

PRANAB MUKHERJEE  
SCHOLAR-STATESMAN BOWS OUT

ACE LAWYER BEN CRUMP  
FIGHTING RACISM IN THE US

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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MADE SNOOPING  
TOOLS MORE INVASIVE

PANKAJ MISHRA ON WHY  
LIBERALS ARE VILLAINS

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

# THE WEEK



ARVIND  
KEJRIWAL

WHAT  
DELHI DID  
YESTERDAY,  
AMERICA  
IS DOING  
TODAY

PLUS

How **Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bengaluru** and **Hyderabad** are battling the pandemic





**Shri Narendra Modi**  
Hon'ble Prime Minister of India



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**COME THIS OCTOBER**, Mirati village will go to Durga Puja without its dearest son. To the rest of India he was the history-buff president, a Bharat Ratna, a peerless trouble-shooter, a dyed-in-the-wool Congressman and the Union minister who read every file that crossed his desk, remembered the notes made and then summoned them from memory at will. But, to this little village in West Bengal's Birbhum district, he was Pranabda, kaku or dearest Poltu—a nickname used by his parents.

Pranab Mukherjee has said many times that his annual schedule would not be complete without his officiating over the annual puja in Mirati. He remembered all the times he missed it. One was in 1995; he was at the UN General Assembly. Then, in 2015, shortly after his dear wife, Suvra, passed away. And a few other times in those busy 84 years. This should serve as enough illustration of his bond with the land that he called home.

During his presidency, THE WEEK had carried a yearlong series called First Citizen, documenting the traditions of the Rashtrapati Bhavan and the initiatives undertaken by Mukherjee. Frankly, I was worried if we would be able to sustain it for a year. Regular columns often run out of engaging material. But, Mukherjee's Rashtrapati Bhavan blew the dust off so many anecdotes, artefacts and traditions that we carried the column for more than a year. On July 2, 2014, the anthology was released as a coffee table book. It was released by

Karan Singh and Mukherjee graciously received the first copy.

Just as he collected facts, he collected anecdotes, too. From his voracious reading surely, but also from personal interactions. Every time I visited him at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, I would promise myself that I would leave quickly. But ever the gracious host, he would always ask, "Why are you in such a hurry?" And the chat would go on.

Resident Editor K.S. Sachidananda Murthy, then head of Manorama Music Sivaram Sreekandath and I met Mukherjee on February 15, 2017. That, perhaps, was his last official engagement with us. The president was to receive the Samavedam series produced by Manorama Music. Dr Thottam Sivakaran Namboothiri, who had recited the Samavedam for recording, was also with us. When press secretary Venu Rajamony requested Namboothiri to recite a sample for the president, Mukherjee was all ears. So, Namboothiri sat cross-legged on the sofa and recited the first verses from Purusha Suktham. I truly believe that it is this generosity with his time and support that gained him friends from every walk of life.

Mukherjee was a friend of THE WEEK and the Malayala Manorama. Indeed, he was the chief guest on the 125th anniversary of the daily newspaper on March 16, 2013. And on November 26, 2015, he received the first English copy of my father's autobiography, *The Eighth Ring*, from my brother Mammen Mathew. He paid tribute to my father and quipped: "I knew K.M. Mathew since the early days of my life which is neither too long nor too short—in early 1970s."

His regard for THE WEEK and the group was evident in the speech made while receiving *First Citizen*. "The last two years have been busy and eventful," he said. "Many projects have been completed. Others are nearing completion. Many more are in the offing. I am delighted that THE WEEK has been a fellow traveller on this journey. I look forward to its continued companionship in the days to come.... The Malayala Manorama Group, with its 125 years of history, represents the best in journalism anywhere in the world. THE WEEK is a true inheritor of this great tradition."

Thank you for opening your home and heart to us, sir. Go in peace. We know we will miss you.

