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GANDHIS STAY IN CONTROL

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MORE ASYMPTOMATIC INFECTION'S GOOD

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NOW, LADAKH v TIBET

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DAVID LIM,
SINGAPORE AIRLINES
RECOVERY SLOWER
THAN EXPECTED

IPL 2020
ON THE FRONT FOOT
WITH BIO-SECURE BUBBLE

SEPTEMBER 6, 2020

THE WEEK

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BEST INDIAN INNOVATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Business responds
with smart ideas

PLUS

Uday Kotak,
president, CII
Industry rose to the
challenge

Suresh Narayanan,
CMD, Nestle India
Respond, reset,
reconsider

Mayank and Sakshi
made use of the
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PLUS

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COVER PHOTO COURTESY THE WESTIN GURGAON

COVER DESIGN BINESH SREEDHARAN

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Ruthless sinner

I am glad that THE WEEK named and shamed Robert Clive. He is symbolic of all the misdeeds that happened during the British rule in India ('Thug of Hindustan', August 23). Clive will always be remembered as a ruthless military commander.

It feels great to know that there are many petitions seeking the removal of Clive's statues in England. Such a move should have happened long ago. All said, Clive's inheritors and family should not be victimised or harassed in any manner for all the sins that Clive committed in India.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Your cover story on the villainous hero of the Battle of Plassey made for an enjoyable read. Clive was instrumental in promoting colonial rule in India and he was

looting personified. Such a relook on the partly and purposely camouflaged history helps us to see the unvarnished truths of how our colonial

masters bled us white.
Raveendranath A.,
On email.

As rightly said by Philip Mathew, the cover story was an attempt to prevent a forgetting, and to highlight what Clive means to us as Indians. When we have not forgotten Timur or Adolf Hitler, why should we forget Clive?

P.M. Gopalan,
On email.

Your cover story on Clive was too good. It stood out from all other cover stories during the pandemic. I, especially, liked the cover painting of Clive, and other illustrations that went with the package.

Prince Solomon,
On email.

End the controversy

I agree with Meenakshi Lekhi that the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya is the beginning of a harmonious phase ('Forthwrite', August 23). All controversies relating to the Ram Mandir should end henceforth. I hope that at an appropriate time a

mosque will also be built in Ayodhya.
Ramesh Pandey,
On email.

Lekhi said the construction of the Ram Mandir is the logical result of the Supreme Court judgement. But, was the Supreme Court judgement logical? In its judgement, the apex court ruled that the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the 1949 desecration of the Babri Masjid were in violation of law.

The judgement for allowing construction of a temple at the disputed site was based on the report by the Archaeological Survey of India, submitted by the Allahabad High Court as "not an ordinary opinion". The ASI report stated that there was a structure underneath the Babri Masjid, but it did not conclude that the said structure was a Ram temple.

Pankaj Kumar Chatterjee, Kolkata.

Serious lapse

Something somewhere went terribly wrong at the Kozhikode airport, which

HOW TO REACH US

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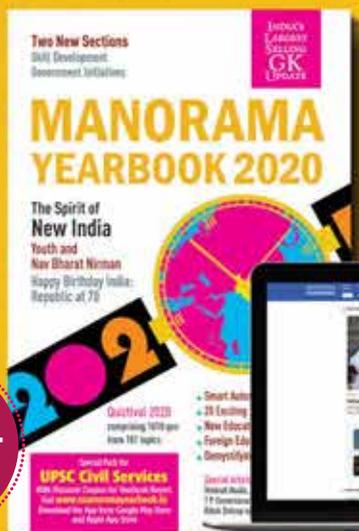
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led to the death of around 20 persons. Ideally, there should not have been any flight operation on that fateful day in Kozhikode when it was raining so much there.

This is a lapse on the part of the authorities ('Heights of negligence', August 23).

One cannot blame tabletop airports for such accidents. Wide-body aircraft should not be allowed to land from now on at any of the tabletop airports. Likewise, pilots should be specially trained for landing on tabletop airports.

Randeep Sharma,
On email.

The Kozhikode airport is one of the trickiest tabletop airports in the country. The clamour for more wide-bodied aircraft to be allowed to land at the airport from certain quarters is irrational, especially at a time when there are worries about the length of the runway.

All aspects must be carefully weighed and considered before a final decision is taken on what exactly led to this accident.

K.V. Raghuram,
On email.

Presidential system for India

Mani Shankar Aiyar's 'The perils of presidentialism' (August 16) rings hollow, based as it is on some anecdotes rather than solid arguments.

Shashi Tharoor cited proven benefits of the presidential system: people choose their leader directly, local governments are accountable, governments are more stable, legislatures are more effective, laws are smarter, people vote for individuals not parties, the president avoids legislative whim, he can appoint a talented cabinet and devote all energy to governance. Aiyar said US presidents often engage in pork-barrel politics, misusing agencies to keep legislators in line.

But he missed the point: their legislature is not a rubber-stamp, nor can it bring any government down. As for talented cabinet members, Aiyar cites some instances of the US failures. Would he concede the case after being presented with a much longer list of brilliant successes? He said Trump engages in politics rather than governance in managing Covid-19. But, surely, if he searched, Aiyar could find more than a few examples of presidents' excellent governance in the past. Based on the presidential system's structure—direct elections, genuine federalism, separation of powers—that system would work much better for us than our parliamentary setup.

Bhanu Dhamija,
On email.

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— **APERITIF** —
THE BIG PICTURE

LEAP OF FAITH

A devotee releases a clay Ganesha idol into the sea on the third day of Ganesh Chaturthi, in Chennai, on August 24. This year saw muted celebrations across the country as Covid-19 restrictions prevented devotees from holding grand celebrations and carrying out traditional rituals to honour Ganesha.

PHOTO BY AFP

POINT BLANK



PTI

I remember standing in the slips, and in between bowling about 4,000 overs and getting hammered around the ground.

I discussed my favourite movies with Adam Gilchrist, we swapped hats, and tried everything to try and not think about it.

Shane Warne, former Australian cricketer, on the 376-run stand between Rahul Dravid and V.V.S. Laxman against Australia in a 2001 Test match

When the time comes, popular pressure will compel political unity, and the right person will be chosen to lead an electoral alliance against domination and coercion.

Rajmohan Gandhi, historian and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi

Militancy is something you can control. What you can't do is force the people [of Jammu and Kashmir] to feel more Indian than they feel. You can't force a sense of isolation, bitterness, anger, or a sense of separatism, out of people.

Omar Abdullah, National Conference leader

Find me a party, organisation, company that's perfect. They are constantly evolving, reworking strategies, getting back to blueprints. And constantly finding what must now be done given that the environment is changing. If that's happening everywhere, then why must we [Congress] be an exception?

Salman Khurshid, Congress leader

American Cinema was moved from New York to a Los Angeles suburb called Hollywood in the first decade of the 20th century. Similarly Bollywood should be shifted to Lakshadweep.

Subramanian Swamy, BJP leader, on the controversy surrounding the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput



AFP

If one marriage doesn't work, it is not necessary that the second one won't. My father [Kabir Bedi] has been married four times. We have had wonderful step-moms and his relationships and marriages have taken him from strength to strength.

Pooja Bedi, columnist and actor

WORD PLAY

It would be fair to say that 2020 has been the worst year in recent memory because of the pandemic. Most of us just want this sorry-go-round to end. A **sorry-go-round** is a repetitive cycle of depressing events. Lexico.com traces its first use to *The Manchester Guardian* in the late 19th century, but there is hardly any other recorded use of the word. Until 2020. Or as one tweeter poignantly noted: "You'll find it in the 2020 abusement park, next to the trollercoaster."

MILESTONES

SAIL THROUGH

The 1.8km ropeway across the Brahmaputra river is now India's longest river ropeway. The ₹56 crore project will reduce travel time between central and northern Guwahati to just eight minutes. Earlier, it used to take 30 minutes by ferry and an hour by road.



AFP

BLOWING UP

The video of 'Dynamite', a song by K-pop group BTS, clocked 101 million views within 24 hours of its release on YouTube, beating the earlier record for most views within a day held by Blackpink for their song 'How You Like That' (86 million).



KING OF SWING

England fast bowler James Anderson got his 600th Test wicket in the third Test of the series against Pakistan. It was the 38-year-old's 156th Test match. Only Muttiah Muralitharan (800), Shane Warne (708) and Anil Kumble (619) have taken more Test wickets.



REUTERS



Make the fund public

Amid his grim preoccupations on domestic and foreign fronts, Narendra Modi released visuals of him taking care of peacocks in his residence in New Delhi. These visuals gave rare glimpses of the softer side of the workaholic prime minister, and brought back memories of president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam attending to an injured peacock at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

If peacock care has been a 'light motif', Modi's feathers remained unruffled in a more weighty matter relating to the PM-CARES Fund, which has received more than ₹10,000 crore as donations for Covid-19 relief. The Supreme Court has ruled that the fund is not a government initiative and hence need not be statutorily audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The court also said the money collected need not go into the National Disaster Response Fund, even though the government has declared the disease a biological and medical disaster. But critics want the fund to be open to public scrutiny, as the money is collected in the name of the prime minister and three top ministers.

The Supreme Court agreed with a government lawyer that the fund has nothing to do with government and that it is a public charitable trust under the Registration Act, whose accounts can be checked by a private auditor. The court accepted the statement that the fund would be used to fight the pandemic and for giving economic relief to those affected.

The fund was set up soon after lockdown was imposed and there was a flood of donations from private and public sector companies, their employees, celebrities and ordinary citizens. Besides, there was compulsory deduction of a day's salary of several categories of government employees.

Though the government claimed in court that

it has remained at an arm's length from the fund, its fingerprints are all over the fund. Like many government schemes, it is named after the prime minister, giving the impression of a government-sponsored initiative. The PMO has aggressively pushed for donations through all ministries, and announced disbursal of ₹3,100 crore, much of it through state governments and district collectors. Funds were given to a group monitored by the government's chief scientific adviser to develop a vaccine. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, a fund trustee, gave approval for income tax exemptions for donations and to treat them

as part of corporate social responsibility. The other two ex officio trustees are Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Modi can also appoint three eminent persons from outside the government as trustees.

The PMO has told RTI applicants that the trust is not a "public institution" and has declined to give them information. It is true that

the prime minister is free to be chairman of a trust. He heads the Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Trust, but then it was established by an act of Parliament and gets government funding.

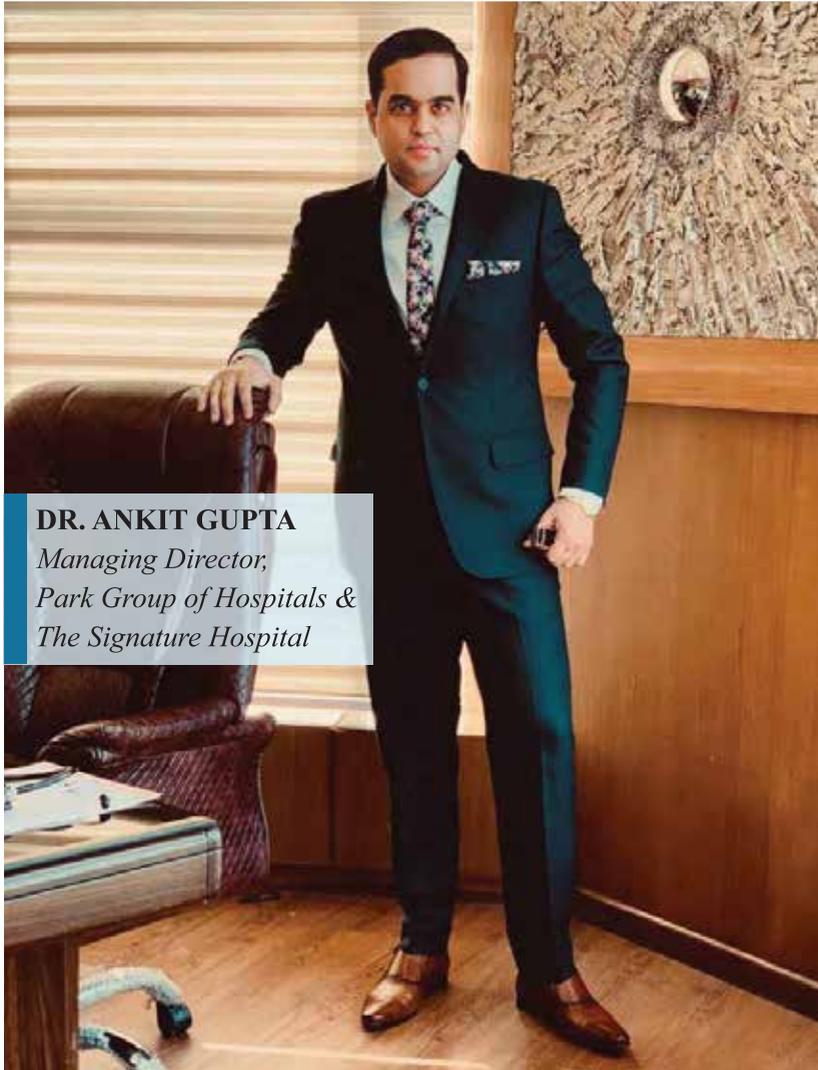
The opposition parties plan to demand a discussion on the fund when Parliament meets soon. The government is likely to use the same arguments it did in the Supreme Court to counter them. But it can disarm them even better by showing Parliament the trust's account books.

The peacock is magnificent even when it does not display its plumage. Similarly, the PM-CARES Fund will shine as a symbol of caregiving when it becomes a public institution, embellishing the promise of selflessness and accountability made to the nation when Modi first became prime minister six years ago.



Awarded as “Future Leader of Healthcare in India” Dedicated to Comprehensive Quality at Affordable Cost

An Interview with Dr. Ankit Gupta, Managing Director, Park Group of Hospitals & The Signature Hospital



DR. ANKIT GUPTA

*Managing Director,
Park Group of Hospitals &
The Signature Hospital*

As a doctor and business leader, how do you balance between the two roles and tackle the challenges that come with them?

I think it is a balancing act ! My Endeavour is to bridge the gap between the clinical and business components. To run a hospital is to run an intensely complex business, but one where the bottom line is not solely profit, and one where the

stakes have a human face .Being managing director of a hospital means being a business leader requiring a blend of diplomacy, advocacy, business management, and financial sense. In addition to a business leader and a managing director, he is responsible for maintaining the overall health and effectiveness of the facilities as well as internal & external customers. To achieve that, I divide my day

judiciously to personally oversee the back-end operations; data analytics, latest integrations in the system which are providing new, complex ways to deliver top-quality care to our chain of 10 NABH-accredited hospitals.

I am very passionate about health care, having being brought in the system from day one under the able guidance of my father Dr. Ajit Gupta, Chairman, Park Group of Hospitals. I strive to understand my patient's problems and arrive at concrete solutions with my medical expertise and knowledge. The role is very challenging because you are bestowed with a responsibility to manage and deliver a very high standard of quality care and patient safety. A compassionate and hardworking team is our backbone. We have amazing people doing amazing things and it always takes me back, no matter how difficult and consuming some of the challenges I may be dealing with, to the fact that we are making a big difference in people's lives and helping them through significant life events. Every day is challenging, but that is what keeps me going.

How can private hospitals in India contribute more to the fight against the pandemic?

Covid-19 has triggered the fear factor. We are witnessing an advanced health system stretched beyond its capacity. The need of the hour is for hospitals to be well-

equipped with extra beds, ventilators, drug supply, respiratory support and an unwavering mindset to defeat this disease. It should be our constant effort to help the general public understand what they can do well in time. At the Park hospitals, we have our best team of doctors and nurses, who, with the support of our state-of-the-art technology, have been able to help recover 500+ patients. An entire wing was allocated exclusively for Covid-19 cases at our Delhi/NCR and Haryana hospitals.

You were awarded the 'Future Leader of Healthcare in India'. What do you think is the future of healthcare in India and your plans for it?

The recognition has been extremely special and I feel honored to receive an award from the Hon'ble Vice President of India as "Future Leader of Healthcare in India". The responsibility attached with it has brought a lot of motivation and a need to constantly evolve.

The sector is getting involved in the tier-I, tier-II and tier-III cities, and this will drive growth in India's healthcare sector. By offering customized solutions to fit the needs of doctors, diagnostics centers, hospitals, in the country, more people will have access to great healthcare in the years to come. In a couple of years, the big cities won't be the only ones with access to excellent healthcare, and people won't have to travel from their hometowns, in search of good doctors or hospitals. Our vision & mission is to reach masses where the healthcare is not available and to be the leading

health care provider, providing comprehensive quality healthcare at affordable cost. We are present in Tier1 & 2 cities to provide best healthcare services to the masses and with cutting edge technology and modern infrastructure facilities, we provide comprehensive medical care for diagnosis and treatment for patients with renal disorders, cancer disorders and helps them reclaim normal life. We have already done successful Renal & Bone marrow transplant at our Park Hospital Gurugram. Our recovery for ECMO patients is 100% as far as better than international figures.

With medical tourism on the rise, India is surely a key contributor to a brighter future of medicine and holistic health care. Several people from all over the world choose to come to India for medical treatment.

Hence, we are constantly evolving our technology and services to be able to help India access advanced health care services. We can look forward to a healthier India in the coming few years.

What are your future plans for Park Hospitals?

The first Park Hospital was established in Malviya Nagar, south Delhi, in 1982 under the adept guidance of Dr. Ajit Gupta, Chairman, Park Group of Hospitals. He not only laid the foundation of affordable quality health care in north India, but also a strong vision that has resulted in a chain of 10 super-specialty NABH accredited hospitals and cancer care centers for the India of today.

As part of our 2021 strategy, we will be focusing on digital transformation. We are preparing for this by partnering with different providers in terms of telemedicine. Park Group of Hospital is well placed to imbibe the latest technology from across the world and thereby provide best care to all it present and future perspective patients

As part of our mission to be the best hospital chain in north India, we aim to add up to 2,500+ beds by 2021. With a projected turnover of Rs. 750 crores by 2021, Park Group of Hospitals already marks its presence across major north Indian cities like Delhi, Gurugram, Hodal, Ambala, Karnal, Faridabad and Panipat.

We plan to expand to Punjab first. We are also looking at strengthening the Park cancer care centers. Recently, we rolled out special MRCP and DNB courses to those aiming for a dynamic medical career. On August 1, we welcomed our first batch of young and energetic students at Park.

On the patient experience front, we have made many advances, from patient engagement programmes to mobile payment processes to prior appointments through websites.

Our mission is to be the leading health care provider, dedicated to delivering comprehensive quality of healthcare at an affordable cost.

We have always believed in extending personalised care to people of all ages and at every stage of life and we wish to take that legacy forward with every milestone we achieve.

ALLOW AND DISALLOW

BJP leaders in Telangana demanded that Ganesh Chaturthi pandals be allowed on the streets. The party insisted that, despite the pandemic, police should not obstruct religious rituals at popular pandals, especially in the state capital, Hyderabad. However, in Andhra Pradesh, the party has taken a different stance. Party state president Somu Veerraju had written to the home ministry to discourage the setting up of idols in public places to prevent crowding.



GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

As August 24 marked the first death anniversary of former finance minister Arun Jaitley, the ministry launched a campaign to laud the work done by its officials over recent months to give relief to small businesses and tax payers. Jaitley was credited with bringing the new GST law, and for keeping all states on board. Two of Jaitley's proteges, Nirmala Sitharaman and Anurag Thakur, are managing the finance ministry, and scores remembered his contribution. Jaitley's absence is acutely felt as many leaders in the BJP miss his mentoring and guidance.

HEALTH UPGRADE

Covid-19 has changed the fortunes of several state health secretaries. The latest change has been in Uttar Pradesh, where the incumbent Amit Mohan Prasad was promoted in June. Prasad is now additional chief secretary (health and family welfare), and in his place, Alok Kumar, who was adviser (health and nutrition), NITI Aayog, has taken over as principal secretary of health and family welfare. At NITI Aayog, Kumar was a key author of the legislation on the National Medical Commission and advocated reforms in medical education. Soon after his latest appointment, Kumar rushed to Kanpur to review pandemic preparedness in the district.

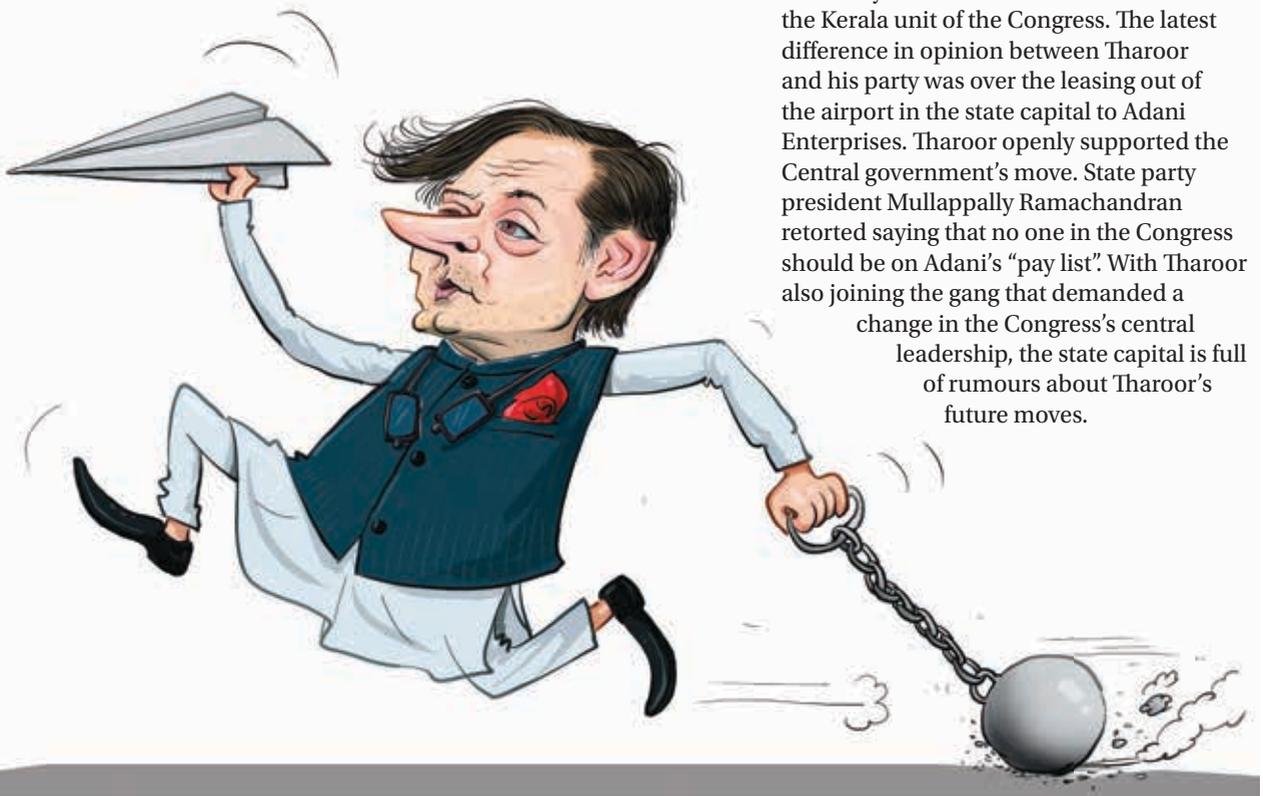


DIGITAL ARMIES

With the Karnataka assembly polls a good three years away and with Covid-19 guidelines barring crowds, parties are bracing for a digital explosion. The state Congress is identifying “digital youths” in every village, while the BJP has revamped its frontal organisations and asked its heads to be more proactive on social media. The JD(S) is building a tech-savvy cadre. The sudden surge in Twitter wars between leaders of all three parties has indicated that social media will be the new battleground.

