

CASH CRUNCH : WHAT THE STATES ARE DOING
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS: YOGI ADITYANATH, ASHOK GEHLOT, T.M. THOMAS ISAAC

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THE WEEK

JULY 5, 2020



RELIGION IN THE
YEAR OF THE MASK

HOW PRISONERS
ARE MEETING FAMILIES
DURING COVID

TWO FARMERS
ARE GROWING APPLES
IN THE DECCAN

EXCLUSIVE

WHY XI IS UPSET

Li Xiaojun,
Chinese State Council
director, speaks to
THE WEEK

PLUS

Barkha Dutt reports
from Ladakh

**India should meet
China halfway on BRI**
Xu Wenhong, deputy
secretary general,
OBOR Center, Beijing



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TAMIL NADU

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Narendra Modi
with Chinese
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during 2018
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HANDSHAKES TO FISTFIGHTS

The India-China relationship has seen a major deterioration in the last eight months. Beijing is now trying to push the narrative that the instigation for the latest border skirmishes in Ladakh came from the Indian side. And, by positioning itself in Ladakh firmly, China has challenged India's position in South Asia. The Asian century is now entering an unpleasant new normal, it seems.

- India should meet China halfway on Belt and Road Initiative: Xu Wenhong, deputy secretary general, One Belt One Road Center, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
- Ladakh wants Modi to act with China as he did with Pakistan after Pulwama: Barkha Dutt reports from Leh

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fervent prayer for
divine intervention
in a world that
wishes to get rid of
the mask

COVER ILLUSTRATION BINESH SREEDHARAN

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Control the deaths

Arvind Kejriwal has mismanaged the situation in Delhi. It is a different matter, though, that he did not get enough support from the Centre. The BJP government at the Centre and the AAP government in Delhi should put aside politics and fight the crisis on a war footing (‘Capital pains’, June 21).

It is very important that patients get enough beds, in both private and government hospitals. Kejriwal took a wrong decision when he said that hospital beds in Delhi are exclusively for residents of Delhi. One cannot afford to have such a rule in the capital of the country. I feel awareness among people in Delhi is less, when compared with states like Kerala. Or, people are mostly nonchalant. All this is adding to the worry. People in Delhi should wear masks and take all precautions when they move out.

Covid-19 has reached a stage where it has started affecting so many of us, but it is important at this juncture to control the number of deaths. It is a positive sign that the recovery percentage has gone up in the country.

P. Gopikrishnan,
On email.

It is too early to suggest that Kejriwal has lost the plot in Delhi. Of course, he took some missteps, like the attempt to earmark government hospitals in Delhi. When Delhi, or for that matter, the whole country is in the thick of a crisis, it is better to extend a helping hand than to point an accusing finger.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

Kejriwal is playing his old trick of blaming the Centre and lieutenant governor for all the ills! Why was he not prepared for all this in the first place?

Kejriwal should rise to the occasion and take all help from the Central government in tackling the pandemic.

K. Aravinda Upadhyaya,
On email.

Thank you

At a time when we are scared of Covid-19, ‘Gentle touch to lonely giants’ (June 21) was a welcome read; it felt like a painkiller. As readers, we owe you a big salute for having presented us with such a good report.

More and more tourists should come to this elephant rehabilitation

centre in Kerala.
P.M. Gopalan,
On email.

Fooling the people

It is not the longevity of politicians that should matter. Almost all of them are there in politics only for personal gains (‘Power Point’, June 21). It does not matter whether an MP sat in the last row or was a frontbencher. What was his or her contribution, if any? Said Abraham Lincoln, “You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.” Alas, the likes of Deve Gowda and his ilk seem to think they can fool all the people all the time, and they are proving it, age no bar.

Sharath Ahuja,
On email.

Rise to the challenge

Swara Bhasker has rightly questioned the aptness of people ridiculing Bollywood celebrities for not opening their purse strings to bail out the nation in the ongoing crisis, as if it’s something which is obligatory on their part (‘Just a bad play’, June 21). The moot point is that a crisis is not overcome

through charities, but by rising up to the challenges.

The government is taking recourse to statistics, no matter how pleasing the figures may appear, to cover up its own inefficiencies. With health care a shambles and with jobs being lost, lives and livelihoods remain at stake.

Vipul Pande,
Nainital.

Brave Mumbaikars

Jerry Pinto has delved deep into the psyche of people, revealing the truth behind the facade of Mumbai (‘The city of perils’, June 14). The city of dreams, as we call it, has a very unique character and its people often bounce back after turbulent times.

Covid-19 is teaching us some bitter lessons. We need to cope with stressful conditions, performing everyday chores. Here beauty and ugliness coexist. Good wishes to brave Mumbaikars!

Surinder Pal,
On email.

The pandemic is inflicting maximum damage on Maximum City. Mumbai, which has always been bursting at the seams, is now gasping for breath, struck by a virus which respects only social distancing, a tall order in a city which is home to not only one of the largest slums in the world but also billionaires.

As mounting Covid-19 cases put unrelenting pressure on an already

overstretched health care system, surviving the pandemic is becoming more of a lottery. The Mumbai spirit seems to have been, for once, vanquished by an invisible enemy.

Vijai Pant,
On email.

Indira Gandhi in 1981 had said at a conference in Rome that the cost of an inter-continental ballistic missile was equivalent to setting up over three lakh primary schools. Covid-19 has already killed so many people. None of them were killed by bombs, drones and bullets.

Any man with common sense would agree that it is far more important to realise that the essence of real security is in safeguarding people—their capabilities, and not just safeguarding borders.

It is strongly suggested that world leaders should jointly prepare a peace plan, also involving terrorists, which should address the following points: (a) Importance of peace than a piece of land, (b) health care for all living beings, (c) the need for countries to come closer for oneness and togetherness, (d) the need for efforts to bridge the gap between weak and rich countries and (e) efforts to jointly bring the world out of crisis to tranquility.

Ashok Nihalani,
On email.

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■ **APERITIF** ■
THE BIG PICTURE

LOVE'S LABOUR WON

Karla Lopez Rangel did not go to hospital even after 15 hours of labour. Covid-19 cases in Mexico have been surging, and the Mexico City neighbourhood where Karla and her husband, Miguel, live was teeming with patients. So the couple stayed home, bought a birthing tub and, with the help of two midwives, brought their baby to the brave new world the pandemic has given birth to.

PHOTO BY REUTERS

POINT BLANK



Kriti Sanon,
actor

Social media is fake and a most toxic place. If you have not posted RIP or said something publicly, you are considered not to be grieving. It seems social media is the real world, and the real world has become fake.

The country needs a de-escalation of rhetoric. The government needs some room to decide its strategy. Mature nations do not react when provoked, they respond when they choose to.

Yogendra Yadav,
national president, Swaraj India

I was scared of darkness at one point. I could not step out of the house, and I did not let anyone step out of the house, because I feared we could get kidnapped.

S. Sreesanth,
cricketer, on life after he was banned in 2013 for alleged spot-fixing in the IPL

Our capacity to tackle problems, indeed our ability to adequately understand problems is inhibited by the political culture of the day, where the ruling party seek to present the prime minister as infallible and his policies beyond criticism.

Ramachandra Guha,
historian

I do yoga, meditation, apart from the regular exercises, to keep my body fit.... This is important when we enter the court. For we can counter the demands with lot more ease.

P.V. Sindhu,
badminton player

WORD PLAY

Amid the Covid-19 crisis, **phygital** marketing is becoming the buzzword in the retail sector. It refers to the effort to integrate physical and digital elements for marketing a product. Phygital strategies include providing in-store experiences to customers that would initiate online ordering and vice versa. In the decade ahead, more content marketers will be tasked with coming up with compelling ideas in this domain.

MILESTONES

POWER COUPLE

Surgeon Rear Admirals C.S. Naidu and Arti Sarin became the first couple in the Indian Navy to serve together as chief medical officers of two commands. Sarin assumed the post of the CMO of the southern naval command on June 22; Naidu is the CMO of the eastern naval command.



SCIENTIST SON

Tejas Thackeray, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's youngest son, and his team discovered a new lizard species from Sakleshpur in Karnataka. The species has been given the name *Cnemaspis magnifica*.



BIG RECOGNITION

Political theorist and Harvard professor Danielle Allen won this year's John W. Kluge Prize for the study of humanity. The \$500,000 award recognises lifetime achievement in various disciplines not covered by the Nobel Prizes.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



An oily challenge

Daily rise in the prices of petrol and diesel for a fortnight in June has made retail consumers unhappy. The Narendra Modi government is facing unfavourable comparisons with similar price hikes during the Manmohan Singh regime. Critics have dug up the statements made by Modi and other BJP leaders criticising UPA for burdening the common man.

The government and the BJP have adopted a strategic silence, refusing to explain why the prices are shooting when global oil prices are very low. An otherwise voluble Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has also been quiet, while the oil marketing companies shrug and point at the finance ministry—which needs more revenue as tax collections are down.

But the Covid-19-induced restrictions have put street protests on hold. A significant marker is that diesel is no more a holy fuel, and its price would almost match with that of petrol after a few more hikes. There were times when diesel was selling at half the price of petrol as it was considered an essential subsidy for farmers, Railways and road transport sector. It was one of the essentials for farmers along with cheap fertilisers, free power and zero income tax. Governments would tremble at hiking the costs of agricultural input or for imposing income tax on farmers. But the Modi government, which has a vision to limit subsidies, has tackled those for fertilisers and diesel in the last six years.

One of the first acts of Ananth Kumar as Union fertilisers minister in 2014 was to get Modi's approval for changing the subsidy scheme for fertilisers, where the differential amount between factory price and sales price was directly going to fertiliser factories. Then, neem-coated fertilisers were promoted by the government to eliminate diversion of fertilisers for industrial use. The success in limiting

fertiliser subsidies gave confidence to the government to tackle diesel subsidies.

The Modi government claims that dependence on diesel has come down due to improvement in electricity supply—as it made water pumps more efficient. The government also claims that increase in support prices for cereals means big farmers could now absorb the rising diesel prices. There was a time when ruling party leaders used to appeal to the prime minister and the petroleum minister not to increase the diesel and kerosene prices, as it would upset rural voters. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala

Yojana programme has increased the usage of cooking gas extensively, saving both kerosene and firewood. This has, in turn, led to increase in the green cover and wildlife, as fewer trees are now felled for cooking purposes.

Political leaders feel that price increase protests can become a mass agitation only if there is a severe shortage of essential commodities. The economic

reforms started in 1991 have taken care of the supply side of almost all essential commodities. Unlike fertilisers and fuel, the Centre has not been able to raise electricity prices in rural areas, because states, run by all parties including the BJP, are committed to give free power. That is why under the new economic reforms, loans to state governments is made conditional on power sector reforms. But increasing power tariffs is a tricky business as the Left Democratic Front government in Kerala has discovered during the lockdown.

As far as income tax on agricultural income is concerned, the NITI Aayog and the income tax department had recommended reforms during Modi's first term itself. But the then finance minister, Arun Jaitley, had scotched it saying government would not tax farmers. Comparatively, diesel price hike is a low hanging fruit.



FOR THE FARMERS

Karnataka Agriculture Minister B.C. Patil has a reputation for creativity. Now, the former cop and Kannada actor has appealed to the staff of the Bengaluru Agriculture University, and farmers, to answer their phones with “Jai kisan” instead of “Hello”. The three-time MLA from Hirekerur has also instructed his department to use the state farmers’ anthem as their mobile caller tune to instil a sense of pride in the farming community.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

VANISHING ACT

The BJP and Congress continue to dominate Madhya Pradesh’s political landscape and it is not surprising considering their numbers in the assembly. But, in the aftermath of the recent Rajya Sabha polls, even the miniscule presence of other parties has diminished. The Samajwadi Party expelled its sole MLA, Rajesh Shukla, for voting for the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls. The BSP had already expelled one of two MLAs last year. This leaves only one MLA of any third political party, among the seven non-BJP, non-Congress MLAs in the 230-strong assembly.

RECALL VALUE

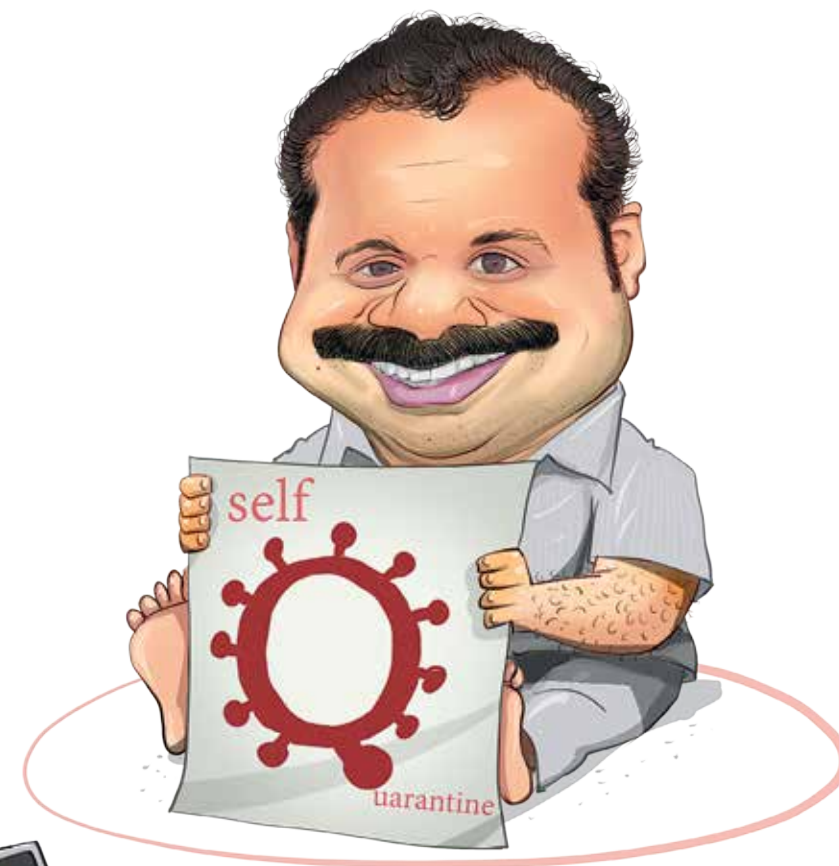
Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel emerged as the Congress’s poster boy on World Yoga Day. Baghel, who has been practising yoga for many years, posted some pictures and videos of the asanas that he performed at home. These included the difficult shirshasana or headstand. Congress leaders were quick to highlight it and refer to former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s ability to perform the asana.

FOR INDIA AND FOR BENGAL

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee may have surprised a few recently with her nationalist stand. During an all-party meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the Ladakh face-off, Banerjee said, “Don’t worry we shall overcome; we will win the battle.” Banerjee also went a step further, asking Modi to curb Chinese investment in India. It is not known whether she is planning to make the time-tested nationalist angle an election plank.

THE COVID-19 FIG LEAF

All eyes were on Telugu Desam Party legislators during the recent Rajya Sabha elections in Andhra Pradesh. A year after the YSR Congress Party came to power, a few TDP leaders had started drifting towards the ruling party. TDP MLA Anagani Satya Prasad, who has been maintaining a distance from his party, wrote to TDP supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu on the day of elections. He said he could not vote as he had come in contact with a Covid-19 positive person and was in self-quarantine. However, later that evening, he showed up on news channels saying that his test report was negative. “Had I received this report a few hours earlier, I would have voted,” he said. Timing, we say!



BACK IN DEMAND

It has been more than a year since Navjot Singh Sidhu resigned from the Punjab cabinet over differences with Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh. Now, he is being wooed by many, including the AAP and the breakaway faction of the Akali Dal. As the buzz over a cabinet reshuffle gained traction in Punjab, Asha Kumari, senior Congress leader and in-charge of party affairs for Punjab, said Sidhu was welcome to join the cabinet again. Sidhu has been quiet so far.

However, it appears it is not just the political parties who are chasing Sidhu. A team of the Bihar Police had recently landed in Amritsar looking for the former cricketer as he was booked in a case during the elections last year. Some feel it is a message to Sidhu—stay away from campaigning during the Bihar assembly elections later this year.

PRECARIOUS STATES

Their finances a shambles and with not much help coming from the Centre, states are desperately attempting never-tried-before measures to stay afloat

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

BRICK BY BRICK

States' sources of income dried up owing to lack of economic activity. This kiln in Chennai has not seen much sales since the lockdown started

Imagine that you are a villager in India. You live in a close-knit village which follows the feudal system, with the zamindar lording it over from his mansion. There are only a few specific jobs, confined to your mohalla, that you are allowed to do and make money out of; the larger part of the earnings from the fields you toil in go straight to the landlord, who has promised to return your share in due course.

Then, out of the blue, everything goes awry. Not just in the village but the entire region. A locust attack, otherwise uncommon, takes place, destroying all means of livelihood. The zamindar issues a diktat that all

work, in the fields and otherwise, should be stopped and the villagers should drop what they are doing and take refuge inside their tenements. This is the only way to save yourself, and the village, he tells his startled fellow citizens, who are now not just facing an unknown enemy swarming all over the fields and dashing hopes of their regular subsistence earnings, but placing a question mark over the expected 'cashback' from the landlord.

Virtually every state in India right now is you, reeling over a double economic whammy—the Covid-19-induced lockdown has reduced their own meagre revenues to a trickle, and the Centre, on whose

handouts the states depend on for a good chunk of their expenditure, has been forced to tighten its purse strings. The result? The economic position of every Indian state is a shambles.

"Punjab's financial situation is extremely critical," says Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh. Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant says the state has had to face "extreme hardship," while West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee says her state is "financially starved". Chief minister after chief minister has sent SOS letters to Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking for urgent financial help.

The economics is spilling into po-

litical friction. Centre-state relations have not been exemplary since Modi came to power in 2014, but now, the gloves are off. Not just between New Delhi and the states, but between embattled states themselves, boxed in from both sides of having to deal with rising infections as well as dwindling incomes.

AN UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP

Indian states essentially spend money from two sources. First is the income they make directly from the few things they are allowed to tax, like petrol, diesel and liquor as well as revenue from land transactions. All other goods and services are taxed under GST, the money going

to the Centre from where the state's share is given back later (and sometimes, not soon enough). The other source of money is what is 'devolved' from the Centre, like plan allotment and budgetary allocation for Central government schemes like highways.

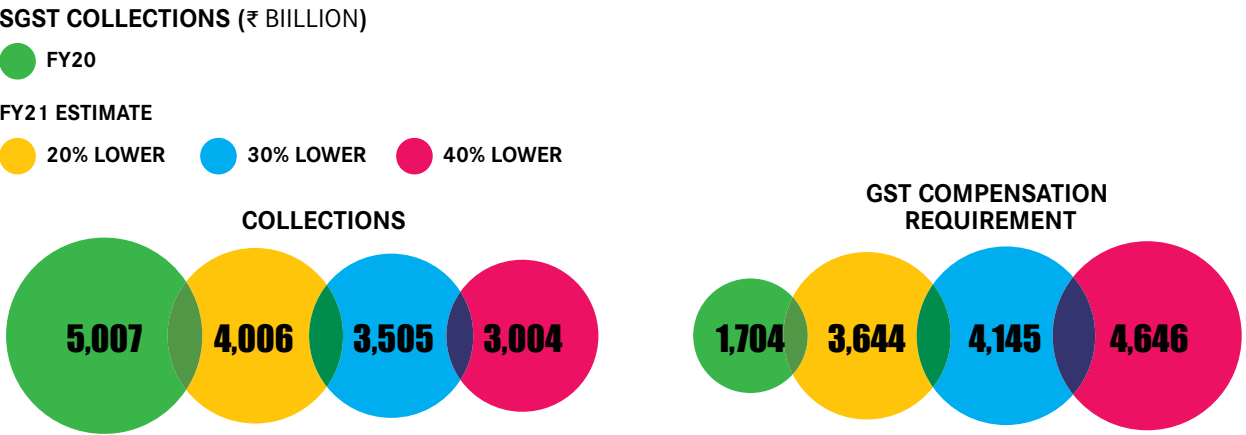
The issue? Over the years, problems such as changes in the tax structure like GST and their own profligacy have left most states financially weak. Many borrow way beyond their means. While rules like the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act limit how much states can borrow, previous debt and interest piling up has been a common feature. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has a total debt of ₹4.56

lakh crore, while Karnataka will have to pay more than ₹22,000 crore alone in interest this year. According to a report by the Reserve Bank of India, Punjab has the worst debt-to-GDP ratio at nearly 40 per cent, followed by Uttar Pradesh at 38 per cent.

