 per cent increase in deaths and if the numbers continue to rise, the pandemic will break the national

health care system, which is used mostly by poor Brazilians. "As the virus spreads to the outlying, poorer regions, the death rate will be much higher because it is going to join other epidemics like dengue fever and chikungunya and conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes and malnutrition. Putting all these together, you can see the situation of the poor, black population," says Silvio Humberto, city councilman in Salvador, and professor of economics at the State University of Feira de Santana. "Covid-19 has come to make a grave situation of social vulnerability worse. The city of Salvador is cited in poetry and prose for its enchantment and physical beauty. But the pandemic has come to show us that Salvador has gained the title, not of the city of music, but of the city of the poor."

Slavery in Brazil lasted from the 1530s till May 14, 1888. But after their emancipation, the victims of slavery were left to fend for themselves by doing precarious, informal work, such as sharecropping or hard labour. At the same time, European immigrants were offered land and free passage in exchange for agricultural work. The result is that the south and southeast of Brazil, where the European immigrants settled, became more white, accumulating and distributing more wealth, while the north and northeast continued to be locked in a slavocracy with most of the land owned and controlled by descendants of the beneficiaries of the Portuguese land grants who maintained the racial, class and economic disparities of slavery. Humberto says the virus has only revealed the tip of the iceberg. "We had poverty, informal labour and people scraping for a living doing whatever they could in the streets, doing their hustle. Families sustained themselves this way. Now the streets are closed off," he says.

DISASTROUS MANAGEMENT

COVID-19 CASES AND DEATHS IN BRAZIL



SOURCE **BRAZILIAN HEALTH MINISTRY**

GRAPHICS **SREEMANIKANDAN S.** \ RESEARCH **KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH** \ ILLUSTRATION **JOB P.K.**

Doranei Alves, an Afro-Brazilian social worker who lives in Salvador's São Caetano neighbourhood, says the situation is dire. "There is a huge street fair where everything—from shoes to tea and natural herbs to fruits—is sold. Imagine what is happening to the people who make their living from this. This money pays for their food each day. With the pandemic, everything has stopped. The media says 'stay home and use a mask'. But people need to eat. Money from the government is taking a long time to come. Many people have not gotten it yet."

As a musician who is out of work because of the lockdown, I am not rich by any means. But the fact that I can stay home, alone, and live on money I have saved means that I am privileged. In many communities, people are weighing the risk of getting infected against the need to feed their children. "People cannot afford to stay at home anymore," says Alves. "They have returned to street fairs and have started selling their products again. This reveals how much inequality is there in Brazil. Mothers go crazy when there is no food for their children."

The combination of financial, mental and emotional stress has led to increased domestic violence and also defiance that contributes to the spread of the virus. "Women are going crazy because of domestic violence. This affects children and their development," says Alves. "Many old people are at home alone. Family members used to visit them every day and now they cannot visit. Physical contact is very important. It is hard when you are deprived of it."

While the fear of getting sick has forced many people to comply with the norms of social distancing, others are rebelling, following the example of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro. "There is a group that defends the president and the majority of them are men," says Alves. "They are using



the president as an example and are going against the recommendations. These men are going to play football, even though they know that they are putting their families at risk. They are going to bars. They are trying to show defiance through their actions. The fight against the virus is also an ideological and political fight."

Bolsonaro, however, insists that Covid-19 is just a cold and says Brazilians could "swim in excrement and still emerge unscathed". He says his priority is the Brazilian economy, not Brazilian lives. He questions scientists who oppose his opinions, rails at the press coverage of the pandemic and refuses to wear a



PHOTOS AP

mask even at rallies where he shakes hands and hugs his supporters. He even planned a big barbecue at the presidential palace on the day when deaths from the pandemic crossed 10,000 in Brazil. It was cancelled finally following widespread protests and the threat of a lawsuit.

For Bolsonaro, the pandemic has provided a convenient cover for rolling back land rights of indigenous peoples and Afro-Brazilian *quilombos*—homesteads where descendants of escaped slaves and indigenous people have lived for hundreds of years. Decree MP910 signed by Bolsonaro is before the Congress, and once approved, it will allow loggers, wildcat miners and farmers to lay claim to protected land reserves in the Amazon, traditionally inhabited by indigenous Brazilians. It has emboldened them to invade land and kill indigenous leaders even as they spread Covid-19 among indigenous people with no immunity or access to hospitals. Ivaneida Bandeira of the NGO Kanindé says the pandemic is being used as a cover by the president and corporations involved in agro-business, logging and mining.

Humberto, however, sees an opportunity for change in the ongoing crisis. "With so much uncertainty, we have an opportunity to stir things up," he says. "We have a non-government. The president goes against science, against the 10,000 deaths. While our country is mourning, the president is jet skiing. This shows how insensitive, ignorant and incompetent the president is. He does not resolve problems, but creates crisis on top of crisis. But the light in this crisis is the empowerment that solidarity has brought to the Afro-Brazilian communities."

DIFFICULT TIMES

The poor in Brazil has been particularly vulnerable to Covid-19

Humberto says there have been numerous examples of solidarity and brotherhood across the country. "The pope was right, there is no salvation individually. Salvation has to be collective and we have to be very careful about returning to the so-called 'normal' like it was before," he says. "We need change, not just in the economy, which has been turned on its head. The economy cannot be the be-all and end-all. It should serve society. We have to be liberated from this hegemony of financial capital. It is going to be difficult, but we cannot keep having money generating more money to the detriment of everything, of the people. The people need to be the beginning, the middle and the end."

The newfound solidarity has given hope to millions. Marcia Marciel, a social worker from the neighbourhood of São João do Cabrito, says volunteers in the neighbourhood have decided to create a chain of solidarity. "The solidarity has multiplied," says Marciel. "I hope that this chain will continue to remain even when this is over."

Alves says there was solidarity when he was growing up. "It is still present, even though today capitalism separates people and encourages individualism. But still, if you need some flour, it is your neighbour who will help you," she says. "As the wheels of the government turn slowly in response to the pandemic, community organisations are providing for the residents using their own resources and money donated from friends, colleagues and others who feel that we have a shared responsibility to provide for those in need."

Humberto believes it is going to be a new beginning. "This is not just about Covid," he says. "It is a vision of an African Utopia, an evolution and a new view."

The author is an African American singer settled in Brazil.

FAR RIGHT, FAR WRONG

Critics say the biggest threat to Brazil's fight against Covid-19 is its president, Jair Bolsonaro



BY R. VISWANATHAN

Covid-19 cases in Brazil are growing at an alarming rate, with the number of deaths crossing 11,000 as on May 10.

But for President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, it is all a big joke. "My name is Messiah. But I cannot work miracles," he said. Hearing about the mounting death toll, he responded with supreme indifference, "So what? What do you want me to do?"

In most countries, presidents and prime ministers visit hospitals to comfort victims and support the medical staff. But not Bolsonaro. He was recently seen at a shooting range, grinning at the cameras in

front of a bullet-riddled target, saying, "Pretty good, eh?"

Brazil faces a shortage of ventilators, masks and other essential items. But it hardly bothers Bolsonaro. He is more worried about the shortage of guns in Brazil. When governors are scrambling to get ventilators, Bolsonaro wants to see more guns. Last month, he shut down a military project that sought to use blockchain technology to track guns and other weapons. The public prosecutor's office is investigating the constitutionality of this move.

While presidents of other countries are meeting scientists and doctors for advice on dealing with the virus, Bolsonaro had an unusual guest on May 4. He received at the presidential palace Lieutenant Colonel (ret'd) Sebastião Curió Rodrigues de Moura, a notorious assassin who killed several left-wing guerrillas in the Araguaia region when Brazil was under military

FINAL JOURNEY

The Nossa Senhora cemetery in Manaus has seen a surge in the number of new graves after the outbreak of Covid-19

dictatorship (1964-1985).

As Covid-19 infections grow exponentially, mass graves are being dug in cities like Manaus, where a large number of indigenous people have lost their lives. The mayor of Manaus was in tears describing the acute shortage of coffins, medicines and equipment. Unable to get Bolsonaro's attention, indigenous leaders have approached the World Health Organisation and even climate activist Greta Thunberg. Millions of poor, mostly Afro-Brazilians, live in the *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo without adequate water and sanitation facilities. Even the drug-trafficking gangs have started helping them, but not Bolsonaro. The president has ignored WHO advice on Covid-19, but has targeted the world body, saying it promotes masturbation and homosexuality among children.

The president has not been supportive of officials who have been working hard to tackle the pandemic. He has sparked protests by sacking his popular health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, after repeated clashes over handling of the crisis.

According to a study by the University of São Paulo, Brazil may already have the most number of Covid-19 cases in the world. But testing is minimal in the country due to the lack of federal government support. Bolsonaro continues to downplay Covid-19, calling it a "simple cold" and a "fantasy" and "hysteria" promoted by the media to weaken his government. Such talk clearly misleads and confuses the general population. He criticises the lockdown imposed by state and municipal authorities and calls social distancing measures imposed by governors and mayors as "crime". He goes around shaking hands and taking selfies with his supporters at rallies organised by his sons and allies. He wants to resume football games, arguing that players are less likely to die from



FAN BASE

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his daughter Laura pose for a selfie with supporters outside Planalto Palace in Brasília

Covid-19 because of their supreme physical fitness. Bolsonaro once said, "Brazilians could swim in excrement and still emerge unscathed". He even launched a #BrazilCannotStop campaign which asked people to get back to work and normal life. The move was banned by a federal judge.

At least 20 officials of the Bolsonaro administration, including national communications chief Fabio Wajngarten and National Security Minister Augusto Heleno, have tested positive for Covid-19, but the president scoffs at preventive measures. On May 8, Bolsonaro said he would celebrate the weekend with a barbecue at the presidential palace. But a day later, after facing widespread criticism and being threatened with a

lawsuit, he called the news about the barbecue fake, blamed journalists, and was seen riding a jet ski on Lake Paranoá. He stopped to chat with a group of people who were barbecuing on a speedboat.

Bolsonaro attacks journalists day in and day out, often using the language of street thugs. Following his cue, his supporters have even physically attacked journalists at the president's rallies. Bolsonaro and his sons spread fake news on social media, forcing Facebook and Twitter to remove some of their posts. The

prosecutors are investigating fake news campaigns of the Bolsonaros.

The president does not even spare the Congress and the judiciary. He routinely incites his followers to shout slogans in favour of military dictatorship. The attorney general is investigating one such case of sloganeering outside the army headquarters when Bolsonaro was present. The defence ministry issued a statement on May 4 saying the armed forces were dedicated to their constitutional mission and democracy.

For Bolsonaro, protecting and promoting his family comes first. He recently fired the chief of the federal police and appointed a family friend in his place to scupper ongoing criminal investigations against his

sons and allies for murder, money laundering and disinformation campaigns on social media. Justice minister Sérgio Moro resigned recently after publicly accusing the president of criminal obstruction of justice. The supreme court subsequently vetoed the appointment of the new police chief and ordered an investigation on the basis of Moro's charges. The president has now proposed another family friend to the post. The association of the members of the federal police has written to Bolsonaro to "keep the constitutionally-required distance" and not interfere in the day-to-day work of the police to maintain objectivity and public confidence.

Last year, Bolsonaro had tried to make his third son, Eduardo, Brazil's ambassador to the US, saying 'Eduardo and President Donald Trump's sons are friends'. But Eduardo had to withdraw his candidacy following widespread protests against such blatant nepotism.

Besides polarising the country with his hate-speech, the Bolsonaro clan continues to burn bridges with the world. He had insulted the wife of French President Emmanuel Macron and made disparaging remarks against President Alberto Fernández of Argentina, Brazil's neighbour and most important regional partner. He had provoked China, Brazil's top export destination, by visiting Taiwan during his presidential campaign. Sino-Brazilian relations deteriorated

further after Eduardo criticised the absence of democracy and transparency in China and also its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Chinese embassy in Brasília made a scathing counterattack, saying the president's son had contracted a "mental virus" while he was in the United States. "Sadly, you are a person without any international vision or common sense. We suggest you don't rush to become the US spokesman in Brazil," said a statement by the embassy. The sharp reaction prompted some state governors and exporters to apologise to the Chinese ambassador, especially as they have been hoping to procure masks, protective gear and ventilators from China.