PHILOSOPHERS' ZONE

The no-confidence motion moved against the LDF government in Kerala revealed that the state assembly has loads of erudite readers who can quote classics at the drop of a hat. From the Mahabharat and the Gita to Shakespeare and Kalidasa, MLAs belonging to both fronts were quoting eloquently from the classics. The quotes and allegories offered a welcome relief from the usual mudslinging.



FIGHTS AND FLIGHTS

Thiruvananthapuram MP Shashi Tharoor has always been considered an outsider in the Kerala unit of the Congress. The latest difference in opinion between Tharoor and his party was over the leasing out of the airport in the state capital to Adani Enterprises. Tharoor openly supported the Central government’s move. State party president Mullappally Ramachandran retorted saying that no one in the Congress should be on Adani’s “pay list”. With Tharoor also joining the gang that demanded a change in the Congress’s central leadership, the state capital is full of rumours about Tharoor’s future moves.

War without arms

To keep China at bay, India works on its Buddhist legacy, beefs up support for nomads along the LAC and embarks upon a campaign to win Ladakhi hearts and minds

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

AS CHINA CONTINUES to maintain an aggressive posture in Ladakh, New Delhi has also opened up non-military fronts to strike back. Lieutenant Governor R.K. Mathur, the former defence secretary, has been tasked by New Delhi to implement the strategy. He is being assisted by his adviser, 1989-batch IAS officer Umang Narula, Ladakh divisional commissioner Saugat Biswas and other senior officials. The Union home ministry is closely monitoring the developments, including disbursal of funds.

Late last year, at UNESCO, India had claimed that the 2,500-year-old traditional medical system called Sowa-Rigpa was part of its “intangible cultural heritage (ICH)”. After China challenged the Indian claim at the ICH meeting held last December in Bogota, Colombia, a final decision was deferred till the end of this year. China, supported by Pakistan, cited territorial dispute with India over Jammu and Kashmir, including the Ladakh border.

“As per UNESCO guidelines, China cannot raise territorial disputes at the forum,” said Dr Padma Gurmet, director in-charge at the Leh-based National Research Institute for Sowa-Rigpa. “We have submitted a lot of evidence in the form of Buddhist literature to prove that Sowa-Rigpa originated in India and was introduced to the trans-Himalayan region around the 8th century.”

Amitabh Mathur, former adviser to the home ministry on Tibetan matters, added, “The Tibetan Buddhist traditions are regarded to be a continuation of the Nalanda tradition. While China is trying to show that it is a Tibetan invention, the fact is that

Buddhism was introduced into Tibet by great Indian masters like Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava.”

China, meanwhile, is said to be using Sowa-Rigpa to fight Covid-19. “As per reports, the Beijing Hospital of Tibetan medicine has prepared the ‘nine-flavour epidemic formulation’ and distributed it to the affected areas,” said Gurmet, who has approached the AYUSH ministry to incorporate Sowa-Rigpa medicines as prophylactics in the fight against the pandemic. The ministry has constituted a five-member team, with Gurmet as its convener, to suggest Sowa-Rigpa interventions, to invite research proposals and to prepare



GETTY IMAGES



REACHING OUT

A file picture of a Changpa woman herding pashmina goats in Ladakh

guidelines for its practitioners.

If India wins at UNESCO, Ladakhi families which have continued the Sowa-Rigpa practice for over nine generations will benefit. It will help the Boto, Changpa, Drogpa, Gara and Balti tribes of the western Himalayas and the Bhoto, Lipcha and Tamang tribes and communities of central and eastern Himalayan regions.

China's attempts to usurp trans-Himalayan Buddhism can be detrimental to India's interests. One way to checkmate this, Mathur said, is to make the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Leh a university; now it is a deemed university. "It will allow students from the rest of the

country and also from abroad to join the institute," he said.

He also referred to Bakula Rinpoche, the great nationalist and champion of Ladakh, who established close relations with Mongolia while serving as Indian ambassador and became a revered figure there. "These cultural links with Mongolia, which practices a pure form of Tibetan Buddhism, can be deepened by inviting Mongolian monks to study in Ladakh. It will strengthen the objective of national integration and make Ladakh a base for extending India's soft power of Buddhism."

The Ladakh administration is also reaching out to the Changpa nomads

who rear pashmina goats. These families frequent the pastures along the Line of Actual Control, thereby acting as the first line of defence. They are often the first ones to spot Chinese incursions and infrastructure upgrades. But these nomadic families have been moving away over the years, because of lack of adequate remuneration for their produce, absence of educational facilities and tough weather conditions.

Former Ladakh BJP chief Chering Dorjay said Indian troops, too, often challenged the grazing rights of the nomads. "If these nomads of the Changpa tribe go away, we will lose our first line of defence," said Sonam



KEPING ALIVE A LEGACY

A Sowa-Rigpa doctor at the National Research Institute for Sowa-Rigpa in Leh

Tsering, general secretary of the All Changthang Pashmina Growers Co-operative Marketing Society in Leh. “There are around 2,000 families who own sheep and goats, but the actual number of nomadic families is 1,200. The rest keep their livestock with other families and pay shepherds (to care for them).”

After government intervention, the price of raw pashmina has gone up from ₹400 for a kilogram to up to ₹3,000. But it is still nowhere close to what cleaned pashmina fetches—₹10,000 for a kilogram. Tsering said cooperative societies were trying to fix a minimum price for raw pashmina. “We are also trying for value addition and have started producing yarn and finished products on a trial basis,” he said. New textile units, better machines and transportation are huge challenges which the new administration has to surmount in order to capitalise on its assets. This can only happen if road and air connectivity is improved.

Biswas said road connectivity was being upgraded, with a focus on rural roads. The public works department recently completed the first dou-

ble-lane bridge on the Indus at Choglamsar, a Tibetan refugee settlement and a centre for the study of Tibetan culture and history. Improving connectivity within Leh will benefit not only the economy, but also the Army.

Since Ladakh’s economy depends heavily on tourism, Biswas said the administration was considering introducing chopper services, gondolas and winter sports. The local economy is facing a major crisis with the Covid-induced lockdown; six months of harsh winter will make things worse. Hence, the push to make Ladakhis direct beneficiaries of the Centre’s flagship schemes like the National Rural Livelihood Mission, which allows women self-help groups to avail bank loans. “I am earning enough money to support my family and to pay my children’s school fees. When the women of the village come together, we are able to sort out so many problems,” said Zahra Bano, a self-help group worker.

But, more employment and more tourists will also bring more waste, which will pollute the scarce natural resources of Ladakh. The heavy troop deployment on the borders is already

adding to the strain. The administration’s Project Tsangda aims to address this problem. The PWD and the Border Roads Organisation are using waste material for road construction; waste is also being used to make biofuel bricks. “While the assets have always been there in Ladakh and in the Himalayas, vested political interests have prevented the region from getting due recognition,” said Tenzin Tsundue, writer and Tibetan activist.

So while New Delhi rolls out its pushback policy, it needs to remember that the main source of strength on the borders is not only the Army, but also the local people. A major challenge that remains is building trust and synergy between the two major districts of Ladakh—Leh and Kargil. “The trust deficit that Ladakh had with Jammu and Kashmir can now be seen between Leh and Kargil,” said a senior official in Delhi. While Buddhist-dominated Leh is the capital of the Union territory, the Shia-dominated Kargil seems to be feeling left out. But, if the soft, cultural assets are nurtured well, India might be able to project Ladakh as the seat of national integration. ●



Improving learning competence

India is one of the few countries that have brought out policies in alignment with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

The National Education Policy, 2020, (NEP) is yet another historic step towards realising the SDGs. The NEP has been carefully crafted to give our children the best of both worlds: the rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge, and the modern ideology of providing freedom to choose. The pursuit of knowledge (*jnan*), wisdom (*pragya*) and truth (*satya*) is overtly visible in the policy.

The NEP lays emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities—both the foundational capacities of literacy and numeracy and higher-order cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving—but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions. With the quickly changing employment landscape and global ecosystem, it is becoming increasingly critical that children not only learn, but more importantly learn how to learn.

The education system of India needed overhauling for long. We were following a 10+2 scheme of education, which will now be replaced by a pedagogical 5+3+3+4 system. Currently, children in the age group of three to six are not covered in the 10+2 structure as class one begins at age six. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure, a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age three is also included, which is aimed at promoting overall learning, development and well-being.

The policy also honours native Indian languages and promotes teaching in mother tongue/regional languages up to class five to ease society's fixation with English as a medium of education,

and often as a measure of competence.

The best feature of the policy is abolition of the stream system which forces children to study a pre-fixed set of subjects at the plus two-level by choosing either science, commerce or humanities with marks earned through mug-and-puke methodology. The glamorisation of the sciences as a stream and the hierarchical nature of the streams belittled other sets of qualities. This policy is a step ahead to place all subjects in horizontal boxes, rather than vertical, where no subject is superior to another. The NEP will also give freedom to choose individual subjects, say physics with geography, or accountancy with chemistry, at the +4-level to create a unique skill set for each individual. This will not only ease the pressure on students to prove their worth by taking up science

at plus two-level but also thrash the rampant system of demanding cash by schools to grant science stream to students with low scores in their high school examination.

Minorities are also comparatively underrepresented in schools and higher education. The NEP acknowledges the importance of

interventions to promote education of children belonging to all minority communities, and particularly those communities that are educationally underrepresented.

The NEP has been launched with a goal to improve learning competence of individuals. The NEP envisions a significant increase in public investment in education by both the Central and state governments. The proposal that the Centre and the states should work together to increase the public investment in education sector to 6 per cent of GDP at the earliest is unique in its own right. This will prove to be extremely critical for achieving high quality and equitable public education system that is truly needed for India's future economic, social, cultural, intellectual and technological progress and growth.





Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women Sector 36-A, Chandighr (U.T.)



DR. NISHA BHARGAVA
Principal

Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women was established in 1968 to commemorate the exemplary service of Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan, the third Chief Justice of India and the erstwhile Prime Minister of Kashmir. Shri V.V. Giri, the then President of India, laid the foundation stone of the college and since then the college has covered an expansive journey. The institution is running under the aegis of DAV College Managing Committee, New Delhi under the visionary leadership of Dr. Punam Suri ji, Padmashree Awardee, Hon'ble President, DAV CMC. With a vision to groom individuals of substance who are able to contribute significantly towards nation building, the college provides an academically invigorating and morally enriching environment that aims for holistic development of its stakeholders. Accorded A Grade by NAAC, the college has also been awarded Star Status by Department of Biotechnology, Government of India. A multi faculty postgraduate institution of eminence, MCM has been ranked among the topmost educational institutions of India by reputed periodicals like India Today and The Week. Shining bright on the firmament of Indian skies, the college is a proud recipient of 1st Rank in the country in the Swachh Campus Ranking 2018 by Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India

besides being awarded 3rd Rank in the country for Best Citizen Led Initiative 2019 by Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India.

To cater to diverse needs of the learners, the college has 31 departments and offers M.Phil/Ph.D. in English, 8 postgraduate and 6 undergraduate degree courses, a UGC Innovative Programme in Microbial and Food Technology, 2 postgraduate diplomas and 6 add-on courses. The state-of-the-art infrastructure of the college includes well-equipped laboratories, smart classrooms, conference and multimedia halls, digital library and a rich library equipped with INFLIBNET, DELNET and LIBSEY's facilities. A pioneer in many fields, MCM is the first and the only college in the region to introduce the adventure sport of Rock Climbing besides being the first institution in India to install Air Quality Monitoring Sensors at five locations and the only educational institution in the region to set up a biogas plant. The college also has the distinction of being the only institution in the region to be registered on the portal of National Skill Development Council as a skill provider.

The institution is making rapid strides in diverse fields, including academics, sports and extracurricular activities, which reflects in its long list of glorious accomplishments. Carrying forward the legacy of inimitable academic excellence, the college bagged 207 top-10 positions in the 2018-19 Panjab University Examinations. The institution has won Panjab University Women's General Efficiency Sports Shield 39 times in its existence of 52 years. With various international winners in sports and three players in current Indian Women's Cricket Team, namely, Taniya Bhatia, Harleen Kaur and Ridhima, the college has made a significant mark in the sports arena. Every year our students win numerous prizes at zonal, state and national level events and youth festivals.

Focusing on promoting research for the benefit of the society, the college publishes a double blind peer-reviewed research

journal New Horizons, which has been included in the list of UGC approved journals. The college has a Panjab University approved Research Centre in English. Besides the participation of the faculty in international and national conferences and publication in reputed journals, research at undergraduate level is promoted by the college.

The college has undertaken remarkable work in the area of social outreach and the institution was awarded the Best NSS Unit award by Panjab University in the year 2019. Over the past two years, the college has adopted eight villages for inclusive development under Swachh Bharat Summer Internship, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan and two villages under Open Defecation Free drive of Government of India. The college has established Institution Innovation Council under the guidelines of Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

The institution has been accorded generous grants under RUSA, STAR College and DST-FIST programmes of Govt of India. Focusing on Sustainable development, the institution has instilled solar power capacity of 360 kwp and also a Sewage Treatment Plant of 50 KLD Capacity.



Not letting the disruption caused by COVID-19 shake the indefatigable spirit of MCM, education went on unhindered as the college swiftly transitioned from the offline mode to online teaching. It is a rare distinction that the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 could not deter the college from achieving its goals. In fact, during the past few months the institution has been working with great zeal and commitment and has shown great resilience and versatility while shifting from classroom to online teaching and curriculum delivery.

MEHR CHAND MAHAJAN DAV COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

Sector 36-A, Chandigarh, Phone: 0172-2603355, Fax: 0172-2613047

(Under the aegis of DAV College Managing Committee, New Delhi and affiliated to Panjab University, Chandigarh)

ADMISSION NOTICE 2020-21



HIGHLIGHTS:- • Re-Accredited Grade 'A' by NAAC • 207 top 10 Panjab University positions in academics in 2019 • Ranked 1st in the country in Swachh Campus Ranking of HEIs - 2018 under Residential Colleges Category • 3rd in India under Swachh Sarvekshan 2019 in Citizens led initiatives • Ranked among top-most Colleges in India by India Today's Survey • Winner of Panjab University General Efficiency Sports Shield 39 times • Identified as a 'Mentor Institution' by NAAC to formally induct non-accredited Colleges • Accorded Star College Status by DBT, Ministry of Science & Technology, Govt. of India • First Training centre in the northern region providing GST Training under the aegis of National Skill Development Corporation, Govt. of India. • Holistic development of its stakeholders. • Merit cum means scholarships and tuition fee waivers for various categories and deserving students.

RESEARCH PROGRAMME

❖ M. Phil and Ph.D. English

POSTGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES

MA ❖ English ❖ Hindi ❖ Economics ❖ Psychology ❖ Sociology

MCom, MSc ❖ Chemistry ❖ Mathematics

POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA COURSES

❖ Computer Applications ❖ Mass Communication

ADD-ON COURSES

❖ Communicative English ❖ Cosmetology & Beauty Care ❖ Floriculture & Landscaping ❖ French ❖ Interior Designing & Decoration ❖ Video Reporting

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES

BA: General **BA Honours:** ❖ English ❖ Hindi ❖ Punjabi ❖ Economics ❖ History ❖ Political Science ❖ Psychology ❖ Public Adm. ❖ Sociology

BSc: Non-Medical ❖ Computer Applications (Elective) ❖ Medical ❖ Microbial & Food Technology ❖ **BSc Honours:** Physics ❖ **BCom** ❖ **BCom Honours** ❖ Accounting & Finance ❖ Economics ❖ Management Studies ❖ **BBA** ❖ **BCA**

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COURSES UNDER CENTRALIZED ADMISSIONS

Semester I (First Year): BCom, BBA, BCA, BSc Medical, Non-Medical, Computer Applications (Elective), MCom. For details and dates visit: www.dhe.chd.gov.in

ONLINE ADMISSION SCHEDULE TO COURSES UNDER NON-CENTRALIZED ADMISSIONS

DATE OF ONLINE SUBMISSION OF APPLICATION FORMS: 27TH JULY 2020 ONWARDS

Semester I (First Year) : ♦ BA General (including ADD-ON COURSES)

Semester I (First Year) : ♦ BSc (Microbial & Food Technology) for any query contact:- M.: 99140-84438

Semester III (Second Year) : ♦ BA General ♦ BCom ♦ BBA ♦ BSc Medical, Non-Medical, Computer Applications (Elective), Microbial & Food Technology ♦ BCA ♦ Honours: BA, BCom & BSc

Semester V (Third Year) : ♦ BA General ♦ BCom ♦ BBA ♦ BSc Medical, Non-Medical, Computer Applications (Elective), Microbial & Food Technology ♦ BCA ♦ Honours: BA, BCom & BSc

Note:- • Admission schedule with respect to PG Degree Courses including PG Diploma will be declared as and when released by Panjab University, Chandigarh • For Admission Updates and Online College Prospectus check the College Website: <https://mcmdavcwchd.edu.in/> • For Courses under Centralized Admission check the website: www.dhe.chd.gov.in • For Courses under Non-Centralized Admission Visit: www.admissions.mcmdav.com • Admission Form to be filled Online only • A student seeking admission to Online Centralized Courses is also required to fill Online College Admission Form once her name appears in the Centralized Merit List • For College Admission refer to the Online College Prospectus at: www.mcmdavcw-chd.edu/ / www.mcmdav.com • For Hostel Admission refer to the Online Hostel Prospectus at: www.mcmdavcw-chd.edu/ / www.mcmdav.com and fill separate Online Hostel Admission Form.

Website: <https://mcmdavcwchd.edu.in/>

E-mail: principal_mcmdavcollege@yahoo.com

Fee is to be paid Online only

Dr. Nisha Bhargava
(Principal)

■ INTERVIEW

Chandrakant R. Patil,
BJP president, Gujarat

My aim is to win 150 seats in 2022 assembly polls

BY NANDINI OZA

MANY WERE SURPRISED by Chandrakant R. Patil's appointment as president of Gujarat BJP. The three-time Lok Sabha member is believed to have been handpicked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Patil, 65, is the first non-Gujarati to assume the post. He, however, calls himself a Gujarati, and it seems few can disagree. He won from the Navsari Lok Sabha seat in 2019 by a margin of 6.89 lakh votes.

The Congress has been highlighting an old issue in which Patil was suspended as a police constable for his alleged proximity to bootleggers. But he is undeterred, and is meeting party functionaries and travelling to different regions. In an exclusive interview, Patil talks about his new responsibility. Excerpts:

Q/What are your priorities?

A/To further strengthen the Gujarat state unit's organisation, which is already strong, make the model acceptable and ensure that it is copied and discussed in all states like the Gujarat development model. The organisation that can win maximum number of elections, seats with the maximum margin, and take policies of the state government to the masses, and can be called the best organisation.

If you win, you form a government, make leaders, enable masses to get the fruits of various schemes and based on it you again face an election. This is a cycle; you cannot break it.

Q/What are the challenges before you and the BJP in Gujarat?

A/I have been lucky that I have got a responsibility that does not have a challenge. The party's organisation has the strength to face any challenge. All the units of the party are like gold; they only have to be given shape so that they look even better.

Q/What are your goals as the state party president?

A/The only aim is to win 150 seats in the 2022 assembly elections. I cannot disclose how I plan to do this.

Q/You recently said that the BJP should not rely on those who had come from the Congress to win elections.



If BJP workers do not want people from other parties to come to the BJP, it is their responsibility to ensure the victory of a candidate.

A/If BJP workers do not want people from the Congress or other parties to come to the BJP, it is their responsibility to ensure the victory of a candidate. If that happens, Congressmen will not have a reason to join the BJP. There will not be a reason to bring them in. I am confident that in the days to come we will create such a situation.

Q/Is the Congress a challenge for you in Gujarat?

A/Not at all. Not only in Gujarat, it is not a challenge in the country.

Q/What about Hardik Patel, who was recently appointed working president of Gujarat Congress?

A/In the past, he has not helped the Congress win a single seat. In Surat, he did make efforts and said they would win eight to 10 assem-

bly seats. The Congress did not win a single seat and the margin of the BJP increased. We, in fact, benefited because of Patel.

Q/You are tagged as the first non-Gujarati to become state BJP president. How will you get rid of that tag?

A/I have been in Gujarat all my life. Gujarat and Maharashtra were one when I was born. Just on the basis of the surname how can you call someone non-Gujarati? I am a Gujarati. When you do not get any issue to talk about a person, you raise such issues. Look at the merit. I won the Lok Sabha election with the highest margin in the country. Had this been an issue, I would not have won. The Congress president is from Italy. She is not even an Indian. But if C.R. Patil is made Gujarat BJP president, you have a problem. They fear that I will finish them.

Q/Your appointment came as a surprise to many.

A/There has been a mindset that the person should be of a particular caste and from a particular area. The media also thinks on those lines. For them it is a surprise. The BJP gives responsibilities to the workers and I have been a party worker for 30 years. The way partymen from different regions are coming and greeting me shows that they have faith that I will do something new.

Q/Your past as a police constable is being highlighted after your

appointment.

A/The way I am being portrayed reflects their fear. They should talk about my electoral fights. They blabber when they do not have any concrete issues to raise.

Q/How will you coordinate with the state government? There are rumours that some ministers do not listen to party workers.