"States are now more dependent on the Union government," says Avani Kapur, director (accountability initiative) and fellow, Centre for Policy Research. "While part of this is inherent in India's fiscal structure where states are the big spenders and the Centre controls the purse strings, the situation has been exacerbated by the introduction of the GST... eroding the ability of states to raise their own revenues." For example,

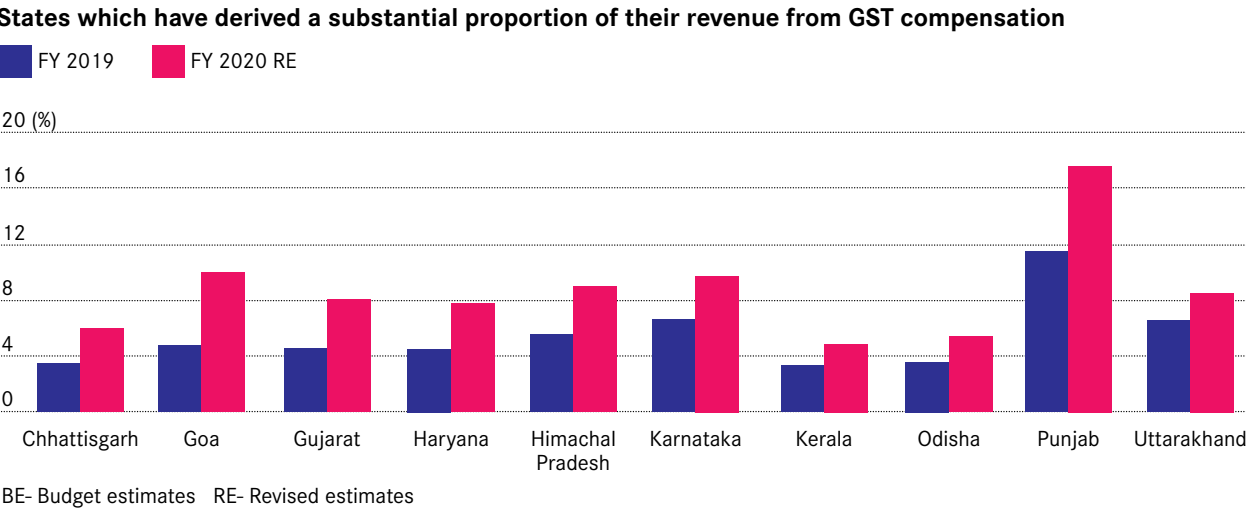
DOUBLE WHAMMY

States are expected to suffer as a result of shortfalls in both tax revenues and Central devolution



Estimate of gross tax revenues and devolution for FY2021 (₹ TRILLION)

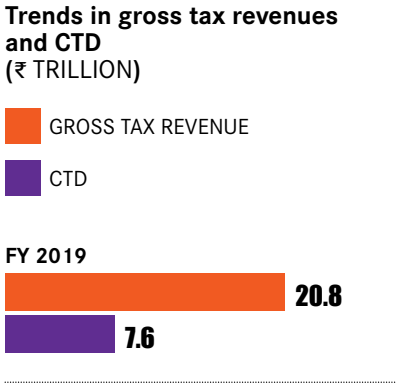
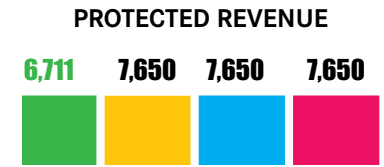
	FY2021 BE	20% lower than FY2021 BE	30% lower than FY2021 BE	40% lower than FY2021 BE
Gross tax revenues of the Centre	24.2	19.4	17.0	14.5
Central tax devolution (CTD) of all states	7.8	-	-	-
Estimated CTD in FY2021		6.8	5.9	5.1
Less excess CTD devolved in FY2020		0.5	0.5	0.5
Adjusted CTD estimated		6.3	5.5	4.6



SOURCE ICRA

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.

The Centre is bound to protect a 14 per cent growth in states' GST revenues, and if shortfall arises, compensate it to the tune of the amount of shortfall



while money raised by states themselves was 55 per cent in average of their total expense in 2014, it has fallen to barely half now.

“The state of state finances is bad, no doubt about it,” says Hemant Sharma, principal secretary (industries), Odisha. “But that is because state finances are directly dependant on economic activity and devolution from the Central government.”

The lockdown hit both. Money coming in from alcohol, petrol and electricity, the main sources of direct revenue for states, virtually plummeted overnight when the national lockdown with its draconian provisions kicked in on March 25. And, for all practical purposes, most Central schemes and grants approved for this year will remain suspended till the end of the financial year, as the Centre itself is strapped for cash. Ratings agency ICRA estimates that tax devolution from Centre to states will be down by 30 per cent this year.

ALL FALL DOWN

Adding to the woe is the fact that not only are states on the frontline of fighting the pandemic, with health care being a state subject, they also have immense expense obligations, ranging from salaries to pensions to social security schemes. To go back to the initial imagery of the villager being an Indian state, imagine how it would be while your salary has been cut. You are now saddled with the unenviable task of not only providing for your family members, but also shelling out for Covid-19 treatment of infected relatives. Not a good ‘state’ to be in, right?

For example, in the month of April which was completely washed out by the lockdown, Kerala’s finance minister Dr T.M. Thomas Isaac could only watch helplessly while the state’s revenues crashed to just over ₹1,000 crore—it was four times that in the corresponding period the previous year. Meanwhile, the state’s expenses

went up from nearly ₹9,000 crore to more than ₹15,000 crore. The result? The state’s deficit crossed 40 per cent of its budget in just the first month of the financial year.

The horror story is repeated across the board. Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao had to make do with 25 per cent income compared with the previous year, while Nitish Kumar in Bihar had to be satisfied with 18 per cent. Amarinder Singh during one of the prime minister’s video chat with chief ministers claimed that Punjab’s income had crashed to 12 per cent. Chhattisgarh’s GST revenue fell from ₹1,200 crore to ₹200 crore in April, while that of Jharkhand went from more than ₹800 crore to a little more than ₹100 crore.

So, the states did what they always do—clamour for help from Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Only, this time the Centre itself was trying hard to figure a way out of its own snare to throw any benevolent scraps their way.

CONDITIONS APPLY

The only direct relief came as part of Sitharaman’s ‘Covid stimulus’ series of announcements, with the limit on how much money states can borrow increased from the existing 3 per cent to 5 per cent. But it comes with a catch. Only an additional 0.5 per cent is unconditional. Anything further depends on how fast the state digitises ration cards and sets about reforming their electricity sector. Obviously, it has not gone down well, especially among opposition-ruled states. “This is violative of the country’s federal structure,” says Amarinder Singh.

“Increase in borrowing powers of states is a step in the right direction, however, if it is made conditional, it constrains the fiscal space,” says Lekha Chakraborty, economist and professor at the Delhi-based National Institute of Public Finance and Policy. “The fundamental change has

■ INTERVIEW

Yogi Adityanath,
chief minister, Uttar Pradesh

Safety of investors who come to UP is my guarantee

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Q/State finances have been badly impacted by the lockdown. How can the Centre help?

A/In these testing times, the Centre's assistance has been of great help. Financial assistance from the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana helped in making food grain available to the needy, while the second package of ₹20 lakh crore is proving to be helpful in strengthening the economy of the states, especially in boosting the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector. It is also helping in supporting street vendors, youth and workers who have returned from other states.

Q/What are the innovative ideas Uttar Pradesh is considering to tide over the financial crisis?

A/Our focus is entirely on 'work for every hand and employment in every household'. Priority is also being given to the production of indigenous goods. This will further open up new job opportunities. Besides, we have also started several prestigious projects such as expressways, dedicated freight corridors and medical colleges. Thousands of workers are already engaged in these projects. Our government is also working on the concept of creating a land bank for setting up industries.

Q/Uttar Pradesh has been wooing businesses leaving China, especially Japanese companies.

A/We have been receiving good response from foreign investors who want to invest in Uttar Pradesh. We are talking to companies that want to shift their bases from China; we will provide [them] space. German footwear company Von Wellx is going to invest in Agra. Similarly, we are talking to many other interested companies. Japanese companies have shown interest in the Electronic City of (the upcoming) Jewar airport. Besides, they are also showing interest in logistics parks and the food processing sector. Apart from this, the industrial institutions with which we have signed MoUs under groundbreaking ceremony-1 and ground-

breaking ceremony-2 are also setting up their units.

Q/Uttar Pradesh does face challenges as far as industrial townships and skilled workforce go. It is also deficient in other parameters that companies look for.

A/This land is full of rich resources and opportunities, whether we talk of manpower or infrastructure. The previous governments might have had a lax approach towards utilising available resources due to which people had to

migrate to other states in search of jobs, but we are committed towards taking Uttar Pradesh to the pinnacle of development.

Our policies in different sectors are attracting huge investment. We are also making the changes required, following Covid-19. We are providing 24-hour electricity. Land is available for investors, and their safety is my guarantee. We will have the maximum number of expressways in the country. In the coming days, there will be metro connectivity in other major cities (besides Noida and Lucknow). The nation and the world will connect with Jewar airport (coming up near Greater Noida).

As the state with the largest population, we are the most endowed as far as human resources are concerned. There is no market bigger than Uttar Pradesh. Apart from a population of more than 23 crore, half of Bihar and Nepal depend on us for their economic, educational and medical needs. World-class IIT, polytechnics and ITIs provide lakhs of skilled human resources every year. All these things have to be communicated to investors. MoUs and investment projects progress are now tracked online. This will help existing investors and give new entrepreneurs the confidence to invest in the state.

Q/What can be done to sort out the present economic crisis? There are people without income and there is drop in consumption.

A/We are already far ahead in this process and have taken several measures to keep the wheels of the economy running. During the lockdown, we ensured that there was cash flow in the rural and urban economy. We bought food grain at MSP (minimum support price) from the farmers. We purchased 3.47 lakh quintal of wheat and ₹3,890 crore was paid directly into farmers' accounts. Along with this, ₹2,000 was deposited in the bank accounts of the farmers twice under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi. Throughout the lockdown, crushing continued in 119 sugar mills in the state; 12,000 brick kilns were running and 2,500 cold storages continued to function. Around 25 lakh workers have been working in these three industries and we ensured that they were paid salaries. About 94 per cent of the units in the state paid salaries to their employees and ₹1,700 crore was paid to the companies from the government.

Q/How does Uttar Pradesh plan to capitalise on the migrant labour force which has returned to the state?

A/Workers coming back from other states are our asset, and providing them employment is our priority. So far, more than 32 lakh migrant workers have returned to Uttar Pradesh. They are being engaged in MSMEs, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme and other industries after mapping their skills. Their data is also being provided to labour and employment exchange offices in every district. The insurance cover of all workers is also being ensured.

Many large industrial bodies including FICCI and the National Real Estate Development Council are coming forward to provide employment. Recently, we received a demand from the Noida Apparel Export Cluster asking for nearly two lakh workers—tailors and support staff. So you see, these workers have already started their contribution in building a new Uttar Pradesh.

to come in debt deficit dynamics."

"Most of these consumption drops, like the electricity consumption lost for the 60 days or so of the lockdown, cannot be recouped in the latter part of the year. They are a net loss," says Hemant Sharma of Odisha. "Of course, as industrial activity restarts, there is going to be a rebound in some sectors. But no state is sure at the moment as to how much of the loss can be made good in the months to come."

DISUNITY IN DIVERSITY

While the states are on the same boat as far as dwindled revenues go, the misery has been different for different states. By a twist of fate, the more developed states have been the hardest hit. According to a Crisil study, top eight states affected by the pandemic, like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, accounted for 65 per cent of manufacturing, 60 per cent of construction and 53 per cent of services, meaning the overall impact on the economy was further accentuated by businesses being affected here.

Liquor, too, can make or break fortunes. Uttar Pradesh and Telangana, for example, are most dependant on excise from liquor, affecting these states that much more as revenues dried up during lockdown. Alternatively, Gujarat, a dry state, depends way too much on petrol and diesel tax, and got battered as lockdown dialled it down to a trickle.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

Ditched by the Centre and left to their own devices, states have surprisingly resorted to a level of dexterity and enterprise many of them are not really a natural at—rolling out the red carpet to investment. Besides the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and the 'vocal for local' narrative, states were also catalysed by a specific exhortation to them from Modi to woo businesses leaving China.

Thus, while Gujarat wrote to the Japanese government and business houses, offering them land and subsidies, Uttar Pradesh has set up an economic task force to showcase its business hubs bor-



■ INTERVIEW

Ashok Gehlot,
chief minister, Rajasthan

It is very difficult for the states to survive on their own

BY SONI MISHRA

Q/Is the Covid-19 situation in Rajasthan under control?

A/Rajasthan has been at the forefront of the war against Covid-19. The number of cases as on June 22 stands at 14,997 of which active cases are only 2,987. Our recovery rate of 77.5 per cent is the second highest in the country and the death rate of 2.3 per cent is much less than the national average. Total tests done so far is 6.99 lakh and the testing rate per million is over 8,500, which is among the top three states. The rate of doubling of cases is 27 days, again much better than the national average.

Q/How big a challenge was the issue of the stranded migrant workers?

A/The challenge was of an unforeseen scale. But we were sensitive to the problems of migrant workers. We created an online platform to register workers who either wished to come to Rajasthan or go out. More than 24 lakh migrants registered on it. Initially, five trains were provided for Rajasthan, which was totally inadequate. Looking at the huge number of migrants, we started free Shramik buses. We made arrangements for food, water and lodging. We ensured move-

ment of more than 19 lakh migrants with an expenditure of ₹25 crore.

Q/What is being done to help migrant workers returning to the state?

A/Providing suitable employment to migrants is one of the top priorities. An online Rajkaushal Labour Employment Exchange has been made operational. It has already registered 53 lakh workers and 11 lakh employers. We have already provided employment to more than 50 lakh people under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme, which is 18 lakh more compared with last year. This is one of the highest in the country and it includes a sizable number of migrants.

Q/How has the state's economy been impacted?

A/The lockdown has crippled our economy and has caused suffering for daily wage earners and migrants. It has become very difficult for the states to survive on their own. The states are fighting the pandemic at the ground level, but the package announced by the Centre does not contain any direct assistance to the states. It does not have any relief for the

poor or any support to people who have lost their jobs. Industries are struggling because of the shortage of workforce, lack of demand and unavailability of working capital.

Q/What steps are being taken by your government to revive the economy?

A/The state government and its agencies are working tirelessly to bring back all activities to an optimal level and bring the economy of the state back on track. Concrete steps are being taken to create a conducive environment for the revival of industrial units. We have constituted a task force headed by former Union finance secretary Arvind Mayaram to suggest a combat plan and policy interventions. We would come out with policies realigned to the needs of different sectors. We will be hand-holding trade and industries and the various sectors that would help speed up the economic growth of the state.

Q/You demanded Central assistance to deal with the situation.

A/The economy of the states is in the doldrums. Certain demands were put

forward to the Centre by us for the benefit of all the states. Unfortunately, no direct financial assistance to the states has been granted in the ₹20 lakh crore package by the Centre. Only very small assistance under the State Disaster Response Fund and the PM Cares Fund has been committed to us. But the situation warrants a much more substantial direct assistance to the states.

Q/Do you agree with the Centre on ending the lockdown when Covid-19 cases are on the rise?

A/We have seen a large number of cases

in the past few days following the opening up of economic activities and allowing the movement of migrants. Looking at the critical financial conditions of the states, it has become essential to resume economic activities. Covid is not going to vanish soon. Hence, we will have to learn to live with it for quite some time with strict observance of precautions. Covid containment should remain the top priority. We should continue with the same strictness in containment and hotspot areas, while in the rest of the areas, all activities should be resumed with required precautions.

The whole country has been under lockdown for more than 70 days. It is high time we restarted economic activities. It is essential for economic revival.

Q/You have alleged that the BJP attempted to buy your MLAs.

A/There were reports that a huge amount of cash had been brought into Jaipur. At a time when the BJP should be fighting Covid-19, it is conspiring to topple governments. The Rajya Sabha elections were to be held two months ago. The elections were postponed because the BJP had not been able to complete horse-trading in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Q/So, the Rajya Sabha elections were postponed as part of a conspiracy?

A/Pressure was put on the Election Commission to postpone the elections. And now, the same elections were conducted at a time when we have more COVID-19 cases.

Q/How stable is your government?

A/They tried to replicate what they did in Madhya Pradesh. However, our MLAs did not fall into their trap. Inducements were made, but I am proud to say that the six MLAs from the BSP who had joined us have continued to be with us, and it has happened only in Rajasthan that 13 independent MLAs supported the government without the offer of money or post.

Q/What kind of inducements were made to your MLAs?

A/There were reports of cash transfers happening in Jaipur. There was talk of advance amounts being offered: accept ₹10 crore as advance, ₹10 crore more will be paid later and then ₹5 crore more.



dering Delhi, and the upcoming defence park and the Jewar airport. "We have been receiving good response from foreign businesses who want to invest," says Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in an exclusive interview with THE WEEK.

German footwear brand Von Wellx

shifted out of China to set up a footwear unit in Agra on the invitation of the Uttar Pradesh government, which says the project will throw up 10,000 direct and indirect jobs. Says Ashish Jain, director and CEO of Iatric Industries which handles Von Wellx's Indian operations, "The

UP government was very eager to help at different levels and has also announced economic packages for companies moving in. This was a major parameter."

Invest India, the Union government's investment promotion agency, recently facilitated a series of

meetings for states like Maharashtra and Telangana with global electronics majors like Apple, Intel, Samsung and LG. States like Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are also interested in following suit. Invest India plans to conduct similar sessions for other sectors, too, start-

ing with pharmaceuticals.

From Assam, which highlights its subsidised electricity for industries as a USP, to Punjab, which points out how its 'Invest Punjab' department's single-window clearance facility assures ease of business, and Odisha which touts its stable and well-ad-

ministered investment-friendly climate, the go-get-it attitude is palpable. Andhra Pradesh Industries Minister Mekapati Goutham Reddy recently said, "We call ourselves 'providers'. We were the fastest in opening up after the lockdown."

Guruprasad Mohapatra, secretary

■ INTERVIEW

T.M. Thomas Isaac,
finance minister, Kerala

Unlimited and open health expenditure is not sustainable

BY CITHARA PAUL

Q/The Kerala government's efforts to contain Covid-19 were well-appreciated. But the state has had to pay a huge price.

A/The containment strategy that Kerala adopted has been very effective and widely appreciated. But you are right, it comes at a heavy cost—not only the direct health expenditure but also the relief expenditure....

The total expenditure in April and May has been ₹23,771 crore—24 per cent higher than that in the previous year. On the other hand, the overall revenue declined by 17 per cent to ₹9,774 crore. The gap of ₹13,997 crore has been filled by front-loading the annual market borrowing....

Q/Kerala may be the only state to provide free Covid-19 treatment and quarantine facilities. It may be a great 'citizens first' approach, but how long can the state afford to do it?

A/We could do well on the Covid-19 front owing to the sustained high investment in the health sector over the last century. Forty-eight per cent of the population depends on the public health system for treatment, [which] is free.... The institutional quarantine cost is borne entirely by the state, except for those who opt for private facilities. The question you raised regarding financing of health expenditure is very relevant. Unlimited and open health expendi-

ture is not sustainable. We are debating the possibilities of cross subsidy.

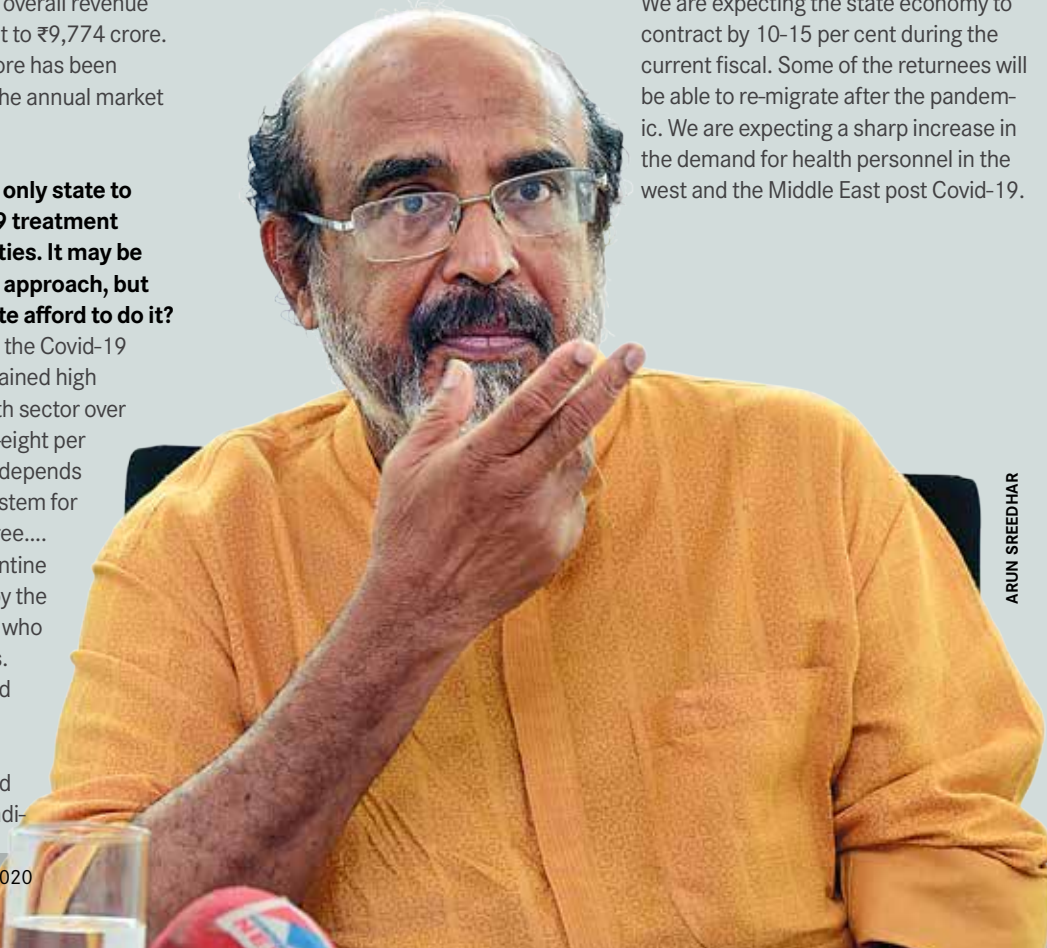
Q/How much has the government spent on Covid-19 management?

A/The first file I signed in the new financial year was the allocation of ₹607 crore for the Medical Service Corporation. The total budget allocation is only ₹324 crore. It overshot in the first month itself. The expenditure of the health department during April-May was ₹1,300 crore.

And this does not include the quarantine expenditure.

Q/Remittances from the Gulf account for more than 30 per cent of the state's GDP. But now with people there losing jobs and coming home, it will be a tough challenge.

A/We are expecting around 5 lakh non-resident Malayalis from abroad and other states in India to return. The fall in remittances is going to have a reverse multiplier impact on Kerala economy. We are expecting the state economy to contract by 10-15 per cent during the current fiscal. Some of the returnees will be able to re-migrate after the pandemic. We are expecting a sharp increase in the demand for health personnel in the west and the Middle East post Covid-19.



ARUN SREEDHAR

With the excellent brand image of the Kerala health sector, we are hopeful that our nurses and paramedics would be able to tap into this potential. An urgent massive skill upgrade and finishing programme has been drawn up for this purpose.

Q/Kerala's economy has always been about 'no-production and all-consumption'. Therefore, Kerala suffers more than any other state in such crises. Is it possible to change this pattern?