Bolsonaro's ministers, however, are competing with each other to impress the boss with their own incendiary statements. Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo wrote that Covid-19 "could be a global project to transform the world into a concentration camp and impose communism via the 'comunavirus'". Education Minister Abraham Weintraub tweeted that the pandemic would serve Chinese interests. In his tweet in Portuguese, he substituted the letter 'r' in 'Brazil' with 'L' so that it read 'BLazil', a style used to mock Chinese accents. The Chinese ambassador called Weintraub a racist and the supreme court has ordered an investigation into the minister's action.

Critics fear that the Bolsonaro administration has managed to undo in less than 16 months the excellent work done by Brazilian diplomats over the past two decades. Bolsonaro has shocked the world with his bigotry on several issues, including global environmental concerns. Brazil today stands completely isolated on the issue in sharp contrast with the leading role it played during President Lula's time. On April 20, Brazil voted against a UN General Assembly resolution co-sponsored by 179 countries seeking global

Bolsonaro attacks journalists day in and day out, often using the language of street thugs.

access to medicines and vaccines to tackle Covid-19. It was ironic as Brazil had in the past successfully led developing countries in their fight for affordable HIV/AIDS medicines, even breaking a few international patents in the process. Marking a complete turnaround in its foreign policy, Brazil recently voted against a pro-Palestine resolution in the UN, further alienating several countries in the developing world.

The only bridge Bolsonaro has built so far is with Trump, his role model. But this is temporary and unsustainable. Although Bolsonaro wants total alignment of Brazil's foreign policy with that of Trump's, he has been restrained by his own foreign office and military. For instance, his decision to shift the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has not been implemented.

Most people voted for Bolsonaro in 2018, in a clear verdict against the corruption scandals involving the Workers Party and other mainstream political parties and leaders. There was a massive anti-incumbency wave across Brazil, which benefited Bolsonaro. But many of those who voted for him regret their decision now. People are horrified to see his inhuman approach towards the pandemic. People had hoped that the power and prestige as president might make him moderate and pragmatic. They are disillusioned to see that he has become worse and even incites anti-democratic attacks from the presidential palace. Millions are now protesting, banging pots and pans and yelling "Bolsonaro out" whenever the president comes on television. They are afraid that the longer Bolsonaro continues as president, the worse it will be for the country.

Sensible politicians, businessmen, civil society leaders and professionals consider Bolsonaro more toxic than Covid-19. The president does not have the support of any major polit-



REUTERS

BLIND SUPPORT

Supporters of Bolsonaro in a protest against the Supreme Court

ical party. He has moved from one fringe party to another eight times so far. During his presidential campaign he was with the Social Liberal Party. He quit last November over a dispute on the control of campaign funds and launched his own party called the Alliance for Brazil with himself as president and his eldest son Flavio as vice president. But it does not have any other recognisable leaders.

The Congress has already received at least two dozen impeachment petitions against Bolsonaro. It had impeached president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 for budget manipulation.

It was nothing compared with the charges being levelled against Bolsonaro. However, he enjoys the support of the bible, bullet and beef lobby comprising evangelicals, rich landlords and the cattle and meat industry, which uses him to advance their own partisan agenda. Some other legislators are willing to support him thinking that this is the best time to bargain for favours and pork barrel (appropriations made for projects that are not essential but are sought because they pump money and resources locally).

Former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso cautioned that Bolsonaro's authoritarian impulses could lead to the return of the military dictatorship. Rodrigo Maia, president of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, tweeted, "The whole world is united in the fight against the coronavirus. In Brazil, we have to fight against the coronavirus and the virus of authoritarianism."

The author is a retired diplomat with extensive experience in Latin America.

Sensible politicians, businessmen, civil society leaders and professionals consider Bolsonaro more toxic than Covid-19.

IVORY TOWER

SANJAYA BARU



Season of policy wonks

The Covid-19 lockdown will be remembered for many things. One of them, without doubt, would be the tsunami of policy advice that has hit many governmental shores around the world. Sitting at home and forced to read, reflect and write, professionals in the policy world—ranging from pure academics and theorists to locked down government officials and their retired seniors—have loads of time to think about the pandemic and its consequences and come up with solutions.

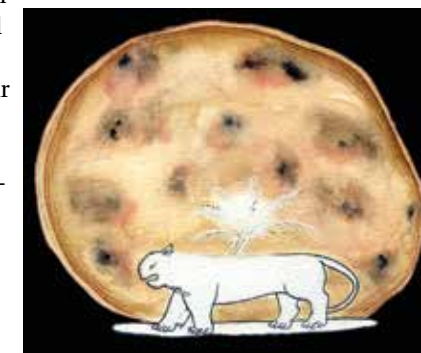
Crisis periods are like that. When governments are hit with unexpected challenges, they reach out to practical ideas from wherever they can get them. The Great Depression and the era of post-war reconstruction were two such periods when governments desperately looked around for ideas and that is when economists came into their own. The tallest among them was John Maynard Keynes, the father of modern macroeconomics. Keynes's biographer Robert Skidelsky subtitled the second volume of his three-volume biography thus: 'The Economist as Saviour'.

In an earlier era, wrote Skidelsky, the common folk turned to priests and soothsayers for reassurance about the future in the midst of uncertainty. In the 20th century of reason, logic and empiricism, they had turned to the economist. "The generational shift with which Keynes was associated," writes Skidelsky, "is properly called avant-garde. His generation saw itself as the front line of the army of progress."

However, Skidelsky adds, Keynes gave central importance to uncertainty in the realm of policy-making. All human action in the present is taken based on data from the past and assumptions about the future. But in a world of uncertain outcomes, "uncertainty pervades both private and public calculations of means to achieve given ends." Skidelsky accused Keynes's disciples of not paying adequate attention to the role of uncertainty in policy-making.

In a crisis, the more successful governments are those that can manage the implications of uncertainty. Risk can be calculated, based on probability. Uncertainty is a virtual black box. One way in which economic policy makers have handled uncertainty is to rely on the disciplines of psychology and sociology. How are individuals and groups likely to behave under given circumstances? In going into the lockdown, the government may not have had enough time to reflect on its consequences. However, at the end of seven weeks of lockdown, there ought to have been adequate thinking within the government both on the consequences of continued lockdown and of the end of lockdown.

It is now clear that different social classes have reacted differently to the lockdown. The middle class have been remarkably tame. Usually more vocal and argumentative and more demanding of the government, the urban middle class has silently fallen in line and accepted the lockdown. The less privileged and poor have, however, shown little confidence in the government and have opted to return to



the imagined certainty of their distant homes rather than accept the risk and uncertainty associated with staying put in less hospitable territory.

How will a population that has lived through the lockdown respond to various economic signals once the lockdown is lifted? Will the middle class regain confidence and return to public places? Will migrant workers return to places of work? Will consumers, savers, investors, employers trust governments? Can policy interventions of the past work in the future? Answers to these questions can only be found in the realm of human psychology and sociology. While behavioural economics may offer some answers, mainstream post-Keynesian economics would have little to contribute since most of its conclusions are based on past data and an understanding of homo economicus in a very different world.

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

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

STATE OF WORRY

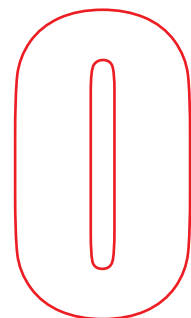
With low testing and the highest Covid-19 mortality rate in the country, West Bengal could be staring at a public health disaster. THE WEEK takes a look at how things came to a head in the state

BY RABI BANERJEE



IN A MESS
West Bengal Chief Minister
Mamata Banerjee

SALIL BERA



On March 19, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a Janata Curfew to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, West Bengal seemed preoccupied with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and its attendant politics. Though Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee did not object to Modi's decision, many shops remained open on March 22, the day of the curfew. The same day, Banerjee declared a lockdown in West Bengal till March 27, signalling that the state would decide on all pandemic-related measures.

At the time, both Banerjee and the state BJP were chalking out plans for next year's assembly elections. While many BJP leaders were slated to visit the state, Banerjee was preparing to head to north Bengal, where her party was routed in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. She was banking on the anti-CAA sentiment in the state, and her new strategist, Prashant Kishor, was keenly monitoring the situation.

Elsewhere, a storm was brewing. As Covid-19 cases started increasing in March, many factories across the country began releasing workers and shutting down. Amid the panic and chaos, a large number of Bengalis had to return home. "There was no way I could stay there (Kerala)," said Tofajjal Sheikh, a young man from Lalgola in Murshidabad. "I was working in an agro-farm near Kasargod. My employer asked me to go back home as many other employees were also running a fever. I came to Lalgola on March 12."

Thousands of others also returned, but medical checks at the stations

were reportedly lax.

"I was alarmed to see how migrants were treated," virologist Amitava Nandy told THE WEEK. "They were all coming from highly infected zones and were released after being given hydroxychloroquine (HCQ). This is absurd and unimaginable. HCQ has no role at the pre-exposure level. Even in full-blown patients, it does not kill the virus but only reduces symptoms. They should have been sent for institutionalised quarantine."

Hundreds of students from Rajasthan, Kerala and Maharashtra, who returned in buses and trains, were also given HCQ and allowed to go home to various parts of the state.

"We are unable to track the virus because the way it is mutating is alarming," said Nandy. "It has a certain character in one place, but just 5km away, it is mutating in such a way that the old antibodies fail to tackle it."

When the Modi government first extended the lockdown till April 30, Banerjee said her state would also do so, but with a human face. Bengal kept open markets and gave relaxations to labour-intensive sectors like tea and jute. However, people violated social distancing norms in these places, which could have worsened the situation in the state.

Bengal was also reportedly late in tracking down those who had attended the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi, which later became a Covid-19 hotspot. According to news reports, the state began identifying the attendees only on March 31, nearly 10 days after the event had ended.

A large number of people from

SALIL BERA



TOUGH JOB
Health workers waiting for the body of a Covid-19 patient at Bangur Hospital in Kolkata

Kolkata, Howrah, South 24 Parganas, Hooghly, North 24 Parganas, Malda and Murshidabad had gone to the Tablighi *markaz* (centre). The Bengal government, however, officially detected only 73 attendees, who came to it voluntarily. "If Assam could detect 500 cases within three days and altogether 800 cases, why could the Bengal government not go beyond 73?" asked state BJP president Dilip Ghosh. "Apart from migration, the Tablighi returnees are the major reason for infections in the rural belt. The government knew it and did nothing."

But there were also some who

BENGAL WAS REPORTEDLY LATE IN TRACKING DOWN THOSE WHO HAD ATTENDED THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT EVENT IN DELHI, WHICH LATER BECAME A COVID-19 HOTSPOT.

supported Banerjee. "The chief minister dealt with the Tablighi issue correctly," said Syed Zamirul Hasan, state president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen. "They (Tablighis) are known for their cleanliness. It is a pity that the Centre and many other governments gave them

a bad name and ill-treated them."

Nevertheless, people living in certain parts of central Kolkata like Park Circus and Taltala—where many Tablighi Jamaat followers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are said to be staying—told THE WEEK that they saw many bodies being taken out

from their areas recently.

Shehanshah Jahangir, former Indian Union Muslim League national secretary and businessman, said he was also told about bodies taken to various burial grounds in Kolkata. "Not only Muslims, but many Hindus also died in the past one month," he said. "They might have died of other diseases, but the way they were cremated and buried by the police and sanitation workers wearing PPE (personal protective equipment) raised a lot of suspicion."

According to sources, the Pragati Maidan police station in eastern Kolkata was entrusted with organising

a mass funeral at the Dhapa landfill, one of the biggest dumping grounds in India. The officer in charge of the police station, along with a few others, was infected and hospitalised.

On April 21, Sisir Naskar, superintendent of the government-run M.R. Bangur Hospital in Howrah, reportedly wrote to the Jadavpur police station, saying that bodies needed to be removed as the mortuary was full. State government sources said Naskar has been asked to explain why he wrote such a letter.