A/The ministers have worked in the party's organisational structure for years. They do know the problems of the organisation. We also understand the problems of the state government. We understand that every demand cannot be fulfilled. In such circumstances, one needs to chalk out a common minimum programme and problems of the masses should be resolved.

Q/Do you intend to give less prominence to those who have come from other parties?

A/When a person resigns from one party, it is apparent that he has had problems in that party and does not see a political future there. He does not join the BJP as a Congressman. He comes as a neutral person. And if he is given a ticket, he has to prove his capabilities by winning the election.

Q/There has been discontent within the BJP. Partymen want original BJP leaders to get tickets.

A/Only those with the BJP are being given tickets and it will be so in the future also. The newcomers have become BJP workers. ❶



JANAK PATEL

A DAY BEFORE he was sworn in as Kerala chief minister in 2016, Pinarayi Vijayan held a media conference. He advised everyone to be careful of certain “avatars”—crooks who claimed they were close to the government, and used it as leverage to strike illegitimate deals.

Vijayan, apparently, did not heed his own advice. With assembly elections less than a year away, it has landed the government in a spate of controversies that led to a no-trust motion in the assembly. The government defeated the motion, but not before Vijayan was compelled to speak for hours defending his government.

Barely a few months ago, the Left Democratic Front led by Vijayan was hailed by national and international media for its efficient handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. The social welfare measures initiated by the government during the lockdown were also praised as a model of good governance. The government’s good performance had the opposition rattled. A survey held at that time predicted that the LDF would return to power after the assembly polls, breaking Kerala’s 40-year tradition of not re-electing an incumbent government. The survey said 86 per cent of respondents wanted Vijayan as the chief minister.

But all that is old story now.

A series of controversies are eroding the government’s credibility. It all began with the seizure of 30kg of gold from a consignment addressed to the UAE consulate in Thiruvananthapuram. The smuggling case soon became a political hot button when it was revealed that the main accused in the case, Swapna Suresh, had links with M. Sivasankar, principal secretary to the chief minister. The opposition alleged that Swapna was one of

Reversal of fortunes

Controversies sparked by a gold smuggling case have the **Pinarayi Vijayan** government cornered

BY CITHARA PAUL

the “avatars” who had considerable influence in the government. Though Vijayan removed Sivasankar from the post the day after the scandal broke, the damage had been done.

The National Investigation Agency, which is probing the case, has twice questioned Sivasankar in connection with the smuggling case. The customs department and the Enforcement Directorate have also questioned him. There is no evidence that links Sivasankar to the case, but it is clear that he has close ties with Swapna. And that has been enough to put the LDF government under a cloud of suspicion.

“Sivasankar may not have anything to do with gold smuggling,” said N.M. Pearson, a political observer known for his left leanings. “But it is a huge embarrassment that the secretary to a chief minister belonging to a left party has got involved in such a nasty case.” According to him, the incident shows the “depoliticisation” of left parties.

The smuggling case led to more skeletons tumbling out of the LDF government’s closet. Higher Education Minister K.T. Jaleel, a prominent Muslim face in the government, was accused of accepting money and ‘gifts’ weighing 4,000kg from the con-



MANOJ CHEMANCHERI

sulate in March. The minister said the gifts were copies of the Quran, but the opposition alleged that some of the packets contained smuggled gold. The ED has already started an investigation into the matter.

The Life Mission, the government's housing scheme for the homeless, is also embroiled in allegations. Swapna, who earlier worked at the consulate, allegedly received kickbacks for an apartment project sponsored by Red Crescent. The government, however, has denied the allegation.

"It is ridiculous to raise such allegations against a project that has built homes for more than two

lakh people across the state," said M.B. Rajesh, CPI(M) leader and former Lok Sabha member. "All these allegations are meant to just hood-wink people. Once the smoke clears, people will see the good deeds done by this government."

The government, however, has been lurching from trouble to trouble. It had long been opposing the Union government's move to lease out the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport to Adani Group, and had even enlisted the opposition Congress's support in the effort. Recently, though, it was revealed that a legal firm that had links to Adani

Group had served as consultant to the government on the matter.

That these violations happened under his nose will be a matter of regret for Vijayan. "Yes, he is hurt because he had trusted Sivasankar absolutely," said a source close to Vijayan. "Even when others pointed fingers at the latter, the chief minister trusted him because Sivasankar had such a blemish-free track record."

The source, however, insisted that the controversies had not affected Vijayan personally or officially. "His routine is the same," he said. "All work is happening per schedule. Only that there is more caution these days. He is a fighter and he has survived worse battles."

Vijayan's recent losses have been opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala's gain. Until a few weeks ago, the towering image of the chief minister had dwarfed Chennithala and his efforts to discredit the government. It had even led to a section of the Congress demanding that former chief minister Oommen Chandy be made opposition leader. It was argued that only Chandy had the charisma to effectively take on Vijayan.

But the smuggling case has helped Chennithala eclipse both his rivals. "The case was a golden opportunity for Chennithala," said K. Saju, senior journalist. "He upset the moral high ground of Vijayan and the Left government, and established his supremacy in the Congress."

According to Pearson, the government suffers from centralisation of power. "If the LDF government has done a good job, the entire credit goes to Pinarayi Vijayan for anchoring both the government and the party," he said. "But if something has gone wrong, the blame for that, too, should go to him. That is the price one has to pay for centralising power." ●

Family comes first

The letter seeking sweeping reforms in the Congress may have had the unintended impact of hastening Rahul Gandhi's comeback

BY SONI MISHRA

MISTRUST SEEMS to have been the defining sentiment at the meeting of the Congress Working Committee on August 24. At the fourth virtual meeting of its highest decision-making body in Covid times, the Congress switched from Zoom, the videoconferencing app which the CWC had used for the first three meetings, to Cisco Webex so as to make it more secure.

That, however, did not stop real time leaks of the proceedings to the media. An infuriated Ahmed Patel, Congress treasurer and a close confidant of the party's interim president Sonia Gandhi, paused the discussion and asked the participants to either keep away their phones or switch them off.

The mistrust was further evident as senior leader Kapil Sibal, not a CWC member, jumped the gun based on media leaks and posted a strongly-worded tweet reacting to remarks attributed to former party chief Rahul Gandhi. Reportedly, Rahul had said at the meeting that the 23 signatories of a letter sent to Sonia seeking sweeping changes in the party were acting in cahoots with the BJP. Sibal, who was among the signatories, withdrew the tweet when Rahul called him and categorically

denied having said anything like that.

If Sibal created a flutter with his tweet, four signatories of the contentious letter who were present at the meeting—Ghulam Nabi Azad, Anand Sharma, Mukul Wasnik and Jitin Prasada—were treated with suspicion by the vast majority of the participants. The intent behind the missive was questioned. It was interpreted as a challenge to the leadership of the Gandhis. And the 'dissenters' were attacked for leaking the letter to the media even before the party could take it up.

The letter stated that the party needed a full-time and visible leadership. It sought sweeping reforms in the organisation, including a system of collective leadership, elections at all levels and decentralisation of decision-making.

However, the letter, parts of which got leaked a day before the CWC meeting, read more like an indictment of the leadership of the Gandhis, especially for the party's first family and its supporters. Some of them termed it an insult to Sonia. It was also felt that the letter betrayed an unease with the idea of Rahul making a comeback as party president.

"The letter is very disturbing," said

Manickam Tagore, Lok Sabha MP from Virudhunagar in Tamil Nadu. "They say there should be a full-time president. Are they saying that Sonia Gandhi is not working full-time? They say there should be consultations. But we do have mechanisms for consultations. For example, we have regular strategy meetings in Parliament, of which many of the letter writers are members."

The endeavour was crushed in a predictable manner. Sonia offered to resign ahead of the meeting, which was followed by pleas from chief ministers, state Congress presidents, MPs and MLAs and other leaders from across the country that they needed her leadership. Many of them also said for good measure that Rahul should take over the reins of the party if Sonia did not want to continue.

This overwhelming show of support for the Gandhis, which critics would call sycophancy and say is the party's tragic flaw, set the stage for the meeting, where leader after leader reposed faith in the leadership of Sonia and voiced support for Rahul. The authors of the letter were cornered.

By the end of the day, the letter writers were at pains to prove that



POWER CENTRE

Sonia and Rahul Gandhi continue to enjoy overwhelming support within the party



PTI

SPEAKING UP
Kapil Sibal and
(left) Ghulam
Nabi Azad

they had not questioned the authority of the Gandhis. They had to reiterate that they were life-long Congressmen with impeccable credentials and that the well-being of the party was at the heart of their effort.

“Many of us have served the party for more than two or three decades or even half a century. We have made sacrifices. We worked with Indiraji when she was going through a politically difficult time. All we want is that the drift in the party be arrested,” said a former Union minister, who was among the letter writers.

The CWC meeting showed that there can still be no challenge to the authority of the Gandhis, despite the

unpopularity of dynastic politics and the family’s declining vote-catching ability. As if responding to the demand in the letter for a full-time and visible leadership, the CWC resolution said Sonia and Rahul had been at the forefront of taking on the Narendra Modi government.

“It is very easy to tell your leader what needs to be done. But the leader needs a team that will work on the ground,” said Sushmita Dev, president of the Mahila Congress and a special invitee to the CWC. “We have all been given some responsibility. We should concentrate on that and hit the ground. Also, we need to resist the temptation of going public

just for the sake of getting publicity. That will only harm the party.”

Although the leaders who sent the letter were castigated, their concerns have been acknowledged by the leadership, which shows that there is a realisation that the issues raised by them have a certain resonance and cannot be brushed under the carpet. Also, the profile of these leaders, with a proven track record of service to the party and a rich experience in governance, has to be taken into account.

The CWC resolution specified that the correspondence formed the basis of the meeting. While there was a strong rebuke for the authors in the

form of a warning that no attempt to weaken the party or the leadership would be allowed, Rahul himself suggested that a committee be set up to assist Sonia in carrying out her duties as party chief. The resolution also authorised Sonia, who agreed to continue as interim chief till a new president was elected, to carry out organisational changes necessary to meet the current challenges. This could be read as a response to the call for sweeping reforms demanded in the letter.

“It is now acknowledged that we did not question the leadership. The idea behind the letter was to reorganise the party and make it battle-ready before the 2024 elections. We are hopeful that our concerns will be addressed,” said former Union minister M. Veerappa Moily, one of the signatories of the letter.

If the optics was of the Gandhi family loyalists overwhelmingly outnumbering the letter writers and making them look insignificant, the Gandhis have reached out to them nevertheless, displaying a certain willingness to address their concerns. In her closing remarks, Sonia said she bore no ill will towards them and that they were all one large family. Rahul, even as he condemned the timing of the letter and made the emotional pitch that it was sent to an ailing Sonia, was prompt in calling up Sibal to soothe the ruffled feathers.

Although the leaders who sent the letter were castigated, their concerns have been acknowledged by the leadership, which shows that there is a realisation that the issues raised by them have a certain resonance and cannot be brushed under the carpet.

Also, if Rahul’s supporters saw in the letter clear signs of an unease with the former party chief making a comeback, the letter writers were effectively let off with a warning, despite some leaders at the CWC

meeting calling for disciplinary action against them.

The flutter created by the letter may have had the unintended impact of hastening the comeback of Rahul, who has so far been reluctant to don the mantle. It is learnt that in the meeting, Rahul agreed on the need to call an All India Congress Committee session within six months to decide on the leadership issue. This, coupled with his silence, as opposed to a categorical ‘no’ in the past, in response to entreaties that he should now take charge of the party, is seen as a sign that he is now ready to come back. Also, the overwhelming support for the Gandhis has made it clear that a non-Gandhi option cannot be considered for president.

“No matter what we do, unless the AICC session happens and Rahul Gandhi comes back, this feeling that all is not well will linger on,” said a CWC member close to Rahul.

Congress leaders feel that the timing of the AICC session will depend not just on Rahul’s readiness for the top job, but also the coming round of assembly elections, with Bihar kicking off the poll season later this year, to be followed by elections in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Puducherry and Tamil Nadu in April-May 2021.

If nothing else, the letter episode has come as a wake up call for the Congress leadership to get things going. **1**

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Learn from Prashant Bhushan

I do not know about you guys, but ‘a visible and full-time Congress president’ sounds like a damn fine thing to me. (I would have thrown in ‘accountable’, too, but I am greedy like that.) In fact the whole letter, signed by 23 legit, long-standing party men and women—which addressed the issues of uncertainty over leadership, drift in the party, ideological vagueness, delay in organisational appointments and the absence of free and frank discussions—sounded like pretty much what the doctor ordered for the ailing party.

Of course, resentment and low-key rebellion have been simmering in the Congress pot longer than meat and rice in a dough-sealed *dum pukth handi*, but this is the first time the seal was actually broken, the steam released and a heart, *jigar* and kidney biryani that bared the soul of suffering party workers everywhere was humbly and reverentially offered up to the ‘high command.’

Which is why it sucks that all it seems to have given said high command is a bad case of constipation. The Oliver Twists who were demanding a little ‘more’ have magnanimously and glacially been told that no ill-will will be harboured against them (why would something so obvious even have to be stated in a healthy and vigorous democracy?). And pathetically grateful for this reassurance, they have dropped their guns, backtracked hastily erasing their own footprints while swearing total and complete loyalty, and the status quo, or rather status comatose, has been clamped down again—but only for another six months, we are told.

And every voter seeking a viable option to the BJP has again been left mystified and wondering why in a nation that seems to condemn nepotism as ferociously as India—just look at all the uproar around the death of Sushant Singh Rajput!—the Congress insists on remaining tongue-tied and slavish before its

leadership. So just like a disappointed mother who compares and contrasts her children unfavourably with the neighbour’s children (you know the whole ‘Sharma *ji ke bete ko dekho*’ tactic) I would urge the ex-rebels from the Congress camp to look at, and be shamed by, the stellar example being set by Bhushan *ji ka beta*, Prashant.

Here is a man who knows how to:

- 1) Call out misrule and miscarriage of justice for what it is.
- 2) Stoutly stick to his guns when the going gets stormy.

I mean just look at the tweet he put out: “When historians in the future look back at the last six years to see how democracy has been destroyed in

India even without a formal Emergency, they will particularly mark the role of the SC in this destruction, and more particularly the role of the last four CJIs.”

That is telling it with total and devastating clarity, and without even seeking the support of 22 other signatories to give himself a warm feeling.

And when he was hauled up for contempt of the Supreme Court and asked to apologise he stoutly said, “If I retract a

statement before this court that I otherwise believe to be true, and offer an insincere apology, that in my eyes would amount to the contempt of my conscience and of an institution I hold in highest esteem.”

Wah, Bhushan *ji-ke-bete*, *waah*. Matlab, I did not know legalese could be lyrical, but surely these revolutionary, gently rebuking words are sweeter than any lines penned by Rumi or Gulzar. I would put them in the ICSE English poetry syllabus and teach them to all Indian children if I could. And, of course make them compulsory study material for all Congress Working Committee members before their next ‘meeting’.



group medical director and senior paediatric gastroenterologist,
Apollo Hospitals Group



Staying in has its advantages

Food, fitness and patience are key to your child's health this pandemic

In my speciality, I notice that vaccination of children under two years has been affected severely by the pandemic. Many vaccines require more than one dose—diphtheria, tetanus, pneumococcal meningitis, mumps and measles-rubella—and a huge gap between doses or an incomplete course is not a good idea. By all means, precautions need to be taken, but people need to remember that kids are susceptible to a number of infectious diseases, and they cannot afford these delays.

Studies across the world have proved that children are not a high-risk group for catching Covid-19, though they can be carriers of the infection and end up passing it on to grandparents. Other diseases such as chronic liver disease and infectious bile disease also need urgent attention.

Fewer gastric infections

Staying in though has had its advantages. Typically, during this time of the year, we see a rise in cases of diarrhoea, typhoid and viral hepatitis. However, cases of viral Hepatitis A and E and diarrhoea have come down since food and drink indulgences—such as sugarcane juice and cut fruit salads—from outside the home have reduced. It is important to pay attention to the quality of water and ensure that fruits and vegetables are washed properly.

Be patient with children

Being at home has also meant that parents and children are getting time to bond like never before. For some families though, it can be a big struggle. Having children focus during online classes is challenging. My advice

to parents would be to be patient with such kids since it is a radical change after all, and some children need time to adapt.

Eating healthy at home

Paying attention to a child's nutrition is also a must. A typical Indian *thali* is a great way to provide a mix of cereal, vegetables, dal and salad. Green leafy vegetables and fruits are extremely important to provide vitamins and minerals. With reduced physical activity, children are also gaining weight. Constant munching has to be avoided. Colas, sweets, packaged fruit juices and pastries need to be avoided. Indoor exercises such as skipping need to be emphasised. Obesity can predispose them to health problems such as high blood pressure, high sugar levels and dyslipidemia (abnormal amount of lipids in blood) that can cause heart disease later in life.

Lastly, I think the fear psychosis owing to the 'infodemic' around Covid-19 needs to be remedied by focusing on the positive aspects—the disease is being better understood, outcomes are definitely better, and until a vaccine is out, adequate precautions should be taken.

-As told to Namita Kohli

“
Cases of viral Hepatitis A and E and diarrhoea have come down since food and drink indulgences from outside the home have reduced.
”



Having children focus during online classes is challenging. Be patient with your kids as they may need some time to adapt.



Green leafy vegetables and fruits are extremely important to provide vitamins and minerals.



Cut the frequent snacking. Colas, sweets, packaged juices and pastries need to be avoided.



To watch the interview with Dr Sibal, scan the QR code

Monica Gandhi, professor of medicine and infectious diseases specialist, University of California San Francisco

Asymptomatic infection may lead to greater immunity

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

IN THE JOURNAL of General Internal Medicine, Monica Gandhi writes about the hypothesis that universal masking reduces the “inoculum” or dose of the virus inhaled, leading to milder, asymptomatic infections. She tells **THE WEEK** how asymptomatic Covid-19 infections could be helpful and about other findings in her research. Edited excerpts:

Q/You say that a high rate of asymptomatic infection is good.

A/Yes, a high rate of asymptomatic infection in Covid-19 can be a good thing. This virus has protean manifestations, ranging from no symptoms to severe disease and death. In mid-July, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the US estimated the rate of asymptomatic infection with Covid-19 to be 40 per cent. Asymptomatic infection can be a problem (in terms of spread), but getting infected and not being sick is a good outcome for a patient.

Moreover, if individuals develop immunity to Covid-19 after asymptomatic infection, that is helpful in slowing down the spread of the disease. There is accumulating evidence that cell-mediated immunity develops after asymptomatic infection. There are two arms to the immune response—antibodies and cell-mediated immunity. Cell-mediated

immunity provides longer term protection and, if this develops to asymptomatic infection, it is a very good outcome.

Q/You talk about universal public masking for pandemic control.

A/The main finding of our study is that there are increasing bodies of evidence in three domains—virologic, epidemiologic, and ecologic—that masks reduce the viral inoculum or dose someone inhales, leading to less severe disease. For Covid-19, that means that masks protect the individual and drive up the rate of asymptomatic infection. The virologic evidence is outlined in the article, but we have papers dating back to 1938 on the relationship between viral inoculum and severity of disease. The

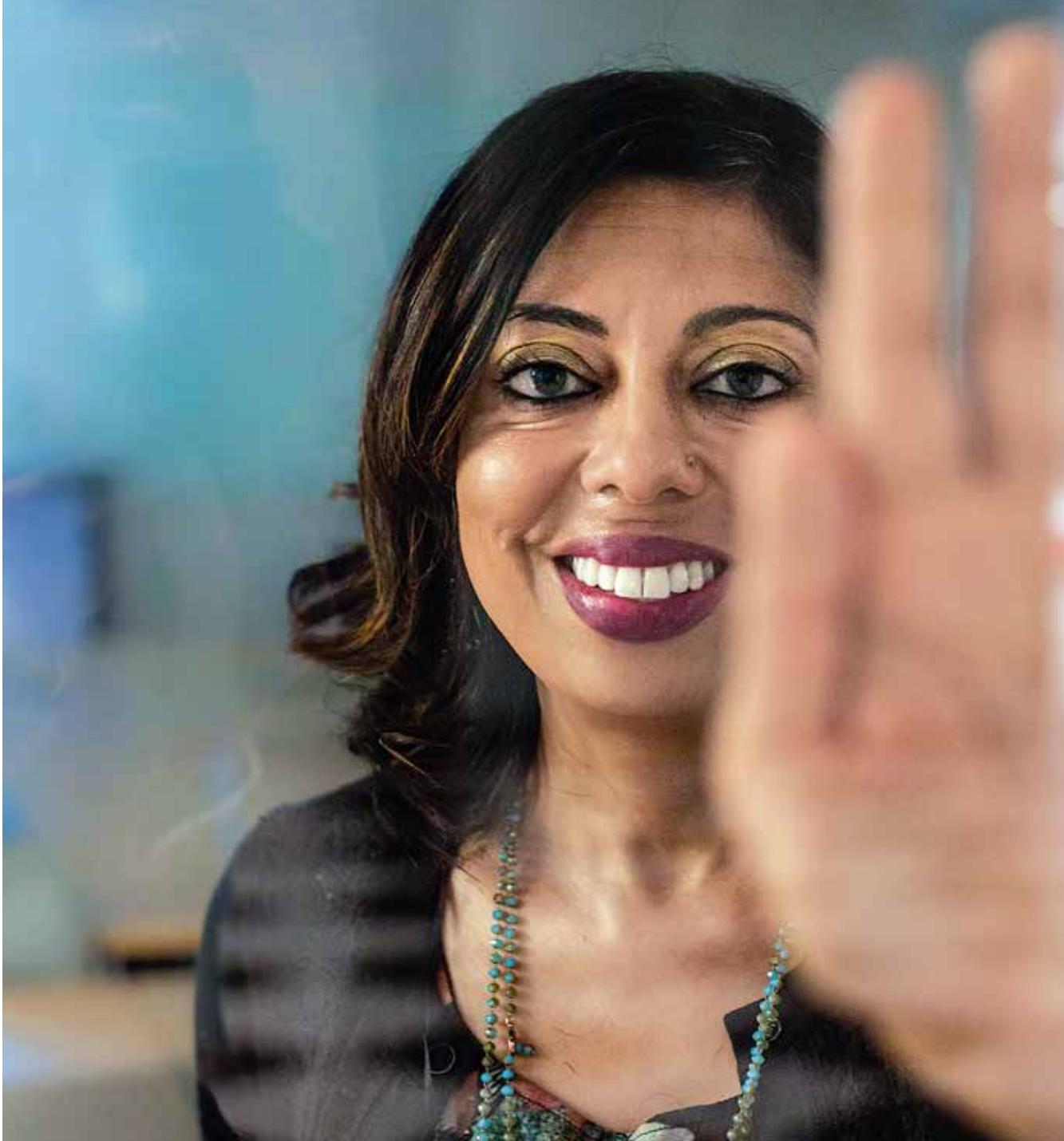
more virus a host gets in, the sicker the host gets. This has been shown with influenza A in human volunteers in 2015. In a hamster study, animals given higher inoculum of virus had more severe disease than those given lower inoculum of virus. In a recent study simulating masking for hamsters, the hamsters who got exposed to Covid-19 when masked were less likely to get Covid-19 and, if they did, they got mild disease.