A/Kerala is a consumer economy, with the highest per capita consumption in the country. Our per capita income is 60 per cent above the national average. We have failed to link the high savings availability and high consumption demand to the possibility of expanding the domestic production.

We are trying to shift to a new development paradigm. Quality jobs have to be generated for the educated youth in knowledge, skill and service industries. An earnest effort is being made to attract private investment into the sectors of core competence by improving the ease of doing business and creating high quality infrastructure. The ₹50,000 crore infrastructure stimulus package that is being implemented through the Kerala State Infrastructure Investment Fund Board would play an important role in creating the appropriate environment for growth.

Q/You were one of the first finance ministers to request a hike in the borrowing limit of states, and the Centre has now hiked it from 3 per cent of gross state domestic product to 5 per cent.

A/It is a step in the right direction. But imposing conditions on market borrowings is totally wrong. The Centre is setting an unacceptable precedent. This can be used to undermine even the limited autonomy that the states enjoy today. The economic package takes micro-managing state policies to a ridiculous level. For example, the power sector reforms have three components: reduction in aggregate technical and commercial losses, reduction in average cost and average revenue gap and introduction of direct benefit transfer to farmers. For compliance to the first two sub conditions, 0.05 per cent of GSDP each and, to the third, 0.15 per cent of GSDP additional borrowing would be permitted. Sadly, some clever guys sitting at the Centre think that they are a fountainhead of wisdom to micromanage the diversity of India.

of the Union government's department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT), says each state can be a champion in their areas of strength. "As we aim for more global brands (as part of the PM's call), states will play a major role in this." Sawant recently wrote to Modi that the economic slowdown would help in exploring other opportunities.

WHAT ABOUT THE HERE-AND-NOW?

Not everyone thinks it is the right approach, though. "To me, it looks quite weird to compete for factories moving out of China at the state level," says Chakraborty. In her view, the focus should be on increasing public health infrastructure and services and in tackling hunger and loss of livelihood issues. "Decisive public infrastructure investment alone can attract private investment," she says. "Ease of doing business, judicious labour reforms and climate-related policies are crucial determinants."

With investments still a work in progress, there is also the question of what the states can do to meet their dire scenario right now. There is, of course, hope-against-hope for some financial assistance yet from the Centre. "Reforms, of course, will help, but will take time. Meanwhile, some additional funds to state governments is definitely desirable," says Sharma.

GST compensation is something states are banking on—as agreed when the GST Council was set up. The Centre is supposed to make up for any drop, if actual revenues to states do not grow by 14 per cent every year. Sitharaman has convened the next GST Council meeting in July only to discuss whether they can borrow from the markets for GST compensation. Meanwhile, reports that the Centre may try to wriggle out of paying by invoking the force majeure (act of God) clause (though the provision is not there in the GST Act) has further alarmed desperate states.

Other options include debt restructuring, tapping the bond market and, of course, squeezing money out of your own sources. "The shift is already beginning, with the proportion of revenues coming from alcohol and stamp duties increasing," says Kapur. A tried-and-tested means to increase state income has always been 'hitting the bottle'. As liquor vends re-opened, for example, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal did not think twice before slapping a 70 per cent Covid cess on liquor. West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Haryana promptly followed suit with their own price hikes. Starved of their poison for more than 40 days during the lockdown, relieved tipplers did not particularly seem to mind.

Just as the Centre's Covid relief package aims at structurally reconfiguring business and industry, states are also hoping that the shake-up throws up fresh opportunities—Adityanath manoeuvring to optimise the return of migrant labourers by putting them to work in industries which he hopes will come up soon is only a case in point. Haryana Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala summed it up succinctly at a business continuity webinar recently, "If I see it as a crisis, it will be hard. [So why not] see it as an opportunity?"

Malady and madness

Clumsy policies, bureaucratic disarray and absence of effective coordination have worsened the Covid-19 crisis in Tamil Nadu

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

ON JUNE 18, a day before Chennai and neighbouring Kancheepuram, Tiruvallur and Chengalpattu districts went into lockdown, the Tamil Nadu government announced that it was withdrawing an earlier order amending the English spelling of 1,018 cities, towns and villages in the state. The order had drawn widespread criticism, and the railways and India Post had not been consulted on the new names.

This was not the first policy U-turn the government had made amid the Covid-19 crisis. On June 9, Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami cancelled the class 10 board exams, even as the advocate general was arguing in the Madras High Court that the exams ought to be held in mid-June, before the number of infections begins to peak. On June 12, when journalists asked Palaniswami whether the government was planning to lock down Chennai to contain the virus, he asked them not to believe in such “rumours”. Three days later, though, he declared the lockdown.

Later, when journalists asked him about rumours that Higher Education Minister K.P. Anbalagan had tested positive, Palaniswami looked irked. “He himself has said

that he is not infected. What more do you need?” he shot back. On June 20, though, Anbalagan told THE WEEK that he had indeed been infected and was being treated at a private hospital in Chennai.

Anbalagan was one of the five ministers overseeing relief work in the Greater Chennai Corporation. After he tested positive, half a dozen ministers who had come into contact with him rushed to get themselves tested. Apparently, all ministers are worried that they have been exposed to the virus. A 56-year-old private secretary in the chief minister’s office, B.J. Damodharan, died of Covid-19 on June 17, a day before Anbalagan was infected. At least seven people in the chief minister’s offices have been infected.

Palaniswami himself has twice undergone tests; the results were negative. He maintains that there is no community spread of Covid-19 in the state. “If you and I get infected, only then can it be called community spread,” he told a journalist. “As of now, there is no community spread; things are under control.”

The government, however, seems to be groping in the dark. It had appointed 12 teams of IAS and IPS officers in April to review Covid-19 programmes across the state and recommend

changes. But, except for the medical experts team, none of the groups have submitted any report. The government had also constituted a team under IAS officer J. Radhakrishnan to exclusively handle Covid-19 operations in Chennai. But the five IPS officers in this team have not been handling any Covid-related work. On June 6, the government appointed Pankaj Kumar Bansal, IAS, as special coordinator to oversee initiatives in high-risk zones like Chennai, over and above what it had asked Radhakrishnan’s team to do. On June 12, Radhakrishnan replaced Beela Rajesh as health secretary, after it was alleged that



TOUGH TIMES
Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami

R.G. SASTHA

Palaniswami has twice undergone tests; the results were negative. He maintains that there is no community spread of Covid-19 in the state.

the health department was under-reporting casualties. “At least 200 deaths were not reported by the Chennai corporation,” said Jayaram Venkatesan, convener of the NGO Arappor Iyakkam. “The family of the deceased were given mortuary cards at the hospitals where the deaths happened. But [the deaths] were not added to the corporation’s record.”

The government set up a committee to look into the matter, and the chief secretary issued a strongly worded order to Chennai corporation commissioner G. Prakash to take immediate measures to control the disease in Chennai. It was an unusual order, as corporation commis-

sioners report only to the municipal administration secretary and Prakash is close to Municipal Administration Minister S.P. Velumani, who is referred to as the “shadow Chief Minister” in the ruling AIADMK.

Earlier, on June 1, IAS officer S. Nagarajan was removed as director of the Tamil Nadu Health Systems Project, which was established in 2005 to reform the health care sector. Such bureaucratic reshuffles, however, have not improved the ground situation and the numbers continue to rise in Chennai and other districts.

“The chief minister is not able to take any stern action,” said DMK president and opposition leader M.K. Stalin. “This is because he does not have control over his own cabinet. The ministers should shed their egos and work together to eradicate the virus.”

The government says 60,000 people in Tamil Nadu have contracted the virus and more than 750 have died. Though it has maintained that only the elderly and people who have existing health conditions were at high risk, 30 per cent of the dead were under 50 and had no comorbidities.

Stalin said the government should stop fudging figures and reveal the actual numbers of patients and deaths. “The government has an indifferent attitude in handling the pandemic,” said DMK spokesperson A. Saravanan. “The chief minister denying that his own colleague has tested positive is proof that the government is not transparent. The government is just fumbling about in the dark.”

Palaniswami says no decision has been taken to extend the lockdown in Chennai. He wants everyone to wear masks and stay indoors for now. “The complete lockdown is like a speed-breaker,” he said. “We have implemented it so that people stay indoors. This lockdown is not to trouble anyone, but to stop the spread of the virus.”

Trouble in paradise

Though everything seems to be going the BJP's way in Madhya Pradesh, the real test awaits and its own cadre is likely to emerge a bigger concern than the Congress

BY SRAVANI SARKAR

EVEN BEFORE THE results of the Rajya Sabha elections were announced in Madhya Pradesh, social media saw a stream of congratulatory messages emanating from the BJP camp. Sure enough, the party won two of three seats on offer. Senior BJP leaders went to the state assembly with winning candidate Sumer Singh Solanki and a representative of the second winner, Jyotiraditya Scindia, who could not be present because he was in Covid-19 quarantine, to collect the winning certificate.

But they were not elated as expected. It seemed as though future tasks were hanging heavy on their hands. Political watchers say that despite regaining power and the high of the Rajya Sabha polls, the BJP's real test is just about to start. And trouble is likely to emanate from within.

Sources say that when the much-publicised "Operation Kamal" was set in motion in the state in

March, the BJP had two objectives—dislodge the 15-month-old Congress government and win two Rajya Sabha seats. Before that, the BJP was not in a statistical position to ensure two Rajya Sabha berths, despite having 107 MLAs in the 230-strong assembly. Both objectives were achieved when Scindia and the 22 MLAs who supported him quit the Congress for the BJP.

Now, with Scindia in the upper house—considered part of the deal—the BJP has to fulfil promises made to his supporters. And this is going to be tough, say political watchers. "Now with Rajya Sabha polls done, the BJP has to set about expanding the Shivraj Singh Chouhan cabinet to accommodate Scindia supporters who have been waiting for three months," political analyst Manish Dixit says.

He says that the BJP, which has been stalling the much-awaited expansion, first on the grounds of

the lockdown and then the Rajya Sabha polls, has no excuses left. "The patience of Scindia supporters is wearing thin and the bypolls to 24 vacant seats in the state are looming," says Dixit. "In such circumstances, the BJP has to take a call on the cabinet expansion."

Sources say that as part of the deal, at least 10 to 12 of the 22 defectors have to be made ministers, while the others are to be made chairpersons to boards and corporations. But, if the BJP accommodates all 22 Scindia supporters in such a manner, it will mean fewer opportunities for other BJP leaders. Several BJP leaders who were former ministers or have won multiple elections and are aspiring to become ministers, have already started to show their discomfort.

"Striking a balance between Scin-

dia supporters who are awaiting their reward and original BJP leaders who want their years of loyalty to be acknowledged has certainly put the BJP in a catch-22 situation," says Dixit. The developments during the Rajya Sabha polls—Guna MLA Gopilal Jatav is rumoured to have cross-voted and Raigaon MLA Jugalkishore Bagri cast an invalid vote—are also being looked upon as signals sent by the upset senior MLAs, though the party and the MLAs have denied any such motive. Dixit also points out that in the past fortnight many BJP leaders, including some prominent ones, have joined the Congress; several Congress members have joined the BJP, too.

Shams Ur Rehman Alavi, political commentator, says that the BJP cannot now wait until the bypolls to

expand the cabinet or make political appointments as Scindia supporters will want a strong turf to play on when they seek re-election in the bypolls. On the other hand, upsetting senior leaders could make the situation difficult as the bypolls are the key to the BJP staying in power, says Alavi.

The BJP has to win at least nine of the 24 seats to get a majority. Then, with the support of the non-Congress opposition MLAs, it can comfortably complete the tenure. But the Rajya Sabha polls showed a problem in this aspect, too—the Congress managed to get two additional votes. If the rumour of the BJP MLA cross-voting is false, then the party got the votes of two non-Congress opposition MLAs. And the BJP, with 111 votes, got at least five votes of non-Congress

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Jyotiraditya Scindia with
Chief Minister Shivraj
Singh Chouhan



opposition MLAs—as one of its votes was invalid.

Experts say that if the Congress managed to attract one or two non-Congress MLAs during the Rajya Sabha polls despite being down in the dumps, then the role of these seven non-Congress MLAs will become interesting and BJP could not count on them fully. The BJP might actually manage to win more than the required nine, given that it is the ruling party and that the Congress might not find the right candidates to pitch in the regions where Scindia has support, says Alavi.

K.K. Mishra, Congress spokesman in-charge of the Gwalior-Chambal region (where most of the bypolls are to be held), said that the BJP's "annual examination" was due. "Like developing the Covid-19 vaccine, the task of expanding the cabinet will be a most challenging one," he says. "Balancing the aspirations of its own cadre and the honour of those who have not yet been mentally [accepted] as their own will be a daunting task. Parties thrive on the loyalty and hard work of its ground workers, but if they are upset, it is a bad signal."

BJP state president Vishnu Dutt Sharma told THE WEEK that the cabinet expansion would be done soon and the focus is on the impending bypolls. He said that there were no immediate plans of making appointments to government posts, but steps would be taken when required. As for the leaders or workers of the party being upset at the developments, he said that though some frontline workers might be discontent, there was "no major issue." "Our party has a culture where all things are resolved through mutual discussions and party workers go by the party line," says Sharma. **●**



Blunting a brahmastra

India is waiting for two *brahmastras*. Both have been on the anvil for long. One is a Bollywood multi-star fantasy. Its makers say it will be a blockbuster, and will give *Baahubali* a run for its money, muscle and magic, with some characters shooting fire from their hands. (No handshakes with them, corona or no corona.) The film, delayed by Covid-19, is set to hit the screens in December.

The other is the Indian Army's Brahmastra Corps, officially called XVII Corps. A corps, with two or more divisions under it, is an army's largest fighting formation and is commanded by a lieutenant-general. Corps numbers are traditionally given in Roman numerals, unlike division, brigade and battalion numbers which are given in Arabic. Companies are numbered ABCD.

But the numbering is never in order. After 1, 2 and 3 divisions, they may have 39 or 57. The generals will tell you that this is to respect the unit's tradition and to confuse the enemy, but I guess they do it to confuse their own military accountants.

Let us cut the numbering nonsense and talk about the corps.

Corps are of two kinds, going by their tactical task—pivot corps and strike corps. Pivot corps are defensive in nature; they hold ground against the enemy. Strike corps are offensive in posture; they capture enemy land.

All the corps that the Indian Army has deployed against China are pivot corps. The Brahmastra Corps, proposed when China began showing its fangs after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was supposed to have been India's first mountain strike corps. The proposal was critically examined at the service headquarters, the chiefs of staff committee and the National Security Council.

Finally, like General K.V. Krishna Rao persuaded Indira Gandhi to build border bridges and roads

in the 1980s, General Bikram Singh used his persuasive powers and presentation skills to pester the peace-loving Manmohan Singh and A.K. Antony to sanction it. They yielded in 2013 (much to the envy of the Indian Navy which was asking for ships that could strike Shanghai), and also okayed two new mountain divisions under the two already-existing corps who are our guardians of the east against China.

For once, the Chinese commies saw red. Two new divisions and a new strike corps of 90,000 men on the Indian mountains was worse than what they had ever war-gamed or bargained for. They protested loud, but all those remained cries

in the mountain wilderness, as we quietly set up the corps headquarters at Panagarh in West Bengal, and raised its first division there itself. It got light guns and heavy-lift helicopters. Grounds were cleared on the hills for helicopters to land with cannons and troops. Plans were also laid out to raise the corps' second division at Pathankot in Punjab, to scare the Chinese from Ladakh side.

Then something went wrong somewhere.

Today, the Brahmastra Corps is as good as a phantom formation. No one knows whether it exists and in what shape, though we see its apparitions now and then. Like Muhammad bin Tughlaq's capital shifts, its headquarters was shifted to Ranchi and then back to Panagarh. The Pathankot division, which was to come up in 2017-2018, is now on the backburner. Many say, shelved.

Three explanations are being proffered. One is that the Army is doing away with large formations and shifting to small battle groups in American style. Another is that raising a corps is too costly. A third is that there has been a rethink on the strike corps idea, and it has been put on the backburner in a bid to mend ties with Beijing post-Doklam.

If that be the case, shouldn't we have a rethink on the rethink, post-Galwan?



Strive for a settlement

The India-China border in the western sector is neither defined, delimited or demarcated. This is principally because—as underlined by Nirupama Rao, former ambassador to China and former foreign secretary—in territorial disputes with its 15 neighbours, “China intentionally left its claims ambiguous.” She does not add, although I am sure she would agree, that this did not come in the way of China coming to a settlement with all of them, except India (and Bhutan).

We have put ourselves in a bind because ever since defence minister V.K. Krishna Menon flew to Geneva, in July 1962, to settle matters directly with Chinese foreign affairs minister, Chen Yi, Menon insisted that before talks begin “again”, China should “first demarcate several areas”

to be given to India, and “commit” itself “in advance to letting India have these areas.” (Amit Baruah, *The Hindu*, June 16, quoting Marshall Chen Yi). This has dogged any settlement for the past six decades since China refuses to disclose its goals in advance of negotiations. It has done this with all other countries with whom it has had, but

no longer has, border disputes. Can India not live with this asymmetry, provided it lights up the prospects of arriving at a settlement?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi confessed at the Tsinghua University: “Neither side knows where the LAC [Line of Actual Control] is in that area.” (Ananth Krishnan, *The Hindu*, June 16). Indeed, it was not till 1993, 41 years after the India-China war of 1962, that the 1993 India-China Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility became “the first legal agreement that recognised the LAC.” Yet, because the agreement did not define the LAC, it had “the unintended side effect of further incentivising the forward creep to the line by ‘both’ militaries” (Shivshankar Menon, *Choice-*

es: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy).

The 1996 agreement on Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) also did not include the exact location of LAC, although its general alignment was known to both sides, including the 13 hot-spots (in all three sectors) which could lead to “face-offs.” Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the continued Chinese refusal to provide maps in advance of their “perceptions” of where the LAC lay, both sides took the wise step of agreeing at their special representatives talks in 2005 on the “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Border Question.” Readers are invited to underline for themselves the word “settlement”.

That should be the key objective. Nirupama Rao

does not believe a mutual settlement is possible for “a generation or two.” But that pessimistic (if realistic) perspective could be sensibly shortened if we were to settle down to working out a “settlement of the border question”, instead of remaining fixated on non-settlement, despite having come to a mutual agreement, 15 years ago, on

“political parameters” and “guiding principles” to “settle” the border question.

Why not get on with that instead of letting things lie until the Chinese provide us with maps that would reveal their hand in advance? We will get to know, in any case, as the talks move from stage to stage. And, we will have all the time in the world to make our claims known to them with no ambiguity, and then negotiate our way through the thicket. The alternative is to stick to Modi's position that “India will protect every inch of its territory”—without even knowing where that last inch lies. Does it lie at the farthest reaches of Aksai Chin, as claimed by Home Minister Amit Shah, or at Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso in Ladakh?



BEIJING'S BLAME GAME

China's State Council tells **THE WEEK** that the border situation is "very dangerous"; that India is the "aggressor" that broke its word; and that Indian leaders and media should stop adding fuel to the fire

BY RABI BANERJEE

UNDER PRESSURE

China's President Xi Jinping looks on as soldiers carry the Chinese flag during a medal presentation ceremony in Beijing

GETTY IMAGES

When Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, many in China saw him as a man of development who had, as Gujarat chief minister, travelled to their land looking for investment. Policymakers in China had then told their president, Xi Jinping, who had taken office in 2013: “This Indian prime minister is a resolute leader with remarkable charisma. Frugal, clean and effective on social media, he looks like a saint, combining tradition and modernity.” It seemed like a time for change, and Xi was keen on India joining his One Belt One Road project, now known as the Belt and Road Initiative. It sought to connect China with Europe by road and sea, and South Asia through a Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. Though India declined to join the BRI, the friendship between Modi and Xi seemed unaffected. But now the two countries are in conflict, with their soldiers massacring each other in June, the bloodiest violence in more than four decades. Though all-powerful—he is the president of the country, the general secretary of the Communist Party, and the chairman of the Central Military Commission—Xi is not above criticism in China. His decisions are debated and questioned in the Politburo and the Central Committee. He is now under pressure, as it was he who had sold the BRI idea to the party. The onus is on him to make it a reality, and India’s resistance does not suit him.

While China grew massively in the past three decades, its western part remained mostly backward and inaccessible. This is the part that borders India. So, under Xi, China decided to connect the southwestern Yunnan province to the autonomous Xinjiang province in the northwest through roads and airports. In the past few years, Xinjiang has also seen rampant militarisation, worrying India. Modi has also been building roads in the northeast part of India, which borders China. This activity increased after Article 370 was revoked and Ladakh was made a Union territory last August. Most Indians, obsessed with the Pakistan border, did not notice that there were more than 400 transgressions by the People’s Liberation Army on the India-China border in 2017. They woke up only when the Doklam standoff happened that year. In this dispute, India objected to China building a road in Bhutan to further its BRI project. Confidence-building measures followed talks between the two armies. The Eastern Command monitored the measures in the northeast and the Northern Command monitored them



“New Delhi is clear where the LAC is and it has ordered the soldiers to take wrong steps into the Chinese fields, like it did in Doklam.”