Kolkata apart, there have been reports of the police cremating bodies in Alipurduar district in north Bengal. Officially, the district has no cases. However, on April 20, the police and villagers clashed in a village in the district after locals tried to stop the cremation there. The police had been wearing PPE and the families of those cremated were later told to remain home. "If these were natural

deaths, why were families asked to be quarantined?" asked state BJP vice president Biswapriya Roychowdhury.

Another problem plaguing Bengal is that the doctors are scared of treating the patients. In Howrah, the superintendent of the district hospital was infected, along with some other doctors and nurses, forcing the facility to close temporarily. At least half a dozen doctors in Kolkata have also been infected, and two have died. According to news reports, the West Bengal Doctors Forum has written to Chief Secretary Rajiva Sinha about the rising number of infections

among health workers in the state.

As of now, the cases seem to be largely confined to south Bengal. But if the virus spreads in the northern parts, it would spell doom for the state. Of 68 Covid-19 hospitals in the state, north Bengal has only 10, that too for nearly two crore people.

"I have no doubt that it has now become community infection," said Nandy. "There are hundreds of cases where we have not found any source of contamination. We need to follow a roadmap to tackle the spread. We are completely in a mess thanks to a lack of decisions at the top."

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UPPING THE ANTE
West Bengal BJP
president Dilip Ghosh

SALIL BERA

INTERVIEW



Dr Sukumar Mukherjee,
chairman, state health advisory
committee, West Bengal

I fear the worst is in store for us

BY RABI BANERJEE

Q/What is the current situation in Bengal?

A/It is not out of control. But the number [of cases] is increasing rapidly.

So there might be a huge jump in cases. If it increases this way, we are apprehensive of that.

Q/What is the plan of treatment?

A/The symptomatic cases will go to hospital. Asymptomatic and mild cases would be treated at home. If they become symptomatic, they would have to be taken to hospital.

Q/What about the high death rate?

A/The death rate in Bengal is around 3 per cent without comorbidity.

Q/Why are deaths due to comorbidity not included?

A/After our intervention, it has now been done. [As part of] the advisory board, I told the government to include the comorbid number according to ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) norms.

Q/But why did the government not follow that initially?

A/There are deaths of Covid-19 and deaths with Covid-19. More stress was given to [the former].

Q/What are your thoughts on the death audit committee?

A/In our state or country, postmortem is [mostly] not done [in Covid-19 cases]. So, our government decided

to set up a death committee. It is their decision, I have nothing to say. But it is very difficult to find the cause of death during this pandemic situation.

Q/West Bengal has low testing.

A/This was because of various reasons. A lack of kits, faulty kits, etc. Sometimes, a negative case in a CBNAAT (cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test) gave a positive result in an RT-PCR (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction) test.

Q/But there must be tests at the community level to check the spread.

A/Yes, of course. But the government has limitations. I have told the government to raise the number of daily tests to 5,000 immediately. The total tests would have to reach 60,000 within a few days. Only then will we have an idea about the pattern of the disease.

Q/Do you feel West Bengal has reached community-level infection?

A/I cannot say yes or no. Slums in north and south Kolkata are getting infected. This is a clear indication of community-level infection. But no large community-level study has been conducted yet. So far we have been able to do contact tracing; community tracing is yet to be started.

Q/You are part of the 'global advisory board' set up by the chief minister. What advice have you given the

state government?

A/I have said that we need to stick to the ICMR guidelines. There cannot be several guidelines to follow. I also pointed out that there is no option but to start community tracing as early as possible.

Q/As the virus is spreading quickly, was the lockdown not a success?

A/I would not say it has failed. But yes, it has not got the desired result. People's help was missing. This is because the level of education in the state is much lower than what is required today. Look at Kerala. It is largely successful because of its high rate of education even in rural areas. [The people] listened to the government.

Q/What is the way ahead?

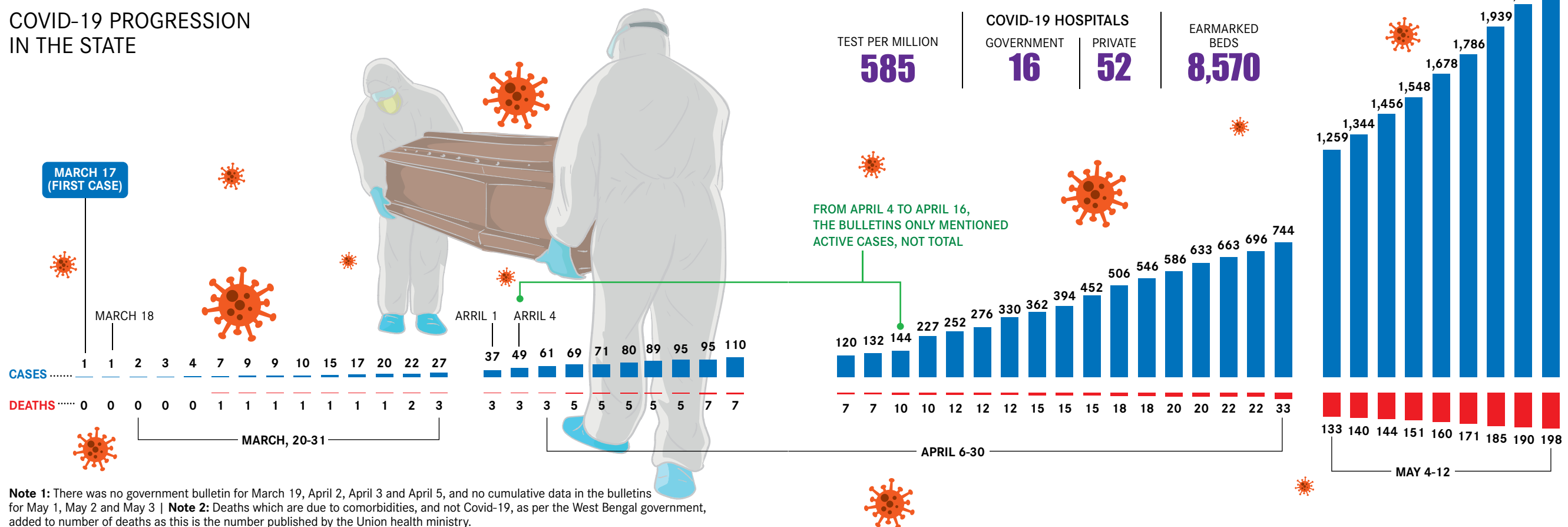
A/[Having a] lockdown forever is just not possible. We have not yet thought of the second wave. I fear that the worst is still in store for us. I wish we have a united attempt at tackling the situation. People would have to listen to the government. We must know that hospitals have a limit to bear [the load].

Q/Are you confident that the state's health care system can tackle the situation?

A/It has become an issue between life and livelihood. Which one to save? Nobody knows. People would have to [find a] balance, otherwise no government can do that.

BLEAK BENGAL

COVID-19 PROGRESSION
IN THE STATE



SOURCE DAILY BULLETIN ON WBHEALTH.GOV.IN

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.\RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH, RABI BANERJEE

The 10 Covid-19 hospitals in north Bengal are small nursing homes with very few beds. In Darjeeling district, only six private hospitals (no government facilities) have been allowed to treat Covid-19 patients; the district has had two deaths already, one in Siliguri and the other in Kalimpong.

The total number of beds in these six hospitals is 525, catering to 20 lakh people. The North Bengal Medical College and Hospital, the biggest state-run hospital in the region, did not have the facilities to tackle the pandemic.

Together, the 10 private hospitals in north Bengal have 67 ventilators. The whole state, according to the government, has 392 ventilators for Covid-19 cases. "Only 31 have been

ONE REASON WEST BENGAL HAS SUFFERED DURING THE PANDEMIC IS THE LACK OF PRIVATE INVESTMENT IN THE HEALTH SECTOR.

used so far," said Home Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay, trying to project confidence.

One reason West Bengal has suffered during the pandemic is the lack of private investment in the health sector. "No health care investment took place in Bengal in the past one decade," said Darjeeling MP Raju Bista. "The situation in north Bengal is grimmer than in Kolkata. There is

no big hospital to cater to two crore people, and there are no ICUs in hospitals."

On April 3, the government set up an audit committee to ascertain if patients had died of Covid-19. Curiously, victims who had co-morbidities were not listed as having died of Covid-19. "This is a human rights violation," said Bista. "Nowhere in the world have the powers of doctors

been curtailed in such a way. It is a violation of the code of medical ethics and practice."

While the media reported more deaths in the following days, the official number remained low. In fact, even before the audit committee was formed, the state kept altering the format of the daily bulletins, adding and removing information and causing confusion.

On April 20, the Union government sent Inter-Ministerial Central Teams to Bengal to assess the situation. A few days later, the teams from Delhi sought details of the working of the audit committee.

The two IMCT teams were initially not allowed to move around freely. Noted the team led by Special Sec-

retary Apurva Chandra: "The state government has taken an antagonistic view to the IMCT and has not supported the IMCT in performing its duties. This is in contrast with the experience of the IMCTs deputed to other states, where daily schedules of the visits were prepared and meetings were held by the IMCTs with the highest levels of the government to the field-level functionaries."

The IMCT teams also found gaps in the state's pandemic data and said that the Covid-19 mortality rate in West Bengal (9.2 per cent on May 12) was the highest in the country.

The Central teams were apparently denied information on the Tablighi Jamaat *markaz* attendees and they were not given appointments with

senior state officials. "Except the principal secretary, health, whom we spoke with through video conference, no one was available," said Chandra.

Said State Education Minister Partha Chatterjee: "If the intention was to assist the states, they would have sent teams to Gujarat and Haryana before West Bengal. In February, over one lakh people were packed in a stadium for the Namaste Trump event in Ahmedabad. Can the Centre guarantee that there was no transmission of Covid-19 in that event and there weren't attendees from Bengal who possibly carried the virus back to the state?"

After the IMCT teams pulled up the state government, the latter has



On May 12, in the face of mounting criticism, state health secretary Vivek Kumar (above) was transferred to the environment department.

been more forthcoming with the information. On May 11, the government put the number of Covid deaths at 118, a dramatic increase in the number (18) it had claimed on April 24. The number of deaths due to comorbidities was 72 on May 11.

On May 12, in the face of mounting criticism, state health secretary Vivek Kumar was transferred to the environment department. Also, the death audit committee would now study only select Covid-19 deaths. Said Dr Sukumar Mukherjee, the chief minister's health adviser: "The government has decided to retain the committee. I am not part of it and have nothing to say about it."

BJP leader Roychowdhury saw

politics behind the formation of the committee. He alleged that the ruling Trinamool Congress wanted to use the pandemic as a political tool.

There has also been criticism of the low testing in the state. Till May 11, Bengal had tested 47,615 samples, which is 529 per million people. Till mid-April, the state was testing only 400 samples a day. This is now around 4,000.

Chandrima Bhattacharya, West Bengal junior health minister, blamed the faulty kits and the Indian Council of Medical Research guidelines for the low testing. "If the ICMR fixes [parameters for] who can be tested and under what circumstances, what could we do? Also, we got

faulty kits that had to be returned. It is too bad that they (the BJP) are playing politics over it."

Countered Roychowdhury: "If we had to do politics, why should we not target Kerala, Delhi and Rajasthan? They took initiative and bought test kits. This government sat idle because it wanted to blame the Centre."

The state-Centre clash did not stop there. Recently, as the Railways decided to run trains carrying migrant workers, the Union home ministry asked the states to submit a report on the number of migrants they had.