The epidemiologic evidence in [masked] settings (like cruise ships) show that masking drives up the rate of asymptomatic infection. For instance, in cruise ship outbreaks from the beginning where we did not know about masking, the rate of asymptomatic infection was 18 per cent. And in an Argentinian cruise ship where all the passengers and staff were masked, 81 per cent of those who became infected were asymptomatic. And in countries that mask, the rate of severe disease is very low.

Therefore, masking is one of the most important pillars to fight the pandemic. In India, if there are very crowded environments, wearing comfortable facial masks (simple cotton masks) at home would have benefit in reducing the frequency of severe illness. Benefits of masking [in the case of] asymptomatic patients is to protect others, because people

The importance of T cells

- One of two primary lymphocytes (white blood cells that decide immune response), along with B cells
- T cells which developed in response to other coronaviruses, such as the one that causes the common cold, seem to be showing the potential or ability to fight Covid-19, as per Gandhi
- This, says Gandhi, gives a level of “natural immunity” to a certain segment of the population



without symptoms [and with Covid-19] can shed virus from their nose and mouth at high rates even when they feel well.

Q/Do age and genetics play a role, in some showing no symptoms at all while others die?

A/Individuals who are older or have certain blood types or are immunocompromised may be more likely to get ill from SARS-CoV-2. However, we

have been researching how the viral dose seems to matter a lot in how sick someone gets.

Q/Do certain individuals have pre-existing immunity against the virus?

A/Yes. Emerging data is showing us that many individuals may have T cells (or a cell-mediated immune response) that developed in response to other common coronaviruses. These

T cells seem to have a “cross-reacting” potential or ability to fight off this novel coronavirus. Therefore, there is a certain segment of the population that seems to have some natural immunity to SARS-CoV-2, leading to them having a milder disease or asymptomatic infection if they become infected.📍

To read the full interview

Visit www.theweek.in



Game theory

A bio-secure bubble and an elaborate set of safety protocols are expected to ensure a Covid-19-free IPL season

BY NEERU BHATIA

A SEPARATE wing of the hotel or resort, a private beach, a gymnasium and swimming pool solely for the team, an exclusive tennis court and cycling track, rooms with a view or a balcony, and a dedicated Covid-19 treatment room. These were part of the must-have list of Indian Premier League franchises hunting hotels for their teams in the UAE, which will host season 13 of the IPL.

All eight teams had landed in the UAE by August 23; they had been tested thrice before they boarded chartered flights from India. Each member of the squads and support staff—franchises had sent around 60 persons each—went into the mandatory six-day isolation. Once they clear three Covid-19 tests, the players and staff will move into a ‘bio-secure bubble.’

That is not the end of testing. As per the BCCI’s standard operating procedure, every individual in the bio-secure bubble will be tested twice in their second and third week in the UAE. After that, there will be tests every fifth day for the remainder of the season.

Welcome to cricket in Covid-19 times. Rigorous testing will be paramount; specialist teams will ensure

foolproof security. The sound of dhols and music after each shot or wicket will echo in empty stadiums, because keeping the bubble secure will be key to the season’s success. “One person’s negligence can bring down the whole tournament,” said Dhiraj Malhotra, chief executive

officer of Delhi Capitals. “When the travel dates were announced, we had to test every player thrice. It was tough monitoring players at home and asking them to go into isolation. But everybody saw the bigger picture.”

Jake Lush McCrum, chief oper-

WHAT IS A BIO-SECURE BUBBLE?

A secure environment or corridor that aims to minimise the risk of Covid-19 infection for personnel associated with the event. It isolates those inside it from the outside world



British technology firm Restrata will provide security and safety management for IPL 2020. It will take over the venues and the software at the team hotels to monitor personnel



The company provided technology and security design consultancy for London 2012 and the Camp Nou, and helped organise the recent bio-secure Test series between England and the West Indies



A software platform developed to protect against terrorist strikes and industrial accidents will be deployed



Bluetooth to track movement within bubble. A chip in a band/accreditation card to be used as GPS



Stadiums to be divided into zones; “track and trace” software will regulate number of people in each zone



■ INTERVIEW



Brijesh Patel, *chairman,*
IPL Governing Council

Key to a bio-secure IPL will be testing

Q/How hard has it been to ensure a secure, healthy environment for all those involved in IPL 2020?

A/We have taken the example of the NBA (National Basketball Association) and guidelines by the ICC and the ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board). England has already played the West Indies and is currently playing Pakistan. We are following [those guidelines], have made some changes and have finalised the steps to be taken. This has been circulated among all players, teams and officials.

Q/How confident are you of creating a fully secure bio-bubble?

A/We have strict rules. I think teams understand that; as do players. It is [about] their health and safety as well.

Q/Will there be punitive action against those who breach the bio-bubble?

A/Yes. We have to be strict and follow the protocols.

Q/What did you learn from England's recent series?

A/The key to ensuring [the league's] success is [regular] testing of the players. They will be allowed to go and practise [only after testing]. If their families or team owners want

to join them, they have to follow these rules.

Q/How mentally challenging will it be for those inside the bio-bubble?

A/It is going to be tough, but I think once matches start, the days will just fly [by]. This is the only way we can play.

Q/Do you think players who will join the IPL after having played a series would be better prepared to handle the bubble than domestic Indian players?

A/I do not think so. Many of the players were already in a bubble. [For example,] Royal Challengers Bangalore players have spent about ten days in a camp in a bubble in Bengaluru. I think the players are getting used to it. They are also very keen to play. They have been at home for five months.

Q/What made the BCCI opt for Restrata to manage the bio-bubble?

A/They have already done it. They have the experience, they have a setup in Dubai, too.

Q/Do you think the IPL without fans will be as fun?

A/I think in the initial few weeks, there will be no crowds. Once we are sure everything is under control, and depending on [whether] the government allows restricted entry, [we may have crowds]. Even so, the [spectators] will be allowed only in the upper tiers of the stands.

Q/Do you think the league will have the same buzz?

A/I am sure the television viewership will be much more. [People are] fed up with Netflix and OTT shows, and schools and colleges [are also shut].

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S./
RESEARCH NEERU BHATIA

ating officer of Rajasthan Royals, is confident that the bio-secure bubble would remain safe. "Different zones have been identified for people with different roles within a group," he said. "So even after the quarantine period is over, the zones will not mix with each other as much as possi-



ble. Individuals outside the bubble cannot come into contact with the players. That is a strict BCCI protocol everyone must follow.”

Setting up and maintaining the bubble has not been an easy task. “We have managed to form a healthy cohort of individuals around us and have enforced strict measures to keep it that way,” said Dr Charles Minz of Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB). “Anybody coming in contact with the team must undergo two Covid-19 tests; only after furnishing two negative reports can he be part of the bubble. This includes all hotel, security and transport staff. They, too, will have to follow strict protocols once they enter the bubble.”

Those inside the bio-secure bubble will only be able to travel from their hotel to the ground and vice versa. Teams have recruited their own net bowlers for training. All movements will be “tracked and traced” by Restrata, the security agency the BCCI has hired to keep the bubble secure. There will be around 450 persons in a venue during a match, including players and support staff, match offi-

cial, production staff and commentators, and security, housekeeping and administrative staff.

Satish Menon, chief executive officer, Kings XI Punjab, said everyone knew the importance of staying in the bubble. “I don’t think anyone will breach it,” he said. “The hotel we have chosen is exclusive to us, completely cordoned off; there is no way people can go out. There will be punitive action [if there is a breach].”

McCrum said the teams would soon get an SOP from Restrata, which would track all players and staff. “This will ensure that players are following protocols,” he said. “If there is a positive case, you will be able to see who that player has been in close contact with, and then you can isolate them as well. It will be a strict bubble, but given the fantastic facilities here, the players can relax and enjoy.”

Team managements have been taking care of logistics ever since the BCCI announced in July that this year’s IPL will be held in the UAE. They had been testing domestic players and ensuring that they adhered

to the standard procedures. “Our primary objective was to identify a hotel that is in complete compliance with the need of the team,” said Sanjeev Churiwala, chairman, RCB. “A full risk assessment was carried out while choosing the hotel. The SOP was explained to the hotel management. The dedicated staff serving the team members are part of the bio-secure environment; they will be tested every fifth day throughout the season.”

Menon said the weeks leading up to the team’s departure to Dubai were maddening. “Starting from the choice of hotel to the choice of facilities and the size of rooms, we went into even small details,” he said. “We wanted rooms with a balcony, and cycling track, private beach, gyms, swimming pools and gaming rooms to keep players occupied.”

McCrum said the Rajasthan Royals had plenty of time for preparation. “One key focus area was getting a really high-class hotel, which we have done,” he said. “The main focus, however, was to get the players and support staff [to the UAE] safely. Our



RARING TO GO

Delhi Capitals players in Dubai

INTERVIEW



Dr Rob Young, team doctor, Rajasthan Royals

We will do a daily checklist

DR ROB YOUNG, Rajasthan Royals team doctor, is the team's latest recruit. A sports medicine specialist, Young was in the bio-bubble during the recent England home series against the West Indies and the Test against Pakistan at Old Trafford. Excerpts from an interview:

Q /What are the medical protocols in place?

A /First, we need to make sure that everyone adheres to the [protocols]. We have several tools put in place to help with that and remind us daily to do a checklist. Second, there is a practical approach to looking after everyone in the hotel environment and in training. We will regularly remind them of the procedures and rules to follow and make sure that the training is according to IPL regulations and is done in a safe way. Finally, there will also be the management of injuries within the bubble and regulations have been set out.

Q /How will the length of the tournament affect the players?

A /It is a long tournament. I have been working at both a rugby club and a county cricket team, and then with the England cricket team at Old Trafford. So, I have already worked in a bubble. My role as a doctor is to help them (players and officials) remember those regulations, answer any queries, and [along with physiotherapist] John [Gloster], with his sports medicine input, look after the players. We must not forget that we are here to play cricket and we need to make sure that everything is safe. As we move on and transition into training, the players would be more aware of the rules themselves. Then we will try to focus on cricket.

Q /What are the best practices for players during a match or in training?

A /During the training and in match situations, the players should try to keep themselves relatively distant, particularly in training. They should maintain their distance and not engage in celebrations with others after picking a wicket. Then [there is] looking after the ball. Traditionally, everyone uses saliva on the ball, but now they cannot. So, they will really need to change the way they do things. Another aspect would be looking after the kits and making sure they are kept clean. Once back in the dressing room, it is important that they keep their distance and drink only from their own bottles. Also, they should shower back at the hotels rather than in the changing room.

international players [will] come in the next days and weeks."

If a person in the bio-secure bubble tests positive, teams will follow strict guidelines. "[He] will not be allowed to enter the bubble," said Churiwala. "Individuals who are awaiting test results will also not be allowed to enter until their negative report is available. Those who test positive will be in quarantine for 14 days, during which they will be tested on the tenth, thirteenth and fourteenth days. If the results from days 13 and 14 are negative, and if the individual does not have symptoms for more than 24 hours after that, [he] will be permitted to re-enter the bubble. After recovery, players will have to undergo cardiac screening before they resume team activities."

The BCCI has prepared a list of accredited hospitals that would manage Covid-19 cases in the IPL. Each team has its own Covid-19 task force, and a senior team official will be in charge of the bubble. Teams are also planning to rope in psychologists.

Families were allowed to accompany players, but most players and

officials chose to travel alone. "We don't know how families will cope when the team goes for training," said Malhotra. "The players have PlayStations, pools and virtual reality games to indulge in during off-time. But what will the families do?"

The season will last more than 80

days. Though the players are happy to resume competitive cricket, it will be tough to remain upbeat in the isolated bubble. "It will take time to settle down," said Menon. "But once training starts, it will be intense. It won't be easy, but there will be lots of practice games." 🏏



VIRAL FERVOUR

AS INDIA WORKS ITS WAY INTO THE NEW NORMAL, THE WEEK PRESENTS STORIES OF RESILIENCE, IDEAS TRIUMPHING AFTER FLOATING ON A THREAD OF HOPE FOR A WHILE, LIGHT-FOOTED ADAPTATIONS THAT HELD US IN GOOD STEAD—THE VERITABLE SILVER LINING TO THE COVID-19 CLOUD HANGING OVER ALL OF US

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS



INT

ever since Lady Macbeth has hand washing become such an obsession. And opportunity. Once an accessory of just health care professionals and, perhaps, hypochondriacs, the hand sanitiser today comes Modi-endorsed, up there in the list of essential commodities for offices, shops and homes.

So, just as well, that from a handful of brands, as many as 152 new companies entered the sanitiser manufacturing market in the month of March alone, according to Nielsen India. Scores more followed suit in the ensuing months, ranging from startups and pharmaceuticals to liquor manufacturers and sugar mills.

Rahm Emanuel, who was chief of staff in Obama's White House, put it succinctly. "Never



OVEN FRESH

Akshay Singhal (left) and Karthik Hajela, cofounders of Log9, with the CoronaOven that uses ultraviolet rays for sterilisation of items

let a serious crisis go to waste," he said. "It's an opportunity to do things you could not do before!"

So it was when the pandemic-lockdown lethal duo sucker-punched India. While most of us withdrew to the safety of the four walls of homes, an intrepid bunch decided to unleash its ingenuity. From Bengaluru's Log9, which came up with a CoronaOven to sterilise anything from milk packets to a wad of cash, to the Gollar robot employed in Covid-19 wards in Mumbai to serve food and medicines to patients, to the IIT Madras wrist-band that tracks early Covid-19 symptoms and notifies the result via Bluetooth, the examples are plenty.

As their 'normal' business models fell by the wayside overnight, companies far and wide had to pivot. The giant Tata Consultancy Services nimbly adapted to a work-from-home model overnight. When restaurants and food delivery came to a halt, Wow! Momo, a pan-Indian takeaway, switched to delivering essentials. With passenger flights banned, SpiceJet scaled up cargo services, ran repatriation flights for stranded Indians, and even launched an insurance scheme offering test, medication, consultation and hospitalisation cover for Covid-19 patients. Kolkata's Agarwal Industries, which makes cement bags, got into making bags to store grain and dry rations; it added an ultraviolet additive to ensure

cereals are not damaged even stored in open sunlight.

"You are now seeing instances where auto manufacturers are producing ventilators, sanitary napkin manufacturers are producing surgical masks and sugar industries are manufacturing hand sanitisers," NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant told THE WEEK. "There is absolutely no dearth of innovation in India, and going forward, businesses must not only innovate but also adapt to the changes in demand that have been brought about by this crisis."

Then there are companies that reinvented themselves overnight. Mukesh Ambani was probably the busiest man in the past few months, as he sewed up deals left, right and centre. He is in a process of rebuilding the conglomerate that his father, Dhirubhai, built on oil and petrochemicals. The new focus? Digital commerce, with a vengeance.

Yes, there is fear. And yes, there is uncertainty. Yet, one of the many lessons India—and the world—is learning from this pandemic panic is that there is hope, and opportunity. As scientist Raghunath Mashelkar asked recently, "What better way to innovate than in the time of a crisis?"

HYPER-VENTILATOR

Looking back, it is rather funny. In April and May, alarm bells had started ringing as Covid-19 cases started spiking and the country stared at an acute shortage of ventilators. While India's hospitals cumulatively had less than half a lakh ventilators, worst-case scenarios projected that

it may end up with two lakh Covid-19 cases requiring ventilator support. By August, that story had come full circle. A stream of intrepid innovations has now left the country with a problem of plenty. With ventilator production rising from roughly 5,000 per month in March to 50,000 in just a few months, the government had to authorise their exports from August 1.

While the likes of Bharat Electronics, along with Skanray and DRDO, did their bit by churning out 30,000 ICU ventilators by Independence Day, the role of India's auto industry in this dramatic turnaround is no less impressive. After a communique from the heavy industries ministry, auto companies hooked up with ventilator makers.

It soon became clear that the issue was two-fold. With ventilator demand till then limited to big hospitals, there were just a handful of companies making it. The numbers were small and the cost high. The auto companies had more than just the task of production at hand.

MG Motor, for instance, tied up with Vadodara-based ventilator maker MAX to scale up production. MG's plant is in Halol in Gujarat. The collaboration focused on scaling up production by addressing issues in the supply chain, IT system and manufacturing process.

The production capacity was increased five times, to 300 ventilators per month, in the first phase, which was completed by June, with an eventual enhancement up to 1,000 ventilators a month. "We are committed to supporting our country's fight against Covid-19. This collaboration is designed to work towards the common goal of serving the community," said Rajeev Chaba, president and managing director, MG Motor India.

Maruti Suzuki tied up with Delhi-based ventilator maker AgVa to scale up production, source com-

ponents, help in financing and also with upgrading systems. Hyundai collaborated with French company Air Liquide Medical Systems to make and supply hospital ventilators, targeting 1,000 in the first phase. Skoda-Volkswagen used 3D printers to convert snorkelling masks, and use them for surgical procedures. It also helped in manufacturing intubation boxes for doctors as well as mechanical Ambu bags. Mahindra & Mahindra has been even more ambitious, and developed a ventilator that costs just ₹7,500, even while working on developing an automated Ambu bag.

DOCTOR WILL 'SEE' YOU NOW

Dr Joyeeta Basu is precise in her instructions. "Press two fingers down just below your sternum," she guides, as I lie down on my bed. "Do you feel any discomfort, any pain?" she asks, before telling me to do the same on the stomach and lower abdomen. Then she asks me to stick my tongue out, shakes her head and pronounces the golden words that soothe my frayed nerves. "No, it's not Covid," she says. "Seems like a belly infection that sparked off this fever."

A regular day at the doctor's? Not quite. Basu did her diagnosis over a WhatsApp video call, and sent the prescription over email. The payment was done over net banking, though there was an option of UPI as well.

Telemedicine, for long viewed suspiciously by patients and the government as a tech-fangled option that could never replace a hands-on consultation, became a life-saver, as patients and medics finally took to it as the 'new normal'. It is now the boom story of 2020—as per RedSeer Consulting, India's digital health market will jump from ₹9,000 crore last year to ₹33,000 crore this year.

Practo Technologies, one of the leading players in the space, says online consultations went up 500 per

cent since March. Apollo Hospitals' tele-consultations reportedly have gone up three-fold since March; it expects 40 per cent of its consultations to move online in the next three years. Another player, 1mg, had 150 doctors on its platform, but come lockdown, it says 10,000 doctors wanted to sign up!

It also helped that the government changed rules, accepting tele-consultation as an essential service. As per a report by the US-based Centre for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy, India has a shortage of six lakh doctors and 20 lakh nurses. While the

HARVESTING HAPPINESS

Vasudevan Chinnathambi, cofounder of Ninjacart, with a farmer. Ninjacart used its logistics technology to link farmers to consumers in the locked-down cities



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

government operates telemedicine services like eSanjeevani, a part of Ayushman Bharat, it is evident that a rapid scaling up by private operators will speed up coverage.

Practo has been on an overdrive, getting on board more doctors and clinics and training them on protocols, even while launching subscription-based health plans for customers. “For long, telemedicine remained a luxury for many. Today, it’s a necessity. More so for the two-thirds of the country’s population that resides in villages,” said Shashank N.D., cofounder and CEO

of Practo. “Imagine what having access to a doctor on the phone could do to this population!”

HOTEL FAMILIES

Quarantine, which directly translates into ‘40 days,’ turned out to be literally that for Bhima Sankar Raju—that is how many days he got stuck in a hotel when lockdown was announced. An oil rig engineer with GE, Raju was on his way to his hometown, Rajamundhry in Andhra Pradesh, from an offshore oil rig off Mumbai, when he got stuck in transit

in Hyderabad. “Flights to smaller cities were cancelled in advance,” he recalled.

Stuck at the Novotel Hyderabad Airport hotel, Raju slowly adapted to a life in quarantine amid strangers. “I quickly became friends with some pilots and expats who were also stuck,” he said. The hotel tried to keep its quarantined guests engaged with a novel concept—guests were given a patch in the hotel’s herb and vegetable garden to tend, to pass time playing ‘farmer’.

“They guided us, and we spent an hour every day tending to ‘our’



garden,” Raju said. “It was quite satisfying, it kept us active and made us cheerful. And now I feel like there is a part of me in a corner of that hotel forever.”

From ‘DIY kits’ of restaurant-grade ingredients, discount vouchers that could be redeemed in the future and social media gigs and cooking classes, big hotel chains left no stone unturned to engage their patrons, despite being pummelled in the first wave of the pandemic’s aftermath.

“The pandemic gave us an opportunity to innovate and engage with our consumers through newer avenues,” said Kerrie Hannaford, India head of Accor, the world’s second largest hotel chain which runs brands like Novotel, Fairmont, Ibis and Sofitel. Many hotels put on their thinking hats trying to figure out how to ride it out, ranging from offering

properties as Covid-19 treatment or isolation facilities, as well as giving packages for ‘work from hotel’ for those tired of hibernating in their apartments.

Many hotels tried to make up for the guest restrictions for weddings by throwing in packages for a honeymoon stay for the couple. While the Sarovar group actively courted MNC executives who were forced to leave their company guest houses, the Taj group came up with packages like 4D and Urban Getaways for guests who want staycations.