—Li Xiaojun, information director at the State Council

in Ladakh. “[Regardless,] China is building huge physical infrastructure in Bhutan at the request of the people of Bhutan, who would like to come out of poverty,” a Chinese strategist told THE WEEK. As China built up Xinjiang, the Indian Army started building roads in the Galwan valley and near Pangong Tso, two strategic points in Ladakh. China sees it as India’s effort to gain access to Aksai Chin and Gilgit-Baltistan. The Chinese were also angered by statements of Indian politicians, including a cabinet minister, that India would take back Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin. The Chinese State Council, the country’s highest administrative authority, seem to have taken these statements at face value. Responding to THE WEEK, it called the Modi government the “aggressor” and accused India of trying to repeat another Doklam in Ladakh. “It is the result of New Delhi’s miscalculation and the new ‘forward policy’ of the BJP government,” Li Xiaojun, information director at the State Council, told THE WEEK. “New Delhi is clear where the LAC is and it has ordered the soldiers to take wrong steps into the Chinese fields, like it did in Doklam.” Apparently, the statements by Indian leaders irked China so much that Xi asked the PLA to take full control of the Galwan valley and Pangong Tso, which China says were “unmarked and disputed”. “China tried to take control of the Galwan valley because that would enable it to create a parallel CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) road through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir,” said Major General K.K. Ganguly, a veteran who fought in the three wars between 1962 and 1971. He said Xi had been sidelined internationally because of the Covid-19 pandemic and had received threats of an investigation into the outbreak. “He asked for India’s help (to open up India for Chinese companies) and our prime



minister turned a blind eye,” said Ganguly. “The prime minister also checked Chinese investment in sectors that are now open to domestic players only. As a result, China [executed] an inhuman massacre at the border.” The current dispute is not confined to Ladakh. The two armies

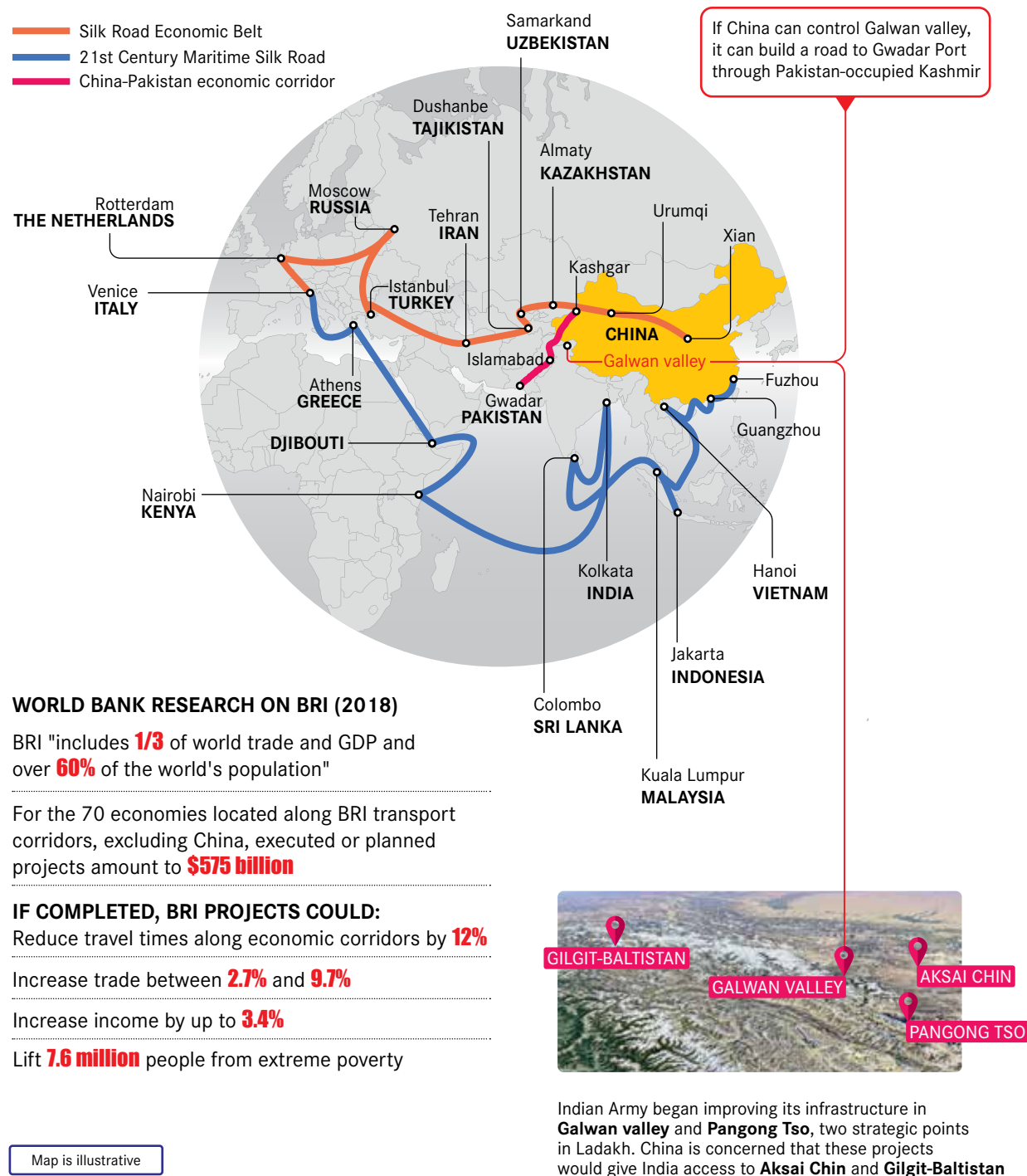
also fought at the Naku-La sector in north Sikkim in May. Apparently, China wanted not only to redraw the Ladakh border but also to revoke its recognition of Sikkim as Indian territory. “If the Chinese were shouting that Sikkim is not Indian territory, then too, we have a problem,” said

POWER GAMES

Russia’s President Vladimir Putin with Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Xiamen, southeast China, in 2017. Russian intervention could hold the Chinese army back with no further bloodshed

MASTER PLAN

China's Belt and Road Initiative at a glance



SOURCE GOOGLE MAPS

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S. \ RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

Jabin Thomas Jacob, associate professor, department of international relations and governance studies, Shiv Nadar University. "[China] had officially accepted that Sikkim was Indian territory in 2003." He said the Chinese were determined, unlike during Doklam, to set a new status quo. "This time, the transgressions are of a different nature for two reasons. First, they intruded in Galwan, across an alignment of the LAC that was previously not disputed. Second, they are preventing Indians from patrolling up to our perception of the LAC at Finger 8 at Pangong Tso and have blocked us at Finger 4, which is their perception of the LAC. In both instances, this is a change of the status quo. Why now? Why not now? It was always in the cards post-Doklam." Jacob agreed that the clashes reflected China's desperation to implement the BRI. "China would do whatever it takes to implement the BRI successfully," he said.

In May, when scuffles started in Ladakh, the State Council told THE WEEK: "[The issue] is a nonstarter here. We are busy with parliament proceedings (Hong Kong-related legislation). Nobody cares and India plays it up too much." Apparently, unlike during Doklam, Xi did not lay the groundwork for diplomatic dialogue this time. He left it to the military to resolve the matter. As a result, Modi's Doklam team, led by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, has been missing from the headlines. Li said the recent meetings at the joint secretary and military levels were a big sacrifice on China's part. "Compromise means give and take," he said. "No winner and loser. But India just overlooked the compromise we made." The talks failed and clashes began. On June 16, India lost 20 soldiers; a week later China admitted that it had lost less than 20 soldiers.

India had about 10,000 troops against China's 7,000 in Ladakh. But China flew in 10,000 more from

Wuhan before the corps commander-level talks on June 6. Indian Army sources said China even brought fighter planes to Xinjiang airstrips. "[It was] tragic and unfortunate. It was an unexpected loss of precious lives [on both sides]," said Li. He said India had broken the resolution agreed upon on June 6; it did not stop the construction of roads and tried to obstruct China miles away. "India should stop living in a dream on border issues," he said. "China would never retreat 20km only to find India taking them all and edging forward." "It was almost impossible for China to convince the Indian authorities and people about the intricacies of [the] border," the State Council said to THE WEEK in a statement. "But we tried to do that impossible work thanks to our strong leadership. But India broke its word in the end." The State Council alleged that a section of the Indian media had "instigated the government". Calling the border



"I am sure China would create a complex situation in Arunachal Pradesh. But I am sure the people of Arunachal Pradesh would checkmate it."

—Major General K.K. Ganguly, who fought in the three wars between 1962 and 1971

situation "very dangerous," it said, "We would like to see political and military leaders in India as well as the Indian media stop adding fuel to the fire. Both sides should strictly observe the political documents [agreed to] in the past on border tranquillity in letter and spirit." Asked to comment on foreign ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava's statement that China's claim on the Galwan valley was untenable and exaggerated, Li said: "Mr Srivastava used similar terms like our side. But his LAC is not our LAC. His fruit might mean mango, but ours might mean apple. This kind of difference can only be solved through words and pens, instead of fists and stones." A Chinese official alleged that the Indian soldiers had thrown the first punch in both Sikkim and Ladakh. "Seeing the brutality of the Indian force, we had to retaliate," said the official. "It was unfortunate, but the instigation was clearly from the Indian side." Ironically, India and China were planning to celebrate 70 years of their diplomatic relationship in 2020. Modi and Xi discussed it when they met last year and decided to choose a suitable time for the celebration. In fact, they planned to visit each other as a mark of gratitude. "The face-off is a slap to both leaders," said Li. "It should have been avoided or [should] at least be resolved without further escalation. Otherwise, the 70th [anniversary] events would turn out to be useless and emotions on both sides [would be] damaged beyond [repair]." The recent clashes have also drawn attention to other parts of the India-China border, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, which China sees as part of South Tibet. Major General Ganguly said it was a matter of time before there was a flare-up on the eastern border.

"China is an expansionist force," he said. "Look what it has done in the South China Sea. I am sure it

would create a complex situation in Arunachal Pradesh. But I am sure the people of Arunachal Pradesh would checkmate it.”

Only two dozen of 400 border transgressions in 2018 were in Arunachal Pradesh; the majority were on the northern border, said Army sources. So, is the Arunachal Pradesh issue settled? “No, I do not think so,” said Jacob. “Such transgressions and face-offs also happen in Arunachal. It is only a matter of time before something serious happens there, too.” Li said the boundary dispute was a colonial legacy; British India had annexed thousands of kilometres of Chinese territory. “Independent India happily inherited the map, invaded Tawang in 1950 and seized South Tibet,” he said. “The Johnson Line and others were only dreamed lines. The ground reality and historical reality were quite different. Aksai

GRAND PROJECT

The Belt and Road Initiative supply chain base under construction in Lianyungang, Jiangsu, China. Modi is unlikely to cede an inch on the BRI in exchange for withdrawal of Chinese troops

Chin was never under British India’s rule. The Indian people should know this. They should also know the internal report on the 1962 border war.” The report is classified in India, but sources said it talked about how India was politically “defeated by China,” which led to military backtracking. However, the situation has changed a lot in the past six decades and India has strengthened the Arunachal Pradesh border with huge military build-up. It has also influenced the people of Arunachal Pradesh culturally, trying to instil in them a feeling of Indianness. And perhaps China realises that Arunachal Pradesh is not a desert, like many parts in Ladakh, and it would be difficult to be similarly aggressive there. In fact, Li said, “For the Chinese, it would be better to accept the reality that it is almost impossible to take back each inch of its former territories, namely some parts of South Tibet.” However, by positioning itself in Ladakh firmly, China has challenged India’s position in South Asia. Even India’s friends, such as Bangladesh, could be left with no

option but to accept the Belt and Road Initiative, even if they face the possibility of being debt-trapped. “At the moment, it does not look like the Chinese are going to withdraw from Pangong Tso,” said Jacob. “They have achieved what they wanted. They seem to think they have the strength to change the status quo and get away with it.” The Modi government would either have to retaliate on the border or defeat China diplomatically on the international stage. India has begun to consolidate the border with more troops, arms and ammunition, and fighter jets. Major General Ganguly, however, said, “India would have to [consider] all other avenues apart from military options. The entire world economy [has gone] haywire after Covid-19. The Chinese economy is not that hurt. A war would make things complex. India must think how, by aligning with world powers, it could cause major harm to the Chinese economy and further isolate it from the world.” Prime Minister Modi is at a crossroads. With Covid-19 spreading faster, experts said, it would be pru-

dent not to choose military options. As for reaching out to other nations, some analysts felt Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has partnered with China for the BRI, could be a better option than US president Donald Trump, who is already in a verbal war with China. A Russian intervention could hold the Chinese army back with no further bloodshed. Modi, they said, was unlikely to cede an inch on the BRI in exchange for withdrawal of Chinese troops. Li finds India’s objections ridiculous. “China advocates the five principles of peaceful coexistence, good neighbourly relationships, [and] win-win cooperation. The top priority is to eradicate abject poverty and build a comparatively well-defined society (through BRI).” Modi would, of course, love to eradicate poverty, just not the Chinese way.

As David Chang, an industrialist in Shanghai, said, “From 2019 to 2020, within a mere eight months, the Sino-Indian relationship has gone from holding hands to fist fights. The Asian century, which is centred on cooperation between the two most populous countries, is now entering an unpleasant new normal.”

INTERVIEW



Xu Wenhong

deputy secretary general, One Belt One Road Center, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

India should meet China halfway on BRI

BY RABI BANERJEE

The One Belt One Road Center, created in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, not only works to mould global opinion in favour of the Belt and Road Initiative, but also carries out scientific research on its implementation across the world.

Xu Wenhong, its deputy secretary general, has travelled the world in this regard and advises Jinping and the Chinese State Council on BRI projects. In an interview with THE WEEK, Wenhong talked about the BRI, India’s absence from it, and how India’s fear about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was unfounded. Excerpts:

Q/ How much progress has the BRI made?

A/ Till now, within the framework of the BRI, China has signed cooperation documents with more than 170 countries and more than 30 international organisations. The BRI and its core concepts have been included in important outcome documents of the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the G20, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), etc. This means the BRI is [transforming] from China’s economic development initiative into a prescription to revive the world economy.

Q/ India sees the BRI as a strategic initiative rather than a commercial one. How does China see India’s objection to the BRI?

A/ Every country has its own assessment, no matter how many times China tries to explain it. Only the results of the BRI will prove it (China’s intentions). [Even] after so many years, if the Indian government still cannot understand the key points of the BRI, I would say the only thing the Chinese government can do is



encourage the Indian government to meet it halfway. We would also suggest that the Indian side correctly view and understand China's development trend.

Q/ Is it possible that the BRI might influence the foreign policy of other nations?

A/ The original [aim] of the BRI is to unite all countries to contribute to regional economic development. If you say that the BRI has influenced the foreign policy of different nations, [so be it].

Q/ How much progress has the BRI made in India's neighbouring countries?

A/ Till now, BRI-related projects in countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan are going well. All parties are satisfied with the current situation. Future progress of the BRI depends on their real needs, the friendship between these countries and China, and the real capabilities of both sides.

We hope that China and India join hands with these countries to build a real Shangri-La along the foothills of the Himalayas.

Q/ You have said that China is working in Bhutan. But did it not halt making roads there following the Doklam standoff with India?

A/ We believe in the wisdom and capabilities of diplomats on both sides to settle it (Doklam issue) peacefully. To dominate other countries is not the Chinese way. We have [done] nothing to dominate Bhutan. But, to eliminate poverty there, on the request of the local people, we might provide some help in infrastructure construction.

As the Chinese saying goes, 'If you want to be rich, first build the road to be rich.' So, infrastructure (roads, bridges) and connectivity are the top priorities of the BRI. China has some infrastructure projects in Bhutan and



NEIGHBOURS IN ARMS
Pakistan's former national security adviser Lt-Gen Nasser Khan Janjua presenting a shield to Xu Wenhong

other countries, but [those are] just for economic development, not for [any] geopolitical purpose.

Q/ India has objected to the BRI, and within it the CPEC and the Trans-Himalayan economic corridor, perhaps because of strategic interests.

A/ India has been a very important neighbour to China for thousands of years. More communication should [happen] between these two countries. China has repeatedly explained

to India through various channels that the CPEC emphasises transport connectivity and economic cooperation; no sovereignty disputes and political considerations are involved. According to the Chinese mindset, poverty is the breeding ground for terrorism. The construction of the CPEC will solve the problem of terrorism in Pakistan, which is also conducive to [strengthening] India's national security. The BRI [does not mean] an exclusion of India. There is the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) economic corridor just for connecting India and China.

Q/ China has made significant progress in building infrastructure in Nepal. How do you see that affecting the India-China relationship?

A/ China is a peace-loving nation and wants to be a good neighbour, good friend and good partner to all its neighbouring countries. China is willing to be of help as its capability allows [it to do so].

Q/ How could India benefit from the BRI? Can India be a joint partner in this initiative? India has Japan as an infrastructure development partner, and the latter might not like India working with China.

A/ The BRI originated in China, but it benefits the whole world. China is willing to have a fruitful dialogue with India. It is said in the China-India joint declaration released after Prime Minister Modi's visit to Wuhan that both sides welcome cooperation within the framework of

the BCIM economic corridor, which will provide more opportunities to India. There is huge room for cooperation between the BRI of China and Project Mausam of India. It is not what some speculators call as opposing or even controlling each other. Within the framework of SCO, BRICS, China-India-Russia mechanism, etc, both sides should know how to abandon the Cold War mindset of a zero-sum game. By connecting the two major ocean plans and connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, [India and China can] jointly promote peace, development and prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.

Q/ So, like Japan, can India can also join the BRI through third-party market cooperation?

A/ Yes, of course. We hope India will do that.

Q/ Can you explain how third-party market cooperation works?

A/ Take, for example, Nippon Express, which is a Japanese global logistics company. It recently began using the China-Europe express to provide intermodal transport services between Japan and Europe. The China-Europe express passes through BRI countries, which, according to Japanese entrepreneurs, could play a positive role in the

march of Japanese enterprises into Central Asia, Russia and Europe.

Also, there are precedents for China and other countries to jointly develop markets in third countries. For example, China and France have jointly built nuclear power projects in Hinkley Point, in the UK, and China and the United States have jointly developed bauxite resources in Guinea.

Q/ The US has been criticising China as if there is another Cold War. We are also witnessing a global pandemic. Do you feel the BRI would face roadblocks in the days ahead?

A/ Yes, China-US relations are facing a hard time. But, whether it deserves to be described as a cold war, we will have to wait and see. China-US relations are a vital part of current international relations.

In the backdrop of the coronavirus, not only will the BRI not face roadblocks, but [its] necessity will also be demonstrated.

Q/ How do you counter the argument that countries could fall into a debt trap while supporting the BRI?

A/ The so-called BRI-related debt trap is a western media illusion. When you say BRI-related debt trap, it means that you undervalue the wisdom of those who are cooperating with the Chinese. Almost all BRI-related projects are located in African, South Asian, Central Asian and Latin American countries, where western capital is reluctant to get involved. Those countries either cannot get financial support from western financial institutions [or] get loans at very high rates. Compared with [this], BRI-related projects are usually the [cheapest]. [Only] those who have had a bite can tell you the taste of the peach. If such a cooperation can be sustainable, it means that such a trap is a sweet one; the local people like it. ❶

“The BRI originated in China, but it benefits the whole world. China is willing to have a fruitful dialogue with India.”

Red hand shows

With India and Nepal at loggerheads, China seems to have an edge over its neighbours. It is also taking on the west for allegedly fomenting unrest in Hong Kong

BY RABI BANERJEE

China has been on an economic expansion spree for a while now. Its investments in deep-water ports and other infrastructure projects in Pakistan and Sri Lanka are well-known. While building assets outside its territory has contributed to an all-time high national debt, many in China see President Xi Jinping as an icon who is turning the country into a super-power.

Xi's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, despite it originating in China, was well-appreciated. He managed to restrict its impact on the economy, even as the country's growth rate plummeted in the first quarter. But the growth rate does not worry Xi, as the resumption of economic activities will spur growth. What worries him is the job loss in different sectors and the fear of US firms exiting China. Xi decided to take on the US by introducing a stringent security law in Hong Kong, which is being opposed by its citizens and the west. Chinese intelligence claimed that the US, UK and Taiwan were involved in the widespread protests that shook Hong Kong recently. "It is nothing but colour revolution," said Li Xiaojun, information director of the State Council, China's highest administrative body. "The intention is to change the regime through staged protests like the Arab Spring and protests in central Asian countries. The umbrel-

la movement in Hong Kong was one attempted colour revolution."

While the US alleged that China was trying to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy, Li asked whether the autonomy was to serve Washington's interests more than China's. "The rioters were brainwashed through problematic textbooks and teaching by the British, even after the handover," said Li.

The US, said Li, has 1,300 companies in Hong Kong and enjoys more than \$34 billion trade surplus with Hong Kong. He alleged that Taiwan and the US financed the protests in Hong Kong. "The US and Taiwan provide financial support through their various entities operating in Hong Kong," he said. "The Netherlands and many US foundations and companies gave training to those

Many believe the difference of opinion between India and Nepal came to light because both countries are now ruled by nationalist parties.

brainwashed youngsters in Hong Kong."

According to the State Council, some of these protesters were children of landlords and capitalists who had fled from mainland China after the communists came to power in 1949. "They were taught to hate anything connected with socialism and communism. The US and the UK did that along with Taiwan," Li told THE WEEK. But China is trying hard to transform the Hong Kong society through its intelligence networks and large-scale social media intervention. It believes that a segment of the new generation in Hong Kong is pro-Beijing.

While China has spelt out its plans for Hong Kong, it is tight-lipped about its silent intervention in Nepal, which recently issued a new map that "includes Indian territory". The disputed territory is Kalapani, which is the tri-junction between India, Nepal and China. The tussle between India and Nepal came to a head when India inaugurated the 80km-long Lipulekh-Dharchula road in early May. While India said the road would help pilgrims reach Mansarovar quicker, China saw it as India's move to bolster its military base near the border. A senior Indian defence ministry official told THE WEEK, "It is no secret that this emerging global power is unhappy with any infrastructure develop-



DRAGON'S GRIP

Durbar Square in Kathmandu has been restored with China's help

ment along the borders and has often used direct or indirect methods to pressurise smaller nations to toe its line."

Many believe the difference of opinion between India and Nepal came to light because both countries are now ruled by nationalist parties. "It should be a matter of concern that this growing fissure in the once close relationship maybe exploited by a third nation," said the defence official. "The current Nepalese ruling dispensation has always played up a theme of nationalism and India is its favourite whipping boy for obvious reasons."

But not everyone blames China for the dispute between India and Nepal. "Indians managed to complicate the relationship with Nepal with their own lack of sensitivity

and unwillingness to acknowledge Nepalese concerns or to implement their promises in a timely manner," said Jabin Thomas Jacob, professor of international relations at Shiv Nadar University. "This created openings for the Chinese, which they have exploited to the hilt." A number of infrastructural projects that India failed to finish on time were taken up by China. Also, China has made inroads into Nepal through the trans-Himalayan project under its Belt and Road Initiative, selling the development dream to Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and his people, including Indian-origin Madheshis.