*Philip Mathew*



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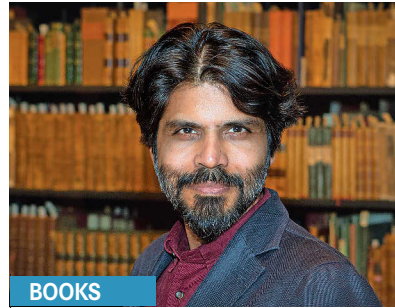
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TRIBUTE

Pranab Mukherjee will forever be remembered for throwing open the doors of the Rashtrapati Bhavan to the common man

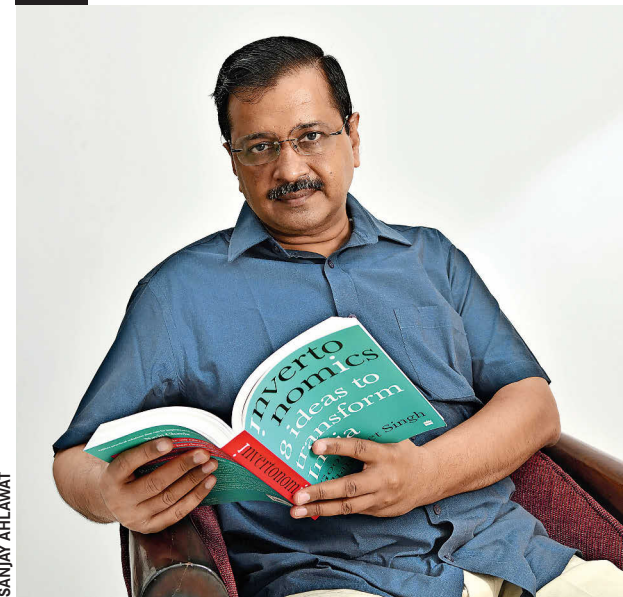
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## Big Salute

THE WEEK has been mentoring us, the readers, all the while! Therefore, it augurs well that you have come up with a special issue on best colleges of India ('Rapid response', August 30).

We owe you a big salute for updating us on India's education hubs and top colleges, with the help of an authentic survey.

Further, the editor elucidated the concept and issued a clarion call to young people to be brave and have self-confidence to face any unknown bumpy road in future. Thank you.

P.M. Gopalan,  
On email.

THE WEEK continues to give me so much of information every week. The best colleges special issue, I am sure, will be useful for students, who are seeking guidance on courses that offer the best job opportunities.

Lissy Saji,  
On email.

It is good to note that India's top colleges have reacted fast to the pandemic, grabbing any opportunity that came their way. More colleges should introduce innovations to elevate online education, which is new normal.

## HOW TO REACH US

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Technology has to be the backbone of future education.

Vismay Mathur,  
On email.

## Learn from the past

We cannot judge Robert Clive by today's sensibilities. What he did was totally acceptable norm of that era ('Thug of Hindustan', August 23). End justified the means. Clive's Mir Jaffer ploy is acceptable even today—weaken the opponent by causing rifts.

The thought that [Winston] Churchill's misdeeds are acceptable because he was an elected representative goes against the grain of the entire nation's integrity. Clive was a subject of the Empire and thus the ruler would be more complicit than Clive himself. Removing his statue does not make sense.

As the author says that Clive has been removed from British history books for the last forty years, so the present generation has no idea of the antics of the British Empire and removing his statue will completely obliterate him. Only the ego of Indians will be satisfied. I would rather the statue stand and various means be used to

highlight the shame for all to see. This will arouse the curiosity amongst the present generation, and questions will be asked and lessons learnt.

Now to come to the aspects concerning Seths and Jaffers of the world. Since the Ghazni and Ghori invasion and subsequent Babar's invasion and founding of the Mughal Empire, one thing that stands out is the lack of cohesion among Indian principalities that allowed these invasions to succeed. The British followed suit based on this principle. In fact we must thank the Brits and mostly [Vallabhbhai] Patel's diligence for getting us together as a nation.

Now, we, as a nation, must ensure that history never repeats itself. We must learn from the past that together we stand and divided we fall. A newfound sense of nationalism may to some extent be seen in this perspective.

Rakesh Sood,  
Sainik Farm, Delhi.

All outsiders—from Alexander the Great to the Britishers—came here with varying degrees of avarice, with the intention of looting, capturing and trying to



establish their rule. Then, why an article on a Brit alone as if other invaders came here for peaceful and platonic relationship?

**M. Rao,**  
On email.

**Review all airports**

Whenever a tragedy strikes the country, we all join together, lament over it, and conveniently forget the same without seriously looking into the cause of the mishap and finding a permanent solution to guard against such tragedies in future ('Loss of vision,' August 23).