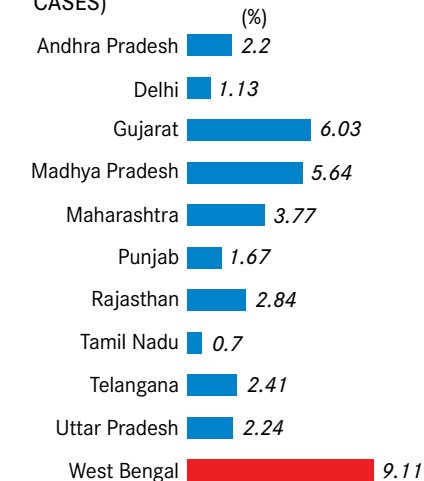
West Bengal, apparently, did not answer. The home ministry mailed another letter to the chief secretary, which also went unanswered. Home

HEAVY LIFTING
Labourers in Kolkata have not been following social distancing norms



FATALITY RATES

(IN STATES/UTs WITH 1,000 OR MORE CASES)



GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

isters, Banerjee said that the states should be allowed in the discussion before the Centre takes any decision. "My only humble request is, do not bulldoze the federal structure," she said.

Asked about the politics surrounding the pandemic, virologist Nandy said, "I would only urge the politicians and everyone else not to damage the science and allow it to propel [research]. We have serious days ahead of us."

He said the major mistake India had made was not having a single policy across states. He said the Centre should have first shortlisted Covid-19 cases in different parts of the country, and then launched massive testing in those particular areas to know whether it was spreading. "Every week, we should have done tests at places where positive cases were reported," he said. "This should have continued for a few weeks. Only then would the government know how long a lockdown was required. Nothing like that has been done; the states and the Centre kept fighting in these critical hours." ■

Minister Amit Shah then shot off a letter criticising the Bengal government.

While Trinamool Rajya Sabha member Derek O'Brien said it was in Shah's "DNA to play politics [even] during a pandemic", no one from the government explained why there was no reply to the home ministry's letters.

Sources in the state administration said that Banerjee was initially reluctant to accept migrants from red zones. "She herself decided to bring people stuck in green and orange zones but the situation would have turned serious if red zones were given priority," said a state official.

The Centre, however, was unfazed,

and went ahead with its plans.

The medical side of the pandemic aside, sources said Banerjee was extremely upset at the Centre's handling of the economy, especially the impact of the lockdown on the states. GST collection would be affected because of the lockdown and states would have to rely on Central grants.

On April 8, the Centre announced that states would be allowed to borrow a cumulative of ₹3.20 lakh crore from the market between April and December. Of this, West Bengal would get around ₹20,000 crore, which the state government says is not enough.

On May 11, during Modi's video-conference with the chief min-

BALLOT FEVER

A tussle is on between Mamata Banerjee and the BJP. Voters know that this is not about Covid-19, but about the 2021 assembly polls

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

SALIL BERA



In March, Mamata Banerjee took the Covid-19 fight to the streets, distributing masks and drawing circles on the road to enforce physical distancing. But, for the past one month the West Bengal chief minister has been spending more time inside her Nabanna office in the red zone district of Howrah. Notices from the Union home ministry have been piling up on her desk. She is probably the chief minister whose political acumen has been tested the most during the pandemic and, in her case, the results have changed from positive to negative in two months.

And, Banerjee is miffed. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's conference with chief ministers on May 11, she accused Home Minister Amit Shah of being the brain behind the "politics" over the pandemic. "When something happens in Gujarat or an ordinance is declared to snatch away the rights of labourers in Uttar Pradesh, why don't you question them? Why are you targeting Bengal and its people by sending notices?" she asked.

Shah has been firing notices through home

secretary A.K. Bhalla. The first set of letters criticised the state government for violating lockdown norms. Banerjee had been visiting hospitals, quarantine centres, stadiums and markets, sometimes sporting a mask, sometimes not. Her visits to pacify people won her praise even from her detractors.

But as the number of Covid-19 cases grew in the state, Banerjee stayed put at Nabanna. On April 3, she set up a five-member committee to audit the Covid-19 deaths. The committee first examined the death of 105 Covid-19 patients and found that the virus had caused only 33 deaths. In other cases, the patients died of other factors and having Covid-19 was "incidental", the committee said.

West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh said that the state government was trying to hide the actual figures. "If the chief minister and her cabinet themselves did not follow lockdown rules, what could you expect? Twelve hospitals handling Covid-19 cases had to be shut as doctors and staff got infected," he told THE WEEK. "The food, health and home departments have failed to perform."

The Centre versus state tussle is now being played out at the bureaucracy level. An inter-ministerial Central team (IMCT), led by additional secretary Apurva Chandra, alleged that it was restrained from making visits or interacting with health professionals during its 10-day visit to the state. However, state chief secretary Rajiva Sinha denied the allegation. On April 24, Chandra wrote to Sinha questioning whether the formation of the audit panel was in line with the Indian Council of Medical Research guidelines and asked for the methodology adopted by the panel.

The IMCT reported that at the Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute and Bangur hospital a large number of patients in isolation wards had to wait for five days or more for their test results. "There is a danger of a Covid-19 negative patient acquiring the infection in the hospital awaiting his test result," the report said. It also found that dead bodies were left lying on beds for at least four hours, before death certificates were issued. There was shortage of ventilators and testing facilities, too, it said.

On May 6, Bhalla wrote a two-page letter saying that West Bengal had the highest mortality rate in the country at 13.2 per cent. "This is a reflection of poor surveillance, detection and testing in the state," said Bhalla. In another letter, he wrote that West Bengal had failed to resume the movement of goods between India and Bangladesh. As a result, trucks carrying essential supplies were stuck at border crossing points. Also, drivers returning from Bangladesh were denied entry and were stuck there. Bhalla said these issues had larger implications for the Indian government.

There has been an exchange of missives between Banerjee and Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar, too. The governor said it was time for the chief minister's "tryst with reality". Banerjee, in turn, reminded him of his "ornamental" position. Their bickering has now spilled over to Twitter and text messages as well.

Recently, Shah shot off another letter to Banerjee over her government's failure to make arrangements for the return of migrant workers. The railway ministry tweeted that Indian railways had run more than 300 trains for states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but it had received approval for only two trains from West Bengal till May 9. While West Bengal subsequently approved more trains, Trinamool's Rajya Sabha member Derek O'Brien told THE WEEK that Shah was spreading half-truths to gain political advantage. "What we need is true federalism and genuine humanism," he said. "The Centre, on the other hand, has made a hotchpotch of handling the crisis at the national level. A 21-day lockdown with four hours of notice? They abandoned the migrant worker."

Banerjee is now in damage control mode. On May 12, she replaced health secretary Vivek Kumar with Narayan Swaroop Nigam, who was in charge of transport. In April, she had replaced food secretary Manoj Agarwal with P.A. Siddiqui over allegations of anomalies in the public distribution scheme. Ghosh said that Banerjee was trying to shift blame on the bureaucracy for her poor performance. O'Brien, however, said, "We are doing well, but there is no place for overconfidence."

Both the BJP and the Trinamool have realised that the 2021 assembly polls will be fought under the shadow of Covid-19. For the state and its people though, what matters now is a victory over the virus. ●

Ahmedabad blues

Sluggish measures, flawed decisions and lack of coordination have worsened the Covid-19 crisis in Gujarat

BY NANDINI OZA

IN APRIL, more than two dozen Covid-19 patients spent hours on the streets after they were denied admission to the 1,200-bed Ahmedabad Civil Hospital in Gujarat. After a video clip showing their plight went viral, Chief Minister Vijay Rupani blamed those who had attended the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi, one of India's biggest Covid-19 clusters, for the increase in the number of infections in the state.

Rupani's statement was politically expedient and hardly surprising. What was surprising, though, was the speed with which the police swung into action, quietly identifying Tablighi members who had returned to Gujarat, tracking their primary contacts, quarantining them and taking measures to prevent communal flare-ups.

There are more than 9,000 Covid-19 patients in Gujarat now; about 550 have died. Ahmedabad alone accounts for 67 per cent of cases and 77 per cent of deaths. Since Muslims make up only 9 per cent of the six crore people in the state, Rupani can no longer blame the minority community for the worsening crisis.

Lack of vision and coordination have been evident in the government's response to the pandemic. Rupani, who has been keeping a low profile, does not appear to be in

command. Nor does he see eye to eye with Deputy Chief Minister Nitin Patel. Bureaucrats fighting the pandemic are taking pains to give credit to both the leaders.

The first two Covid-19 cases in Gujarat were reported on March 19. The state government woke up to the threat rather late, because it had been busy organising the Namaste Trump event in Ahmedabad on February 24. "At a time when the World Health Organization had issued warnings about Covid-19, thousands of people came for the event. This could have been avoided," said Congress leader Shaktisinh Gohil.

JANAK PATEL



The initial response to the pandemic was riddled with missteps and flawed decisions. The government made U-turns on several announcements, adding to the confusion regarding lockdown rules. In Ahmedabad, Municipal Commissioner Vijay Nehra had to quarantine himself after two persons he had met tested positive. Nehra has since been sidelined, reportedly because he had failed to take the political leadership into confidence.

In Ahmedabad and Surat, only shops selling milk and medicines were allowed to open. The decision was taken apparently to contain potential "super-spreaders"—vegetable vendors and grocery shop owners—but the government failed to make alternative arrangements.

The fight against the pandemic also suffered from poor coordination. A case in point is the situation at the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, which has one of Asia's biggest Covid-19 wards. Bureaucrats have been accused of threatening doctors, while doctors have been accused of not taking heed of suggestions of public health experts.

In a bid to set things in order, the government has brought in Dr M.M. Prabhakar, the hospital's former medical superintendent. Prabhakar, who had been transferred to the medical education department, knows the staff well and is

The government failed to prevent protest gatherings. Migrant labourers in Surat have hit the streets four times in the past six weeks.

expected to streamline operations.

Experts say the rising number of Covid-19 cases in Gujarat was the result of the poorly implemented lockdown. Elected representatives and political workers have not been of much help in spreading awareness and preventing infections. "The BJP's booth-level management during elections is considered to be very good," said Rohit Prajapati, a Vadodara-based activist. "Where are these managers now? They should be asking people to follow social distancing rules and helping migrant workers."

Sociologist Gaurang Jani said the crisis showed the collective failure of the BJP government. "They blamed the Tablighis and did nothing for a month," said Jani.

Rupani himself failed to take adequate safety measures. Congress legislator Imran Khedawala, who was part of a delegation that visited Rupani in April, tested positive within hours of the

meeting. Rupani was forced to go into isolation for more than a week.

The government also failed to prevent protest gatherings. Migrant labourers in Surat have hit the streets four times in the past six weeks. Rupani had announced in April that labourers, including those from outside the state, would be given rations free of cost. But the project does not seem to be working properly. The labourers reportedly have to walk at least two kilometres carrying their utensils to get supplies. Also, children are not provided food if they do not accompany their parents.

The alleged poor handling of the Covid-19 crisis has spawned rumours that the BJP's national leadership wants Union Minister Mansukh Mandaviya to replace Rupani as chief minister. Mandaviya, however, has denied it. "Rumours of a change in leadership will only damage Gujarat's interests," he said. "I have spoken to Vijaybhai and requested him to take action against those who are spreading such rumours."

On May 11, Dhaval Patel, editor of the news portal Face of Nation, was arrested for publishing a report suggesting that Rupani would be removed. He was charged with section 124A (sedition) of the Indian Penal Code and section 54 (punishment for false alarm) of the Disaster Management Act.

Rupani's poor show could be the reason that senior bureaucrat K. Kailashnathan has been asked to take charge of the Covid-19 response. Known as Modi's close confidant, Kailashnathan is chief principal secretary to the chief minister. All front-line workers and senior officials are now reporting to Kailashnathan.

BJP spokesperson Bharat Pandya said Rupani had performed well. "He is capable and has taken quick decisions," said Pandya. "He holds discussions and monitors everything, taking decisions that are big and small." ●

IN THE LINE OF FIRE
Vijay Rupani

Bimal Jalan
former RBI governor

If we do not accelerate growth, the effects of Covid-19 on the economy will be challenging

BY ABHINAV SINGH

WHILE EXPERTS ARE divided on the manner in which the lockdown was imposed across the country after the Covid-19 outbreak, former Reserve Bank governor Bimal Jalan has no doubt that it was the best thing the government could have done. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, he talks about why the slowdown might be a temporary one and the measures the government should take to revive the economy. Excerpts:

Many people have opined that the lockdown will severely affect the economy. Do you think it was the best thing to do by the government to resort to a complete lockdown? There is no doubt at present that the lockdown has affected the growth rate of the economy. According to the estimates made by several economists and experts, the growth rate will significantly decline. Estimates of likely growth rate during this period range from 0.5 to 2 per cent. Hopefully, it will be a short-term issue. The lockdown has ensured that the spread of Covid-19 has been brought down. If the lockdown had not been imposed there would have been many more sick people and many more people would have died. As such I think there would have been no option for the government but to go in for a complete lockdown. I hope that once the lockdown is lifted, growth will revive as the number of affected people has not been very high in India, compared with other countries.