FIRST DAY, FIRST SHOW

Over-the-top, or OTT, the web-based streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, have consistently maintained their buzz factor over the past year or so. Yet,

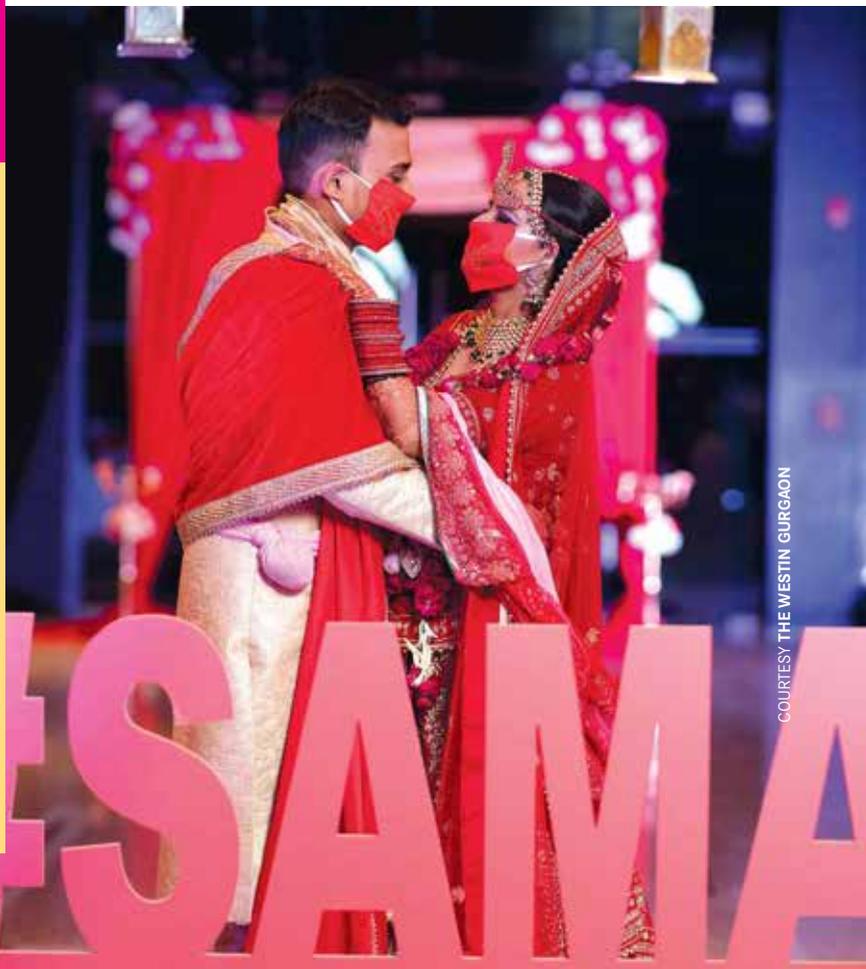
even by this measure, their lockdown innovations were truly over the top.

Take Disney+ Hotstar, the OTT market leader, for instance. ‘First Day First Show ki home delivery’ was the ambitious tag line it gave to premiering an array of Bollywood films, skipping the traditional modes that normally preceded an OTT appearance, like theatre release, DVD and satellite TV telecast. With cinemas across the country shut down for the fifth month running, it could not have been better timed.

“People want pictures, and they are locked up at home. There are only 52 weeks for movie releases. So we thought, why not use the pandemic to create a big, big alternative world of a virtual, private theatre in everybody’s homes,” said Uday Shankar, chairman, Star & Disney India. Disney+ Hotstar’s plan is to premiere

Innovative service delivery

SAKSHI AND MAYANK JAIN had to shift their wedding from the Doon valley to The Westin Gurgaon because of Covid-19. The couple said the hotel ensured that they had an “elegant engagement and an intimate ceremony”. Rahul Puri, multi property general manager at the hotel, said that apart from the standard safety measures, guests are offered contact-less valet, mobile check-in and check-out, key-less entry, QR code menus and digital payment options. All hotel staff wear PPE kits and housekeeping entry into rooms is negligible/minimal, unless specifically requested. Puri said that the wedding segment had remained resilient and is helping the recovery of hotels. “We hosted 60-70 weddings events (in two properties) from June to August,” he said, adding that there is round-the-clock attention on health and safety. “The focus has shifted from aesthetic cleanliness to clinical cleanliness.”



COURTESY, THE WESTIN, GURGAON



Indian industry has met Covid-19 challenges

BY UDAY KOTAK

Managing director & CEO, Kotak Mahindra Bank, and president, CII

To battle the coronavirus outbreak, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 25, with relaxations since June 1 when the first phase of unlocking began. This helped buy time to create the necessary health care facilities for the emergency situation. Ensuring business continuity became critical as the lockdown severely disrupted business and economic activities.

The government took quick decisions to cushion the shock by providing regulatory relief, additional credit and supportive measures for poor households. Many industry suggestions for business continuity from CII were addressed in the policy announcements. At the same time, to deal with the impact of the lockdown, Indian firms changed their business models significantly.

The first order of the day was to ensure the safety and health of employees. CII brought out operating protocols for different sectors, and businesses put in stringent procedures overnight. Secondly, health care products such as masks, PPEs and ventilators were the immediate requirement. CII put together a coalition of member companies and partners to fast-track production, which helped to quickly create new capacity. It was notable that while the market for ventilators numbered 8,500 in 2019, by July, production had been ramped up to 50,000, with most components sourced in India.

Enterprises that had to defer their physical operations with social distancing becoming a norm shifted their operations online and implemented work from home (WFH),

wherever possible. The transition to the WFH model, in fact, yielded positive results, as this ensured business continuity in a cost-effective manner, improving quality and productivity for most organisations.

As the lockdown was relaxed, organisations instituted precautionary measures to ensure safety at workplaces. These included, among others, sanitising workplaces at regular and frequent intervals, staggered work shifts, ensuring physical distance between workstations

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It was notable that while the market for ventilators numbered 8,500 in 2019, by July, production had been ramped up to 50,000, with most components sourced in India.

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and limiting visits of clients and customers. Arranging transport and provision of housing facilities, wherever possible, were also undertaken by many business enterprises.

Sensitising employees on Covid-19 and its spread through awareness sessions, and encouraging hygiene practices such as frequent hand-washing, use of hand sanitisers and wearing face masks continue to be carried out. Apart from instituting health and safety measures in their own premises, many companies also formed medical task forces to assist medical preparedness of hospitals, in terms of quarantine centres, isolation wards, doctor training and medical logistics.

Innovative health apps and thermal screening devices promoted safety in workplaces by enabling health check-ups and regular monitoring of employees. Digital technology also helped in the delivery of goods and services and provided a major boost to e-commerce businesses.

Interestingly, companies also came forward in large numbers to support their communities during this trying period. They provided medical and food kits, as well as cooked food to distressed sections of society. Several companies even imported equipment for free distribution. CII converged efforts and helped reach out to 80 lakh beneficiaries in various ways.

With a focus on digital technology and innovations, the Indian industry has risen to the many challenges brought about by the coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown. ①

Bollywood films that could not make it to theatre due to the lockdown, one every Friday. This includes big ticket titles like Sushant Singh Rajput's last film *Dil Bechara*, *Laxmmi Bomb* (Akshay Kumar) and *Bhuj: The Pride of India* (Ajay Devgn).

Going by economics, it makes sense to most filmmakers. The longer they wait for theatres to open, the bigger is the interest burden on their investment, not to forget the ever-present threat of prints being leaked on the internet. There were also worries that once cinemas open, the prized slots will be gobbled up by releases from big production houses and A-list stars, leaving other films at a disadvantage.

For a movie going straight to OTT, the money paid by the platform forms the biggest chunk of its revenue, followed by satellite and audio rights. But it also saves on the massive promotional and distribution costs a theatrical release would have incurred. Of course, this would mean that the



JOINT VENTURE

Rajeev Chaba, president and managing director, MG Motor India, at the Auto Expo early this year. MG Motor tied up with Vadodara-based ventilator maker MAX to scale up production

GUEST COLUMN



Respond, reset and reconsider

BY SURESH NARAYANAN *Chairman & managing director, Nestlé India*

Covid-19 is not just a health challenge, but also a humanitarian call to redefine the way in which humans live, engage and work innovatively. Food companies need to leverage their in-depth knowledge of food habits, nutrition, quality and safety in order to innovate and also adapt to this new normal.

There has been an increase in

in-home indulgence as a way of seeking small pleasures, and consumers are experimenting with new cuisines and cooking styles. Alongside this, Covid-19 has also led to enormous concern about nutrition, quality and safety of brands and products among consumers. The kind of nutrition a brand seeks to offer and its trustworthiness have become key parameters of a

consumer's choice.

To cater to the rise in in-home indulgence, Nestlé India introduced a 'Maggi - Cooking Made Simple' service. It was made available through our website and it brought forth the most popular recipes from across the country. Different recipes and master classes with Milkmaid and Nescafé were also held to engage with



SANJAY AHLAWAT

makers will never find out if it could have been a ₹100 crore film or bigger, but producers call it a 'risk-free deal,' especially for an off-beat or non-superstar film.

For streaming platforms, too, movies are what 'mega soaps' were to satellite TV. The average time spent by OTT subscribers went up from around 20 minutes to an hour, as per reports. And, with more than 40 OTT platforms, the competition is also rife. This is where movie premieres come in.

Unlike satellite TV channels that buy rights to a film and then recoup it from selling ad space during the movie telecast, OTT players depend on subscription. Having a line-up of new films and serials—particularly premiering movies directly on the platform—becomes a USP to increase the subscription. That most subscription packs are annual, or renewed automatically, helps the platforms to retain the subscriber for a longer period.

While the powerful distribution-multiplex lobby is not exactly thrilled, for the

film industry, there is no other option. Even if the government greenlights the opening of movie halls, surveys show that a vast majority of the public would still be wary of going to cinemas.

But for OTT, it is another step in its upward trajectory. "If we can beam films on the 50 crore smartphones in this country... it is going to make the industry much, much bigger," said Uday Shankar. "We should not see this as a short-term tactical compromise, we should see this as a big leap. It is not an 'either' or 'or' question, it is a multiplier." The only issue, as actor Varun Dhawan quipped, would be, "popcorn *khud banana padega!* (one needs to make one's own popcorn)."

CLEAN KINDLY LIGHT

A few hours before Prime Minister Narendra Modi put India into a lockdown on March 24 midnight, a bunch of entrepre-

consumers during the lockdown. AskNestlé2.0, an intuitive mobile website, provides real-time and personalised advice on nutrition that is balanced, relevant, scientifically derived and can be customised for the audience.

Clearly, the e-commerce journey is here to stay and there will be re-calibration of channels. Going forward, consumers are going to be more digitally active than they were, and food companies with a strong digital-first capability are the ones that are going to hold the consumer's interest for a long time. Nestlé India's Milo rolled out a workout video that offers advice on simple exercises that parents and children can do together at home. Milkybar 'Play Eat Learn' digital campaign launched a series of simple DIY ideas and Munch partnered with Star Network to launch a campaign which celebrated the confidence and spirit of many

young Indians and their families during these testing times.

Companies need to focus on three Rs—respond to the new demand, reset their defining relationships with consumers, and reconsider their product portfolio in the post-Covid era to make the product healthier while also allowing consumers to make a pleasurable and indulgent choice.

To ensure smooth supply of our products, Nestlé India provided its own transportation and manpower service to suppliers who were impacted, and facilitated direct procurement of ingredients. We also adapted alternative formats of packaging.

We have stood by our nearly one lakh dairy farmers and have ensured that every drop of milk they gave us has been taken into our factory for processing. Similarly, we continue to work closely with our coffee farmers and spice growers,

and extended our support to numerous farmers in Karnataka by sourcing substantial quantity of tomatoes from them through our suppliers to ensure there is no distress.

At Nestlé India, the safety, well-being and security of our people will remain paramount in our minds. Each of us has had to embrace new and different ways of working in terms of "work from home" and has been subject to stresses, fears and anxieties never experienced before. We are sensitive to the human and emotional needs of our employees and have rolled out numerous 'virtual' engagement programmes, training programmes, mental health initiatives, 'check-in' programmes with youngsters who live alone or far from home, and free advisory calls with accredited doctors in India and abroad on queries pertaining to Covid-19. ●



Hospitality sector will bounce back with the help of tech

BY MADAN PRASAD BEZBARUAH

Former secretary, ministry of tourism, and secretary general, Hotel Association of India

It is a no-brainer that the pandemic has impacted the travel and hospitality sector worldwide. The Indian hospitality sector alone is looking at a revenue loss to the tune of ₹90,000 crore in 2020. Having said that, the industry is showing resilience, and is innovating constantly to ensure its survival and subsequent revival in a post-pandemic environment. Known globally for their high levels of service, Indian hotels are rapidly changing and evolving their business operations to meet the changing guest requirements in the new normal.

Customised service with a quality

personal interface has been the guiding force in securing a high degree of customer satisfaction. This is in stark contrast to what is called for in the altered times that dictate minimal contact. How will the industry reinvent in the times of social distancing when it comes to providing accommodation, creating food and beverage experiences and conducting events. In my mind, the industry will do it effortlessly. An industry that has taught associates to smile while talking to the customers on the phone will quickly adapt. In fact, hotels already have changed, some with greater ease than others.

In the past, hotels have been using technology at the back end to support personalisation of services. The same technology will come to the front of the house and be more visible and, in fact, replace or minimise human contact while providing services. Apps help customers to self-check in and check out. Guests can view rooms remotely prior to booking/checking in. A repertoire of culinary experiences can be home delivered through mobile apps. QR codes can replace menus in guest rooms and restaurants. Bio-bubbles and corridors have been created for complete sanitisation. Hotels are

neers and innovators in Bengaluru went into a huddle. The men at Log9 were mostly working on nanotechnology and new energy solutions like fuel cells. But that day, they had a more pressing problem.

“We were facing problems in our own houses in sanitising stuff,” said Akshay Singhal, founder & CEO of Log9. “That’s when we realised there should be something which helps us sanitise objects much more easily and with complete assurance.”

Their solution? The CoronaOven, which uses ultraviolet rays in the wavelength of 253.7 nanometre, a threshold at which germs and bacteria lose their infecting capabilities. It can be used to sterilise anything from a quart of milk to jewellery to gadgets.

There was already scientific research that proved that UV light at this wavelength could kill coronavirus which caused SARS back in 2002. Singhal and his team adapted the technology with other parameters and made it easy to use by launching it in a microwave-like format for public use within two weeks of lockdown. “We also realised there was a dire shortage of PPE kits and masks in the country and if you can use this to sanitise them and use them longer, it would help,” he said.

“From idea to dispatch, we were quick, despite the lockdown requiring permissions for movement and manufacturing,” said Singhal. Considering the lockdown restrictions, the team tried a mix of institutional sales or sales through public service

organisations, as well as through e-commerce platforms like Amazon and 1mg. It is also available on the Central government’s e-marketplace. The oven has 10 variants, with the smallest one retailing at ₹11,000.

ICMR-empowered Central Scientific Instruments Organisation’s (CSIR-CSIO) certification proved to be a shot in the arm. Bengaluru’s Indian Institute of Science (IISc) is jointly working with the firm to carry out further research and optimisation. The technology’s adaptability is perhaps its greatest strength—while the microwave-shaped product fits household purposes, variants include the tunnel installed at the Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru to sanitise airport trolleys and a handrail sanitising format

making increased use of AI devices. They are integrating voice technologies like Amazon Echo and Google Home with their services to offer customers a wide range of services while dramatically reducing personal interactions.

Many hotel chains are also in the process of deploying digital technologies which will enable the increased use of interactive smart tables that can help guests to punch in their dining requirements, change table-top food presentations and pay the bills. AI-enabled technology will also aid access to guest history to facilitate personalised service.

Robotics, too, will help achieve a higher level of hygienic service. Technology savvy hotels are already in the process of automating standardised food production assembly lines on the lines of flight catering to promote reduced physical contact. There will be an increased proliferation of digital display technologies. RFID badges and augmented and virtual reality-based product and service displays will replace talking. 'Socially distant service' and 'minimal contact service' are the new mantras for the industry. 📍

for airport escalators. For Ola cabs, the team came up with a device which can be attached to the roof of the car to sanitise interiors between rides. "A car can be sanitised in two minutes," said Singhal.

REAPING THE BENEFIT

Ninjacart, the business-to-business (B2B) fruit and vegetable supply chain company, faced a unique prospect when the pandemic hit. On the one hand, it was faced with a sudden drying up of business as cities went into the lockdown. On the other, it found its suppliers, farmers across the heartland, left with millions of tonnes of veggies rotting away.

When the farmers sent out SOS messages, the company had to do

Spinning a new yarn

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

When India went into the first phase of the Covid-19 lockdown in March, a pall of gloom descended on Tiruppur, the knitwear capital of India, which was already suffering from the aftershocks of demonetisation and the implementation of the goods and services tax. But it soon found an opportunity in the crisis, by focusing on technical textiles such as face masks, personal protective equipment (PPE) and coveralls.

"Initially we produced it for the district's requirement [following a request from the district collector]. Now we are supplying across the country," said Raja M. Shanmugam, president of the Tiruppur Exporters Association. Nearly 150 factories now roll out a million pieces a day.

"We have got bulk orders for 20 lakh fabric masks, which can be re-used. These are different from surgical masks. We have also designed affordable and reusable two-layer masks for the general public," said K.G. Ganeshan, partner of Swell Knit, a textile unit.

PPE for doctors and frontline workers is also in demand, said Gopinath Bala of SVS Advanced Fabrics. "We have launched a fabric

for coveralls, cubicle partition fabrics that can be used in hospitals and coveralls with breathable fabric for doctors and nurses," he said. It manufactures five types of coveralls and surgical gowns that are antimicrobial and antiviral and can be subject to multiple industrial wash cycles. "Bulk orders will come once the government allows exports," said Gopinath.

Chennai-based initiative Defend and Protect have come up with masks capable of neutralising viruses. "Our HeiQ Viroblock NPJ03 is among the first textile technologies in the world to be proven effective against Covid-19," said Bharat of Emcee Apparels, a member of the initiative. The fabric comes from Taiwan and the chemicals to neutralise the virus are from Switzerland. The three-layer mask is self-sanitising, reusable, breathable and hypoallergenic.

"Textile industry is our biggest job creation platform," said Prabhu Dhamodaran, convener of the Indian Textpreneurs Federation. "With the world looking for products from outside China, I feel we should look into diversifying our products and ensuring cost competitiveness." 📍

WORK IN PROGRESS

Defend and Protect masks being made at Sreekumar Textind Corporation in Chennai



something. “While the supply side was a challenge, there was a hit on the demand side, too,” said Vasudevan Chinnathambi, cofounder of Ninjacart. “Though vegetables and fruits were part of essential items and allowed, city markets were not active in many places, and there were restrictions on how much we can sell. In some places, markets were moved to other locations.”

For Ninjacart, it was clear that it had to develop a whole new system between the B2B model it had, with a direct link between farmers and consumers. The solution was ‘Harvest the Farms’; the company used its logistics technology to link farmers to consumers in the locked-down cities. “We identified vegetables in excess supply as well as those going unharvested within our farmer networks,” said Chinnathambi. To handle the last mile, Ninjacart roped in Swiggy, Zomato and Dunzo.

After running the scheme till the end of July, Ninjacart is now back to its original B2B model, with orders back to the pre-Covid-19 level. “We did it purely as a problem-solving exercise,” said Chinnathambi.

GENIES ON BIKES

When the pandemic brought its food delivery business to a grinding halt, restaurant aggregator Swiggy unleashed the Genie. Simply put, the Genie hyperlocal service is like a *dabbawalla* on steroids, where delivery agents pick up and drop off anything and everything. From a home-cooked meal for a health care professional on duty to a birthday gift for a dear one you cannot meet in person, Genie was a quickly-thought-of and executed idea, and the quick adaptability made the difference.

“The pandemic presented businesses with a rare opportunity to reinvent and build solutions that are needed and aligned to ground realities,” said Vivek Sundar, COO,

Swiggy. “We have dealt with several unprecedented challenges to keep essential services operational for customers in need, and, at the same time, made a diverse range of offerings available to them through partnerships.”

Genie, which was scaled up to 60 cities in no time, was not a one-off. The pandemic also prompted Swiggy to aggressively pursue its plans to deliver grocery and essential services, something which was till then treated as an afterthought to its restaurant delivery model. Besides tying up with FMCG brands like Unilever and ITC and supermarkets, it also partnered with some 100 hotels and premium restaurants to deliver curated meals to customers.

To wash it all down, Swiggy also tied up with some state governments for home delivery of alcohol. Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal used the service. Swiggy hired a tech firm to develop artificial intelligence face recognition for the mandatory age verification, which compares a government ID with an uploaded selfie. “Alcohol e-commerce is an effective way to comply with physical distancing norms, which is the new normal across the globe,” said Amar Sinha, chief operating officer of liquor maker Radico Khaitan.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Before the lockdown, zoom was the function of a camera lens. Today, it is both a verb and a noun, with a plethora of terms like ‘Zoom bombing’ and ‘Zoom shirts’ lighting up the trend-o-meter. Blame it all on the video call phenomenon.

It is not like video calling and conferencing facilities did not exist before the pandemic. Yet, as most of the world retreated into the four walls of their homes, video calls and webinars suddenly became our only link to the outside world—and a semblance of life as ‘normal’ as it could be.



MAN AND THE MACHINE

Krishnan Nambiar, CEO and founder of Vanora Robots, with the UV robots

The harbinger of this video call revolution was Zoom, an app that has been around from 2013, but saw its popularity skyrocketing as a world in quarantine turned to it for anything from school lessons to office conferences to even friends and families catching up with each other. The statistics say it all—Zoom went up from one crore video calls a day to 30 crore in just three months, with Indians making up a significant chunk of it.

“Life after Covid-19 is going to be different,” said Sameer Raje, Zoom’s India head in a recent interview. “People are going to change the way they do business, the way they travel, the way they interact. It’s going to be more and more of a virtual world.”

But do not think Zoom is going to have it easy. As if its security travails (the home ministry even released an advisory restricting official meetings on Zoom), links with China (probably stemming from its big operational team in the mainland as well as the fact that its founder is a Chinese-American) and the flak it had to face due to its deal with Facebook were not enough, it faces tough competition from the likes of Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams and Google



Bot vs virus

Robotic devices that disperse type C ultraviolet rays are solving the hassle of disinfection

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

In April, Krishnan Nambiar, Mangaluru-based robotics engineer, got a call from the district hospital in Kasargod. The hospital was desperate for an efficient, unmanned device that could disinfect its premises, which was teeming with Covid-19 patients. Nambiar, CEO and founder of Vanora Robots, was in his hometown, Kanhangad, during the lockdown and took up the challenge. His team got into action, and in nine days, the hospital got a disinfecting robot that would disperse doses of type C ultraviolet (UVC) rays, which can destroy the cell structure of SARS-CoV-2 and a host of other pathogens.

The robotic platform developed by Nambiar's team was lauded by his patrons as it provided a safe and cost-effective alternative to chemical disinfectants that were expensive, time-consuming to use and left behind a chemical residue.