If we had taken adequate steps to analyse the reasons for the tragedy in Mangaluru airport in 2010, the recent tragedy would not have happened.

Efforts will have to be taken to review all airports with tabletop runways that pose problems, particularly in inclement weather.

**Tharcus S. Fernando,**  
On email.

**Alter examination system**

I read with interest your interviews with Amit Khare, K. Kasturirangan and Leena Chandran-Wadia (August 16).

With my learning and teaching experience ranging over 50 years, I wish to state that the National Education Policy 2020 does not hit upon the crux of the matter for changing the education system at all!

While restructuring the school/college learning years, changing the curricula, introducing local

languages as the media of instruction and invoking technology for delivering lessons can have some limited beneficial effects, they would not change the mindset of teachers and students. They would certainly not lead to a creative atmosphere as we have seen the previous policies.

In my opinion, based on personal experience, it is the examination system that has to be altered. We need to move away from memory testing to intelligence testing at all levels! This can be done most economically, too! It would automatically change the mindset and approach of both the students and teachers.

**B.A. Kagali,**  
On email.

**Don't make politicians columnists**

In her highly-prejudiced column 'Crushed from Within' (August 9), Meenakshi Lekhi is certainly not forthright in her expose on how the Congress is imploding from within.

Lekhi should perhaps also reflect on how her own party used every dirty trick in the trade to topple duly elected governments, including manipulating the office of governors (Karnataka, Rajasthan, Manipur, Goa and Uttarakhand being good examples).

Your magazine should stop giving valuable column space to politicians, be they of any party.

**Sashidhar V.R.,**  
On email.

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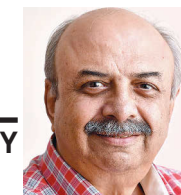
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POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Stand at ease

The global pandemic has given the Indian economy many severe shocks. On that large frightening canvas, the decision by the World Bank to suspend its Ease of Doing Business index for 2018 and 2020 is only a pinprick.

The 17-year-old index, which ranks 190 countries on the way they allow businesses to be established and to function, has been a beacon of verification for Modinomics. During the six years of the prime minister's tenure, India jumped 77 places in the index, from a lowly 134 in 2014 to a healthier 63 in 2020. The global lending institution has cited flaws in data collection and interpretation from certain countries for pausing the index, but the reporting fraud has happened in four other countries, including China.

It is not known when the global benchmark will return and how much credibility it will then retain, as the index measured in two large business cities is extrapolated to an entire country. The bank measures ten major indices, including procedures for starting a business—like electricity connection, property registrations, environmental clearance, getting financial credit, protection—to investment, reasonability of central and local taxes, enforcement of contracts and resolution of insolvency.

Thus, New Zealand has been on top of this greasy pole. India breached the 100 barrier only in 1999, when it was ranked 77, and moved up another 13 places. Since 2014, the Prime Minister's Office has focused on eventually making India achieve a number below 50, while aiming for the moon—a single digit ranking. That is why the first economic stimulus package for tackling Covid-19 had many provisions to make life easier for start-ups and medium and small enterprises. However, the proposal to dilute environmental and labour laws and regulations has met with strong resistance from political parties, activist groups and labour unions.

One of the most ardent champions of the successes

of the government in easing business has been Am- itabh Kant, the NITI Aayog CEO. He had been secretary in charge of the department of industrial policy and promotion, directly entrusted with providing a business-friendly environment. Kant has been using the World Bank honours to prove that the policies of the Modi government have worked. He is unfazed by the World Bank decision, especially as there is no suspicious finger at India. He has assured global and domestic investors that easing the regulations and restrictions would move at a furious pace.

The World Bank had cited three major legislative acts including GST, insolvency and bankruptcy code, and the relaxation of the land acquisition act as motivation for investors and entrepreneurs.

Bibek Debroy, the chairman of the prime minister's economic advisory council, who sits in the same building as Kant, has been campaigning relentlessly for doing away with obsolete laws and regulations. Based on studies done by Debroy before joining the Modi government, Parliament scrapped more than one hundred obsolete laws. But, there are more laws still on the books at the Centre and in the states.

In the last six years, the Modi government has been on a law making spree. The strong focus on security issues has made the cabinet accept more procedures and regulations.