When THE WEEK contacted Oli's office, his foreign policy adviser Rajan Bhattarai said that Oli does not want to make any comment. "This issue is very sensitive for Nepal government and the prime minister is busy implementing the policy of his government," he said.

Deputy Prime Minister Ishwar

Pokhrel said he would get back at an appropriate moment. "We are totally busy with the Covid-19 situation," said Pokhrel, who is also the defence minister.

The current dispute could severely damage Indo-Nepal defence ties. Would the two countries meet and talk, at least at the military level? "No meeting has been slated as of now," said Santa Bahadur Sunar, spokesman, defence ministry, Nepal. "I can only say that India must learn to respect the sovereign rights of the Nepal government and our country's integrity."

China, however, denied any involvement in the Indo-Nepal dispute. "That is against one principle in Panchsheel agreement, namely non-interference in other country's internal affairs," said Li. "China still sticks to it. But India has long buried the Panchsheel, except for the Panchsheel Marg and historical files." ■

Call to action

Amid fear that Pakistan may trigger tensions on the LoC, and notwithstanding practical complications, there is enormous pressure on the Modi government to act against China

BY BARKHA DUTT

At first glance, the town of Leh seems peaceful, almost placid, till you begin hearing the roar of fighter jets racing through the clear blue skies. By the second day that we are there, their roar over the horizon has only gotten louder, breaking the silence every 15 minutes. The Apache helicopter, which can fire Hellfire missiles and destroy enemy tanks, is also in service. But other than that, what one can witness under an open sky is that the movement of the media has been severely restricted. Even the cantonment areas that make up the headquarters of the Army's XIV Corps are off limits for cameras.

While there are varying versions of exactly what happened in Galwan valley and what is still happening between Finger 4 and Finger 8 (the spurs around Pangong Tso Lake), there is one thing that almost everyone on the ground we speak to agrees on. The Chinese clearly try and play with the edges of the Line of Actual Control every year. This year, however, there has been a clear attempt to definitively alter its contours. In Galwan valley, multiple sources confirm that the Chinese had entered one kilometre below Patrolling Point 14 (PP 14) at what is called the 'Y junction'. On the night of June 15, when Colonel B. Santosh

Babu went with 19 of his men to oversee what he thought was going to be a withdrawal by the men of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), he was taken aback to find that the Chinese flatly refused to do so. The first time, the Indian side, which was roughly equal in number to the Chinese soldiers present, pinned six of them down and began dismantling the two tents the Chinese had erected. It is when the Chinese side returned with reinforcements and crude weapons two and half hours later that the crisis blew up. Nearly 300 PLA troops came down PP 14, wearing riot gear and armed with batons, rocks and wooden spurs with sharp nails. By now, we know that Colonel Babu was hit on the head with a blunt object and fell to his death 20 feet below. In the mayhem that followed, Indian soldiers fought with passion, despite being grossly outnumbered.

In Galwan valley, the Chinese may have retreated, arriving only one more time inside Indian territory the next morning to retrieve their fatalities—12 Chinese soldiers were killed in the brawl according to highly placed sources.

But the larger question remains wide open. Military commanders have had several rounds of negotiations. And clearly the hope is that dialogue could still do the trick. Any



MUSCLING UP

An Indian Army convoy heading to Ladakh, here seen at Gagangeer in Kashmir's Ganderbal district

military retaliation would need the "wherewithal of war," says Colonel Sonam Wangchuk, the "Lion of Ladakh". He should know. In 1999, during the Kargil war, Wangchuk cleared a nest of Pakistanis from a mountain post 18,000 feet above sea level—it would later be called the Battle of Chorbit La.

Wangchuk explains that, because reports suggest that the Chinese have the advantage on the heights, "[removing China militarily from any area inside our territory] is no longer possible to do with small firearms. You would need artillery; in fact, you

would need to use artillery as a direct firing instrument."

His namesake—often confused with him, but actually the engineer-turned-educationist who inspired the movie *3 Idiots*—says this ingress by the Chinese is only the latest reason to galvanise Indian public opinion. Wangchuk, whose role Aamir Khan essayed in the movie, says, "While the soldiers respond with a bullet, let citizens respond with their wallets. China is a rogue nation, ethically, politically and morally. The boycott should start now."

This, however, is easier said than done. At Leh's Tibetan refugee bazaar, second-generation Tibetans, most of them born in India, say that when they first asked for an

"While the soldiers respond with a bullet, let citizens respond with their wallets. China is a rogue nation, ethically, politically and morally. The boycott should start now."

—Sonam Wangchuk, engineer-turned-educationist

economic boycott of Chinese goods, their battle cry was considered a joke. No one supported them. They still soldiered on, but found that even when they made the effort to procure 'Made in India' goods, there were hardly any to be found. Literally every product had a Chinese link. This is how entrenched China's infiltration into India's markets is.

Not many believe that there are any immediate solutions in sight. If anything, the very real fear is that Pakistan, as a vassal state of Beijing, may trigger tensions on the Line of Control and heighten the conflagration there. If this happens, then for the first time in decades, both the LoC and the LAC will be hot; a deliberate ploy designed to stretch the attention of the Indian troops.

Notwithstanding the practical complications, there is enormous pressure on the ground on the Modi government to act. P. Kunzang, the president of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, says, "Prime Minister Modi must act with China as he did with Pakistan after Pulwama. If action is not taken, do not be surprised if one day the Chinese are sitting right here in Leh."

That may sound like an exaggeration or an off-the-cuff remark. But across political affiliations in Ladakh (Kunzang is a Modi supporter), the demand is the same. Namgyal Durbuk, a villager from the border areas of Durbuk-Shyok, used to be a councillor with the Congress. But he insists that he is talking purely as a Ladakhi Indian when he says, "We are with you Mr Prime Minister, please act. Where our horses once went to pasture, we see the Chinese."

Given the absence of easy and viable options on the one hand and rising sentiments on the other, perhaps the government may choose to heed the former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao, who says, "Perhaps this is precisely the time to push for a permanent border solution." ■

While there have been no further clashes on the India-China border after the June 15 escalation, tensions between the Asian giants are far from over

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

The Chandigarh Air Force Station has been busy. The Indian Air Force's heavy lift strategic aircraft—C-17 Globemaster and IL-76—have been busy ferrying tanks and other armour designated for forward areas in Ladakh. Military observers said that such urgent movement to Ladakh is a first since 1962. China, too, has pumped up its forces by at least 30 per cent since the clash on June 15, said a military observer.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who went to Moscow to take part in the 75th Victory Day Parade, pressed his Russian counterpart General Sergei Shoigu for urgent supply of spares for Sukhoi Su-30MKI and MiG-29 fighters, T-90 main battle tanks and Kilo-class submarines. (More than 60 per cent of India's weapon systems are of Russian origin.) The purchase of 21 MiG-29s and 12 Su-30MKIs is under consideration to fill gaps in India's air combat capabilities.

Observers said the Chinese aggression in Galwan valley was the brain-child of General Zhao Zongqi, head of the People's Liberation Army's Western Theatre Command. Zhao, who had also planned the Doklam intrusion in 2017, is believed to have "planned the standoff" in the early months of 2020 and tasked units in the Xinjiang military district to take on Indian patrols on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso, and at Galwan, Hot Springs and Depsang Plains. Experts said that he chose

Uneasy calm

LOCK AND LOAD

Army Chief Manoj Mukund Naravane interacts with troops in eastern Ladakh



PTI

Galwan valley to escalate as it was a "settled place" where Indian forces would not anticipate action, but was surprised by "mirror deployment" by India in eastern Ladakh.

The Army has dispatched additional brigades to forward positions along the 826km-long front of the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh and beefed up firepower with the equipment that was flown in. It already had three armoured regiments in Ladakh. The Indo-Tibetan Border Po-

lice has deployed 40 additional companies along the LAC. The Army has also moved at least two peace-time divisions from Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh towards Ladakh, along with two engineer regiments. However, new troops would need to acclimatise to high-altitude warfare.

The IAF has deployed Su-30 MKIs, MiG-29s and Apache attack helicopters to carry out combat air patrol. Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria made a secret visit to Leh last

week. Air assets were deployed after additional fighter jets, bombers and attack helicopters were noticed at four Chinese bases close to the LAC. Animal transport units, which played a crucial role in the Kargil War, have been reactivated to supply weapons and ammunition to areas without motorable roads, including remote outposts at heights of up to 19,000ft.

The PLA has an armoured division (three brigades) and two motorised infantry divisions close to Ladakh.

An Indian official said China also has two armoured brigades and four motorised infantry divisions in Chengdu. After the Galwan valley clash, on the insistence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Army's rules of engagement along the LAC were amended; field commanders can now sanction the use of firearms in "extraordinary" circumstances.

Frank O'Donnell, non-resident fellow, South Asia Program, Stimson Center, the US, said that India's defence position was more secure with adequate dispersal across land, air and sea. He told THE WEEK that India also has more and better aircraft along the border, more experienced air crew, and a large number of airfields in the east and west. "So even if some airfields are down, operations can continue from other locations," he said. O'Donnell said that in the event of war, China would opt for early long-range missile strikes against Indian air bases, but added that a daunting number of Chinese missiles would be required to incapacitate relevant Indian air bases.

Despite the strong preparations, Pangong Tso continues to be a concern for India. The lake is divided into eight fingers—ridges jutting into the lake. In the past, India had claimed territory till the easternmost ridge, Finger 8. But, gradually, both sides agreed on India controlling fingers one to four and China, five

to eight. But India has its last post close to Finger 3. Lt Gen D.S. Hooda, former head of the Army's Northern Command, said that in the last six weeks, when the focus was on Galwan valley, the PLA is learnt to have built permanent structures and roads up to the areas between Fingers 4 and 8. Intelligence inputs based on satellite images said that the PLA now holds the entire Finger 4, almost 5km inside Indian territory.

A build-up of Chinese forces can also be seen at Depsang Plains, north of Galwan valley. But O'Donnell said: "Despite the apparent numerical parity of ground forces, Indian forces are all permanently close to the border, limiting prospects of a successful Chinese cross-border advance."

He said that even in a war with India, a significant proportion of Chinese ground forces would be unavailable, reserved either for taskings on the Russian border or for countering insurrection in Xinjiang and Tibet. Moreover, the majority of forces are located further from the Indian border, in contrast with the majority of forward-deployed Indian forces, which have a focused "China defence" mission.

While the military is determined and prepared to tackle Chinese aggression, questions have been raised about intelligence failure in detecting the massive build-up of Chinese forces on the border sooner. A military intelligence officer said that India does not have enough dedicated military satellites. "To have round-the-clock coverage on the China border, especially in our areas of interest, we require at least 10 dedicated satellites," he said. "Moreover, Indian satellites are controlled by NTRO (National Technical Research Organisation) and ISRO scientists, who do not understand military requirements." An intelligence analyst claimed that India's focus has always been on Pakistan; China was never a priority. It certainly is now. ●

While the military is prepared to tackle Chinese aggression, questions have been raised about intelligence failure in detecting the build-up of Chinese forces on the border sooner.

Relationship update

India needs to re-evaluate its policy towards China and other neighbours

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

In the summer of 2015, Narendra Modi—on his first visit to China after he became prime minister—deviated from his script while addressing students of Tsinghua University to make a grand gesture offering e-visa to Chinese tourists. The gift was not on the list of 24 agreements, and security agencies had warned against it. It even caught Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi by surprise, and he urged students to cheer once again for Modi to thank him for the gift.

Five summers on, after 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a clash with the Chinese at Galwan Valley, Modi's closing remarks at the all-party meeting offered China another advantage, claims the opposition. "No one has intruded and nor is anyone intruding, nor has any post been captured by someone," he said, contradicting the official position of the Army and the ministry of external affairs. The statement, said former prime minister Manmohan Singh, allows the Chinese "to use his words as a vindication of their position".

The Prime Minister's Office rushed to clarify Modi's statement a day later, claiming that his observation of "no Chinese presence on our side of the LAC pertained to the situation as a consequence of the bravery of our

armed forces". However, the confusion has only helped bolster the Chinese confidence and their claims.

"This has been an absolutely shocking coup of sorts by China," says Alka Acharya, professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. "They are unlikely to retreat from the territory they now occupy. It is a crucial part of the overall strategic advantage for China in that area. It remains to be seen what kind of a spin will be given to make it more palatable for India."

Both sides may be now willing to de-escalate—another word that experts believe suggests that India is on the back foot. But the negotiations for peace at Galwan Valley, the bloodiest episode since 1967, and the fallout on the relationship

presents the biggest challenge for Modi. It could not have come at a worse time—there is the war against a pandemic and a looming economic crisis.

Unlike his predecessors, Modi came to power convinced of furthering warmer ties with China. He wanted to move beyond 1962 to define India and China through an economic prism, courtesy his experience as chief minister. The e-visa was his attempt to demonstrate India's closeness with China. All the imagery with Xi Jinping, from Modi's first visit to China to Xi's 2019 visit to Mamallapuram, has been proof of personal chemistry and a special bond.

"The policy has been a failure," says Rajesh Rajagopalan, professor, Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of

International Studies, JNU, referring to the personalisation of the relationship. "It was foolish, and he [Modi] is partly paying the price for that. I don't see, diplomatically, where he goes from here. But at the same time, he can't completely afford to break with China."

The face-off at Doklam in 2017 might have exposed China's intentions, but the Galwan Valley incident has revealed the full force of China's ambition. "New Delhi is under tremendous pressure to retaliate for the 20 Indian soldiers that lost their lives, and a nationalist like Modi could suffer a political blow if he just shrugs everything off. But at the same time, India is in a tough spot," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program and senior associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center.

more the chances increase for more provocations and escalations. So the two sides are far from being out of the woods. And even when they get out of the woods, the next crisis

"Even if China restores status quo ante, one thing is now clear—the old agreements are no longer enough to restore peace and tranquillity on the border."

—Rakesh Sood, distinguished fellow, Observer Research Foundation

"It has relatively few military options, and any punitive economic measures it implements against Beijing could end up hurting India's economy more than China's."

For now, India can take a tough line in negotiations, says Kugelman. "Beijing won't back down either. So what we are looking at in the coming days and possibly weeks are continued talks, but talks that don't lead to a resolution," Kugelman says. "And the longer the talks go without a resolution, the

won't be far away."

This then lies at the heart of the problem. And, the border dispute, which had remained dormant for years, is at the front, centre and looming. That the Line of Actual Control has had different interpretations for both sides is now evident. As are the implications of living with the fuzziness. "Even if China agrees and restores status quo ante, one thing is now clear—the old agreements are no longer enough to restore peace and tranquillity on the border," says Rakesh Sood, distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. "The 1988 modus vivendi [when Rajiv Gandhi visited China] is no longer tenable."

The existing tools in the diplomatic toolbox do not work. And summits, even formal ones, will not work. A win—with all the optics that Modi is known for—will require Houdini-like skill. Continuation of the policy towards China as it exists will not be effective. "The Indian government needs to start afresh in terms of how it visualises its relationship with China in the coming decades," says Sood. "It has to create a new policy consensus by taking people into confidence."

Reaching out across the aisle for support is not Modi's strength. Will he be willing to do it? To make it truly effective, India might need to re-evaluate its relationship with its neighbours. "The economic boycott of China will be only feasible if it is in concert with others," says Rajagopalan. And in building consensus outside—much easier for Modi than domestic unity—India may need to reach out even to Pakistan. "By rejecting any semblance of a dialogue, we have reduced leverage," says Sood. "Is it strategically wise to have a Pakistan-China dynamic? We should not be deluded that we would somehow wean Pakistan off China. But diplomacy is about creating perception." ■

REUTERS

PICTURE IMPERFECT
Narendra Modi and China's Premier Li Keqiang take a selfie with children during a tai chi and yoga event in Beijing in 2015





AAYUSH GOEL

Enemies with benefits

MAKING IN INDIA
Chinese mobile phone maker Vivo's manufacturing facility in Greater Noida

Beyond the street anger and posturing, an economic boycott of China might not be a viable option for Indian businesses and consumers

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS AND NACHIKET KELKAR

Uddhav Thackeray did not have any inkling of what was to unfold when he logged onto an online meeting on June 15. The Maharashtra chief minister presided over the signing of deals with three Chinese firms—Great Wall Motor Company, Hengli Engineering and

PMI Electro Mobility Solutions' joint venture with Photon. The three agreements totalling around ₹5,000 crore of investment were part of Thackeray's ambitious plan to rein-vigorate the state's Covid-19-ravaged economy. In a few hours, however, everything changed.

As the brutal killing of 20 Indian

Army men in a skirmish in Galwan valley on the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC) sent shockwaves across the country, popular sentiment rose up against Chinese products and businesses. Calls to boycott Chinese products began trending on social media and protest marches were taken out in many cities.

Some people in Gujarat threw out their made-in-China televisions and stomped on them, while traders in Delhi made a 'Holi' bonfire of Chinese products. The Uttar Pradesh government had to deploy police-men outside the factories of Chinese

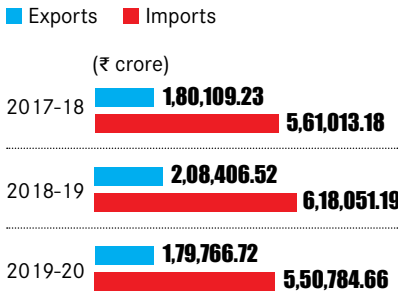
firms in Greater Noida and an apartment complex where some 100 Chinese nationals live. Chinese phone makers in India suddenly started highlighting their 'Indian' credentials, and startups with Chinese funding started referring to themselves as "proudly Indian". In the frenzy, Thackeray's dream projects did not stand a chance, and were put on hold.

The Centre also wasted no time. One of the first deals to be axed was the Indian Railways' ₹471-crore signalling work on the Kanpur-DDU line awarded to Beijing National Railway Research. State-run telecom operators BSNL and MTNL were asked to drop Chinese vendors. E-commerce bidders have been asked to specify 'country of origin' while listing on the commerce ministry's e-market-place, with the provision likely to be extended to e-commerce sites like Amazon and Flipkart.

India had already fired the first shot back in April, when it stopped the automatic foreign direct investment (FDI) route for investment from neighbouring countries. The worry then was that Chinese investors may take over Indian firms weakened by the pandemic. It was followed in May by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and 'Vocal For Local', which actually meant 'stop depending on China and build self-reliance in manufacturing'.

Post Galwan, the gloves are off. New Delhi's move, riding on the coattails of the backlash on the streets and in drawing rooms against China's 'aggression', may no longer limit itself to piecemeal gestures. The department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has asked industry bodies to submit lists of Chinese imports by Indian companies—the aim is to chart out an action plan to replace non-essential imports

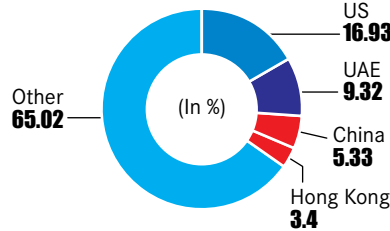
INDIA-CHINA TRADE



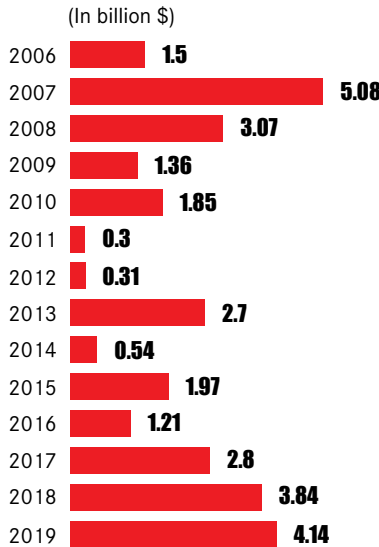
Includes Hong Kong data

INDIA'S EXPORT TO CHINA

China is the third-largest export market for Indian goods as of FY 19-20



CHINA FDI IN INDIA



Includes data for deals above \$100 million

BULK DRUG

Two-thirds of APIs used by India's pharma industry are imported from China



SOURCE BLOOMBERG

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.

with local products where possible. Rules for government contracts, both Central and state, are also set to be tweaked based on quality and technical specifications so that Chinese companies do not become eligible. Further tightening of FDI rules to keep out future Chinese investments now appear likely. There is now an added urgency to take a re-look at India's Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with countries like Thailand and Vietnam to plug the loophole of Chinese products taking this 'third party' route to enter India.

"Economic boycott has been used effectively by this government recently in the cases of Malaysia and Turkey. In both these cases, India had an upper hand," said Divakar Vijayasathya, managing partner of the business advisory firm DVS. But he advocates caution with China. "India is dependent on China for many critical supplies. Any large-scale attempt to boycott Chinese products would invite an export restriction of these critical products. Hence, economic warfare has to be meticulously planned and we should be prepared for a backlash."

Breakups are never easy. According to Invest India, the national investment promotion and facilitation agency, India-China trade, which was worth just \$2.8 billion in 2001, has grown 31 times to \$87 billion in 2018-19. While India's exports to China have grown 12 times to \$16.8 billion during this period, imports from China have jumped 45 times, to \$70.3 billion.

China is well entrenched in India's startup and technology ecosystem. In fact, Chinese tech giants and venture capital funds are the primarily vehicle for investments in tech startups. Over the past five years, companies like Alibaba, Tencent, Didi Chuxing and Fosun International have invested an es-

estimated \$4 billion in Indian startups. Of the 30 Indian unicorns (startups valued at \$1 billion or more), 18 are Chinese funded. Marquee names like Paytm, Oyo, MakeMyTrip, Delhivery and Byju's have received funding from China.

A bigger presence are the many Chinese apps with huge followers in India. It is estimated that half of top app downloads (iOS and Android combined) in India in 2018 were those with Chinese investments, such as UC Browser, SHAREit, Tik-Tok, and Vigo Video.