"The hospital used to spend about

₹30,000 every day on personal protective equipment (PPE) to disinfect the wards," said Nambiar. "But the robot made the process quick and safe as it works as a land-based drone, is agile and moves on specially designed wheels. It is remote controlled (with inbuilt camera and sensors) and can be operated by a technician. It runs on two car batteries." Nambiar worked as an architect in Scotland before obtaining two masters degrees in robotics from England. After his return to India in 2015, he developed robotic platforms for filmmaking and inspections.

"The challenge was to devise a technology to disinfect rooms and surfaces while keeping the UVC light within safety levels as overexposure can be dangerous," said Nambiar. "Our platform has UV controllers that work on artificial intelligence." Vanora Robots is roping in local artisans and fabricators for its product development and production.

"Our UV robot was priced at ₹3 lakh, as it had expensive components," said Nambiar. "By chipping off some of the components, we were also able to develop an affordable model—a robotic tower, which is mobile but not remote controlled. The unit can disperse pre-determined doses of UVC rays in an area marked for disinfection. We began to provide disinfecting services to homes and offices with the UV tower. We also came up with a UV chamber to disinfect keys, files, parcels and documents."

Disinfection will be a key requirement at schools, colleges, hospitals, metro stations, supermarkets, gyms and homes in the days to come. And UV technology has been a saviour of sorts to meet this need. Nambiar says that the UV chamber is being used to disinfect suitcases and files of VVIP guests in seconds. An eye hospital in Udupi is using UVC in operation theatres—instead of chemical fumigation—after every procedure so that more surgeries can be performed in a day.

"UV towers weigh less than 10 kilos," said Nambiar. "Cinema halls can save time [by using these] and have more screenings. The UV chambers come handy in schools to disinfect schoolbags, at check posts and police stations that scrutinise documents, and at apartment complexes when receiving parcels." 📍

Meet, as well as WhatsApp, which promptly updated the messaging app to double the number of participants in a video call.

A spate of Indian apps is also in the fray, hoping to grab an ‘*atmanirbhar*’ chunk of the trend. The most famous among them all is Mukesh Ambani’s JioMeet, an app that aims to steal not just Zoom’s thunder, but its lightning and showers, too, with a host of features that promise to outdo Zoom, like no time limit, HD audio and participants up to 100. Not surprisingly, Zoom cried foul, alleging that JioMeet was a clone. Other contenders include Say Namaste and Airtel’s Blue Jeans app.

TOURISM REIMAGINED

Nivedita would have probably termed it ‘unimaginable’ if you had told her in the second week of March—while she was on an experiential tourist visit to Orchha—that flights, resorts, parks and tourist spots would be shut down worldwide in a few days. Orchha, a town in Madhya Pradesh which boasts a palace resort and a music festival as its main attractions, is among a string of tourist centres the leading travel and lifestyle writer and blogger would call her natural habitat. Little did she know that Orchha would be the last of her jaunts in the foreseeable future.

Nivedita has, since the lockdown

started, been cooped up in her Mumbai pad, wistfully re-posting images from her earlier outings on her social media feeds, wondering when her virus-enforced grounding will end. After posting the lockdown de rigeur photos of food dishes, gardens and views from balconies, she went back to what she does best—writing about the places she visited. Only this time, it was memories, or as social media hashtags it, #throwback. “Memories of a wonderful time come flooding in,” she wrote on a post of a tourist attraction in Italy that she had visited recently.

If travel writers and influencers are feeling the angst, the pain is more exacerbated and pretty existential when it comes to the travel and tourism industry. Analysts say the leisure industry will be back on its feet a long time after things limp back to normal, most probably only after a global vaccination drive.

But you have to give it to their ‘best foot forward’ optimism. Tourism boards and other ancillaries of the travel and tour industry have adopted a digital route to ensure they remain relevant. The Maldives government actually kicked off a tourism campaign in April, even as most of

the world went into various modes of quarantine. The only difference—they billed it ‘Visit Maldives Later’.

In fact, ‘Travel later’ or ‘Dream now, visit later’ have been popular hashtags used by tourism boards, travel agencies and sites on social media, as people across the world remained indoors. The lockdown has also seen the more intrepid of them getting mighty creative.

The tourism board of Vienna, for example, shared access links on the internet that would help users take a virtual tour of the city’s famous palaces and museums, aptly titling it ‘armchair tourism’. In fact, virtual tours virtually came into their own, and today there is no limit to the sights and sounds you can partake in at the click of a button—from checking out masterpieces at The Louvre in Paris to visiting a winery in South Africa.

Kruger National Park has used drones, balloons, remote cams and even guides on foot to bring out a live online safari for viewers across the world, including a real-time interaction with a game ranger!

Many state tourism boards have run campaigns on Instagram and other online channels on the themes of ‘don’t travel now, so you can tomorrow’. Nearer home, an agency associated with Kerala released a video of a Kathakali dancer greeting visitors and using a hand sanitiser. The message, it seems, is clear. 📌

ONLINE SHIFT

Big-ticket films that have moved on to Disney+ Hotstar for a digital release





MR FIX IT

Shekhar Wig started WIG Garage during the pandemic. He repaired and returned some 70 cars across Mumbai

Startup, shake up

These young entrepreneurs have twisted and tweaked their business ideas to suit Covid-19-influenced lifestyles

BY SNEHA BHURA

Shubham Khurana is a “swimming pool designer”. The 24-year-old says his Delhi-based family has been in the business of constructing swimming pools for 25 years. But that is not the only credential he has. This self-avowed gin-lover started off a passion project to create his own brand of the alcoholic beverage also called ‘mother’s ruin.’

He tried 40 different recipes with multiple botanicals over two years. It was in the 14th or 15th recipe that he added hemp seeds, which he would often buy while on a Keto diet. Once he tasted the concoction, he knew he was on to something. Now, GinGin, set to launch in Goa by August end, is India’s only single-shot distilled ‘hemp’ gin. A play on the Italian word CinCin that means “cheers”, the homemade gin will be bottled in a sleek, rectangular slab of glass. And with a name that is as straightforward as it is unapologetic. “How many people will know Tanqueray and Bombay Sapphire are gin brands? This will straightaway let people know what it is,” says Khurana.

The spirit—comprising nine botanicals like lavender, rosemary, cinnamon and butterfly pea flower—is very much a lockdown baby. Khurana was supposed to import a full gin distillation still in February to prepare for an April 15 launch. He had been importing most of his botanicals from Italy. Instead, the lockdown scuttled all import plans to make him truly “*atmanirbhar*” (self-reliant). He built his own column still and all his botanicals are now sourced from Himachal Pradesh. “This is the first-ever gin to be made in an India-made still,” says the single-man team behind GinGin.

It was Orson Welles who said, “The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.” At a time when small businesses are getting pummelled, some lifestyle startups are using the crisis as a launchpad, fully aware that the rules are changing every week. Forced to

twist and tweak their ideas in a pandemic, these entrepreneurs are banking on innovation to thrive amid uncertainty.

Their products represent slivers of opportunity presented at a strange time when logistics and transportation are as unstable as they would be during natural disasters. And social media is the most convenient marketing tool to reach millions glued to their devices more than ever. With no offline events and publicity pyrotechnics, the limited resources can now be poured into making more refined, thoughtful products.

For example, there is Altered TV, which could prove to be a boon for artists, musicians, promoters and event managers, because going out for a live gig is now fantasy-fiction. Created by Mumbai-based music and entertainment company Gently Altered, the live-streaming platform helps the performing arts community make use of a sleek interface that replicates the dance floor or a big party with a stage. Done in collaboration with a French ticketing company, they have been curating their 'telecasts' for the last two months, hosting close to 70 artists who have attracted about 750 people each time.

Whereas Facebook or Instagram live-streams encourage compulsive scrolling, a dedicated platform like Altered TV ensures the viewers stay longer. There are multiple stages, a built-in video conferencing space to meet your friends while watching the live show and a chat room to meet others. "It is inspired by how a dance floor works. Or how when you go to a party, you mostly stick with the ones you know while also meeting a few others you don't," says Gently Altered's founder, Nishant Gadhok. "There is also an after-party room for when the show is over."

Treadmills, cycles, cross-trainers, cameras, washing machines and microwaves, you can rent all of these on Sharent for as limited a time as six hours. Founded by three friends from Amity University in Noida who could not afford home essentials in their undergraduate years, they struck upon an interactive

THREE CHEERS

(Clockwise from right) Shubham Khurana with his homemade GinGin; Altered TV is a live-streaming platform that makes use of a sleek interface that replicates a dance floor or a big party with a stage; team members of Sharent, an interactive rental service



Consumer behaviour in terms of live-streaming has changed and we want to ride that wave.

Nishant Gadhok, founder, Gently Altered



rental service idea which could trump major players in this space. "People do not have the purchasing power right now," says Pritam Bhattacharjee, one of the co-founders. "So, if you have two cameras at home and you are not using both, you can lend one through our platform. You are also earning passive income. We want to be the Swiggy and Zomato in the renting space."

Bhattacharjee recognises the challenge that he has—to build a community which can really trust each other. "When I was moving out of Delhi, I had to sell a fridge I got for ₹8,000 at



₹2,000, even though I used it only for a year," he recalls. "With Sharent, we want to tell people that you don't [have to] sell your goods out on OLX, rather rent it out with us so you can not only earn from it and recover the original amount but turn your depreciating assets into income-generating ones. We are an asset-light model, we don't keep any inventory with us. We don't own any of the products, we are just facilitators." The company will go live in September.

From baby products like strollers and bassinets, Bhattacharjee has included houses also into his quick-fix rental mix. "The pandemic made us stress on quality and hygiene," says Bhattacharjee. "Also, with people losing jobs, we were able to onboard some quality professionals, which would have been difficult otherwise."

But what about when the Covid-19 struggle has passed? How relevant or resilient will these companies born out of adversity be? For Gadhok, hosting concerts, festivals, parties and shows on his platform is not a short-term, opportunistic plan. "Consumer behaviour in terms of live-streaming has changed and we want to ride that wave," he says. "Later on, when events start, live-streaming will be a complementary aspect. It will not replace the live experience but add to it. Imagine how feasible digital festivals would be for people unable to travel all the way."

It is not just about emergency breakdowns. Quality, pricing and loyalty will ensure longevity for Covid-19 biz-kids, like Mumbai-based, Delhi-raised Shekhar Wig likes to think. An accident lawyer, his heart

lies in repairing cars. As a teenager, he used to spend his evenings after school in his father's Maruti-authorized service station in Delhi, observing and learning from the mechanics there. And as an adult, he would hone his skills in garages and workshops in Mumbai after work in the High Court.

But he could only take a real crack at servicing cars in a pandemic. In May, a senior journalist sought help on social media to get her vehicle repaired; a friend of Wig tagged him in the post. While the journalist had found help by the time Wig responded, others noticed how Wig was ready to go anywhere, anytime to fix cars. The requests started pouring in.

"Some were like, 'I have not been able to take my car out since March.' Some were waiting to drive their cars 2,000km to their village or hometown. Some wanted it fixed for medical emergencies. I was completely taken aback by the response. That is when the idea of WIG Garage was born," says the 39-year-old, who has repaired and returned some 70 cars from Maruti to Mercedes across Mumbai. He uses an Instagram page that he started at the insistence of close friend and renowned film producer Guneet Monga.

WIG Garage's business plan is to fix cars while clients stay home. So, Wig picks up faulty cars from housing societies and makes sure they never come back to his garage for the same problem. "I smell the engine of a car from a distance. When I touch the silencer or hear the sound of transmission, I know exactly what is wrong with the car," says Wig. He has had many run-ins with the police during the lockdown, who have stopped him at barricades and check posts, often towing away a client's car. But such are the perils of the job. "This is *sewa* for me like you have them in temples and gurdwaras," he says. "It is a joy for me when people return home in such trying times in cars fixed by me. It is a happy moment." 🍀

JACKSON ARATTUKULAM



DREAM TEAM
Sebastian with wife, Lincy (right), and coworkers at Infopark Cherthala, Kerala

JOY SEBASTIAN, 44, wears many hats. When he is not at his office in Infopark Cherthala, an IT park in Kerala’s Alappuzha district, Sebastian helps out at a people’s hotel in the neighbourhood, mentors students at the local library or takes classes on palliative care in local panchayats.

Sebastian was in the news recently as the developer of India’s own videoconference app—a next-generation alternative to the popular Zoom (made by a US company that has workforce and servers in China). Sebastian’s Techgentsia Software Technologies won a national competition organised by the Union information technology ministry for developing a world-class videoconference app, a crucial service during the pandemic.

Sebastian’s Vconsol outsmarted products from 1,983 companies, including topnotch IT firms like HCL and Zoho. Apart from winning ₹1 crore as prize money, Vconsol also bagged the contract to provide videoconference solutions to all Central institutions for the next three years. “The trials have already started and every government institution will be able to use it soon,” said Sebastian.

Vconsol can support up to 80 active and 300 passive participants simultaneously with minimum bandwidth, providing good audio and video quality. “The government’s demand was for 18 active partic-

ipants, but we could offer a more capable product,” he said. Vconsol has addressed all security concerns and has all the features available on Zoom’s premium variant.

Sebastian said the jury must have selected his product as it married sound technology with the best security features. “I was sure about the quality of my product, but not so much about my presentation skills,” he said. He should know. Job interviews were always a big headache for him. “I would always clear the writ-

ten tests for campus selection. But I always lost out in interviews because of my poor English,” said Sebastian, who hails from a family of poor fishermen in Alappuzha. “I did my schooling in Malayalam medium, in government schools.” He got his first job after an interview board allowed him to talk in Malayalam. “Luckily, they valued my knowledge and skill sets over my English,” he said.

Sebastian keeps this in mind while hiring. “A majority of my 65-member team have rural backgrounds. They may not speak polished English, but they are the best, technologically,” he said. “Vconsole is a software filled with the qualities of the countryside.”

Sebastian attributed his success to the good-heartedness of those around him. He grew up in a one-room house built by the government. He now lives with his wife (a high school teacher), two kids and his parents. He is also grateful to Kerala’s public education system. “If there were no good government schools or colleges, people like me would never have dared to dream high,” he said.

Sebastian’s motto is—help those in need. After his big win, one of his Facebook friends asked if he would still be able to help out at the people’s hotel. “I will always be there,” he replied. “This award may have changed the profile of the company, but I will not allow it to change my life.”

APP ON TOP

Vconsol, India’s answer to Zoom, is endowed with the qualities of the countryside, says the man behind it

BY CITHARA PAUL



Assets, imagined and real

The dystopian world of artificial intelligence that we imagined would unfold in the future is already here. Or, at least a hybrid version with humans and AI working together, but where humans are not always in control. One “enemy” spawning and spinning this dystopian world is the global financial market, says San Francisco-based internet guru Tim O’Reilly. “The market is on its way to becoming that long-feared rogue AI, enemy to humanity, a machine that its creators no longer fully understand,” he said. Problematically, the financial market is disconnected from the real economy of goods and services that it was originally created to support. An example of this disconnection is the stock market rally and Apple’s astronomical \$2 trillion valuation in the midst of an economically devastating global pandemic.

The “market”, nicknamed “Wall Street”, does not factor in livelihoods, indebtedness, inequalities, pollution or resource depletion. Predator Wall Street preys on High Street for profit and productivity. Says O’Reilly, “We are engaged in a battle for the soul of this machine, and we are losing.” How the global financial market evolved into an AI-accelerated web is testimony to humans imitating nature. We, instinctively, associate AI with robots. But, an AI ecosystem is similar to a forest’s biosphere, our brain’s neural networks or our gut’s microbiome comprising the vast ecology of interconnected microorganisms. Billions of humans store and share information every second on the internet, creating a technology-assisted global human-machine hybrid brain. We now live in the womb of this AI ecosystem. This collective super intelligence is designed, directed and amplified by algorithms. More than 50 per cent of the stocks are now traded by algorithms because humans cannot compete with its speed. The time advantage of a high-speed trader is one millisecond. Says best-sell-

ing author Michael Lewis, “It takes 100 milliseconds to blink. So, this is a fraction of a blink of a human eye. But for a computer that’s plenty of time.” High-speed trading and complex investment instruments such as derivatives (that caused the 2008 global meltdown) pull financial markets beyond human grasp and control.

Says O’Reilly, “Financial capitalism became a market in imaginary assets, made plausible only by the Wall Street equivalent of fake news.” The market’s destructive power is also demonstrated by the prioritisation of shareholders over workers, consumers and communities. Experts say the compulsion to increase share price above all else has hollowed out the mainstream economy.

Economics professor William Lazonick notes that over a decade, Fortune 500 companies spent 86 per cent of their \$3.4 trillion profits to buy back shares and give dividends to shareholders, leaving only 14 per cent for reinvestment in the company. Workers are now a cost to be eliminated. Over the past 50 years, the share of wages to GDP fell from 54 to 44 per cent, while

corporate profits rose from 4 to 11 per cent. But the algorithm is servant, not master. It fast-tracks its creators’ intentions, which are driven by altruism or greed. AI accelerates benefits and inequalities, profits and losses. The legendary GE boss Jack Welch was an ardent advocate of this shareholder capitalism. By 2009, he had changed his mind, calling it “a dumb idea”. By then he had retired with a fortune of \$900 million. It was “dumb” because growth slowed. Companies had to buy back stocks to increase share price and create the illusion of growth to conceal the stagnation. Real growth improves people’s lives. So now, fake news in politics complements fake growth in economics. Perhaps, it was farsighted to call this tool artificial intelligence.





Happy feet again

Travel industry goes all out to woo domestic tourists with short stays and road trips

BY SNEHA BHURA

FOR MONTHS Smitha Suhas had been looking forward to her 15th wedding anniversary on June 24. The Bengaluru-based software engineer wanted to travel somewhere outside the city. The lockdown played spoilsport. But then she read about LuxeCamper, a motor home service. More commonly called a recreational vehicle in the west, the campervan is a compact 200sqft vehicle where you can sleep, cook, play or take a shower all the while zooming past golden fields, rivers and forests. With queen-size beds, kitchenette, microwave, shower, toilet, a lounge to laze in and a motorised canopy for a snooze in

the sun, one need not check into a hotel. Right in the middle of a pandemic, Suhas found the snappiest chariot to ferry her homebound family out of the drudgery of online classes, work calls, cooking, cleaning and doom-scrolling.

“The week we were supposed to leave, there were new cases in our apartment building. But that did not deter us. Social stigma was more of a problem than the fear of Covid-19, so we did not tell anyone about this trip,” says Suhas. She picked Bheemeshwari, which is about a four-hour drive from Bengaluru. For ₹53,000, Suhas booked the caravan

for three days for her family of four. The campervan picked them up from home at 6am on June 18. The driver’s cabin was completely segregated from the guests’—only four guests allowed at a time. Parked outside the lodges of Bheemeshwari Adventure and Nature Camp, Suhas and her family kayaked, took coracle rides, ziplined and huddled around a bonfire. They were the first travellers on LuxeCamper, which has now completed around 25 trips in Karnataka, from Bandipur to Kabini, Hampi and Kodagu. Monuments, museums, wildlife safaris and national parks have been thrown open to visitors



LAVNEET GYANI



FUN SPACE

Lavneet Gyani (above, centre) with friends on his way from Delhi to Citrus County farmstay in Punjab for the Independence Day weekend; Gyani's family and friends at the farmstay earlier to celebrate his wife's birthday

in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Some five water bodies like Chilika Lake and the Mahanadi in Odisha now work day-cruise services. The Archaeological Survey of India has reopened some 820 monuments, including the Taj Mahal. Virtual heritage walks and tourism webinars are encouraging people to rediscover their states.

From #IntezaarAapka to #InterzaarKhatamHua, the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board is using social media to tell people that service providers are ready to welcome visitors again, with hotels and restaurants allowing 50 per cent occupancy to ensure better social distancing. "For now it boils down to road travel. And our location is our biggest advantage—right in the middle. We are surrounded by five to six big states," says Yuvraj Padole, senior tourist officer at Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation. While there are no quarantine restrictions, travellers will be checked for a Covid-negative

certificate while entering the state. "Even if you don't have one, we will do the thermal screening. If there are symptoms and if you inform us, we will offer all the help to get you medical aid," says Padole. The state has specialised travel plans for visitors from other states, including

While guidelines differ from state to state, **inter-state travellers will be checked** for e-passes, symptoms and temperature at border checkpoints

A few states have made it mandatory to have **Covid-negative certificates** prior to arrival

Many states are now **doing away with the quarantine rule** as people are mostly travelling for shorter durations

While most hotels are back in business, **only 50 per cent occupancy is allowed** in many hotels to maintain social distancing

16 weekend trails across categories of adventure, heritage, nature, spiritual and wildlife tourism.

In Himachal Pradesh, an RT-PCR test certificate, done 72 hours ago, is mandatory at border checkpoints along with e-pass registration and hotel booking proofs. All hotels are open for business, but a minimum five-day stay in the same hotel is the norm for now. While Rajasthan is not receiving any foreign tourists, domestic traffic from Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh has picked up, says Alok Gupta, principal secretary in the tourism and devasthan department of Rajasthan. "We did not see tourists in June. July has been better, occupancy in resorts are picking up," he says. "We recently started a social media campaign—Short Stay Safe Stay and Dekho Apna Rajasthan—inspired by the Dekho Apna Desh webinars of the ministry of tourism."

With air travel arrangements with the US, France, Germany, the UK, Canada, the UAE and Maldives, globetrotters in India can start making plans. But as of now, there is truly a case for slow, hyper-domestic, conscious DIY travel. This kind of itinerary requires planning, a sense of responsibility and an irrepressible urge to be on the road again. Have a car? Or, a touring-optimised motor-



VACATION ON WHEELS

Smitha Suhas and family booked the LuxeCamper to Bheemeshwari, Karnataka

cycle? It is time to hit the trail, pound the pavement and walk the tracks.

“Travel and tourism was the first sector that got affected by the pandemic and it could be the last one to come out of it,” says E.M. Najeeb, senior vice president of the Indian Association of Tour Operators. “But travel will revive gradually with new practices after this period.” Health protocols will be faultlessly followed by all verticals, he says. “Touchless travel has already been introduced by airlines and hotels. There will be greater demand for domestic travel to quieter locations with perfect health protocols and memorable service,” he adds.