How much growth rate we will actually have in the future is a long-term issue and I feel that after the lockdown ends the growth will start reviving. The government has to take all the necessary action to revive growth as early as feasible. There could be scope for companies to invest more in order to increase demand for their products. The government has already taken some measures and the Reserve Bank has

also infused substantial long term liquidity.

Recently, the RBI took steps to infuse liquidity into the system. Is this enough?

So far, the steps taken by the RBI and the government are timely, but whether they are enough would depend on how the Indian economy actually behaves. The RBI has introduced low rate of interest and the government has also increased the fiscal deficit target. These have been broadly aimed at increasing consumer demand and the supply side in the economy. The RBI has taken measures to provide resources to strengthen SMEs as well as mutual funds in addition to reducing lending interest rates.

If more liquidity has to be created by the RBI and the government, it is necessary to take administrative measures and simplify the approval system for those who are investing. Large corporates have to be encouraged to spend as much they can. At the same time, it must be ensured that benefits reach the common people. Under the present situation, we have to implement the measures that have already been announced by the government and the RBI based on actual developments. In the light of these measures, it should be feasible for the government and the RBI to further increase liquidity in the economy, if required.

Will we be able to achieve the target of making India a \$5 trillion economy by 2024?

I think we should not stick to the target of \$5 trillion economy by 2024. Any target for the economy in 2024, which is four years from now, should be considered only after we mitigate the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. As things stand today, we will not be able to achieve a very high target within the given timeframe as announced earlier. I feel that the present situation will prevail at least for the next two or three quarters. However, if

we do not introduce measures that are required to accelerate growth, the effects of Covid-19 on the economy and the welfare of the people will be very challenging. As of now, we are on track and have taken appropriate, timely steps and decisions.

Will the long-term economic reforms that the government had launched be affected by the lockdown?

Confidence among people in terms of investment, and consumer demand and consumption have to improve. At the moment, the government should take short-term action to revive the economy. It should take long-term economic reforms when the present circumstances have turned around and the slow growth rate is revived to at least 5 per cent.

How much time will the economy take to revive post the lockdown?

This year, the GDP growth rate may not be 5.2 or 6 per cent, but over a period of time it can certainly increase if appropriate policy actions are taken. When growth rate increases, employment prospects and jobs will also increase. Under the present circumstances, as rate of growth and investments have come down significantly, jobs have been impacted severely. So we have to reverse the present situation and ensure that more jobs are created in the economy. As mentioned, the government and the RBI should go all out to revive growth and to take measures to bring back the economy to normal.

All necessary action should also be taken on the demand side. The impact assessment of the lockdown is important, but is not a priority issue. It can be accessed after we have taken measures to revive the growth rate. The immediate priority should be to reverse the impact of this pandemic on the Indian economy as early as possible. ●

REUTERS



SANJAY AHLAWAT

LOST
HOPE
Migrant
labourers
leaving
Delhi

HOME TRUTHS

As migrant workers return to their villages, their home states are under pressure to create jobs

BY PRATUL SHARMA

JOGINDER PAL never thought he would have to go back. He had come to Delhi 18 years ago, escaping the drought-hit Banda district in Uttar Pradesh. In the capital, he found work as a painter, got married and had two children.

Then came 2020. His work was hit twice. First came the Delhi riots, and then the lockdown. Exasperated, he returned home. "I don't know when I

will come back," he said.

With no jobs, paucity of ration and disease-induced fear, migrant workers started returning to their villages on March 25, the first day of the lockdown. Despite government assurances, the workers started their journeys, mostly on foot.

The government belatedly started special trains for workers across the country. These carried more than five

lakh people in the first 10 days of operation. Of the 363 trains, till May 11, the maximum were to Uttar Pradesh (172), followed by Bihar (100), Madhya Pradesh (30), Odisha (25) and Jharkhand (22). Now, the home ministry has asked the railways to run at least 100 trains every day, each carrying 1,700 workers home.

Migrants make up more than 40 per cent of Delhi's population. Over-

all, the metros have been the worst hit, and millions like Joginder realise this. The political class and the bureaucracy were taken by surprise when the migrants left the impersonal, often cruel, urban spaces to find solace in their villages.

"Migrants get economic security in the city and social security—of the family and of public assistance—in their villages," said Chinmay Tumbbe, assistant professor, IIM Ahmedabad. "Instant flight occurs when economic security vanishes and migrants seek social security."

The Economic Survey 2017, for the first time, enumerated Railways data (2011-2016), which showed an annual average flow of close to 90 lakh migrants between states.

"The government should have done towards March end, as we argued then, what it is doing now," said Partha Mukhopadhyay, senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi. "The migrant workers were put in camps after the lockdown. So they could have been moved to their homes in buses, camp by camp. Perhaps, the thinking was that the lockdown would be shorter, and moving them would be costly. They are now doing it six weeks too late. Instead of spreading it over time in an organised manner, now they are trying to hurry it up. This actually increases the chances of infection, because of the mixing of groups."

What this crisis has revealed is that government assurances did not work, and there were huge gaps in the communication strategy, which appeared to be more focussed on the middle class than the poor.

"The government did not have that big a role," said Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh general secretary Virjesh Upadhyay. "It is the social actors who could have convinced the migrants to stay. It was the role of NGOs and politicians of all parties to engage with the migrants and provide relief. This migration was a result of this emotional urge to go home, and the provocation generated by certain forces."

The political class and the bureaucracy were taken by surprise when the migrants left the urban spaces to find solace in their villages.

Most migrants who move from one place to another, like construction workers, are not voters at the place of their employment, and thus seldom a pressure group for politicians. So, with the crisis hitting their livelihoods, they chose to vote with their feet.

The lack of institutional support has increased their pain. When lockdown was imposed, Sumati Devi found herself stranded in crowded Tughlakabad in Delhi, next to a containment zone. Her husband was back in Durgapur, West Bengal, and her son, a mason, was in Ernakulam, Kerala. Though she had worked in Delhi for several years, she did not have a bank account there. And hence, she could not get the benefits of Central schemes. Had she been at her native place, she could have got foodgrain under the public distribution system. This is the primary reason migrants are returning; the access to Central and state government schemes is mostly limited to their places of permanent residence.

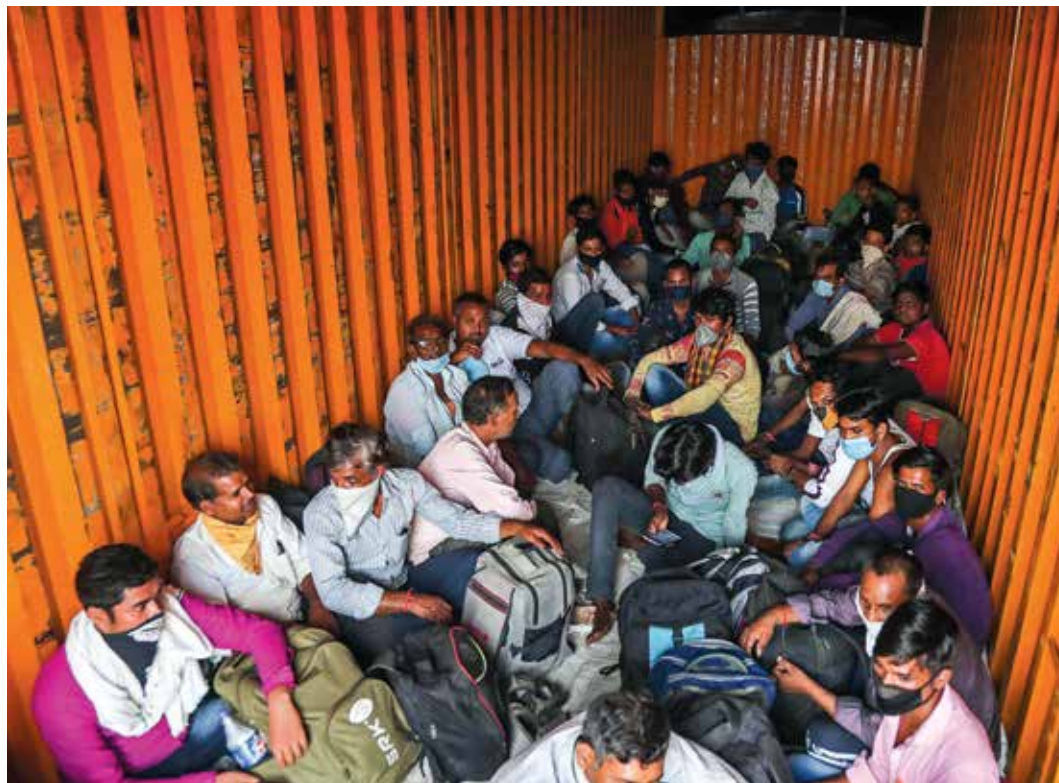
"Another thing we saw in the migration crisis was that people moved out as they were living in inhuman conditions," said Rathin Roy, former member of the prime minister's economic advisory council. "That was a big lesson. We need to see bulk of industry and economic activity in areas where the majority of migrants live. Their livelihoods have to be created there."

He also suggested that the government should focus on building slum-free areas through massive, affordable housing programmes for migrants. "It is morally unacceptable for India to be the slum capital of the world," he said.

As of now, the states that provide the bulk of these migrant workers have their work cut out. Take, for instance, Bihar. Most of the returning migrants are first put in quarantine centres set up across the state, and are allowed to go home after 14 days.



VISHNU V. NAIR



According to official figures, more than 25 lakh migrant workers have registered on the state government app to get the ₹1,000 that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had announced. "Since April, we have created over one lakh job cards," said Arvind Kumar Chaudhary, principal secretary, rural development department. "We created these cards in the quarantine camps they (migrants) were housed. We knew this demand would come. There is a lot of work available in infrastructure projects, like building roads, toilets and rural housing, through which we can employ around 15 lakh people. Currently, we have nine lakh registered MNRGA workers. The state will now do skill mapping of the migrants, who can then be allotted a suitable job."

Uttar Pradesh is aiming higher. It is trying to woo foreign investors who may be looking for an alternative to China. The state has set up a desk to deal with queries from foreign in-

vestors, and there have already been some meetings. "This will create jobs and employment avenues," said Sidharth Nath Singh, state micro, small and medium enterprises minister.

However, in this bid to grow, some states have decided to amend labour laws, which would, depending on the state, bring in changes like—an increase in working hours to 12 a

The industry is looking for opportunities to expand in areas where there is ready availability of labour.

day to a rise in productivity without interference from labour inspectors. The BJP-ruled states of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have been particularly bold in this regard, and the reforms are expected to generate political acrimony in the coming days.

"The country has seen an inhuman spectacle unfold as workers were given only four hours before the lockdown by the Modi government," said Congress spokesperson Shaktisinh Gohil. "They were forced to walk for food and shelter. Then they were hit by another jolt. Labour laws were removed as the government wanted to give a red-carpet welcome to foreign investors."

Left and Congress trade unions have decided to approach the International Labour Organization against the move. "Most of the states ruled by the BJP and its allies are competing with others in the name of development and attracting investment," said

ROUGH JOURNEY

Migrant labourers stuffed inside a goods truck on their way from Hyderabad to their villages in Uttar Pradesh; (left) a migrant labourer and his daughter leaving Mumbai on a bicycle for his village

Tapan Sen, general secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions. "An inhuman crime is being committed."

Added Upadhyay: "We will fight the dilution through all democratic means. The governments should not replicate the China model of bypassing labour laws as it does not follow democratic traditions."