The thriving Indian pharmaceutical industry is heavily dependent on critical components from China. Over the past three years, 68 per cent of the active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) used in medicines in India were imported from China. These API supplies were hit hard as Chinese factories were forced to shut down by the Covid-19 pandemic in January and February. If the imports of API from China were to be crippled, it would have a huge impact on the \$40 billion pharma industry, which is one of India's largest exporters. "If China is taken off the equation immediately, the supply chain would be severely affected, with closures for a long time," said Debabrata Chakravorty, president (global supply chain, sourcing & contract manufacturing) of the pharma major Lupin. "There are limited

The thriving Indian pharmaceutical industry is heavily dependent on critical components from China.

immediate alternatives globally, even at a higher cost."

It is a similar case with the automobile industry. According to credit ratings agency ICRA, China accounts for 27 per cent of India's auto component imports. India also imported capital goods worth around \$12.78 billion and electronics worth \$18 billion from China from March 2019 to February 2020.

"There is a trade relationship that has developed over the last 20-40 years between China and the rest of the world," said Amit Bhandari, a fellow at geopolitical think tank Gateway House. "If something has developed over such a long period, you cannot unwind it in one week, two weeks or even a year. It is a long-term process."

Chinese companies have cumulatively invested more than ₹6 lakh crore in India, spawning 1.87 lakh jobs in the last two decades or so.

They have been scaling up in recent years on the value chain. Besides telecom and software, Chinese companies in sunrise sectors like electric vehicles and renewable energy have been setting up major projects in India.

Almost half of the consumer durables imported into India are Chinese. About 40 per cent of leather products come from China. While that shirt or trouser you are wearing may be made in India or Bangladesh, chances are that the buttons and zippers came from China.

The reason everywhere is the same. The cost. For instance, half of the smart TVs in India are Chinese. The alternatives, those from Japan or Korea, could cost 20 to 45 per cent more. The pandemic also, ironically, helped the Chinese cause. "It has reduced the purchasing power of the Indian public as they have less money in hand," said Anusree Paul, trade economist & associate professor, School of Management, BML Munjal University. "Indian companies are not equipped to substitute China's cheaper products."

Everyone, however, agrees that India should focus on developing the domestic industry, which would help it naturally compete. "Currently, 40 per cent of India's imports are products like electronic items and medical instruments. And almost 50 per cent of imports from China are either in capital goods or intermediary goods, which form crucial supplies to the domestic industry. What can be done is to reduce low-grade imports from China and produce such items domestically," said Mohit Singla, chairman of the Trade Promotion Council of India.

Indian brands account for just one per cent of the booming domestic mobile phone market. "A person does not go to the market and look for products made in China. Instead, he looks for high quality products that are affordable. Chinese products



TOUGH CALL

A man disfigures a hoarding advertising a Chinese mobile phone brand in Patna

have cracked that equation," said brand expert Harish Bijoor.

That is why consumers giving up Chinese products en masse is an unlikely scenario. "Chinese products are value-for-money and they have made their mark in India," said Prachir Singh, senior research analyst with the telecom consultancy Counterpoint Research. He does not see much merit in the campaign against Chinese companies. "Components from China and other parts of the world are assembled in Indian factories that employ thousands of Indians to bring out a Chinese brand mobile phone. How can you label it Chinese in this globalised environment? Like it or not, they are delivering value to the Indian GDP as well," he said.

Let alone its logicity in a post-global world, any attempt by the Indian tiger to leap out of the drag-

on's chokehold may not be practical or sensible. "India still does not have adequate infrastructure and alternative investment prospects to substitute China," said Paul. "So India is going to be affected more if it takes any stringent decision based on the present bellicose sentiments."

So, what is the way out?

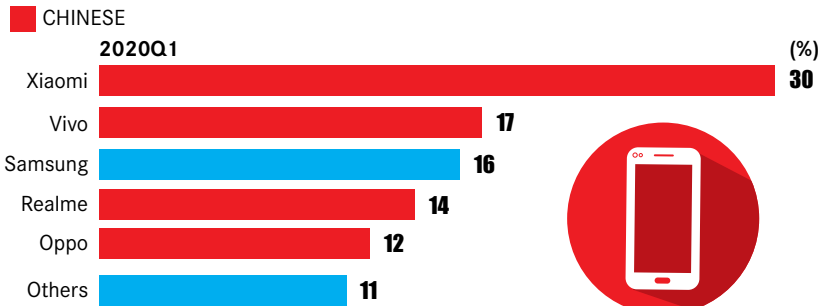
Sankar Chakraborti, CEO of Acuite Ratings, said India could afford to reduce the dependency on China in a phased manner. "We believe that Indian industry has the wherewithal to safeguard its interests," he said. According to Acuite, without any significant additional investments, the domestic manufacturing sector can substitute 25 per cent of the total imports from some specified sectors in the first phase, thereby reducing \$8.4 billion in trade deficit in a year. "With a strategic intent and highly calibrated approach from both the government and industry, the Indian economy can see a new narrative that can not only reduce its trade deficit but also kickstart a cycle of fresh private sector investments,"

said Chakraborti.

The government seems to have a plan. Prime Minister Modi met key ministers like Piyush Goyal and Nitin Gadkari a week ago along with officials. Presentations were made on how to improve India's ease of doing business and ramp up manufacturing and exports. An interesting idea that gained traction was making states compete with each other to attract investment.

Another meeting of ministers with industry captains took inputs on how to reduce turnaround time at ports and how infrastructure can be improved in the countryside, a crucial determinant in making India an attractive hub for manufacturing. Among the non-fiscal measures being discussed are labour, ease of doing business and coordinating the efforts of the Centre and states in a bid to attract more investment. The writing on the wall for the Indian tiger is clear—crouch, crawl and create your own space in the long run, but it will be hard to ignore the dragon in the room right now. ■

SMARTPHONE MARKET SHARE





China's message to Asia

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi came away from his historic 1988 meeting with the architect of 21st century China, Deng Xiaoping, reassured by Deng's famous words: "Only when China and India have developed, will a real Asian century emerge." In 2007, Singapore's founder-leader Lee Kuan Yew expressed the opinion that Asia's rise would be powered by the "twin engines" of China and India. In 1988, Deng may well have believed that, and, in 2007, Lee may well have sincerely hoped that. No one in China and few across much of east and southeast Asia any longer takes those views seriously.

The accelerated rise of China is essentially a 21st century phenomenon. The trans-Atlantic financial crisis of 2008-2009 further consolidated China's power, even as the west went into a period of disarray. India's impressive economic performance in the first decade of the 21st century kept the hope of a catch-up alive. However, several developments in the second decade have combined to change the landscape to India's disadvantage.

First, India's uncertain economic performance and its defensive approach to closer economic ties with other Asian nations. The decision to withdraw from the negotiations towards an Asia-wide Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership signalled India's economic weakness rather than a new sense of self-confidence or *atmanirbharata*. Second, the BJP's focus on a divisive domestic political agenda offered India's enemies an opportunity to draw global attention to political fault lines at home, which many see as a hurdle to economic revival. Finally, United States President Donald Trump's "blow hot-blow cold" policy towards India, once again confirmed by the contents of former US national security advisor John Bolton's book, may have convinced China that the US is unlikely to

weigh in on India's side, beyond a point.

It is into this uncertain space that China's President Xi Jinping is inserting China, hoping to herald its arrival as Asia's pre-eminent power. From Depsang and Doklam to Galwan Valley the consistent push against India is, it seems, aimed at demonstrating to the rest of Asia that India remains pre-occupied with its own security, so how can it offer any reassurance to others? China's India policy is less about acquiring territory and much more about demonstrating to the rest of Asia that India is not capable of challenging China's hegemonic status across the continent any time soon.

It is important to recognise that India is not alone in worrying about China's hegemonic ambitions. Japan, South Korea, Australia, Vietnam and several other Asian nations are equally worried about China's intent and capability. Mindful of this situation, India has reached out to other powers to build a defensive alliance. This is what strategic analysts now call the "Asian Great Game". India must not deviate from the path of building a pan-Asian alliance that keeps Chinese power under check. Surely, no Asia-Pacific nation wants western hegemony replaced by Chinese hegemony.

It is also important to understand that while an overwhelming number of Chinese citizens and people of Chinese origin around Asia take great pride in China's resurgence and rise, and why not, there would be many who would not approve of President Xi's politics and political style. To imagine that Chinese society and China's political leadership is a monolith would be self-defeating. Even at the height of power of great leaders like Mao Zedong and Deng, China was internally divided. Xi's politics and economics have caused much discontent within China. But the question is, would an internally plural China be externally less or more aggressive?



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

INVESTMENT MUTUAL FUNDS



Risk and rewards

It is important to have a dynamic debt strategy in the current times

BY P. SATISH KHUMAAR



EVEN THOUGH DEBT as an asset class has faced some turbulent times of late, it provides some interesting investment opportunities. For a medium- to long-term investor, dynamic bond funds are worthy considering.

What are dynamic bond funds?

There are debt funds for different durations of investment. For instance, to park surplus cash for a short term, investors use liquid funds or short-term bond funds. Investors looking to invest in debt funds purely from a long-term risk appetite perspective choose long-term bond funds. But what if you are ready to take a little more risk of volatility? In that case you can choose the dynamic debt funds.

As per the Securities and Exchange Board of India, dynamic bond funds are open-ended debt schemes that are allowed to invest across a spectrum of duration. Based on the varying market scenarios, this category of scheme allows the fund manager to tweak the duration of the portfolio, with

an aim to generate higher returns. The fund manager can take a call to change investment patterns within debt category across a whole range of duration—right from long term bonds like government securities to short term debt papers like short-duration corporate bonds.

What makes these funds attractive now?

The investment calls taken are largely based on the macroeconomic factors that determine the overall interest rate trajectory in the near to medium term. At present, the interest rates are going down and are expected to remain so due to the measures taken by the government to spruce up the economy. Moreover, fiscal deficit and current account deficit also seem to be pointing to conditions favourable to a lower interest rate in the near term.

Interest rates and prices of bonds are inversely related, that is they move in the opposite directions. This means that lower interest rates or interest rates moving downwards are likely to result in prices of bonds going up. It must be remembered that for longer-

term investments government bonds with a sovereign guarantee are among the popular instruments for investment. Accordingly, lower interest rates could mean that the prices of such long-term papers could go up, providing an arbitrage opportunity to investors who are amply prepared in advance. The dynamic bond funds have the scope to do that, among many other things.

How do you choose one?

When looking for a dynamic bond fund, the important aspect to check is the consistency in return profile over the years. Secondly, check if the fund house has a well-defined system on which the allocation is decided. A proper system will ensure that the fund remains agile and makes the required changes in the portfolio according to the changes happening in the macro-economic environment.

One fund that ticks all of these requirements and has been a flag-bearer for the category is ICICI Prudential All Seasons Bond Fund. As of May 30, 2020, this fund has out-performed its peer group average on one-, three- and five-year periods. Moreover, the portfolio investment calls are based on an in-house model that takes into account various factors such as current account deficit, fiscal deficit as well as credit growth to indicate the steps to be taken. If the past performance is something to go by, this model has worked in favour of the fund, and its investors. Currently, the fund has increased its exposure to longer maturity instruments having the best level of security—sovereign government bonds.

To sum up, dynamic bond fund as a category is poised to reap the benefits of the current bout of volatility seen in debt markets. As a long-term investor, it is important to ensure that you have a debt fund which keeps up with the changing marcos.

Author is director of Vardhana Financial Solutions Private Limited.

Prison un-break

Video-calling can become lifeline for jailbirds deprived of family visits

BY SNEHA BHURA

KUNDAN BHOI, 22, had been meeting his elder brother in Udaipur Central Jail in Rajasthan once in two weeks. He trudged 15km from home every time. But the last time he went there two months ago, the prison had stopped allowing visitors because of the pandemic. He returned home distraught. Later, the prison advised him to apply for an online meeting through the National Prison Portal.

Such meetings, called eMulakat, had started in Rajasthan on April 2. On the ePrisons page, Bhoi keyed in the details of his elder brother, who was serving a seven-year sentence for murder. An OTP confirmed his registration for eMulakat and he got a website link for a video-call and the date and time.

When he logged in from his smartphone for that first video-call with his brother, he was delighted by the swiftness of it all. “My brother met all the family members all at once. We showed him his house waiting for his return. This system is so time-saving,” says Bhoi, who is doing his BCom in a Udaipur college. “Better than going all the way to the prison complex, waiting there and then going through multiple people to meet my brother.” He has met his brother online four

times now. “I hope they keep this system working even after Covid-19.”

Surendra Singh Shekhawat, deputy inspector general of Rajasthan prisons, is also excited about how the state is embracing the new system. “We are No 1 in running eMulakat,” he says. “It is happening in most of Rajasthan jails. And not just central jails. There are five subjails in Udaipur; even they have it.”

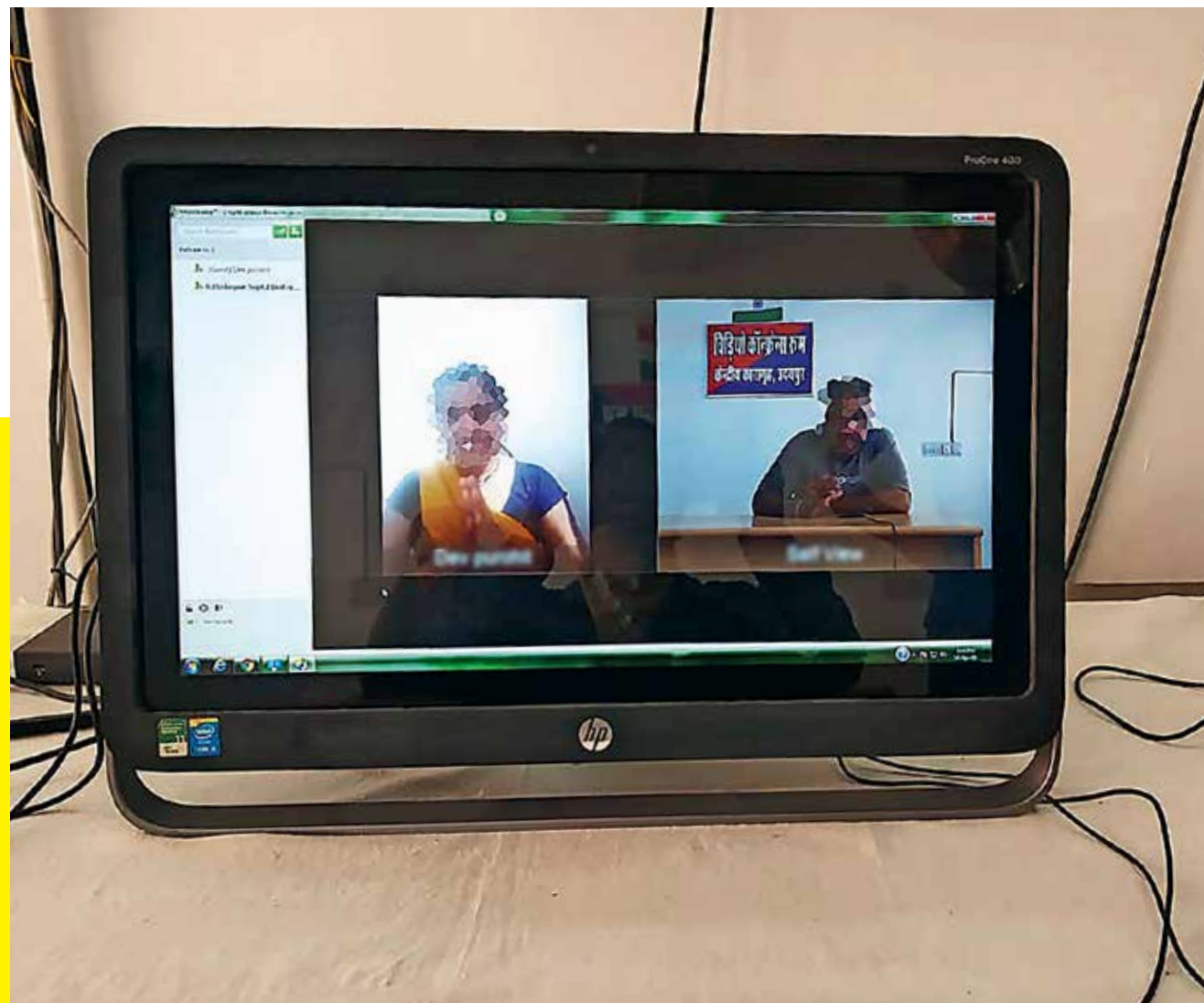
Shekhawat concedes that connectivity is a major worry and that many prisoner families in remote, tribal belts do not have access to the internet. “Prisoners get five minutes to meet their kin via video-calls. Yes, they complain about the short time. There are some technical problems,” says Shekhawat, who plans to upgrade the infrastructure for eMulakat. “We are also in the process of getting families to make online payment for canteen material, so they do not have to come every time to deliver fruits and knick-knacks.”

Restrictions on visits and fears about the virus had led to riots in the Dum Dum correctional facility, the largest prison in West Bengal, in the third week of March. Four inmates were killed and 60 policemen injured in the clashes and arson. “A com-

plete ban on visitations can do great emotional and mental damage to prisoners in these uncertain times,” says Sanjeev P. Sahni, criminologist and principal director of the Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences, Jindal Global University, Sonapat. Sahni says, “States like Odisha, Rajasthan, Punjab and Gujarat are leading in digitisation of visits. Odisha has even ordered [starting of] eMulakat in all 30 district jails. Prisons are establishing visitor rooms equipped with laptops and broadband, and making suitable arrangements at prison cells. These facilities

“
States like Odisha, Rajasthan, Punjab and Gujarat are leading in digitisation of visits. Odisha has even ordered [starting of] eMulakat in all 30 district jails.
”

—Sanjeev P. Sahni, criminologist



VIRTUAL RELIEF

In prisons where eMulakat is working well, the demand is increasing, which is why prisoners get to see their relatives only for five minutes

they somehow miss an appointment, the web link expires, and they have to wait for long for a new booking. Chandra also notes that many families have lost their livelihoods during the lockdown and may not have the means to take internet subscriptions.

Criminal psychologist Anuja Trehan Kapur warns against making eMulakat a norm. “These are video recordings at the end of the day. They can be weaponised later as evidence for punishment even though it is illegal,” she says.

Much has been said about mass release of undertrials and petty offenders to decongest prisons, but it is easier said than done because lawyers are no longer readily accessible. “The district legal services authorities are themselves wary of prison complexes which are seen as high-risk contamination zones,” says Smita Chakraborty, founder of Jaipur-based Prison Aid Action Research, who has been working across jails in Rajasthan as an independent observer and adviser. She says prisoners should be allowed to use eMulakat to interact with their lawyers as well. One can get out of prison only through remission or bail, and one needs a lawyer’s help for that, she notes.

Chakraborty says open jails are better equipped to handle overcrowding. Rajasthan has the largest number of open jails in the world, nearly 40 of them. “Nobody has run away from open jails,” she says. “Prisoners live with their families. Closed colonial-era structures do not work anymore; they are inhuman and expensive. Even the Supreme Court has admitted that open prisons should become the norm in the future. There is no need for eMulakat there.”

are advantageous for visitors from poorer families.”

But eMulakat scheme remains under-utilised for various reasons. R. Rochin Chandra, director of the Centre for Criminology & Public Policy, says prisons tend to balk at spending on high-speed wired internet connection for eMulakat as it is expensive. “The states are struggling to cover the usage fee for video-calls.” In prisons where eMulakat is working well, he says, the demand is increasing, which is why inmates get to see their relatives only for five minutes. And if



Apples in the Deccan

Two Telangana farmers have succeeded in growing the fruit. Here is why and how

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

MAY WAS EXCITING and emotional for A. Limba Reddy and Kendre Balaji. While the rest of the world was reeling under the impact of Covid-19, these farmers, from different parts of Telangana, were eager for a 'bite of history'. Even as temperatures soared to over 40 degrees Celsius, both would visit their orchards daily to tend to fruit trees that were a misfit in the Deccan plateau. They had succeeded in cultivating apples, originally from snow-capped mountains in Central Asia, in tropical south India. "The fruit was very sweet," said Reddy, his success perhaps enhancing the taste.

Reddy, 67, hails from Nizamabad

district in southern Telangana. His five-acre orchard has around 500 apple trees. After he tasted the first apple, he wanted to delay the harvest as he felt that the crop was not mature. But as word spread about the crop, visitors flooded the orchard. Recently, a minister came calling, with a huge crowd and the media in tow. Despite Reddy's reservations that the apples were not ready, the visitors plucked, ate and appreciated them. "Now, I don't have any left," said Reddy, with a laugh.

Reddy, an MSc in physics, took to farming around three decades ago, after stints as an entrepreneur and at a private firm. He said that he used to

grow mango and guava, and wanted more varieties of fruit. "I watched a lot of YouTube videos and once stumbled across an apple variety that can be grown in a warm climate," said Reddy. This was in November 2018. Reddy contacted farmer Hariman Sharma of Himachal Pradesh, who had developed the HRNM-99 variety.

"I placed an order for 500 saplings," said Reddy. "He said that he can only deliver 200. I insisted that I wanted 500. He could sense my commitment and agreed." In December, he received the plants by courier and planted them within a week. His friends and relatives wrote it off as a

SWEET SUCCESS

A. Limba Reddy and Kendre Balaji (left)

futile attempt.

Last summer, the trees bore apples the size of strawberries. This year, they got bigger and better. Did he do anything particular? "They need water like any other crop," he said. "Since I have been preparing manure for other fruit trees, I used it for apple trees as well. It is not difficult to grow them." His apples will hit the markets next year. "I was told that I can earn up to ₹10 lakh on each acre of apple trees," he said. "I will be happy even if I get ₹5 lakh per acre every season."

Balaji, 38, hails from Komaram Bheem district. He had a different reason to grow apples. "In 2013, I visited a doctor. I saw an old lady with her husband there," he said. "The doctor told the lady that she had low haemoglobin and needed to eat fruits. He recommended apples and immediately asked the husband to buy fruit. While the patient waited, her husband came back with an apple. The old man could not afford more as each apple cost around ₹20. I decided that day that I will grow

apples to make the fruit affordable to the poor people of my region."