As bank frauds, asset stripping of companies and cases of money laundering increased, stricter financial norms were required, as the government had to protect the interests of investors, banks and the national exchequer. Interestingly, reform lobbyists have been happy with the decision not to appoint a chairman and members of the Law Commission for several months, as the commission, too, churns out new regulatory laws.

The push and pull of external conditions and governance demands will depend on the pace at which ease of doing business is enabled in these abnormal times.



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■ APERITIF ■  
THE BIG PICTURE

## UNLIKELY MASCOT

Police officers remove a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi from a demonstration against the German government's regulations near the Siegessaule in Berlin. Some 38,000 people gathered to protest restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

PHOTO BY AFP



POINT BLANK



Rahul Gandhi cannot make a coherent, unscripted, passionate and powerful speech. This isn't a criticism. Most people in the world can't. However, the job [of a politician] requires you to do so.

**Chetan Bhagat,**  
author, on the Congress leader

The genius of Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Babasaheb Ambedkar lay in the same seed: constant self-examination; and a brutal honesty inextricably aligned to the greater good.

**Manish Tewari,**  
Congress leader

M.S. Dhoni is a yogi in cricket—the way he has understood the game, his detachment to results, the way he speaks and conducts himself, and on every victory he holds the cup and hands it to someone else and walks away.

**Javagal Srinath,**  
former cricketer

There was definitely a storm brewing, but since I had accepted the storm, all the things that were surrounding it did not really matter to me. I was just trying to be immersed in my technique and I was actually immersed in it.

**Abhinav Bindra,**  
shooter, on life after winning India's only individual gold medal at the 2008 Olympics



Nobody has the right to question my friendships with whoever in the business. Either say something nice, or don't say anything at all. It is the only way you will make the world a better place, the only way you will teach your children to make the world a better place.

**Neha Dhupia,**  
actor

WORD PLAY

After months of little to no touching from other human beings because of Covid-fear, many are now experiencing **skin hunger**. Skin hunger refers to the health consequences developed as a result of a lack of human touch. Higher stress and poor sleep are observed in people who are experiencing skin hunger. Though nothing can replace human touch, activities like petting animals and hugging a pillow can help tackle this issue to an extent.

MILESTONES

VIRTUAL GOLD

India won its first ever gold at the FIDE Chess Olympiad (held online this time) on August 30. India shared the title with the top seed, Russia, following an internet failure that affected two games in the final.



CENTURY LAUNCH

SpaceX launched its 100th rocket—a Falcon 9 with the SAOCOM-1B satellite on board—from the Cape Canaveral in Florida on August 30. This also marked the first successful polar orbit launch of a satellite from Florida since 1969.



FAB FOLLOWERS

American singer Ariana Grande became the first woman to have 200 million followers on Instagram. Footballer Cristiano Ronaldo was the first person to reach this feat.



The Congress's unique adhesive

I suspect that if someone were to take a poll of editors, TV anchors, columnists and BJP activists, as well as armchair critics and NGO jholawallahs, 95 to 100 per cent of the respondents in each category would say the only answer to the revival of the Congress lies in removing the Gandhi family from the stewardship of the party. If the same question were put to Congress workers in a similar poll, I suspect 95 to 100 per cent of the Congress would reply that only under the leadership of one of the three available Gandhis—mother, son or daughter—would the party be able to revive itself.

What accounts for this wide difference in perception? I think it is that Congresspersons believe instinctively that if they want to remain in the Congress, there has to be one Congress to which they can belong. The Gandhis provide the crucial ingredient for the party to stay in play—unity. This is not because they are exceptionally intelligent or exceptionally educated or exceptionally articulate or exceptionally immersed in Congress history and ideology or exceptionally well-versed in realpolitik; it is only because they are the only ones with the charisma to hold the party together. They are the glue, the bonding adhesive.

I think the *sangh parivar* recognises that the Gandhi family are the principal obstacle to a "Congress-mukt Bharat". They recognise, too, that their ultimate goal can be achieved only by first fostering a "Gandhi-mukt Congress". Hence, the training of their sights on not just the three surviving Gandhis but relentlessly on all five generations of the family. The only Gandhi in five generations to have not held the post of Congress president is Priyanka. At just about 50 years, she has at least 30 to 35 years ahead of her

to show her mettle.