The Centre's strategy is clear. It is promoting domestic manufacturing as a counter to China. But a boom in manufacturing results in large-scale movement of labour. The government would have to look into the needs of the migrants when they promote manufacturing.

Defending the labour reforms,

Gopal Krishna Agarwal, BJP spokesperson and an expert on economic affairs, said that most of the manufacturing industry had adequate labour to start factories, but there was no demand as markets are shut. "Look at Haryana," he said. "It has created a website for labourers who want to return for work, and many have already registered."

Said Sidharth Nath Singh: "As a result of reforms in labour laws in Uttar Pradesh, new employment opportunities as well as investment from foreign companies will come to the state." The Uttar Pradesh government has already set a target to create 15 lakh jobs, while ramping up jobs under MNRGA from 20 lakh a day to 50 lakh daily.

The industry is looking for opportunities to expand in areas where there is ready availability of labour. "The lockdown has provided an opportunity for industries to assess the benefits of moving to areas

where the migrant workers are from," said Vikram Kirloskar, president, Confederation of Indian Industry. "We cannot have health without the economy and the economy without health. Therefore, we need flexibility and safeguards with labour laws being relooked at."

The shortage of workers will hurt the industry for some time, but the workers cannot stay in their villages for long. "The migrants will be economically compelled to return as they would have few sources of employment at their native places, and hardly any reasonable living standards," said Mukhopadhyay, who chaired a committee on migration set up by the ministry of housing and urban affairs. "The highly skilled migrants may hold on a bit longer to return as their experience with this process was not particularly positive. But what you see in China, is that it is not clear if jobs will be there at all. So, the workers are more likely to come back if there is some assurance about the jobs available."

The committee he headed had recommended portability of the ration card, which the Centre is doing under its 'One Nation, One Ration Card' scheme. "We had also recommended that the government set up a register of migrants," he said. "The government now has the data as it moved so many migrants into camps and have been documented for relief, for travel and for testing. This data can be used to give social benefits."

The Economic Survey 2017 had shown new trends in migration. "Internal migration rates have dipped in Maharashtra and surged in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, reflecting the growing pull of southern states in India's migration dynamics, as the southern states created more facilities for the migrants," it said. "Thus, also proving that language was no longer a barrier in migration for work." ■

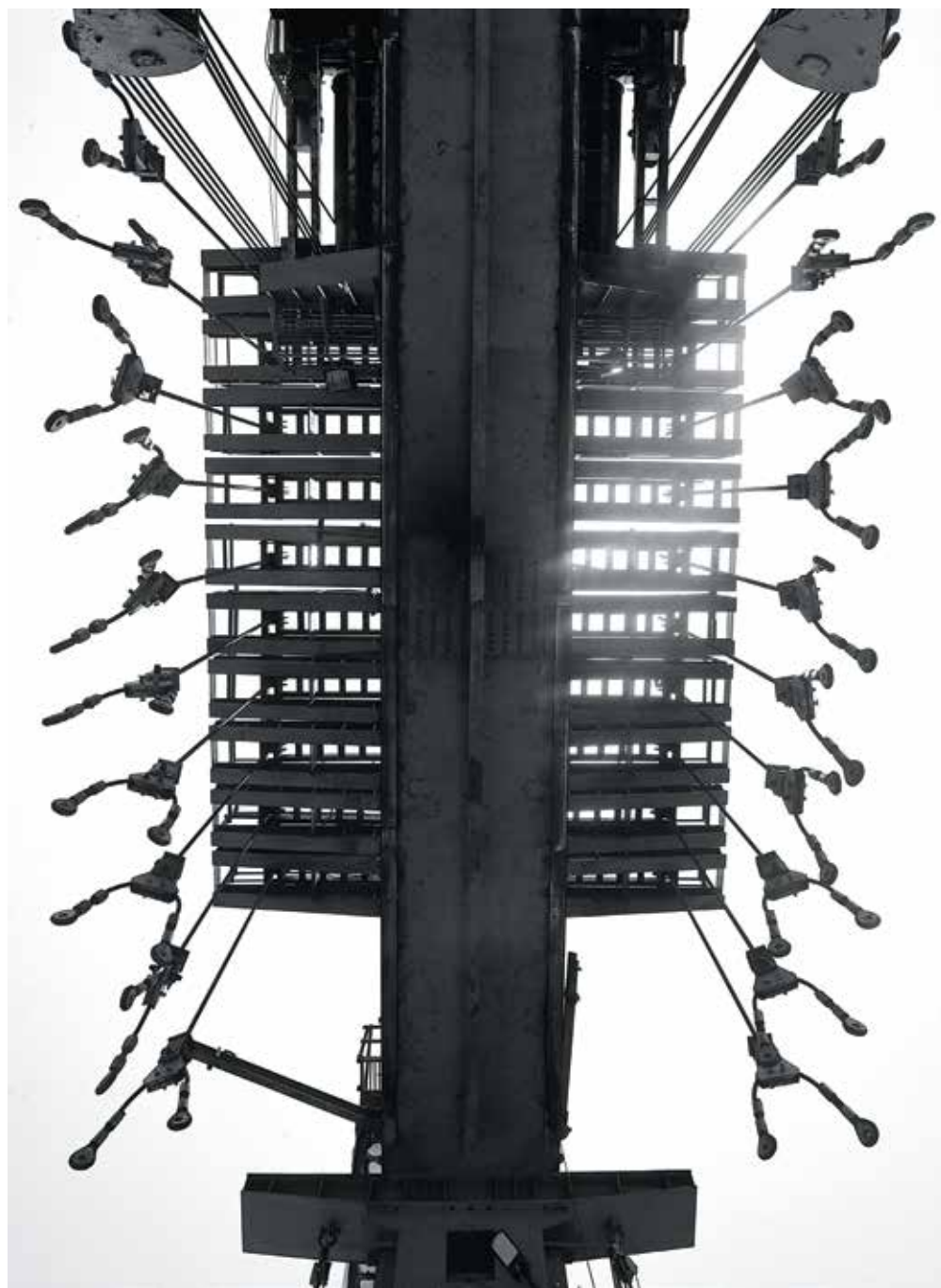
RETAIL

The closure of shops and malls has washed out the sale of seasonal fashion accessories. The retail sector may see huge job cuts

SKELETONS OF THE ECONOMY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

As the world is slowly opening up, businesses have started taking stock of the damages of the lockdown. The Covid-19 pandemic has left many sectors in ruins, and they are struggling to deal with the fall in demand, supply chain disruptions and shortage of labour. But they have already started piecing together the broken parts. This, after all, is just another test for the indomitable human spirit



INFRASTRUCTURE

Projects like construction of bridges, roads and metro lines depend on migrant workers. Most of these workers, however, have left the cities and might not return for a while



AGRICULTURE

Farmers had big financial losses despite the government's efforts to help them sell the produce. The slump in demand, ban on interstate transportation and labour shortage have left fruits and vegetables rotting in farms



RECREATION

Amusement parks and businesses depending on travel and tourism were badly hit as people's movement was restricted and gatherings were banned



ADVERTISEMENT

As companies have stopped spending on marketing and advertisement, most billboards remain naked, giving cities an apocalyptic look



MANUFACTURING

Medium and small scale industries are among the worst affected as they were under stress even before the pandemic broke out



REAL ESTATE

Many realty projects have been paused because of the slow market and shortage of labourers

CINEMA

The halt in the production of cinemas and television series has left many artists and technicians jobless



SALIL BERA

Comfortable in Germany, longing for home

BY VISHWANATHAN ANAND/ Frankfurt

I REACHED Germany in February to play the German league matches. I played on a Sunday and then left the country for a short camp. I got back to Germany on March 10 and was supposed to play a game on March 14 or 15 before returning home on March 17. However, my return was postponed first to March 21, and then to March 27. Eventually, it became clear that the world was shutting down completely.

I have been staying in a small town called Bad Soden, near Frankfurt. I have my own place to stay as I did a lot of my world championship training here, so this stay, so far, has not been my longest in Bad Soden. In that sense, I know this place very well. However, while I used to train here, there was a specific purpose or a schedule. This time, it is just an extended stay. We thought flights would resume on March 31, then we thought the lockdown would be lifted in April, but now it continues into May. I was also lucky in a sense that I got here two weeks before the lockdown was announced here. I could have been stuck in a hotel somewhere for ages. Here, I have my friends next door.

The problem is [my wife] Aruna has to cope with everything all by herself [in Chennai]. Akhil, our son, would have had his summer holidays at this time, and he was looking forward to it, but he cannot go anywhere. If I had been home, I

would have been able to help her. It is harder for Aruna as my father and her parents are old and have illnesses. I am getting the news about Chennai through news reports and from Aruna, but I do not think one can understand a lockdown till one experiences it personally.

In Frankfurt, the lockdown has been mild. I am able to go out, walk around and do some shopping at the supermarket. I have adjusted to this. Reports here suggest that things are under control. People generally follow instructions given by the government. Germans as such are very law-abiding citizens. Besides, Chancellor Angela Merkel has communicated very well with the citizens here.

Bad Soden is a small town with a population of 20,000 or so. I do not know how people in bigger cities in Germany have managed, but here it was alright. People systematically form queues, maintain social distancing and move fast.

I have also spent time playing chess with Akhil online. I have given him some problems to solve. He is into coding also, so he shares some of his coding problems with me. But really, it is more about seeing each other and communicating daily. We are just happy to see each other through Skype.

The Nations Cup, which the cream of the chess world was playing online, is always a very strong tournament. The reason I agreed to be part of it was that it gave me something to do. There

has been a lot of online participation in chess since the lockdowns came into force. People want to expend their energy [and time] by playing chess online and following it.

We had a very good tournament the week before. It was a good routine. [But] the results, as far as India was concerned, were disappointing. We were ranked fifth, but this time it went really badly. Koneru Humpy and D. Harika did well, but the other three players in the team struggled. For P. Harikrishna, in one or two games it was a matter of winning or losing by a close margin. There were games he could have won. It feels like whatever could go wrong for us did go wrong. We could have put up a better performance, no doubt.

Now that the tournament is over, it is about looking to get back home. The repatriation flights to India are taking off, but there is nothing yet from Germany. I am keeping track of developments through the Indian embassy website and people at the embassy. It is all about how much more time I will be spending here now. If it is a week or so, I will concentrate on packing up and [following] the procedures involved. If it will take another three to four weeks, then I will try to learn something new in chess. Everything is dependent on when I get to return home.

As told to Neeru Bhatia.
Anand is a five-time world chess champion.



Nudes and gender naysayers

Last week, an unexpected controversy fired up electronic and social media, following the leaking of screen grabs of a private Instagram group chat called #BoisLockerRoom. Shockingly, this group discussed in sexual, vulgar and sleazy detail their female classmates—sharing morphed and semi-nude photos of underage girls, and fantasising about what sexual exploits could be performed on them.

Perhaps, the real stunner was the fact that a majority of the participants of this group were boys from elite Delhi schools, aged 14 to 15. Only the admin of the group was a young adult.

As the screen grabs went viral on social media, outrage exploded. Women and men condemned the contents of the group and discussed how 'rape culture' was rampant in India. News channels ran debates and interviewed the whistleblower. The Delhi Commission for Women and the Delhi Police got into action mode, eventually the admin was arrested and the most active child member of the group was apprehended. Twenty-four other members were questioned.

The debates on social media were equally polarised with many boys starting a trend #GirlsLockerRoom, making a false equivalence, claiming that girls also talk about sex. Many raised the question why girls were sending nudes of themselves to any boy.

I waded into the debate with an Instagram live, discussing numerous complex questions. Issues like respect for women, consent, privacy, freedom to speak your mind, violation of various sections of the Indian Penal Code, circulation of child porn and, most crucially, normalising rape culture. I thought we would have an honest chat with young people on some of these issues.

The chat was honest all right! The most striking feature of the chat, for me, was the constant denial by numerous men, and a few women, that the chats had anything to do with gender! "Don't make it a gender issue—it is just a few bad individuals." "It's not boys versus girls!" "It's not a man/woman thing." "What about fake feminism?" "Always playing the

victim card!" "What about the suicide of Manav?" (In an unrelated case, a 17-year-old boy from Gurugram committed suicide when sexual harassment allegations against him surfaced on social media.)