With the image of the poor old couple etched in his mind, Balaji began his quest. "I could not find anyone in south India who grew apples," he said. "It took me more than a year of research before the next step. A friend in the Army, posted in Himachal Pradesh, send me apple plants. I planted them in a two-acre field."

In 2015, after reading newspaper reports about him, scientists from Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, visited his farm and recommended the HRNM-99 variety. They supplied 150 sapling; he added 250 more later. Some of the older saplings did not survive; he now has 400 apple trees. The farm is located in a hilly terrain. So how does he ensure the good health of his crops? "On either side of the apple trees, I planted mango, pomegranate and sweet lime so that they protect the apple trees from harsh sunlight and heat," said Balaji. "Marigolds have been also planted strategically so as to provide them with nutrients and also double as manure."

Balaji's efforts were recognised by Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao on June 2—Telangana formation

day—when he tasted an apple from his orchard. "He said it was very tasty," said Balaji. The next year is going to be the most crucial for him as he intends to market his produce. "My aim is to sell in Telangana markets," he said.

Both farmers said that scientists and agriculture experts have tasted the fruits and certified them to be of high quality and with more nutrients than the ones grown in northern India.

As a result, a number of Telangana farmers have lined up to follow in their footsteps. Vissa Kiran Reddy of Rhythu Swarajya Vedika, an NGO that works on farmers' issues, said that growing apples was a "crazy idea and is not an option for local farmers". He added that the successful cases were an exception rather than the norm. "The climate and soil condition in this region are not suitable for apples," he said. "This fruit cannot be grown even in the lower reaches in north India."

But pragmatic views do not seem to matter much to dreamers like Balaji. As he already has the tag of Telangana's first apple farmer, he now has another wish: "I want apples grown in our state to be named after me; after all, I created history." 🍏

The Lord is my shield

The men of God, and women, too, are in fervent prayer for divine intervention in a world that wishes to get rid of the mask

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE

In the year of the Mask,
spikes of an invisible foe pierced our lives,
an oblique attack.

Its crown eclipsed our visages,
shadowing our smiles, burying our
dreams,
locking up all of us in a difficult berth.
The Mask is a temporary weapon, a shield
and a guard, a new normal.

In a masked year,
the ego has fallen, oneness is back.
People of all belief ask for one miracle.
Only one.

To end the wait, to go out, to celebrate;
to take off our masks.

Everyone awaits a miracle.
Let it come from the sea or the sky.
Or any country on the earth.
The world is hoping for a miracle.
A vaccine.



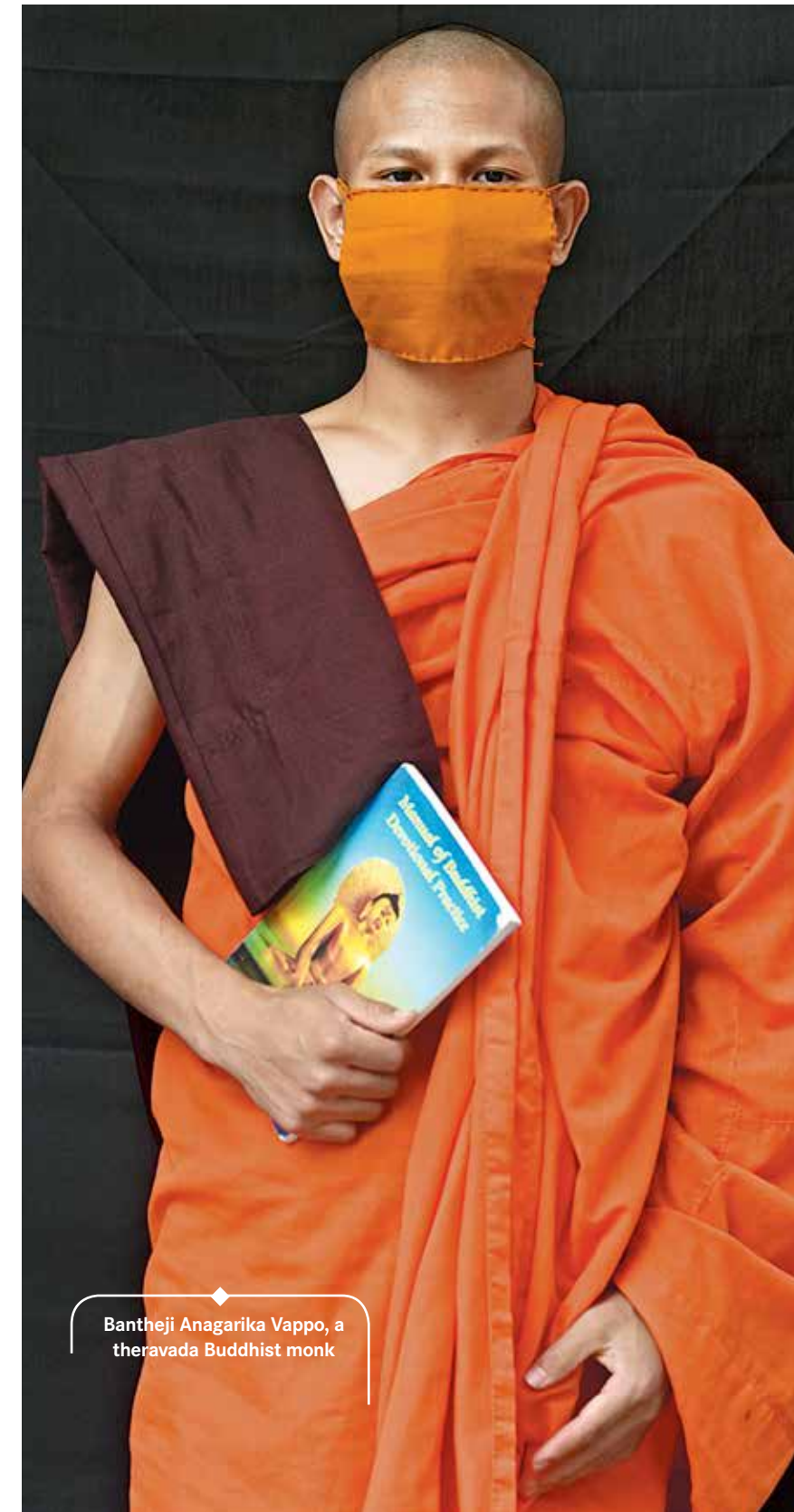
Syed Ziaulla Sha Khadri, head of
Hazrath Syedana Yaqeen Shah Vali
Dargah, Bengaluru



Lakshminarasimha, priest
at Bhagawan Sree Maruthi
Temple, Bengaluru



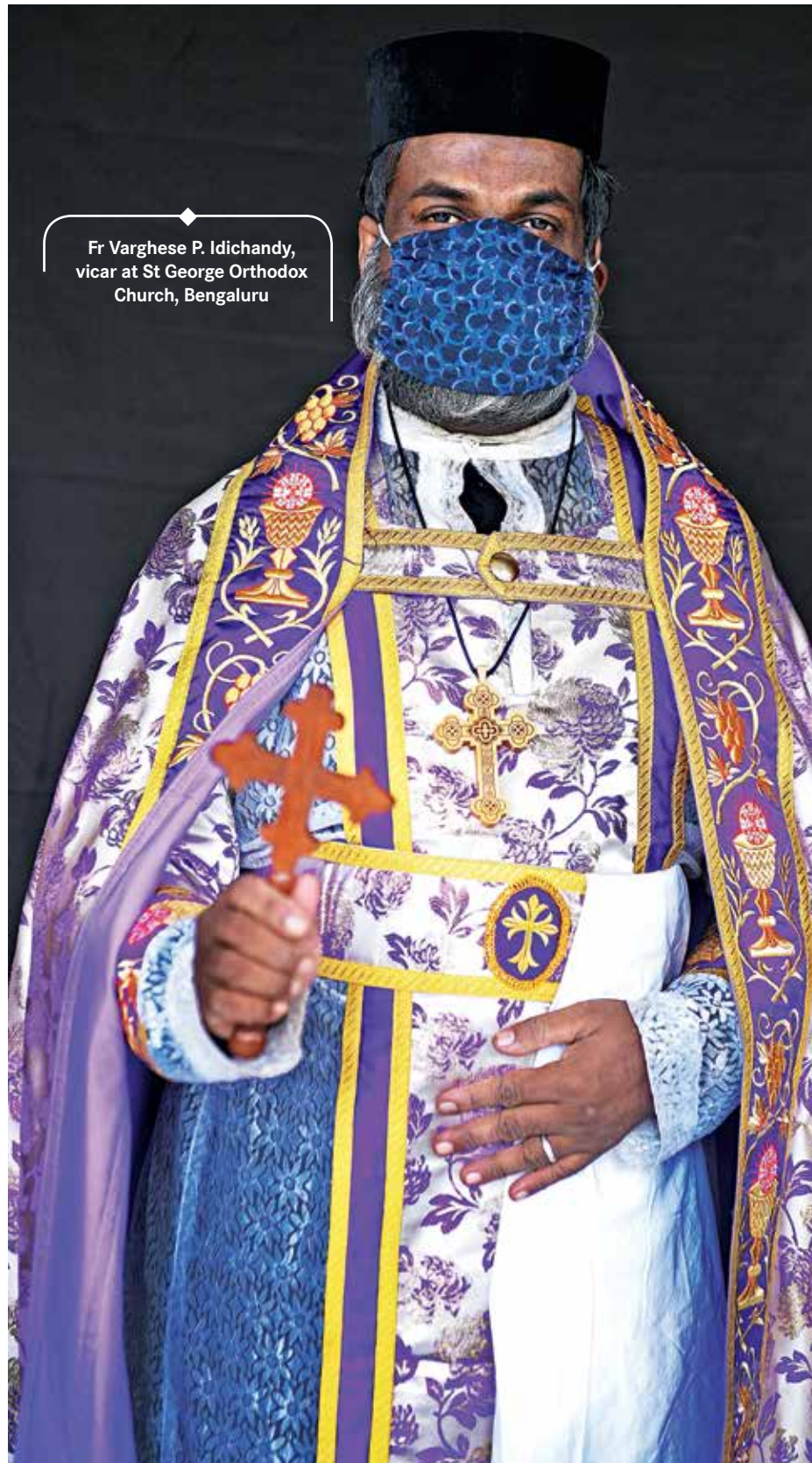
Jasbeer Singh, granthi at
Gurudwara Sri Guru Singh
Sabha, Bengaluru



Bantheji Anagarika Vappo, a
theravada Buddhist monk



Evrad Fardoon D. Karkaria,
panthaky (head priest) at
Parsi Fire Temple, Bengaluru



Fr Varghese P. Idichandy,
vicar at St George Orthodox
Church, Bengaluru



Sadhvi Anima Shri, a
Shwetambar Jain monk



The outsider who conquered Bollywood

I was in the middle of a workout when a generic forwarded message from an established film trade analyst announced the death of Sushant Singh Rajput—by suicide. It knocked the wind out of me, and in the days that followed, it knocked the wind out of everyone within the industry and everyone who has ever watched Hindi films.

Contrary to a narrative that has since emerged, mostly pushed by people who have personal bones to pick with Bollywood biggies, Sushant was actually a dizzying story of success. This boy from Bihar cracked premier engineering entrance exams only to drop out, move to Mumbai with no film connections, become a popular TV face, and then a solo lead hero in Bollywood with a ₹200-crore-grossing film in his kitty. Sushant achieved all this in just seven years. As an outsider who has now spent more than 10 years in the industry believe me when I say—this is a dream!

Sushant's success in Bollywood was no mean achievement. Of the 10 films he starred in, six were hits and among the three flops—*Detective Byomkesh Bakshi* and *Sonchiriya* were critically acclaimed. Sushant's performances always drew praise and he won awards for *Kai Po Che* and *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story*. In seven years, he had worked with all the top studios in Bollywood. His last release, *Chhichhore*, grossed ₹200 crore worldwide. Sushant was very popular with the college-going audiences. He had made good money, and was generous with it. During the 2018 Kerala floods, he donated ₹1 crore to the chief minister's relief fund. He drove snazzy imported cars, lived in a duplex in one of Mumbai's posh parts, and was always rumoured to be dating beautiful actors.

Here was a young, intelligent, talented handsome boy from small-town India, who made it on his own in the cruel world of showbiz and was on his way to superstardom. Well, he had made it, and he was on the cusp of superstardom.

Until he pulled the curtains on his own dream life and, in the process, laid bare the bitter

truth about material success, stardom, fame, showbiz and celebrity lifestyles—that they are no guarantee of happiness or peace. That depression is a disease that can strike anyone. That success, money and name cannot protect us from the dark shadows of our minds. Sushant's deeply tragic death showed us how little we in India understand about mental health. Sushant's death should have been a time for us to learn about mental health—instead we descended into voyeuristic dirt-digging, petty mud-slinging and opportunistic score-settling. Shameless media channels displayed numbing levels of insensitivity in reporting the suicide—some even shoving mikes in the face of his grieving father; countless Indians forwarded WhatsApp images of his corpse (which begets the question of how it was leaked), while certain film stars and directors used the tragedy to make accusations and unleash an emotional virtual mob on their 'personal-enemies' and virtue signal about their own greatness, newly born 'fans' of Sushant spewed filth and hate on 'star kids' and 'nepotism gang,' and Bihar politicians jumped in, with election season around the corner, and demanded a CBI enquiry into Sushant's death. What seemed quite clearly to be a tragic suicide now became a sinister murder with a large part of Bollywood ostensibly accused as the murderer.

And we lost Sushant again. We lost the opportunity to grieve and mourn for a talented young man who came to showbiz with big dreams and left with bigger achievements. We lost the opportunity to celebrate an artist whose passion for his craft shone in every performance. And we lost the opportunity to learn from the life of an inspirational man, and to reflect on what his pain and unhappiness said about our priorities and values as a society.

Goodbye, Sushant. I am sorry we did not allow even your death to be about you.

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



THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Gulabo Sitabo could turn out to be Srishti Shrivastava's big break as she seeks out bold characters that are much like herself

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI





Srishti Shrivastava's first brush with fame was while commuting on the Mumbai local. "Hey, Girliyapa!" yelled someone, referencing her character on The Viral Fever's show. It was 2017, and those around her barely acknowledged her. Flash forward to 2019, when a fellow commuter yelled, "Hey, that's Albina from *Gully Boy*!" and more people took note of her. There is no commuting right now because of the lockdown, but the acknowledgment is pouring in in different ways. Particularly after Shrivastava made a bold appearance in Amazon Prime Video's recent offering, *Gulabo Sitabo*.

A day after the film's release, Shrivastava sounds chirpy on the phone. She is delighted that the reviews have praised her performance, though they have been somewhat critical of the film. Shrivastava's Guddo, in the Shoojit Sircar film written by Juhi Chaturvedi, is a firebrand with chutzpah. The film is set in Lucknow, and Guddo is semi-orphaned, uninhibited and outspoken—someone who would not hesitate to give her elder brother (played by Ayushmann Khurrana) a dressing-down. These bold qualities are evident in her own voice and most of her other work as well. "When I auditioned for it, I had an idea of what the character was," said Shrivastava. "She is a rockstar. She is so comfortable in her skin. I love that about her."

Auditions are the only way for new actors to make inroads in the industry. Over the last five years, Shrivastava has auditioned for "a lot of web series, advertisements and films". She lucked out when casting director Jogi Mallang's team called her to audition for a Sircar film. The brief mentioned that her character, Guddo, would be "chill and *muhfat* (blunt)". Her first question was: "Is she an important character?" She said: "I asked that very selfishly. And, the girl on the call said, 'She is the only girl.'" Only during the audition did Shrivastava find out that Amitabh Bachchan and Khurrana were headlining the film. But she was assured of an important role.



IN THE BIG LEAGUE NOW
Shrivastava with
Farrukh Jaffar in
Gulabo Sitabo;
(below) on stage for
Shikhandi

Guddo is an addition to the growing list of characters that break the on-screen stereotype of small-town women being coy, shy and dim. In an interview with *Film Companion*, Sircar mentioned that he wanted Guddo to be the head of the family. He wanted her to be liberal in terms of her sexuality, and praised the writing. "It's her body, her life, her choice," he said.

Shrivastava captures Guddo's emotions beautifully. But her encounter with diverse women characters of strength and resolve began early on. In her first theatre play, 07/07/07, directed by Faezeh Jalali, Shrivastava is one of the actors playing the lead role of Reyhaneh Jabbar, the Iranian woman who was imprisoned for stabbing her rapist. Then, playing Amba and Draupadi in *Shikhandi*, also directed by Jalali, Shrivastava confronts the notions of maleness,

femaleness and everything in-between. Manav Kaul's *Chuhel*, a love story, sees her as a nonconformist questioning the idea of marriage. It is, however, the Girliyapa videos, with its quirky stories of everyday women, that shot her to stardom. And then, there was a cameo appearance in *Gully Boy* as Albina Dadarkar, whom Alia Bhatt fights on-screen.

But reaching this stage has taken time. Her response to the difficulties



on the road to achieving her acting dreams is not one of frustration. But it is not oblivious of the realities of it either. "We go through a lot of rejection," said Shrivastava. "I have not been selected for [many] ads either. I have done just three ads, having worked for more than four years." With time, she learnt that too many factors influence the selection process. "Your face, whether you look the character or not, the number of followers you have [on social media],

all these influence a director's choice at times," she said. She used to cry a lot, but has now accepted it as the reality of the business.

Born to parents from Uttar Pradesh, Shrivastava grew up in Mumbai and spent four years in Indonesia, where her father works. Her tryst with performance began fairly early. The dreamy-eyed child wanted to become a "heroine". "Just that belonging to a middle-class family, we didn't know how to go about it," she said with a laugh. Her supportive parents, gauging her interests, enrolled her in Bharatanatyam classes when she was four. They also took her to auditions for TV commercials.

She did an ad for Amul ice-cream. She also auditioned for the role of Frooty in the popular TV show *Son Pari*, but did not get it. That was the end of her acting dream as a child. Her parents wanted her to complete her education before resuming acting. But dance continued. In her years in Indonesia, she also trained in Javanese dance. It was later, while studying mass media in Mumbai, that she started out in dramatics. She would go on to join The Drama School Mumbai.

"When I taught Srishti in drama school, I always wanted to work with her once she was out of the school," said Jalali. "You give an exercise to an actor and everybody has their own way of doing it. Some actors think differently. They are a notch above. I was sure I wanted Srishti for 07/07/07." Jalali says that with her experience of working on multiple platforms, Shrivastava has grown in her perspective and performance. "She has gotten more refined," she said. "She is somebody I would work with anytime, anywhere, blindly. I know the discipline and dedication she brings to whatever she does and the joy with which she does it. There are days when she is struggling; days when she questions what she does. But she always comes out stronger."

Shrivastava's last theatre performance before the lockdown was in *Shikhandi* at Prithvi Theatre. She is eagerly waiting for the auditoriums to be opened once again. But with the adulation coming her way for her turn in *Gulabo Sitabo*, she wants to be honest with herself. "I always wanted to be an actor, and what attracted me to it was the fame that came along," said Shrivastava. "I got some of it with the Girliyapa videos and even with *Shikhandi*. I don't know if the lockdown has made me wiser, but I feel that doing *Gulabo Sitabo* was to get more work ahead. My ultimate goal is to do mainstream cinema and good work as a lead. I knew that if Guddo works, it would hopefully open more doors." Train rides for her may never be the same again. ①

“MY ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO DO MAINSTREAM CINEMA.... I KNEW THAT IF GUDDO WORKS, IT WOULD HOPEFULLY OPEN MORE DOORS.”
—Srishti Shrivastava, actor



CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD

SPACE GAZE

Architecture has always reflected social realities of the time. How will it be impacted by the current pandemic?

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Les Musiciens du Ciel (The Musicians of the Sky) is a 1940 French film directed by Georges Lacombe. It tells the story of Victor Barthelemy, a con artist who falls in love with a terminally-ill woman, Jeanne. He meets her in a Salvation Army building called Le Cite de Refuge, which was the first major work in Paris by the famous Modernist architect, Le Corbusier. As the woman slowly succumbs to the illness, a parallel story is taking place—of the partial destruction of Le Cite de Refuge by the bombing of the Gare d'Austerlitz during World War II. In the end, one cannot ignore the connection Lacombe draws between Jeanne's illness, probably tuberculosis, and the backdrop of the building in which her life plays out. One of the major reasons why the

gilded carpets and ornate furniture of the 19th century gave way to the clean lines, empty white walls and sanitised interiors of 20th century Modernist architecture was tuberculosis, which was ravaging the world then. "Many of the ideas that Modern architects proposed did not come from architectural theory, they came from doctors, nurses and hospital architecture, particularly tuberculosis sanatoriums," said Beatriz Colomina, Princeton professor and author of *X-Ray Architecture*, in a recent interview.

In fact, disease has always had a major influence on architecture, whether it was the 1855 bubonic plague in China or the 1954 cholera epidemic in London. Covid-19, too, might force us to rethink the minimalist Modernism we inherited. The

pandemic is driving every aspect of our lives in new and unknown directions. Health and wellness are going virtual with telemedicine and remote patient monitoring. Education has become trans-national with online classes open to people of all ages and nationalities. Hospital-ready hotels might be the new norm. In the face of such changes, we are left with more questions than answers. Will the way we dress change? What about the way we find partners? Or the way we crack jokes? How will our built spaces need to adapt to accommodate these changes?

"People say that things will soon return to the old normal," says Gautam Bhatia, award-winning architect, artist and writer. "But there is not going to be an old normal. There are going to be many changes. The three

biggest ones are that spaces are going to shrink in size, become more intimate and more multi-functional. The virus is going to make a significant dent, not just in the way we design our homes, but also in commercial architecture. Buildings of monumental scale, like airports and stadiums, are going to be majorly affected. Some of them, like the Heathrow Airport, are so gargantuan in size that they leave a huge foot-print. They are going to become much smaller in future, as people limit their travel."