In bringing into perspective this fundamental difference between the bulk of public opinion and the view from within the Congress, my aim is not to make excessive claims in favour of the three remaining Gandhis. It is to point out that the shortcomings identified in the family—including the five to which Ramachandra Guha has drawn attention—are all valid to at least some extent. But these are assets, such as speaking Hindi fluently or speech-writing skills, that can easily be hired by the leadership from within its eager following. There is no lack of Jairam Rameshes.

The one indispensable qualification that cannot be outsourced is the charisma required to keep the flock together. That is a possession unique to the Gandhi family. That was again in evidence at the last meeting of the Congress Working Committee. A consensus was reached with no blood on the floor. So long as vengeance is kept at bay, the consensus will last. Unity, the prerequisite for revival, will be maintained. Revival itself will

depend on constructive accommodation of constructive suggestions.

For we have seen that when the Gandhis are not there, as in the eight years of P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri, the party splinters. And, if it splits when they are there, as under Indira Gandhi, the bulk of the party remains still with the centre while those who exit go straight into the dustbin of political irrelevance or, at best, find themselves confined to their regions. Thus, Sharad Pawar, who could arguably have been prime minister of India, is confined to Maharashtra and Mamata Banerjee, who might also have had an all-India profile, is caged in West Bengal. No more can a fish survive out of water, or a bird outside a cage, than can a Congressperson survive out of the Congress.







## JUSTICE NEVER SLEEPS

Y.C. Modi, director general of the National Investigation Agency, has not let the pandemic stop his fight against terror. He gathered a huge team of officers to handle the Pulwama attack case and dispatched it from Delhi to Jammu by road, during the lockdown. The officers collected evidence in terror hotbeds, teamed up with forensic labs that were working at half strength, served summons to the witnesses and the accused, and personally recorded their statements. Finally, on August 25, they filed the 13,500-page charge-sheet in a Jammu court.

## SHARING DISSENT

After the recent meeting of the Congress Working Committee, former Madhya Pradesh party president Arun Yadav, a special invitee to the meeting, came under fire on social media. Screenshots of the meeting, showing general secretary K.C. Venugopal and party president Sonia Gandhi, had been leaked to the media. Soon, someone noticed that Yadav's name, in the bottom left panel of the screenshot, read "Arun Yadav (me)". This led to speculation that he was the one who had shared the screenshots, leaving him red-faced.

## CAMPUS HERO

Edappadi K. Palaniswami, who prides himself on being a farmers' leader, has gained another set of supporters—college students. The Tamil Nadu chief minister recently announced that all arrear exams, except for the final year, would be cancelled because of the pandemic, and marks would be awarded according to relevant UGC and AICTE guidelines. Following this, a group of students in Erode put up a banner that hailed EPS as the "king of arrear students". When a reporter asked him about this, a grinning Palaniswami said: "It was just a move to ensure that the students are not stressed."



## IDENTITY POLITICS

Till a few months ago, the name Syed Zafar Islam was relatively unknown. Then, the soft-spoken banker-turned-politician had his moment in the sun after helping broker the deal between Jyotiraditya Scindia and the BJP. Perhaps as a reward, Islam was nominated for a Rajya Sabha seat from Uttar Pradesh; the seat had fallen vacant after Amar Singh's death.

That the BJP picked Islam ahead of more experienced leaders, and soon after the foundation stone for the Ram temple was laid in Ayodhya, sent out a clear message. By sending a "modern, progressive" Muslim to Parliament, the BJP wants to engage with the minority community ahead of the state elections, due in early 2022.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

## GROWING INFLUENCE

Shashi Tharoor has once again proved his clout within and outside the party. The Congress MP, one of the 23 dissenters who wrote to Sonia Gandhi asking for changes in the party, was labelled a "guest artist and immature politician" by a few party leaders in Kerala. But the outrage that followed on social media forced them to withdraw the comments. Even state party president Mullappally Ramachandran, who has no love lost for Tharoor, had to step in and rebuke those who made the remarks.

## B TEAMS AND BETRAYALS

For a long time, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen and its president Asaduddin Owaisi were accused of being the BJP's 'B team'. Senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad was chief among those who had labelled Owaisi as such. But now that some senior Congress leaders have reportedly accused Azad of "colluding with the BJP", the tables have turned. And Owaisi seized the opportunity. He put out a statement proclaiming that it was not he, but Azad, who had to answer whether the latter was part of the BJP's 'B team'.