When a group of 50 boys share—without permission—semi-nude photos of their underage female classmates and then slut-shame, body-shame, and objectify and sexualise those girls—also inviting one of the girls into the chat to shame her—how is that not related to gender and the power dynamics of how gender operates even at that young age?

To add a twist to the plot, two screenshots from a Snapchat chat, in which a 'Siddharth' suggested to another boy that they "rape and gang-rape" a female classmate, turned out to be fake—the girl in question was pretending to be Siddharth, to test the boy's character. Gender naysayers got the chance they wanted to delegitimise anyone questioning what happened on the Bois Locker Room. Suddenly, all these victorious handles were sharing 'we told you so', 'Men were the real victims' kind of tweets. Despite a clarification from the police that the fake snapchat screenshot had nothing to do with Bois Locker Room chats, the din from the gender naysayers didn't die down.

People ignored the plain fact that these boys had betrayed the trust of their female classmates and friends. Some of these girls (whose nudes were circulated) were friends with some of these boys and had willingly sent them semi-nude pictures. However, without taking consent of those underage girls, these boys would share those pictures in the group. This is circulation of child pornography. But the die had been cast—suddenly the Locker Room boys were the victims and women were manipulative liars. This round the gender naysayers had won, and the feminist cause had lost.

Now, I am not saying the girl who faked her identity to incite rape as a character test was right—she should certainly face consequences for her thoughtless stupidity. But by denying that gender and gendered-inequality and gendered-power relations even exist, are we as a society not reinforcing the very inequalities that give rise to gender-related crimes in the first place?

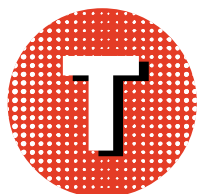
The writer is an award-winning Bollywood actor and sometime writer and social commentator.

JO STEALS THE SHOW

Creative pursuits and independence from market diktats are the hallmarks of Jyothika's second acting stint

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN





Tamil Nadu may be struggling to contain an epidemic explosion in the state, but the crisis was not enough to distract many from a twin storm involving actor Jyothika. First, social media users in the state attacked her when a clip of her speech at a recent award ceremony went viral. In it, she asks why hospitals and schools are not receiving donations as much as temples do, after her experiences while shooting for *Raatchasi* (2019). Her husband and actor-producer Suriya stood by her, issuing a strongly worded statement saying “let us sow love”.

Only days later, the couple were involved in another controversy after it was announced that her new film *Ponmagal Vanthal* would have a digital release on Amazon Prime in May, skipping its theatrical release. It resulted in a war of words between producers and theatre owners in the state as the couple silently fought to create a new normal for digital releases of small-budget films. The exact release date is yet to be announced as theatre owners have threatened to boycott all future Suriya's movies.

In the eye of both storms is a soft-spoken woman with an impeccable reputation in the industry. Seldom has an actor been so admired by Tamil women that she commands a fierce loyalty, even in her 40s. But Jyothika is a rarity, and has inspired many homemakers in the state, particularly after making a comeback in 2015 following a lengthy break.

“For every actor, director and producer, it is a dream to have their films released in a theatre. It is an accolade, seeing the fans cheer the movie in a theatre,” she tells THE WEEK. “But when the situation is extraordinary, my conten-



COMEBACK QUEEN
Jyothika and husband, Suriya; (below) with Revathi in *Jackpot*

Vilayadu (2006).

She faded out a couple of years after her marriage to Suriya in 2006 and the birth of her two children. But in 2015, when their beloved Jo was only remembered as a yesteryear actress who married a leading hero, she was back for round two. While many women actors make such returns only to play supporting roles as sisters or mothers, Jyothika chose strong characters that would fit her age and physique. “It is God’s grace that I got an opportunity to work in a film like *Ponmagal Vanthal*,” she says. “I am really thankful to director [J.J.] Fredrick for making me play the character. But I am also on a look out for such films that have strong characters.”

Her second stint began with *36 Vayadhinile* (2015), the remake of the Malayalam film *How Old Are You?* (Incidentally, the original had also marked the return of Malayalam star Manju Warrier after a 14-year break.) Though the movie did average in the box office, it laid the foundation for Jyothika’s resurgence. It was a movie that invigorated Tamil

tion is ‘Let us all face it’. By the time Covid-19 ends, the smaller films might not get enough space in the theatres. So, I feel it is fair to give small films a platform. I feel OTT is a podium for small films during such difficult situations.”

Ponmagal Vanthal will see Jyothika take on a character she has never played before—an advocate who fights a male chauvinistic society. Her fierce role is in stark contrast to that of the cute, bubbly characters with which she made her name in the early 2000s. Jyothika debuted with Priyadarshan’s *Doli Saja Ke Rakhna* (1998)

before entering Kollywood in *Vaali* (1999), playing a second heroine. She came to be known as Jo among her new crop of fans; post-*Vaali*, her film career rose steadily. She played lead roles opposite Suriya and Vijay and then with Rajinikanth in *Chandramukhi* (2005) and Kamal Hassan in *Vettaiyadu*

“TO ME, AS AN ACTOR, THERE IS NOTHING CALLED WOMEN-CENTRIC OR MALE-CENTRIC.... WOMEN ARE ALWAYS EQUAL TO MEN.”

—Jyothika, actor



homemakers who yearned to go beyond their household duties.

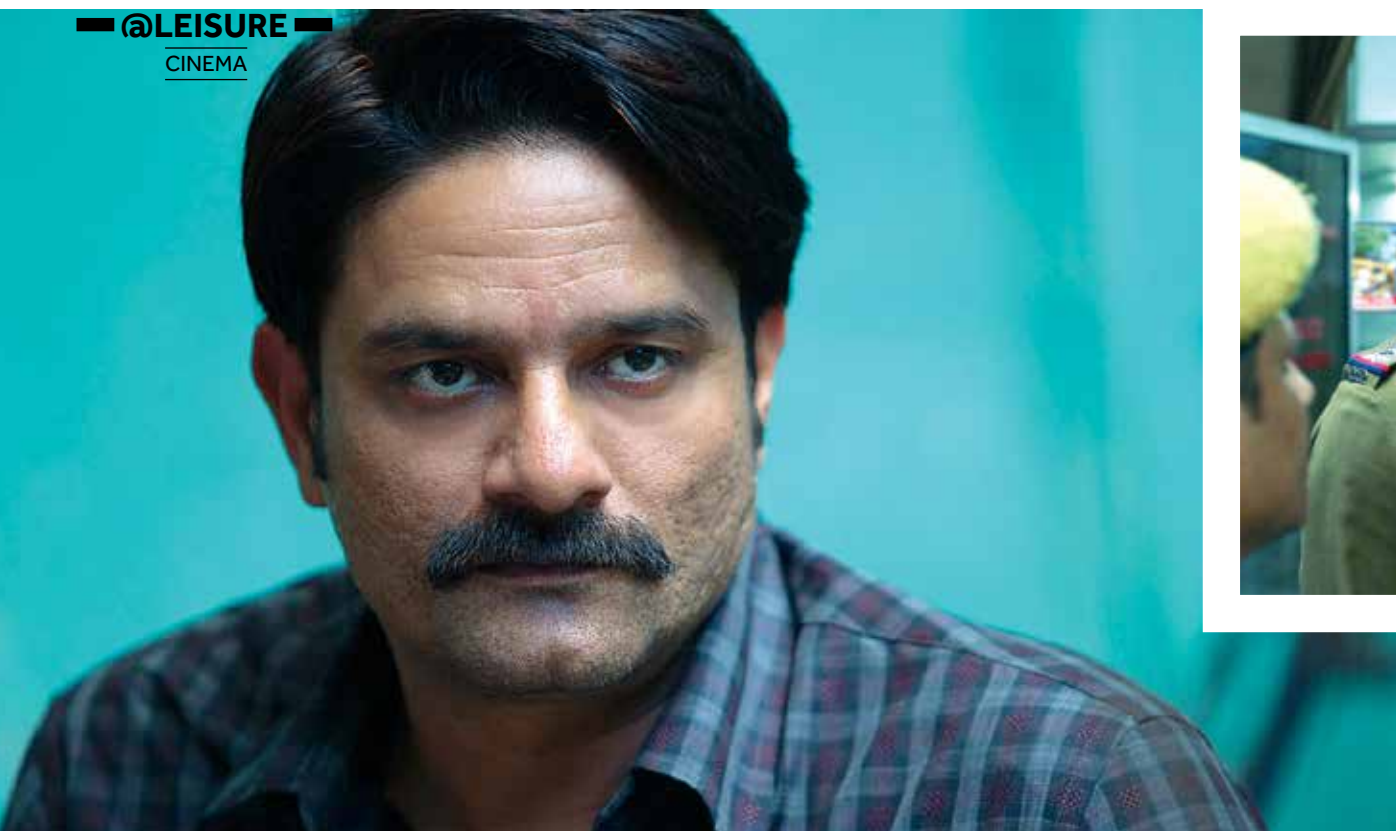
It was a period when the Tamil film industry saw a wave of women-centric films, a rarity in the region. The women usually played second fiddle to a popular hero or a *loosu ponnu* (impressionable girl). Jyothika’s new avatar provided a boost for scripts with women in the lead. “To me, as an actor, there is nothing called women-centric or male-centric,” says Jyothika. “The protagonist is played by a female artist and not a male. Women are always equal to men. We can perform heavy roles or light roles like heroes when we have the confidence in ourselves.”

She ensures that she gets her scripts at least two months before the shoot commences, especially since her comeback. She wants to go into the sets fully prepared. “For *Ponmagal Vanthal*, I did extra homework and memorised all the dialogues, because I was up against [R.] Parthiban in a courtroom drama. There are a lot of lengthy sequences,” she says.

The second film after her comeback was *Magalir Mattum* (2017), where she played a young documentary maker, who takes her mother-in-law on a surprise trip to reunite with her friends. Next was ace director Bala’s *Naachiyar* (2018), where she was a foul-mouthed, aggressive cop who made her fans flinch. She prioritised this over an offer to play the character that Nithya Menen eventually did in Vijay’s *Mersal*. By doing this, she once again signalled her intent to only play characters that challenged her. She had a highly successful 2019 with *Raatchasi*, where she played a school headmistress, then as a tough cop again with Revathi in the comedy *Jackpot*, and finally in the family drama-thriller *Thambi*, with her brother-in-law Karthi.

“Jyothika has definitely broken the [mould] in Tamil cinema with her comeback,” says film critic Sreedhar Pillai. “No actress has had a successful stint like hers after a break. If *Ponmagal Vanthal* does well on OTT, she becomes a star on this medium and her career gets extended. She has taken a wise decision.”

When asked about women being abused on social media, in light of the recent attacks on her, Jyothika says there is an imbalance of sorts. “When a woman talks about equal rights she is labelled as a feminist, which itself is a wrong term,” she says. “We don’t say we want every right above men. We only say equal rights. Generally, women’s terms are always exaggerated. It is an imbalance I feel.”