For filmmaker and photographer Lavneet Gyani from Delhi, car travel has proven to be the best option. On July 14, he celebrated his wife’s 40th birthday at Citrus County farmstay in Hoshiarpur in Punjab. He and his family, which includes a dog, started from Delhi for their seven-hour journey with a few friends. Stopping for *chai-paani* at a *dhaba* or a restaurant along the way was out of question. “We did not even buy a bottle of water on the way. We carried adequate provisions of our own. We only stopped for the dog to take a walk,” says Gyani. At the border, they pro-



There will be greater demand for domestic travel to quieter locations with perfect health protocols and memorable service.

—E.M. Najeeb, senior vice president of the Indian Association of Tour Operators

duced e-passes, and were randomly checked for symptoms and temperature. And since the party was going for less than 72 hours, they did not have to show a Covid-negative certificate. “Once you get used to this new normal, it all gets very easy. At Citrus County, the owner has not allowed his staff to step out of the premises through the pandemic. He does the shopping for the kitchen with all the safety and sanitation protocols. In fact, he delivers their food to them,” says Gyani, who took a biking group to Citrus County for the Independence Day weekend. He plans to travel to Ladakh next month.

With travellers seeking a more isolated experience, big heritage hotels

are struggling to manage costs. Occupancy is picking up, says Siddharth Yadav, vice president of operations at Narendra Bhawan, a boutique hotel in Bikaner. “It is about 30 per cent now,” he says. “In a normal year, it is 60-65 per cent.” Most guests now, he says, prefer to stay in rather than explore the city. “Our worries are just that we are not going to see any other form of business—the weddings and parties are all going to be curtailed,” he says. “The large chunk of business is totally wiped out.”

Chitra Raghavan, a Bengaluru-based lawyer and hobbyist photographer who went for a two-week trip to The Bison in Kabini with her partner in June, has always sought out smaller properties with lesser people around. Safety protocols apart, travelling is still the same for her. “There is a realisation that the more you are at home, the less precautions you are taking. So you might as well be outside and be taking more precautions. In my building, I see people who are not wearing masks or maintaining social distance,” says Raghavan. “There is a false sense of security in an apartment where you think you are safe. You might as well go and enjoy yourself.”



■ INTERVIEW

Prahlad Singh Patel, *Union minister of culture and tourism*

Day trips and weekend travel are gaining popularity

BY SENHA BHURA

How has the Dekho Apna Desh webinar series helped in the revival of domestic tourism?

Recognising the fact that revival in the tourism sector will be largely spearheaded by domestic tourism, focus is being given to domestic tourism and towards this end, the ministry of tourism is arranging a series of webinars under the theme of 'Dekho Apna Desh'.

A total of 48 webinars were held from April 14 to August 15 and these were well received by the travel industry, students and the general public. The webinars have seen participation from over 60 countries other than India and we have had over 2.30 lakh participants....

With the setting up of air travel bubbles with countries like the US and France, how soon do you think international travel will pick up pace?

Opening of domestic flights was the first major step in restoring connectivity. The ministry of tourism is working closely with the ministry of civil aviation. The Vande Bharat flights have been a great success. I had a very fruitful meeting with our civil aviation minister on August 13. We discussed refund policies, flight plans, helicopter services and better use of Khajuraho, Imphal, Dehradun for international [flights]. I am sure the ministry of civil aviation will take a call on adding more countries as air bubbles. There have been no foreign tourist arrivals yet.

What changes have you seen in domestic tourism?

As the 'unlock' process has started, domestic travel has started resuming slowly. People are exploring their neighbourhood attractions through self-drive holidays. Day trips and weekend travel are gaining popularity. A few states are encouraging people to travel and explore their own state....

Safety and hygiene will be the primary concern of people while planning their travel.... With this objective, we have released a set of operational guidelines for hotels and other accommodation units, restaurants and tourism service providers like tour operators, travel agents and tourist taxi operators....

This change has taught the tourism industry the need to enable training and develop programmes for its employees to help them innovate and organise, so as to pioneer a new and better model of business which, in the future, will be able to withstand any crisis.

How is technology being used to revive tourism in India?

We are using social media with an objective to have a conversation with travellers. Building a bond beyond pure marketing of the destination, the ministry is actively using its social media handles on all platforms since the end of March more aggressively....

Furthermore, the ministry has introduced 24/7 chat bot interface to assist

tourists for better planning and quick query resolutions. Also, the website has been assisted with Adobe solution suite to effectively engage with visitors across web and social media platforms. The real-time analytics features help to understand the tourists' demographics and in profiling visitors better.

In view of the pandemic, the ministry developed a microsite— strandedinindia.com—to help foreign travellers stranded anywhere in India.

The ministry has also revamped the Incredible India website.... It is also fully responsive with mobile devices....

Are rehabilitation efforts being planned for job losses in the travel industry?

The situation we are facing today is mainly because of the sudden fall in demand for travel not only in India but also globally. The government of India announced the Atmanirbhar Bharat package, which is primarily aimed at rebooting the economy.... The package has provisions for collateral-free automatic loan for businesses, including MSMEs.... The definition of MSMEs has been more inclusive by doing away with the distinction of services and manufacturing MSMEs and introduction of the additional criteria of turnover. About 70 per cent of tourism units come under MSMEs. A large segment of tourism service providers are expected to benefit under these provisions. 📌

Recovery in international air travel slower than expected

BY ABHINAV SINGH

David Lim has been overseeing India operations for Singapore Airlines since April 2016. A Singaporean, Lim graduated from the National University of Singapore and has spent more than three decades with the company, in various capacities within passenger and cargo service operations. His overseas assignments have spanned across cities such as Berlin, London, Hong Kong, Copenhagen, Zurich and Tokyo. Singapore Airlines, which recently completed 50 years in India, is undergoing challenging times because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The airline suffered a net loss of \$815 million in Q1 of FY21. Conditions continue to be gloomy for the aviation sector in India and globally. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, Lim talks

about the challenges for the airline and the road ahead. Excerpts:

What has been the scenario in the airline segment, especially with regard to your operations from India, since the Covid-19-induced lockdown started?

The nationwide lockdown in India coupled with the imposition of the international flight ban brought all domestic and international commercial passenger flight operations to a standstill. However, with the country slowly opening up, we have revived our cargo operations and are currently operating passenger aircraft carrying cargo to and from India. However, the global aviation scenario is still highly uncertain as there is no clarity about when travel restrictions will be eased and international



COVID COST

The pandemic's impact on the global airline industry

Total losses
\$84.3
billion

Demand (RPK*)

↓ **54%**

Flights cancelled
(Jan-Jul)
7.5
million

According to reports, airlines such as Emirates, KLM, British Airways, Lufthansa and AirAsia have laid off or plan to lay off employees

KLM suffered a loss of around
€800 million in the first half of the year

IAG, parent company of British Airways, posted an operational loss of

€4,037 million (Jan-June)

*RPK: Revenue passenger kilometres is the distance travelled by paying passengers

SOURCES: INTERNATIONAL AIR TRANSPORT ASSOCIATION, KLM, IAG AND MEDIA REPORTS



borders will start to open up. Pre-Covid and before the international flight ban was imposed in India, the SIA group, which includes Singapore Airlines, SilkAir and our low-cost arm Scoot, offered over 140 weekly services from India to Singapore.

What about your relationship with Tata Sons regarding Vistara? How is that relationship growing and where does it stand today?

Vistara is a strategic investment for us in India, which is one of the world's fastest growing aviation markets. We remain committed to our relationship with Vistara.

What measures have you taken to deal with the situation, including cost optimisation measures?

Currently, SIA is operating at about 7 per cent of passenger capacity compared with January. We will continue to adjust our capacity to match the demand. We have also deferred non-essential expenditure projects and imposed tight controls on discretionary expenditure and are in negotiations with aircraft manufacturers to try and adjust our delivery stream for aircraft orders placed in the past.

Additionally, our senior management has proactively taken pay cuts since March 1, with pay cuts of 20-35 per cent from April 1. Directors have also taken a 30 per cent cut in their fees to show solidarity with the management and staff. Further measures include varying days of compulsory no-pay leave every month for pilots, executives and associates, as well as furlough for staff on re-employment contracts. These measures have been taken in addition to a hiring freeze, voluntary no-pay leave schemes and an early retirement scheme.

What is the current status of your operations? A major chunk of your traffic is to the



SIA is operating at about 7 per cent of passenger capacity.



Our senior management has proactively taken pay cuts.



We remain committed to our relationship with Vistara.

US and Australia from India?

This remains a highly challenging time for the Singapore Airlines Group. While there are some bilateral moves to create travel bubbles or green lanes, their impact on air travel and the pace of any recovery in demand remains highly uncertain. Globally, Singapore Airlines and SilkAir have increased the frequency of selected services in their passenger network in August, September and October, and reinstated flights to Cebu, Istanbul, Milan, Perth, Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Taipei. By the end of October, the group's passenger capacity will reach approximately 8 per cent of its pre-Covid-19 levels.

By when do you see a revival happening?

The recovery trajectory in international air travel is slower than initially expected. Industry experts, including International Air Transport Association and International Civil Aviation Organization, have continued to revise downwards their projections for the recovery of global passenger traffic in the near term. Industry forecasts currently expect that it will take between two to four years for passenger traffic numbers to return to pre-pandemic levels. Progress towards global lifting of border controls and travel restrictions, which could facilitate or result in the easier movement of people between countries, is slower than earlier expected. As a result, international passenger traffic remains low. 

To read the full interview

Visit www.theweek.in





Sima, the unlikely celebrity

Like many others, I was most reluctant to watch *Indian Matchmaking* on Netflix. Till my daughter Anandita forced me to give it a shot. Once I started, I could not stop! And the only reason I stayed hooked was to see more of a 57-year-old woman named Sima Taparia. She was the superglue that held this enterprise together. In India, we have traditionally accepted the concept of an arranged marriage. It has worked for centuries, and is likely to work for a few more—if marriage itself lasts. We are a *shaadi*-obsessed nation, and no matter what the counter-narrative, we continue to endorse ‘official’ match-making as one of the ways of finding ‘suitable partners’. No wonder then, that Sima has acquired a cult status, not just in India but across the world, after the mega success of the show. Despite the jeers, memes, digs and taunts about her views, Sima has converted a 15-year-old hobby into a highly lucrative business model today. And the wonderful thing is that she remains pretty untouched by her newly-acquired celebrity status.

How do I know? I met her over high tea hosted by Mumbai’s St Regis Hotel, with a hand-picked group of her admirers. Covid-19 protocol was firmly in place, as excitement mounted in the swanky suite. It was as if the curvaceous Kim Kardashian and not a pleasantly plump happy Marwari housewife-turned-star was about to walk in. Believe me, when she entered, there was applause! There she was, dressed and groomed like she appears on camera—and, equally relaxed as she got introduced to awestruck invitees, her well-dressed husband Anup by her side, smiling broadly, proudly taking in the warm response to his wife.

I jokingly told Sima, “All of us are willing to ‘adjust’, ‘compromise’ and ‘be flexible.’” These are the key words and instructions Sima sprinkles during her

show. A show that now attracts fans from across the world. Over *garam chai* and cupcakes, we chatted like old friends, even though we had just met. That is the thing about Sima—not only is she comfortable in her own skin, she makes everyone else around her feel the same. Sima is a natural. What you see is what you get—no tricks. It is this precise trait that works big time on camera, since the show is unscripted—she walks in blind when the door opens and takes it from there.

Sima herself received over 3,000 biz requests after *Indian Matchmaking* aired. At the moment, she is processing just 135 of those, and says disarmingly that she is unable to take on any more. Today, she has enquiries flooding her website from as far away as Nigeria.

Sima states flatly that she sticks to a ‘certain status’ and does not take on any and every client. Recently, she shared a post that went viral about her own arranged marriage at age 19. But her story had a charming, romantic twist! One can sense the rapport and closeness between husband and wife as they exchange

glances and communicate non-verbally, with enviable ease. Sima’s forthrightness and candour are her trump card. My daughter Avantika mentioned her divorced-with-children friends, who are interested in starting again. Would ‘Sima Aunty’ consider such alliances? Sima’s prompt reply, “Why not? There is a market for them also.” I told her to consider gay matches, given the ever-growing segment for same-sex *shaadis*. Sima paused for a few seconds. It was something she had not thought about or attempted so far. I kept pushing, “See the numbers... tell your producers. It’s all about inclusivity these days.” I showed her a text message from a gay friend: “Please ask Sima to find me a *rishta*.” She smiled, “Why not? There is always a special someone for everybody.”



A new Pakistani show reveals the **dark underbelly of Karachi** through four women out to expose cheating spouses

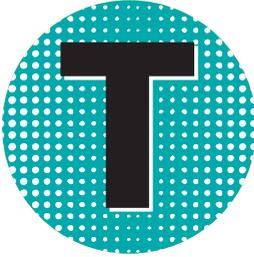
BY MANDIRA NAYAR

BADASSES IN BURQAS

FOUR MUSKETEERS

(Clockwise from front)
Sarwat Gilani (in white),
Yasra Razvi, Nimra Bucha
and Mehar Bano





here is a new superhero cape: the burqa. Not in the trademark black, but in colours of summer fashion—fuschia, fire engine red and tangerine. If Spider-Man has his mask to fight his crusade, the Churails from Karachi have their own version of the justice brigade.

Streaming on ZEE5, the Pakistani show *Churails* has stirred up a mini revolution. Sassy, funny, dark, disturbing and addictive, the 10-episode show is replete with strongly etched characters and a story that stays with you much after the show is over.

Welcome to Karachi 2020—a place of sprawling bungalows, beautiful women, politicians, cheating husbands, greed, drugs and the seamier side of a modern metropolis. Asim Abbasi, director of the film *Cake* (2018), about the relationship of two sisters, is now back with a hit web series.

Churails brings together four women who turn their personal battles into an all-out war for justice. There is Sara (Sarwat Gilani), the perfect wife who discovers one night that her husband has sent messages from LA to Larkana; Jugnu (Yasra Rizvi), a wedding planner estranged from her family and a socialite who is never far from her hip flask; Zubaida (Meher Bano), a young aspiring boxer with a conservative father; and Batool (Nimra Bucha), who murders her abusive

husband.

The show cuts across class and privilege to show different faces of Karachi. There is love—not the usual romance—and there is anger. “It is female fantasy,” says Bucha. The four get together to start a boutique—Halal Fashions—which is a cover for a detective agency to expose cheating spouses, offering the enticing promise of, “*Mard ko dard hoga*” (Men will feel pain). The women of Karachi who lavish money on “lawn and *zewan* (jewellery)” choose instead to spend it on finding out the truth about their partners. Think *Scandal*, but with burqas instead of Olivia Pope’s gladiator outfits.

In one episode, the English professor Uncle Ifty tells Jugnu condescendingly, while pouring out a generous glass of wine, “You have got a thing about notions. The notion of wanting more, being more, deserving more. This has got inside you and reason flies out of the window.” This rebellion and the need to be seen—a powerful and universal emotion—lie at the heart of the show.

Churails is also about friendship and camaraderie—real and authentic. The bond between the women is palpable. “We have become such good friends now,” says Bucha. “Playing out the script at rehearsals brought us together. The script touched our hearts so much that it shook us. I think that, in the end, what was happening to us as actors onscreen was happening to us behind the scenes—this aspect of sisterhood being the real and final family.”

There are many reasons for the show not to have become the word-of-mouth hit that it has. It is Pakistani—a word that in India provokes hostility, especially in the past few years. It is about women getting their own back, written in the post #MeToo



world. There is violence, mostly by women. Zindagi TV had to stop telecasting Pakistani shows post the Uri attack. Yet, these are possibly the very reasons that the show, currently trending on Twitter, works. It also works because it is not peddling love, but something more powerful—a combined sisterhood. It is like the thrilling discovery of Pakistani actor Fawad Khan all over again.

What helps is the flawless and pitch-perfect acting. Whether it is the charming, flippant and privileged Jugnu, who yet has depth, or the young, impulsive and determined Zubaida, each character has grit, which, helpfully, the women have in real-life, too. “We have all dealt with

The show is a peek into a **different side of Pakistan**, where women drink, plot, curse and smoke up.... It is a fascinatingly different world—one that has **never really been part of** popular culture.



**KARACHI
CONFIDENTIAL**
A still from *Churails*

rage,” says Rizvi. “If you look at it, we are kind of the underdogs. Underdogs have a little bit of rage. We are women who have been very vocal about equality and feminism in our own countries—all aspects of it.”

The show is also a peek into a different side of Pakistan, where women drink, plot, curse and smoke up. Not since *Moth Smoke*—the Mohsin Hamid book full of forbidden love, drugs and crime—has there been such an awakening. It is a fascinatingly different world—one that has never really been part of popular culture.

Unlike the more refined *tehzibdar* (civilised) world of the shows that, in the past, have become cross-border hits, *Churails* does not offer the

comfort of gentle romance wrapped in eloquent Urdu. There was a time when scratchy, borrowed VHS tapes of Pakistani plays were consumed over weekends—*Dhoop Kinare* (1987) with the original McDreamy, Dr Ahmer, *Tanhaiyaan* (1986-2011) and *Ankahi* (1982), after which the character of Sana (Shehnaz Sheikh) became the favourite of a whole generation of young girls in India. “There are people who have pointed out, this is Pakistan? It does not look like Pakistan,” says Bucha. “But neither of us (India or Pakistan) has seen each other in that way. We have not had

a close look at each other. We have only seen what cinema or television have shown us. It has shown us what, I feel, has been stuck in a time warp. It is not really us.”

Abbasi crams everything into his Karachi. A transgender character, a socialite who marries a “negro”, gay love, the secret parties and forbidden encounters of the rich, powerful and the privileged, cheating and abusive husbands—all come together to create a complex and addictive show. It is a whole universe, and it is easy to resort to stereotypes, but the strength of *Churails* is that it never dissolves into tokenism.

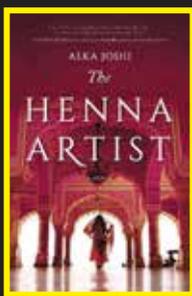
“It is a Pakistani story,” says Bucha. “We complain that we don’t tell our story. Here we have, and that is why it has created so much noise. It has created many ripples because truth can do that.” What is compelling is that these women are not just Pakistani like the earlier plays, there are flashes of them in each of us. “I think the series shows parts of us which are real,” says Bucha. “But because you have not seen us, it seems like we are from another planet. We are more similar than we are different.”

Just like for the actors, for the viewer, too, the show is an incredibly satisfying and freeing experience. “It liberated me as an artist at so many levels,” says Rizvi. “I am a woman who has spent all her life fighting and working for myself to have a voice in not only this society, but also this country and this industry. I am now beginning to think that there are many like me who do not choose to voice themselves. So maybe I should make something autobiographical, which will give them strength because they know it is not a work of fiction.”

For others, there is the rumour of a sequel. 🗨

A
thrilling
ride

BY ANJULY MATHAI



THE HENNA ARTIST

Author: Alka Joshi
Published by MIRA

Price ₹310

Pages 368



Reading *The Henna Artist* is like travelling in a car that is going at just the right speed. At times, author Alka Joshi stops to point out sights and scenes on the way.

At other times, she revs up the story and you find yourself on a thrilling ride to an unknown destination. And that is the best part. Just when you think you know where you are headed, Joshi takes a turn that leaves you completely in the lurch. And you are left thinking: “Wow, I did not see that coming.”

The book is about a fiercely independent and ambitious Brahmin woman, Lakshmi, who runs away from her village, husband and parents, to an entrancing life in 1950s Jaipur as a henna artist to a posse of high-society ladies. She paints her way into their innermost secrets, making herself indispensable to them. Everything is going well until, years later, her husband comes looking for her, along with a sister whose existence she was unaware of.

It is admirable how carefully Joshi has developed her characters. She says that, before writing the book, she thought a lot about what made them the people they are. “Why do they take one action as opposed to another?” she asks. “What must their family dynamics have been like? What do they think about when they are alone?” The central force of the book is, of course, Lakshmi herself. She is beautiful, intelligent and vibrant. But she is also occasionally calculating and manipulative—acting dumb or playing one of her ladies against the other—and that lets Joshi avoid the banality of perfection in her protagonist.

Lakshmi’s character was inspired by Joshi’s mother. Joshi’s parents’ marriage was arranged by their families in 1955, when her mother was 18 years old. They married after having met each other once. Her creative, hard-working mother instilled in her a sense of freedom and a belief that she could do anything and be anyone she wanted to be. That made her wonder what her mother herself would have been if she had the same freedom. “What would she have done for a living?” asks Joshi. “How would she have spent her days? What sort of people would she have interacted with? So I invented Lakshmi, a woman determined to live life on her own terms.”

Joshi, of course, lives in a world far from the exotic one of bustling bazaars and fairy-tale palaces that she has created in the book. When she was young, her family immigrated to America from Rajasthan. She did her BA from Stanford and MFA from California College of Arts in San Francisco. It was her husband Brad, whom she married at the age of 37, who got her thinking about writing. While she was learning creative writing, her mother and she would travel back and forth to Jaipur so that her mother could reconnect with her roots. “Little did I know these trips would also reconnect me with mine,” says Joshi. “*The Henna Artist* became my MFA thesis, and then, almost 10 years after I began writing it, it was published by MIRA/HarperCollins.”

The book received rave reviews and was the May pick for actor Reese Witherspoon’s book club. Buoyed by its success, Joshi is now working on a sequel, *The Royal Jewel Cinema*, which will be out in July 2021. In the meantime, get a copy of *The Henna Artist*, and sit back and enjoy the ride! 🎯



It is difficult to condense a life in 173 pages. Yet, Isher Judge Ahluwalia, one of the first women in India to become a leading economist, a largely male-dominated field, does exactly that. Crisp and insightful, *Breaking Through: A Memoir* is essential reading for every woman who dared to dream. Her memoir comes a few months after her husband, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, released his book.

Breaking Through chronicles the last of the Delhi School of Economics generation to remain

“aloof from politics... the last products of the Nehruvian consensus to which Indian intellectual life subscribed.” The rise of Naxalism and the Emergency ensured that the generations later would be more political. More importantly, it is an account of a woman who stepped into the male bastion, whether it was in Presidency College, where Isher was one of the four women out of 24 in the class, or in DSE or even when working at the International Monetary Fund.

What is also interesting is that the iconic partnership of the two blue turbans of Indian economic reform—Manmohan Singh and Montek—began with her. The two men met through Dr Udham Singh,

head of Khalsa college, who had offered Isher her first job and was close to her all his life. “At that point, in 1970, Dr Udham Singh had been someone who had greatly encouraged and helped me in my career. We had no idea that the gentleman he had introduced us [to] would play a much larger role in Montek’s career in the years to come,” she writes, of their first meeting with Manmohan.