In many ways, the future is already at our doorstep. Take waste management company Bee'ah's headquarters in Sharjah. It is built with "contact-less pathways", and minimum interfacing of the employees with the building. Lifts are operated with smartphones and robots help host meetings. Or take the Netherlands-based real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield's concept of the "six feet office". There are large black tiled circles around each desk to ensure social distancing and provisions for employees to exit only in a clockwise direction, to prevent them from bumping into one another. In the retail segment, DLF Malls is creating isolation rooms and building plex-

FUTURE READY

Real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield's concept of the "six feet office". Large black tiled circles around each desk ensure social distancing

iglass screens into store counters. Watch maker Titan is re-designing its stores to allow for a distance of six feet between customers.

"There is going to be more stress on individuality and individual spaces," says Smaran Mallesh, co-founder and principal architect at Cadence Architects. "We are going to look at how to better execute work from home options. There might be a dedicated corner in your house for that. Decks and outside spaces are going to become important."

He, however, cautions that we are still in the thick of things and it might be too early to speculate. But



"CURRENTLY, WE HAVE DIVIDED OUR CITIES INTO ZONES LIKE RESIDENTIAL ZONE AND COMMERCIAL ZONE. THIS NEEDS TO CHANGE."

—Nisha Mary Poulouse, architect and urban planner

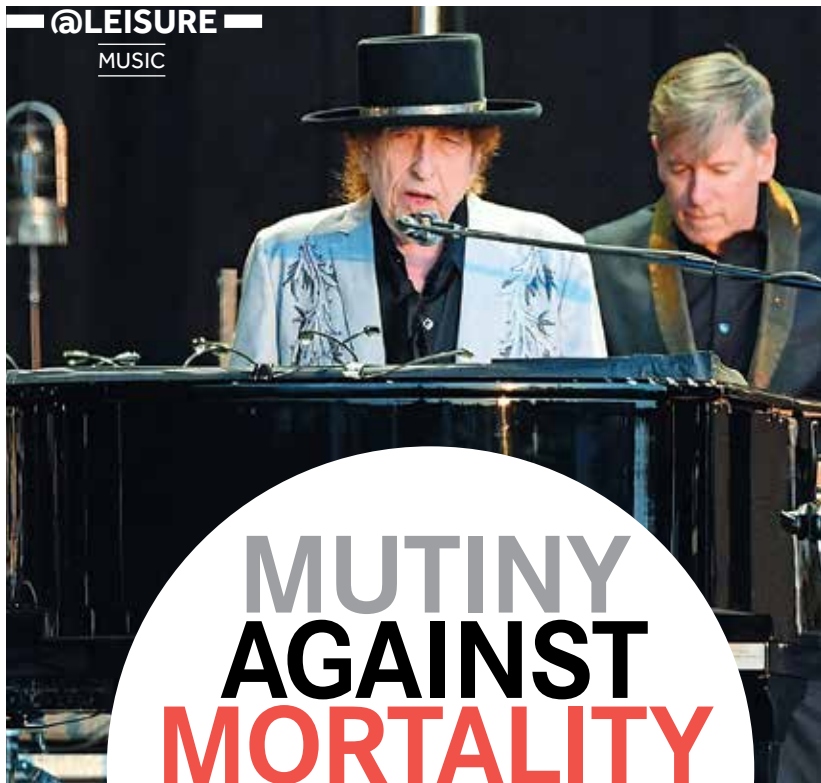


while, perhaps, people are hesitant to initiate permanent changes, many ad-hoc arrangements have come up. To ensure social distancing, a German café distributed hats fitted with pool noodles to its customers. Some parks are handing out hula hoops to children. A church in Bengaluru held a drive-in worship service, where people attended the service without getting out of their cars and bikes.

Nisha Mary Poulouse, architect, urban planner and founder of Woven Design Collaborative, says that what our cities need is "mixed use planning", where all types of land use—home, office and commercial—will be present in a particular area. "Currently," she says, "we have divided our cities into zones like residential zone and commercial zone. This needs to change. Things need to become more localised. We need to realise the importance of, say, a park in every neighbourhood."

Ultimately, the pandemic may inspire new ways of thinking in us which will have lasting repercussions on the spaces we occupy. "We will no longer take our spaces for granted," says Mallesh. "There will be a new sense of empathy with which we view our collective spaces. As we redefine our personhood at the basic cellular level, this will have a ripple effect on everything."

In many ways, Covid-19 is offering us a chance to re-design the world and set a few wrongs right. There is a passage in the book, *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, about brook trouts that lived in deep glens "where all things were older than man" and "hummed of mystery". On their backs, he wrote, were "vermicular patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again." A new world—a pandemic-struck one—might be in its becoming. We have one chance to put it back together. How will we do it? **1**



MUTINY AGAINST MORTALITY

Bob Dylan's latest album is
an elegy to transience

BY VAISAKH E. HARI

In 49 BCE, renowned general Julius Caesar faced a tough choice. He was camped on the banks of the Rubicon in Gaul (now France); if he crossed it along with his 13th legion into Rome, that spelled an act of war. A decision from which there was no coming back. The widely popular idiom 'cross the Rubicon'—meaning a step that cannot be reversed—originates from that snippet of history. In Bob Dylan's latest album, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, the legendary folk singer and reluctant laureate of the 2016 Nobel Prize in literature dedicates a song to 'Crossing the Rubicon.' It is easy to imagine Dylanologists in high academia adjusting their monocles and declaring the song a poignant critique of the world crossing a metaphoric line from which there is no coming back (perhaps he meant Donald Trump, they would whisper triumphantly). But the song means exactly what the title says it means:


**DYLAN'S LYRICS ARE
ABSTRACT, WICKEDLY
WITTY, REPLETE WITH
SURPRISING POP CULTURE
REFERENCES,
SOMETIMES VERGING
ON NONSENSICAL
FREE-ASSOCIATION.**



minimalist. Light on rhythm, with a signature acoustic blend of classical and the blues, and a trademark rasp that has not diminished at 79, this is a treat even for the Dylan-ambivalents. His lyrics are abstract, wickedly witty, replete with surprising pop culture references, sometimes verging on nonsensical free-association. In the Walt Whitman-inspired 'I Contain Multitudes,' he namedrops Anne Frank, Indiana Jones and the Rolling Stones in a single line; In another, he invokes Justin Timberlake's 'Cry Me a River.'

Throughout the album, one motif stands out: he grapples with the idea of mortality and death, which, through Dylan's lens, takes on a multitude of meanings—everything including his legacy and afterlife becomes a fleeting shadow of horror under a candlelight of hypnotic chants. 'Murder Most Foul,' is a darkly illustrative musing on the murder of US president John F. Kennedy; In 'Mother of Muses,' he sings about having outlived his life. In the loud, electric 'Goodbye Jimmy Reed,' he canonises the late eponymous American blues musician. Interestingly, death has been a recurring obsession for Dylan; his 2012 album *Tempest* similarly explores the death of John Lennon.

In 'My Own Version of You,' he plays a Frankensteinian God, piecing together corpses in a morgue. In 'You Ain't Going Nowhere,' he begs the same God to "go easy on him."

In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, coinciding with the release of the album, he said he ponders about "the death of the human race" and "the long strange trip of the naked ape." In the album, death serves as a bigger metaphor, an impressionist's impression of an era bygone. But, against all odds, Bob Dylan is still mutinous; for the protest singer, mutiny is the highest form of optimism. 



BOXED IN

The hijack drama *7500*, recently released on Amazon Prime, takes claustrophobia to new heights, with the entire film taking place in a cockpit. Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays a co-pilot who finds himself locked in the control booth, with the hijackers threatening to kill the passengers unless he lets them in. *7500* is among a clutch of films which has exploited the potential of claustrophobia as a cinematic tool to create a heightened sense of drama. Many of these films have done well at the box office. Might it be that the fear and panic they arouse call out to something deep in the human psyche?

Buried (2010)

Being buried alive is a recurrent nightmare for many people. For truck driver Paul Conroy (Ryan Reynolds), the nightmare comes true when he finds himself in a wooden coffin, after getting ambushed by terrorists in Iraq. Unless he pays a ransom of \$5 million, he will be left to die in the coffin. You might think things could not get worse, until explosions damage the coffin and it slowly begins to fill with sand. And then—wait for it—a snake slithers in. Perhaps a good time for Conroy to "think out of the box".



Compiled by Anjuly Mathai



Locke (2013)

It is not every day you drive one-and-a-half hours to be with your ex-girlfriend as she gives birth, making 36 phone calls on the way. Well, it was *that* day for construction foreman Ivan Locke (Thomas Hardy). Most of it is shot in the car. One minute, Locke is soothing his apoplectic wife as he confesses his infidelity, and the next, there is steel in his voice as he directs his colleague to prepare for a concrete pour. The film won Hardy the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for best actor. Spoiler alert: By the end of *Locke*, you might overdose on Hardy's face.



Room (2015)

This is a searing tale of a child born out of rape to a woman held captive in a room for seven years. Brie Larson plays Joy Newsome, who is trying to teach her five-year-old son Jack about the outside world. Jack does not know how to conceive of life outside the wardrobe where he sleeps each night and the lavatory cistern in which he floats paper boats. *Room* is a rude reminder that the turquoise blue of the ocean and the sun-kissed splendour of the mountains are not ours to take for granted. The film, based on Emma Donoghue's book, won four Oscar nominations.

20 AND TRENDING

A locked down India logged on and got hooked on to a satirist from Uttar Pradesh

BY SNEHA BHURA

If Saloni Gaur was not beaming on to our phones as Nazma Aapi, she might have been performing audits in a government bank. The 20-year-old comedian's one-minute videos online are now considered an essential antidote to the breathlessly virulent world outside. With her hilarious mimicry of actors, politicians, newscasters, middle-class moms, *DU wali didis*, Kusum Bhenjis and Influencer Ishitas, Gaur has commanded an enviably large audience for a humourist in lockdown. She has been around for the world in these troubled times with her own spin on news which has never been more unnerving, yet it almost missed basking in her comic genius.

"I thought I would take up a job in a bank, because my mother wanted me to," says the final-year student of political science. "You know how it is. My mother would stand in line for hours for her turn in government banks. Until last year, I was pre-

paring for banking exams." She thought she would do comedy on the side. "Comedians don't get so suddenly famous at 20," says Gaur on the phone from her home in Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr, breathing a sigh of relief but also slightly amazed at her own popularity.

Now when she lampoons Shashi Tharoor as "the-saurus publisher masquerading as a politician", the Congress MP tweets back with words like 'hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia' and 'garrulous' in an affectionate riposte. Whether it is her relentless take-downs of news anchor Arnab Goswami or her flamboyant send-ups in the voice of a pixie-cut Kangana Ranaut, Gaur knows the ludicrousness of a situation when she sees one.

Training her wit on current affairs and social issues comes naturally to her. "Growing up, I was never into reading novels or story books. There was nothing much to do in my quiet hometown when father returned from work at 10. So we would all sit and watch the news," says Gaur, who credits her father for instilling the habit of devouring newspapers for breakfast.

Gaur wanted to study humanities in high school, but none of the schools in her city offered subjects like political science and economics. It was only after she came to Delhi for college at 17 that the world really opened up. It was also in Old Delhi that she heard snatches of the dialect spoken back home. "It was lovely. And I was always good in mimicry," says Gaur, who until a few years ago did not have access to internet to upload her videos. She would get a friend to upload it from her social media handles.

She counts master satirists Premchand and Harishankar Parsai as her most beloved authors. "I wish I could write like them," says Gaur, who spouts her lines in the street-sharp dialect of western UP—a smattering of *khadi boli* and *braj bhasha*—through earthy, wise-cracking characters drawn from her social milieus. But she can trace her funny bone to her grandmother,

who cannot stand prime-time news. "My *dadi* has the best sense of humour in the family," says Gaur. "Her one-liners are to die for. Like the person in front would be confused if they have been made fun of or not."

In this Covid-melted time, when Indian and Chinese troops are locked in a border standoff, a video on China was only a natural progression for Gaur. When she joked about China's association with India from ajinomoto and cheap phones to TikTok and Chinese whispers in Ladakh, her fans whooped and cheered. But the Chinese tech company TikTok removed her video on May 31 from its platform. Her calling out of TikTok for lack of freedom of speech made national news. She vowed to never post on TikTok again. "This was not the first time they tried to slap community guidelines violations on me," says Gaur. Though TikTok reinstated her video, she would not fully say if there has been a formal ceasefire. Perhaps the negotiations are still on. "I am not planning to put any China-related content now. I covered everything in that video," she says. "Besides, I always wait and watch to see how news develops. One of the reasons why I didn't make a video on the elephant-pineapple-firecracker episode."

With lakhs of social media followers, Gaur is quite aware of her responsibilities. And knows how to be indifferent to trolls. "They are just keyboard warriors with cheap internet," she says, dismissing them with typical quicksilver jibes that come shaded with native wisdom. Just like how she signs off most of her videos: "Popcorn *khao*, Bella ciao!"

SALONI GAUR KNOWS THE LUDICROUSNESS OF A SITUATION WHEN SHE SEES ONE.

BOOK REVIEW

Man behind the monarch

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Ira Mukhoty has been on a 624-page rescue mission in her new book. *Akbar: The Great Mughal*—the first to be released in physical form during the pandemic—is a brave, compelling attempt to fish out Akbar, the man.

Mukhoty stitches together the story of an ambitious man who stretched India's boundaries further than anyone after him. Stunning in its scale and lush with details, she writes evocatively, conjuring up his court, life and times, the food, grand tents, the battles on the field and the ones he fought within.

For years, Akbar had been weighed down by The Great that followed his name. Mukhoty's rescue mission brings alive the man, not as Abu'l Fazl's version in *Akbarnama* but as a human. "He couldn't have sprung up this perfect being," says Mukhoty. "How did this person come to be?

What were his challenges? Are they not similar to the ones India and the world face now?"

Akbar is the portrait of a 16th century monarch who discouraged sati and raised the minimum marriageable age. He was progressive—he even criticised Muslim laws of inheritance that favoured men. Yet, women became more sequestered during his time. Mukhoty, whose earlier books breathe life into women in Mughal history, explores this dichotomy. "Mughals are often accused of the purdah, but Rajputs also have the zenana (women's chambers). In some ways, they both learnt from each other," she says.

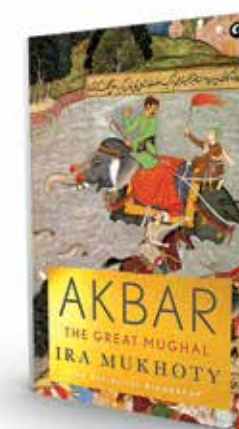
The book is littered with anecdotes: two-and-a-half-year-old Akbar wrestling his older cousin for a kettledrum, defeating his uncle Kamran's attempts to humiliate him; a toddler Akbar recognising his mother—they had been separated for years—despite all the women in the court being dressed alike. He was a man who could not

read, but loved knowledge. A man who knew the name of all his elephants, even though he had thousands of them.

Akbar could accept dissent. Mukhoty writes about the time he offered Man Singh discipleship. Man Singh refused saying he recognises only two religions, Hinduism and Islam. "He never pushed it again," she writes.

While Mukhoty colours Akbar's attributes for the 21st century reader, she also helps provide context to the

Rajput-Mughal rivalry, as well as the legend of Rana Pratap. But it was not a simple black-and-white construct as Hindu vs Muslim or Indian vs foreigner. "There are two inscriptions on Rohtas Fort built by Man Singh," she says. The Persian one talks about Akbar and heaps praise on him. Man Singh is barely mentioned. The one in Sanskrit talks about Man Singh being the king of kings. "There was a duality which had to be navigated," she says. "This was complicated reality. There was a Mughal padshah and you were serving him. They had to navigate this, and they were doing it in innovative ways."



Akbar: The Great Mughal
by Ira Mukhoty
Published by
Aleph Book Company
Price ₹999, Pages 624



Brand new graduate

Congratulations poured in from everywhere as Pakistani activist and Nobel Prize-winner **Malala Yousafzai**, 22, graduated from Oxford University with a degree in philosophy, politics and economics. Among her well-wishers were singer Shakira, former American presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, and our own PeeCee. Sharing a picture of both of them, **Priyanka Chopra** remarked what an incredible achievement it was. "I'm so proud," she gushed. Yousafzai herself says she is not sure what is ahead. "For now, it will be Netflix, reading and sleep," said the young graduate.

For dad, with love

Many of us might be fans of our fathers, but only a few would go to the extent of getting inked for them. **Kirti Kulhari** is one among the few. She got her first tattoo as a tribute to her father, a retired commander of the Indian Navy. The tattoo is of her father's response whenever she caught him over-indulging his sweet tooth. "What is the problem, *yaar*?" he used to ask. "My husband suggested that I should ink this hilarious response," said the actor, who will next be seen in the Hindi remake of the Hollywood film, *The Girl on the Train*.



PRIYANKSHU PAINYULI, actor

Priyankshu Painyuli's career graph has been on the rise ever since he did Vikramaditya Motwane's *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero* (2018). The actor, who loves juggling between theatre and films, is currently busy with digital theatre performances. Fresh from Sam Hargrave's *Extraction*, in which he plays the villain, Painyuli talks about his journey, how auditions have helped him grow and about his upcoming film, *Rashmi Rocket*, starring Taapsee Pannu.

Q\There have been many struggles. How do you feel today, with the popularity of *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero* and now, *Extraction*?

A\I do not like the word struggle. I was 22 when I came to Mumbai, 10 years ago. It has been like climbing a ladder. I also believe there is some amount of risk with every profession, whether it is in the corporate world or anywhere else. I used to say no to a lot of work. Even when I had financial problems, I used to find some other way of dealing with it. I am not here just to be famous for five years. I don't want to pick a few films and then go away. I am here to make it as an actor in the long run. That's how *Bhavesh Joshi*



Here for the long haul

Superhero came about. I never thought I would make my Hollywood debut, but I think I was cast because of the kind of work I have been doing, and also because I like giving auditions.

Q\Can you describe some of your auditions that helped you grow as an actor?

AThere was this one audition for *Sacred Games*. I worked on it for a month or two. It was for the role of Cuckoo (ultimately done by Kubbra Sait). I lost a lot of weight and walked around in five-inch heels. *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero* was in post-production then and Vikram sir (Vikramaditya Motwane) told me to read the part and see if I wanted to do it. I was up for the challenge. A lot of work goes into a part like that. It was an interesting exercise.

Q\You have a couple of interesting projects lined up, including *Rashmi Rocket* and *Mirzapur 2*.

A\I am really excited about *Rashmi Rocket*, working with Taapsee, Akarsh Khurana and RSVP Movies. We had our shoot lined up for this summer. Now, I think we need to be patient. I am a patient guy. I am okay to be home for as long as required. The danger [of the virus] should be out permanently.
—By Priyanka Bhadani



PTI

A dose of Bose

After films like *English*, *August*, *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, *Antaheen* and *Jhankar Beats*, you might have wondered what happened to **Rahul Bose**. He has returned in the recent Netflix original, *Bulbbul*, in which he plays a double role, set in early 20th century Bengal. Inspired by a folk tale, the film is about the legend of a witch brought out through the story of a child bride. Produced by Anushka Sharma's Clean Slate Films, it began streaming on June 24.

Packing a punch

In his latest video, **Vidyut Jammwal** gave a lesson in bone prana punch, which is a form of self-defence in *kalaripayattu*. "It is not only about how you punch, it is about your skeletal system, your muscles, your sync and your harmony with yourself," he says, before punching an old book nearly into pulp. He attributed his literary choice to the lack of punching bags during lockdown. The actor is known for interacting with his fans on social media and giving them tips on fitness and self-defence.



GETTY IMAGES



The message is everything

For me, being on the ground in Ladakh this past week felt oddly personal. Twenty-one years ago, in 1999, as a young 20-something reporter, I was there to report on the Kargil War, in what would be the most transformative journalistic experience of my life.

While what has unfolded between India and China—the transgressions, the squatting on Indian territory, the deaths of our soldiers in the line of duty—cannot be literally compared with the vast theatre of conflict in the Kargil War, the sense of déjà vu is definitely there, especially as the anniversary of Operation Vijay is around the corner.

But no matter which way you cut and splice it, and no matter where you stand on the geopolitical handling of China's expansionism, there is one lesson from Kargil that the government refused to learn—effective strategic communication.



It is quite clear now that our soldiers showed extraordinary heroism even when they were outnumbered by the Chinese in Galwan Valley and brutalised by People's Liberation Army troops using crude weapons. Yet, instead of simply coming forward and taking the Indian public into confidence, the government tied itself in knots, with opacity, denials and mixed messaging that only hurt India's narrative and allowed the Chinese to make absurd, tall claims.

Till there was a clarification on his remarks, even the prime minister fumbled on articulation at the all-party meeting. The clarification made it clear that the Chinese transgression had been pushed by Indian troops in Galwan Valley (though it circumvented the issue of Chinese presence in Pangong Tso). But it was more

than 12 hours before the government issued the clarificatory statement, and by that time the Chinese were lapping up the domestic divisions and fissures.

In Kargil, by contrast, both the government and the military were able to use the news media as a force multiplier. In Delhi, there were daily briefings conducted jointly by officials of the foreign ministry and the Indian Army. At the frontline, reporters like myself were permitted physical access to the theatre of conflict. The result: India's first televised war and an outpouring of national solidarity.

Kargil of 1999 was ahead of Ladakh of 2020 in its instinct for communication. Media planners in the A.B. Vajpayee government also understood the cardinal principle of information dissemination. Quite simply, if you do not say something, someone else will. And, where not enough facts are placed in the public

domain, the vacuum will be filled with rumours, fake news and WhatsApp forwards masquerading as headlines.

No one is recommending that a roster list of operations be provided to the public or the media. On the contrary, in times of a sensitive military situation, if officials reach out to key reporters on the beat and ask them to refrain from certain aspects of the reporting, each one of us would.

The Narendra Modi government has never much cared for journalists, despite large swathes of the broadcast media being brazenly loyal to it. But in times of near-war, that contempt and dislike should be suspended.

This is the age of information warfare. In psy-ops, the message is everything.



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