BREAKING THE MOULD

Typecast in negative roles for long, Jaideep Ahlawat is eager to experiment

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

He is a man at odds with life, vulnerable and unsure about everything. Professionally and personally, Hathiram Chaudhary is down and almost out. No one expects anything from the Delhi police inspector. But then there is an attempt to murder a high-profile, prime-time journalist. Four suspects are nabbed. And surprisingly, Chaudhary is asked to investigate the case, gradually revealing the twisted tales from media and bureaucracy. Jaideep Ahlawat, who plays

Chaudhary in Amazon Prime Video's new series *Paatal Lok*, says, "Hathiram is so vulnerable that you will start loving him, sympathise with him. He is fighting really hard to be sincere in what he does. He is fighting for the space he deserves." It was interesting to study the perseverance of Hathiram, his need and determination to always keep looking for the truth. The role, he says, often reminded him of his father, a teacher (now retired) in Kharkhara village in Haryana and also a common man

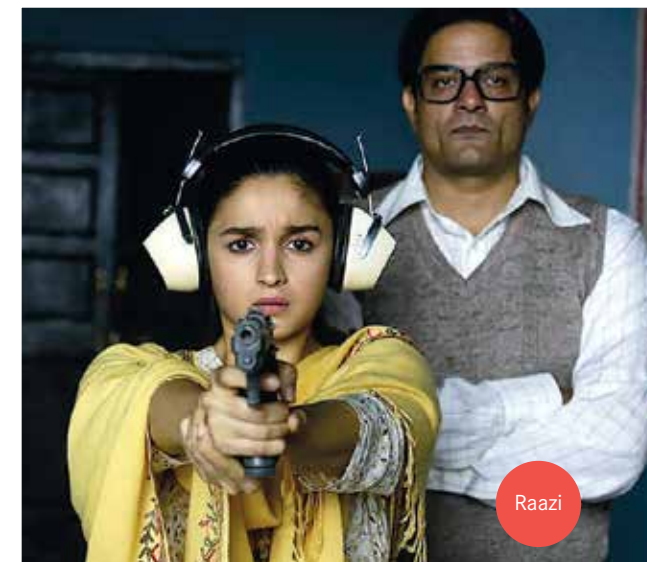
struggling with his day-to-day life. "I have picked up his traits, the way he walks, his body language," says Ahlawat.

Paatal Lok, reportedly based on Tarun J. Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* (not credited in the show), takes the audience to the dark alleys of the political and the powerful, exploring the depths of human and societal immorality.

When Ahlawat talks of Chaudhary's struggles, it seems like he is alluding to his journey in the entertainment industry, a journey that has been often marred with typecasting. He graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India in 2008, and started his film career with a negative role in *Khatta Meetha* (2010). While his portrayal of Shahid Khan in *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) was noticed and applauded, it did not boost his career. And, he had to contend with playing a string of negative characters in films like *Commando* and *Vishwaroopam* (both 2013). The negative streak came to an end with



Paatal Lok



Raazi

Raazi (2018), where he played Khalid Mir, the Intelligence Bureau training officer. Though it was a positive role, Ahlawat was still the tough guy.

"I was always the sure one," he says of the characters he has played so far. "I think that people often take my physical traits—tall and broad—at face value. Maybe that's why I am always cast in such roles." But strong men can be vulnerable, too, says Ahlawat. "We all go through weak moments and (such) life experiences are enough to tap into the vulnerable aspects of a character," he says. "It is good that finally someone else also thought that I could play a character like this, something that no one could explore so far." All he hopes for is getting something new in every film. "Because every film has a tendency of stereotyping you," he says, adding that after *Raazi*, he was offered roles that were similar to Khalid Mir. "Even now I know that I will start getting cop roles. It is not that I won't do another cop role. I will do it by bringing a new twist to the character."

But Ahlawat did not always want to be an actor; he dreamt of donning the olive green. But his Army dreams were shattered when he could not clear the entrance exam. Theatre helped him cope with that failure,

and paved the way for his acting career. Unlike many who would talk of their struggles in this industry, Ahlawat chooses to see it all as a "nice experience." "To be honest, I never thought I would become an actor. *Fauji banna tha, aur actor ban gaye* [I wanted to be a soldier, instead I became an actor]," he says. "Since then, I have had no other life but that of an actor. It's good, isn't it? Sometimes, I feel it could have been better. But this is a part of life."

Being too eager and rushing through your journey, he believes, may not work. "There are many examples of people who rushed and failed, while there are also examples of people who took it slow and

excelled. *Hum bhi maan lete hain ki hum lambi race ke ghode hain, iss liye thoda dheere chal rahe hain* [I also believe that I am in for the long run, and therefore I am taking it slow]."

Growing up, Ahlawat used to entertain villagers with his dance performances, sneaking into any and every wedding or celebration. "I love dancing. I still dance. Maybe not everywhere, but I find it a form of expression, a way to liberation," he says.

No one in the film industry, however, has discovered his singing, dancing side. "There are times I feel that people should just stop the [serious] roles they are giving me and instead give me something fun where I, too, get to dance, romance a girl, do comedy," he says, laughing. "If someone has found the vulnerability in me, I am sure soon people will also find the light-hearted guy that exists in me."

He will next be seen in *Tryst With Destiny*, which recently won the best screenplay award at the Tribeca Film Festival; Maqbool Khan's *Khaali Pee-li*, and a short film for Netflix directed by Shashank Khaitan. For now, like most of us, Ahlawat is home, re-reading his huge collection of Hindi literature and binge-watching shows like *Lucifer* and *Unorthodox*. **1**

**"IF SOMEONE HAS
FOUND THE
VULNERABILITY
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GUY IN ME."**





Breezy tune

Electronic music producer **Ritviz Srivastava**, popularly known as Ritviz, released a new dance-able music video called *Thandi Hawa*, a montage of dancing videos acquired from fans in lockdown. The 23-year-old is already one of the most original singer-composers in the country's electronic dance music scene, with popular numbers like *Udd Gaye* and *Barso*.

Lockdown diaries

Jacqueline Fernandez, who is spending lockdown days at Salman Khan's farmhouse in Panvel, Navi Mumbai, recently uploaded a video of her daily routine. In the lush green environs, the actor has been busy writing quarantine journals, playing with stray dogs, riding horses and more. The actor's last two releases—*Drive* and *Mrs Serial Killer*—on Netflix may have been criticised, but she seems unfazed. She looks pretty happy learning to climb coconut trees and appreciating the flora and fauna. Meanwhile, she also shot an in-house music video with Khan, titled *Tere Bina*.



GETTY IMAGES



ALAYA FURNITUREWALA/actor

This January, Alaya Furniturewala made a smashing debut with *Jawaani Jaaneman*. But her debut was followed by a global pandemic which restricted the things she could have explored. But she has found ways to keep herself busy. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ Growing up, you were not keen on being an actor. After all that reluctance, how has been the experience so far?

A/ It was that one moment when I was acting and I remember feeling so much joy while doing it. It was so rewarding to see people watching me and then giving me feedback.... I am normally a planned and organised person. This was the most impulsive thing I did. I dropped out of filmmaking school and went into acting without even knowing if I could do it. And it all paid off.

Q/ You come from a family of artistes (mother Pooja Bedi, grandfather Kabir Bedi, grandmother Protima Bedi). They say star kids have it easy. But you said you faced a few rejections.

A/ Everyone's struggle and journey is different. Some people get a film right after school, some people struggle for years. When you get into this industry, you are never sure where you fall in this spectrum. It also depends on luck, so much work, and a combination of so many things that you cannot control. I was just very vocal about my story and what my journey was.... I am glad that it took a lot of people by surprise. I am glad a lot of people listened.

Q/ You also changed your name from Alia to

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

Eye on visibility

Alaya to avoid being confused with Alia Bhatt.

A/ It didn't make sense to keep the same name. I could have, but I just wanted my own identity. I couldn't change it entirely because people have known me as Alia for my entire life. But I thought if there can be a Ranbir and a Ranveer, there can be an Alia and Alaya.

Q/ Of late, you have been very active on social media. How difficult is it to be creative now?

A/ Honestly, I finally have time to be on social media.... I kind of lost what my identity was on social media and focused more on learning my craft, which I am glad I did. With the lockdown, social media is the only way that I can be visible right now.... It has given me time to put thought into it and create things that people really enjoy. But sometimes it gets irritating that you have to constantly post. These are very privileged struggles.... It feels stupid even saying it, knowing what the situation is out there and how people are having such a hard time. There are so many problems. But one has to keep oneself productive and engaged, otherwise mental health suffers.

—Priyanka Bhadani



Reel and real

Filmmaker **Anand Gandhi**, who shot to prominence with *Ship of Theseus*, has been working on his next film for the last five years. Titled *Emergence*, the film follows four scientists in a race to save the world from a deadly pandemic. With the story turning out to be eerily prophetic, what with Covid-19, Gandhi is reworking the script. Earlier, the plan was to give information about the nature of a pandemic. "[Now], I can directly take the audience to the understanding of host behaviour manipulation of a parasite," he said in a statement. "I want to use a pandemic setting as a deeper investigation into the nature of human identity and social behaviour."

Delish read

Celebrity chef **Pooja Dhingra** will soon be out with an e-cookbook. The book will have 50 recipes from her Le15 Café; everything from sauces and pickles to pancakes and waffles. The Covid-19 turmoil forced Dhingra to close her café in Colaba, south Mumbai. In an Instagram post, she wrote, "I've always wanted to write a Le15 Cafe Cookbook. Definitely didn't expect to do it in the current circumstances! Nevertheless, doing this book made me very happy because now our recipes will live forever in your kitchens."



COURTESY: TWITTER



The identity crisis

A few weeks before Covid-19 stopped the world in its tracks, I went to visit a city I have visited several times. I stayed in a hotel I stayed in earlier. It was not surprising that the lady at the reception counter recognised me and tickled my ego. "Good afternoon, Mr Debroy," she said. "Welcome back. Can I see some ID?"

I asked her why she needed ID, since she recognised me. It was a facetious question. Of course, she needed ID. Those are the rules. Without ID, I do not legally exist. It is for reasons like this that cases of identity theft become serious.

Most Indians do not have an integrated ID. There is an assorted basket—Aadhaar, PAN, voter's card, passport, driving licence, SC/ST certificate, bank accounts, ration card and MGNREGA job card. Sure, with Aadhaar, a beginning has been made towards some form of national identity, integrating it with Jan Dhan accounts, direct benefit transfer, pensions, insurance and health care through Ayushman Bharat. But, in a largely informal economy and society, this is by no means complete.

Note that this is about an individual's identity. In parallel, Union and state government programmes are linked to the Socio Economic Caste Census, with that database used to identify beneficiaries. Let us ignore valid questions about updating SECC and improving its application in urban areas (It is more robust in rural area).

Note that both SECC and MGNREGA are about a household's identity. The individual and the household need to be matched and it is still a work in progress.

The US is a prime example of how easy it is to migrate from one part of the country to another. That is true of many countries in the west. This is because of portability of identity. In contrast, in India, we are often more concerned with portability

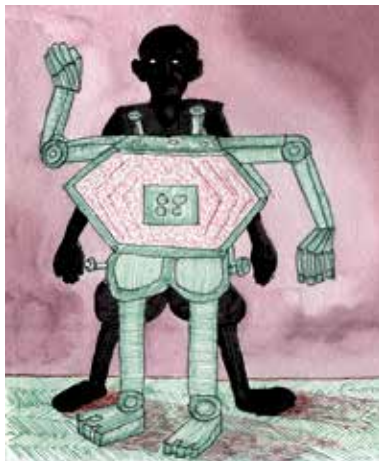
of mobile numbers. Lack of portable identity makes it difficult to migrate, and migration is correlated with positive externalities and economic development.

Covid-19 has led to reverse migration. This has once again flagged the lack of portable identity. Had portable identity existed, returning migrants would not have faced problems of accessing government benefits. When the government is asked to do something for returning migrants, this is not an easy knot to unwind. In passing, what about the issue of doing something for farmers? Do we have a unified definition of farmer? Since the definition of farmer is typically linked to land ownership, do we have satisfactory land-titling records?

This is not only about an individual. A similar problem exists for enterprises. When the word enterprise is used, it is often automatically and unnecessarily assumed that the corporate form is contemplated. A small percentage of enterprises have corporate form. There is a definition of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. But registration of MSMEs is not mandatory, just as it was not under the old Small Scale Industries system. The MSME Census

is old. For what it is worth, more than 95 per cent of MSME enterprises lack legal identity. Forget Companies Act, they are not registered under any law. As is the case with individuals, returning migrants or otherwise. Given that the government would like to do something for MSMEs to counter adverse effects of Covid-19, how does one identify an enterprise? The identity is missing. There are ways to rectify this. For instance, Goods and Services Tax Network numbers can be a starting point. But, in this case, it is not as if this is work in progress. The work is yet to start.

In the west, identity was historically driven by the church, with birth, marriage and death registered in church. An Indian individual (and enterprise) needs portable identity from birth (entry) to death (exit).



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