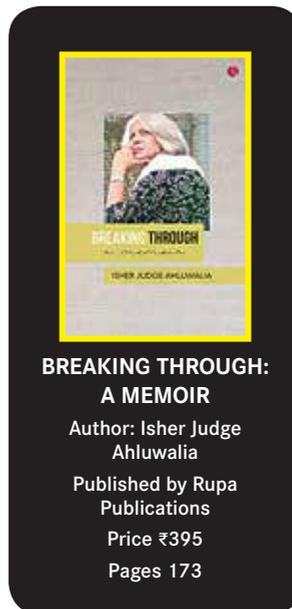
Isher narrates an incident when she was called by the prime minister’s office and offered the position of economic adviser in the ministry of industry in the 1980s. The 39-year-old had no desire to work with the government, so she went to refuse the offer in person. When she reached, she was told that she was too young for the post and could instead be deputy economic adviser. She turned it down, but not without telling off the

special secretary to the prime minister. Montek, she pointed out, had been offered the job when he was 36. And she added that she had a PhD from MIT while he did not have one.

It is this spark that shines through the book. Determined as a girl, Isher was one of 11 children. She did not come from privilege, learnt English much later and could pursue her studies only because she got scholarships, including at MIT. Attending Presidency College was a battle as her father was against coeducational institutions. Isher conquered it all, and later turned around the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, a leading economic think-tank.

She shares her thoughts about the slowdown under the UPA government and how she felt Manmohan appeared to have lost control of his government. “On many occasions, I wondered why the PM didn’t just resign. His continuance in office in an under-performing government was eroding his own legacy. I never said this to Gursharan [Kaur, Manmohan’s wife] or Dr Singh,” she writes.

But more than just the political, she is also honest about the personal. Isher talks about her courtship and the challenges of being a mother. The book was completed, she writes, as she was losing her ability to read and write on her own as she fights her last battle with cancer. 🕊



Mismatching elements

BY REKHA DIXIT



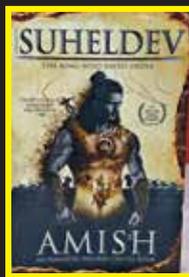
Suheldev, the king who slew the Turk Salar Masud in the Battle of Bahraich in CE 1033 has been, in recent years, resurrected from his part historical, part legendary oblivion. In a country where the history of battles is always about the brave local hero that loses to the superior invader, Suheldev's is that one story where one can proudly get vocal for local.

There is not much in historical texts about him, except in the Persian *Mirat-i-Masudi*, ironically, a hagiography of Masud. However, in recent times, many communities have tried to appropriate the non-Kshatriya ruler. Amish has, therefore, freely fictionalised his latest book. It allows him to play with history, and introduce a range of imaginary characters. There is not much to complain about this literary approach.

The problem with Amish's latest offering

is the writing. When he wrote his *Shiva* trilogy, the narrative was fantastic, even though the writing was rather plain. This time, he has used Immortal Writers' Centre to script his story, sharing credit with the group of writers. Despite employing so many writers, or rather because of them, the storytelling has suffered.

Worse, the story is narrated in a language replete with present-day imagery and wordplay, which is jarring when telling of



**LEGEND OF SUHELDEV:
THE KING WHO SAVED
INDIA**

Author: Amish

Published by Westland
Books

Price ₹399

Pages: 352

events from another age. You have a character who "briefly considered doing a few rounds of Surya Namaskar", another who says, "Guilty as charged," and yet another who says, "Careful is my middle name." The funniest is when the hero talks about his "subaltern caste". Not that one expects the author to write in an archaic language, but it helps to use a vocabulary more fitted to those times, or maybe even created for that. That is how George R.R. Martin created a fantasy world of *Game of Thrones*.

Another problem with this offering is that it is jingoistic and, like Bollywood stories of the 1970s, has characters with mandatory roles. The devout Muslim who saves temples, for instance. Or the woman warrior who steals the hero's heart, but refuses to marry him for the good of his career. They also keep talking about India, even though the idea of India had not even formed by then. One could try and ignore these irritants, but every so often there are more jarring notes.

The book will have its loyal readers. It may do good business, too. However, for the reader who likes to lose herself in words and visualise a landscape built entirely from them, this book is a disappointment. Amish says he has too many stories to tell and not enough time to write them, thus the Writers' Centre. But, should the stories suffer in the haste to tell them? ❗



CINEMA

Dreams come

Shabana and Baba Azmi fulfil their father's wish to shoot a film in his village

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

A long time ago, poet and lyricist Kaifi Azmi asked his cinematographer son, Baba Azmi, whether a film could be entirely shot in his village, Mijwan, in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh. Mijwan being a tiny village at that time, with no infrastructure and few resources, Baba could only



RAHUL GAJJAR

PAYING TRIBUTE

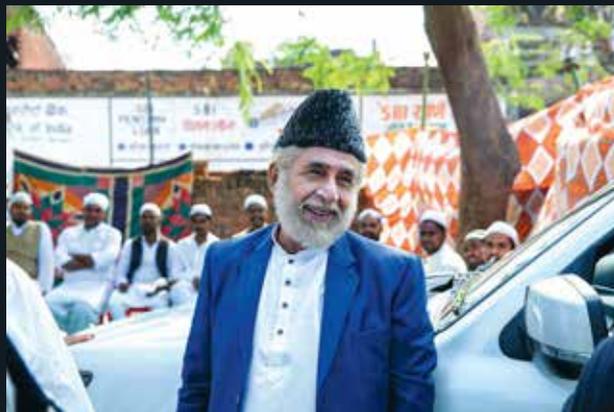
(Clockwise from above) Shabana Azmi; Naseeruddin Shah in *Mee Raqsam*; director Baba Azmi with actor Danish Husain (in black kurta)

that change might not occur in your lifetime,” said her father. “But you must have the conviction that if you carry on working with all sincerity and dedication, then change will occur, even if it does so after you are gone.”

Shabana has taken forward the work in the village and is delighted with the fact that there are no more child marriages happening in Mijwan as well as in the neighbouring 40 villages. “That, to me, is a huge change,” she says. “It is a change in mindset. It is much richer than any number of buildings or infrastructure that can be created. Transformation is a long process, especially when you are dealing with a society that is [determined] to hold on to its identity.”

According to her, art could play a major role in creating counter narratives and bringing about transformation, despite it being attacked and subjected to unnecessary censorship. And one of the counter narratives in the film is the decrying of toxic masculinity. “Through [the character of] Salim, we are redefining masculinity that in these times stands for muscle power and *dadagiri*,” she says. “But why cannot masculinity be about support, sensitivity and encouragement?” She finds it delightful that more men are playing roles that are redefining conventional masculinity—whether it is Husain in *Mee Raqsam*, Kumud Mishra in *Thappad* (2019) or Pankaj Tripathi in *Gunjan Saxena* (2020). “[Earlier], it was such a privilege to be a man in a patriarchal society,” she says. “Now, the women’s movement is redefining privilege and giving women equal status, because of which these [progressive changes] have started permeating our art and our society.”

m
true



shake his head. But in 2019, Kaifi’s birth centenary year, Baba fulfilled his father’s dream through the film *Mee Raqsam* (I Dance), directed by him and produced and presented by sister Shabana Azmi. It is a beautiful film about dreams, about a father-daughter relationship and about India’s composite culture. After nearly a hundred programmes conducted across the world to celebrate the centenary year, the film’s *mahurat* on the poet’s birthday felt like a “completion”.

“It is a film talking about the values that Kaifi *saab* has held dear— whether it is empowering

the girl child, encouraging children to pursue their dreams, celebrating pluralism, or standing up against obscurantism. It was the best tribute we could have given him,” says Shabana about the film that revolves around Maryam (Aditi Subedi), a Muslim teenager who has recently lost her mother and wants to learn *bharatnatyam*. Perhaps the girl’s aspiration might have been acceptable in another place and time; but right then, there were too many naysayers, including her extended family and almost the entire Muslim community led by Hashim (Naseeruddin Shah).

It is her father Salim (Danish Husain), a humble tailor, who stands by his daughter’s choice without caring about the brickbats.

Shabana remembers how, when her father’s NGO, Mijwan Welfare Society, worked for the upliftment of the girl child, it was not smooth sailing. Once she asked him if it was frustrating to “work for change which does not occur at the pace that you want it to”. His response was something that Shabana has held close to her heart since then. “When you are working for change, you should build into that the possibility

Up beat

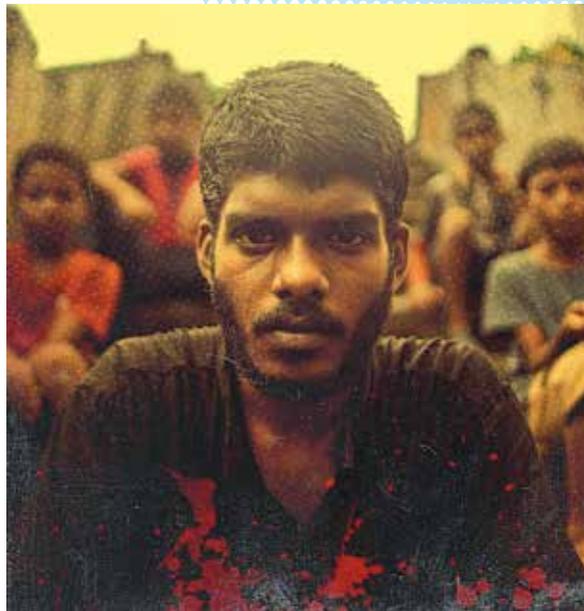
BY NIRMAL JOVIAL

FOR RAPPER Hiran Das aka Vedan, everything he sings is political. His politics, which stems from his upbringing in an unprivileged colony in Thrissur, Kerala, carries the wounds of systemic marginalisation that his people have faced for centuries. So, when he released *Voice of Voiceless* in June, it became the most viral political rap in Malayalam ever. His words, “*Kannil kaanatha jaathi matha verppaadu, yuganagalayi thudangi iniyumenne vettayadu* (Caste and religious divides that you choose not to see have been hunting me down the ages)”, made the usually bubbly Malayali social media users stop and listen.

“I have faced casteism in my life,” says Das. “Though I talk about communities from Kerala, the song is about everyone who faces casteism. Those who ask, ‘Where is casteism in this country?’ are blind about this massive problem around us.”

A few weeks after the release of Das’s song, another Malayalam hip-hop number broke the internet. Written and sung by actor-rapper Neeraj Madhav aka NJ, and produced by Arcado, Panipaali (Messed Up), became an overnight sensation. Panipaali’s success rode on its funky beats and fantasy elements. The song’s comic book-style video has already earned more than 1.8 crore views on YouTube (as on August 26). “The song talks about the distorted sleep schedules of the youth,” says Madhav. “I intended to keep it commercial, and at the same time,

After years of neglect, Malayalam hip-hop is making its way into the mainstream with strong themes



stay true to the hip-hop genre.”

Madhav is known for his acting and was in the recent Amazon Prime Hindi series *The Family Man*. However, his rapper persona, NJ, was revealed only recently. “Since my childhood, I had an affinity for beats and rhythm,” says Madhav. “Kerala has a strong underlying rhythmic setup—we have musical forms like *vaaythaari* (orations) and *vanchippattu* (boat song), and percussion instruments like *chenda* and *mrudangam*. My interest in these may have formed my base for hip-

hop, too.”

Hip-hop in India gained prominence with rap battle communities like Insignia and Battle Shelter rapping in English. The late 2000s saw the emergence of regional language hip-hop subgenres in India. The founders of the 2009-born alternative hip-hop collective from Kerala, Street Academics—Rajeev M. aka Pakarcha Vyadhi and Haris Saleem aka Maapla—are counted among the pioneers of Indian rap.

The Malayalam rap scene languished in relative obscurity until





**GETTING
THEIR DUE**

Rap group Street Academics; (far left) Hiran Das aka Vedan

recently, though there had been an underground community of hip-hop enthusiasts in Kerala for over a decade and a half. Songs like *Voice of Voiceless* and *Panipaali* have finally brought a mass appeal for the genre.

“Malayalam is not an easy language to make hip-hop songs in,” says Madhav. “The language’s phonetics is pretty difficult. It has long words that make the lyrical flow tough. It does not have the ease of English, Hindi or Tamil.”

Initial attempts to popularise rap in Malayalam were limited to

parodies of popular English songs. But the trajectory of Malayalam hip-hop took a new direction in 2010 when Street Academics released a fiery political bilingual track, *Repping the Truth*, featuring Saleem. The other members of Street Academics are Amjad Nadeem aka Azuran, Arjun Menon aka Imbaachi and Vivek Radhakrishnan aka V3k, and their themes range from social realism to dystopian fantasy. Their most acclaimed songs include *16 Adiyanthiram*, *Chatha Kakka*, *Aathmasphere*, *Kalapila* and

Pambaram.

Many others like Danny Varghese aka Achayan, Rameez Musthafa aka rZee PurpleGaze, Sanju Jaison aka San Jaimt, Sarath Sasidharan aka Nomadic Voice and Febin Joseph aka Fejo also came up with original hits in the last decade. But they had to build the Malayalam hip-hop sub-genre from scratch. Rameez released his first original on YouTube in 2014, but that was six years in the making. “I put in rigorous effort in writing and rewriting the songs, and learning beat production,” he says.

Rajeev also recalls the struggling days of his collective. “We had to do all the mixing, mastering, shooting and video editing ourselves,” he says. “We had no model before us [in Malayalam rap] to take a cue from.”

The absence of a rap-literate audience was also a problem. “I have been a live performer for almost 14 years,” says Rajeev. “I used to perform along with folk singers, doing fusions with them. Back then, I used to get reactions like, ‘*Ee chekkanantha ee kanikkunne?* (What is this guy doing?)”

Rajeev adds that over time, people started understanding the genre better, and that in the last couple of years, there has been a major boom in regional hip-hop communities in India. He credits the increased accessibility to music and hip-hop’s adherence to grassroots for this rise. “The origin of hip-hop itself has to do with [overcoming] limitations. You can start making hip-hop with zero-investment,” he says. The proliferation of low-cost music software and hardware and short-format video platforms has also played a significant role in the current boom.

Kerala, though, still lacks a strong independent music industry. “There are limitations for musicians to try something different in film songs,” says Madhav. The absence of film releases during the Covid-19 lockdown has helped this music genre rise and shine. 🎧

Testing time

Greta Thunberg, the teen climate activist from Sweden, has joined the debate on postponing examinations in India. She directed her ire against NEET and JEE for making students appear for entrance exams during a pandemic. "It is deeply unfair that students of India are asked to sit for national exams during the Covid-19 pandemic and while millions have also been impacted by the extreme floods," she tweeted, adding that she stood with the students' call to postpone the exams. Students seem to agree. On August 23, over 4,000 students went on a hunger strike, demanding postponement of exams.



AP

Winning combo

The teaser of *Khaali Peeli*, starring Ishaan Khatter and Ananya Panday, just released. A masala entertainer directed by Maqbool Khan, the film will bring its two young stars together for the first time. "It has been a pleasure working with Ishaan and Ananya—two powerhouses who have given fantastic performances," said Khan. "*Khaali Peeli* is a young, edgy, mad roller-coaster ride that I hope the audiences will enjoy thoroughly." The film, about two childhood sweethearts who get separated, is set to release on ZEE5.



PRAKASH JHA
director-producer

In good faith

Director-producer Prakash Jha is basking in the success of his latest, *Pareeksha*, currently streaming on ZEE5. Set against the backdrop of the National Education Policy, it analyses the conflicts emerging from a society ruled by class. Here, he talks about his next, a digital series called *Aashram* on MX Player, which is an indictment of fraudulent godmen, with Bobby Deol playing Baba Nirala of Kashipur.

Q/ What was the genesis of *Aashram*?

A/ MX Player came to me with this story written by Habib Faisal. It was a long and interesting one—of a criminal taking advantage of the faith of innocent people. People have been speculating that it is a take on this baba or that baba, but it is not that. It is about how quacks function in smaller towns and villages. It has nothing to do with any religion or ritual.

Q/ You released a disclaimer video even before the release of the trailer. Is there fear of a backlash?

A/ We released the disclaimer because we honour and

take pride in our religions and establishments of gurus. As far as backlash is concerned, we have always faced this. Forget about today, when I made *Aarakshan* (2011), it was banned. Even during *Rajneeti* (2010), the entire Congress party was after me because they thought Sonia Gandhi was being maligned. It has always happened. Surprisingly, with the current regime, Anubhav (Sinha) was able to release *Article 15* (2019), which is revolutionary. I did not have any issue releasing *Gangaajal* (2003) during the rule of Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Q/So, it is because of the ruling establishment?

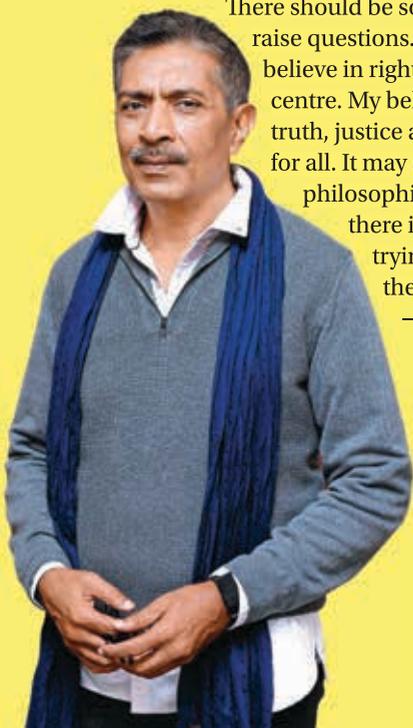
A/ No, it is not about this government or that government. [The noise] today is more because of social media allowing everybody to vent their feelings. It is not a new phenomenon. There have always been groups of people who have opposed certain ideas, but they did not have a platform earlier. But anyway, what can you do about that?

Q/Does your political leaning influence your work?

A/ I do not have a political leaning. Have you ever seen me campaigning for any political party? I am an observer and a student.

There should be someone to raise questions. I do not believe in right, left or centre. My beliefs lie with truth, justice and equality for all. It may seem very philosophical, but there is no harm in trying to achieve these.

—By Priyanka Bhadani



GETTY IMAGES

The write perspective

After announcing that wife Kareena Kapoor Khan and he are expecting their second child, **Saif Ali Khan** recently dropped another bomb. He revealed that he is working on an autobiography about his life, family and movie career. “So many things have changed and will be lost with time if we do not record them,” he said. “It would be nice to look back; to remember and to record. It has been funny and moving, and I must say, this is quite a selfish endeavour. I do hope others enjoy the book, too.” The book, yet untitled, will be published next year.



AFF

Match point

DC launched FanDome, a comic book convention, with a live session with the cast and crew of *Wonder Woman 1984*. The cast and crew, including **Gal Gadot**, Kristen Wiig and Chris Pine and director Patty Jenkins, took a number of questions from fans. The most interesting one came from tennis star Venus Williams, who asked who would win in a tennis match between Wonder Woman and the film’s villain, the Cheetah (played by Wiig). While Wiig bet on her character, Gadot shrugged: “That’s your perspective, but I disagree,” she said. Cat fight?



GETTY IMAGES

CONTRIBUTOR / SNEHA BHURA
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



Of borders, walls and barriers

A closely guarded barrier—part concrete wall, part fence—separates the West Bank from Israel. Palestinian residents of the West Bank can only travel to Israel through a tightly-controlled system of permits. For some years now, small groups from the West Bank have been permitted to travel for a day of fun at Israel's famed beaches on the blue Mediterranean; the hope implicit in these efforts is that human contact with "the other" will ultimately foster peace. But, this year was different. Around Eid, thousands of Palestinians simply walked through holes in the separation barrier and across checkpoints while Israeli border guards, usually a picture of uncompromising efficiency, looked the other way. Enterprising taxi drivers, often booked on social media, took the families for day trips to Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jaffa where they frolicked on the beach and visited restaurants. At night, they crossed back through the breaches, Israeli army floodlights lighting up the path, and waiting taxis took them to their homes

in Nablus and Hebron. Both the extent and the manner of the influx were unusual, even for the Middle East, where you expect the unexpected.

Analysis there can be plenty, but the point here is different—walls, borders, separation barriers are not forever. Political geography is drawn with chalk on a blackboard; when the hour changes, an idea runs its course, or a bell tolls, it is erased. And then drawn all over again. One can often scan old maps for familiar names and shapes of countries in vain: Poland, for instance, thrice partitioned, vanished from the map of Europe for more than a century. Successive maps of the Ottoman Empire, through the centuries, show its ballooning expansion and then its decline until, after the First World War, it was carved up

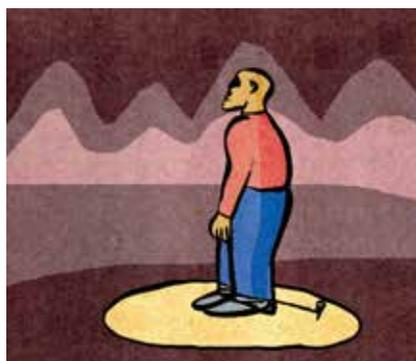
like leftover cake by the French and the British, and the map of the Middle East, as we know it, was drawn. Ethnic, religious and nationality issues rest uneasily under imposed borders, and problems can continue to fester; the Balkans saw this, too, with first the creation and then the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Some barriers can carry more drama than others. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, snaked through the city that had, in the inter-war years, been a throbbing culture powerhouse. Heavily guarded by steely-eyed soldiers and guard dogs, the Wall became the focal point of clashing ways of life and a symbol of separation of family and friends. More than a hundred

people died attempting to cross to the "free world" by crashing through the barriers in speeding vehicles, or climbing over the Wall. When, in early 1989, I last crossed Checkpoint Charlie, the iconic crossing point of the Cold War, I optimistically gave the Wall another fifty years; it went in just six months and the Soviet Union itself disintegrated a few years

later, leaving 15 new countries in its place. Today, Checkpoint Charlie is a selfie spot, the once feared guard house is in a museum and the Berlin Wall exists on T-shirts and coffee mugs.

But it is still August, the month of India's partition. In 1947, Cyril Radcliffe, a man with no previous knowledge of India, took just five weeks to draw a thick line through a complex religious and political landscape, dividing not just the land but the economies, history, religion and culture of Punjab and Bengal. The wounds of that separation still seep blood. When asked years later if he had acted in haste, Radcliffe blamed the leaders of the time, saying "they wanted a line before or on August 15, so I drew them a line." And thereby hangs a tale.



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