# Year of bugs

The pandemic has made surveillance tools more invasive and fearful. The government needs to urgently address privacy concerns

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** has marked the beginning of an era where surveillance is the new normal. China is using camera-fitted smart helmets and drones, and facial recognition technology, to identify potential patients. Hong Kong is tracking people using electronic wristbands; Singapore has launched a contact-tracing app; and Israel is carrying out phone surveillance.

In April, India launched Aarogya Setu, a smartphone app that alerts people when they come into contact with Covid patients. When privacy concerns emerged, the government declared Aarogya Setu an open-source application that allows developers and cybersecurity experts to inspect the app and its vulnerabilities. “Aarogya Setu is a powerful companion that protects people. It has a robust data security architecture,” said Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad.

Given the record of governments targeting dissidents, surveillance tools do not enjoy public confidence. In 2019, the Toronto-based Citizen Lab exposed how Pegasus, a spyware designed by the Israeli firm NSO Group, had been snooping on 1,400 people in 45 countries, including India. Pegasus had hacked into cell phones that had WhatsApp, the multimedia platform owned by

Facebook.

WhatsApp has 400 million users in India. The security breach raised fears of state surveillance, after NSO Group said it sold Pegasus to government agencies only. Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, along with more than 100 activists, lawyers and journalists who were targeted by the spyware, accused the government of snooping on citizens. Last November, the activists wrote to Union Home Minister Amit Shah demanding an inquiry into the breach.

In June this year, a joint investigation by the Citizen Lab and Amnesty International revealed that some of the activists targeted by Pegasus were also victims of phishing attempts. “I have been the target of a coordinated spyware campaign,” Shalini Gera, a human rights lawyer in Chhattisgarh, told THE WEEK. “My WhatsApp and email were being monitored to keep tab on my movements and communications. It was a complete breach of my privacy. Since we have reasons to believe that a Central or state agency was behind this illegal surveillance, we did not register any first information report, as that can lead to more harassment.”

The Union home ministry has not responded to the letter sent by the activists. On November 20, the parliamentary standing committee

on information and technology, chaired by Shashi Tharoor, MP, of the Congress, decided to take up the matter. “The committee held one meeting with some of us, but we have not heard from them again,” said Gera. “It has been almost a year and we don’t know which agency was behind it.”

Ankit Grewal, a Chandigarh-based lawyer who represented activist Sudha Bharadwaj in the Bhima Koregaon case, was a Pegasus target who deposed before the parliamentary committee. He said he had not heard from the committee after that. “It is the prerogative of the government to investigate the matter,” he said.

Delhi-based rights activist Vidhya, who helps survivors of sexual violence, said she was targeted because she was part of a larger group of



## DISQUIETING DATA

John Scott-Railton (extreme right), senior researcher at the Citizen Lab, says the Pegasus case in India is “extremely troubling”

“  
The advent of a public health emergency in the form of Covid-19 should not serve as an excuse for countries to engage in surveillance.”

—Pavan Duggal, founder and chairman of the International Commission on Cyber Security Law

activists who fight for democratic rights. “I am not scared of scrutiny,” she said. “But the reason why surveillance is disturbing is that it is not just my personal space getting compromised, but also the identities and privacy of hundreds of survivors who are in touch with me. Their cases get compromised in the process.”

Officials in Delhi said there had been no unauthorised surveillance. WhatsApp, however, is suing NSO Group, which told a US court that it sold Pegasus to law enforcement agencies only. John Scott-Railton, senior researcher at the Citizen Lab, termed the Pegasus case in India as “extremely troubling”. “The Indian government has not contacted us,” he told THE WEEK. “If they would like to [investigate], they certainly have the resources to do so.”

In 2018, the Union government issued an order authorising 10 Central agencies, including the Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing, to monitor and intercept internet traffic and calls under the Information Technology Act. The order said state law enforcement agencies could exercise similar powers only after the state home secretary approves it.

The Pegasus case has raised questions about the safeguards against government misuse of surveillance technologies. “The advent of a public health emergency in the form of Covid-19 should not serve as an excuse for countries to engage in surveillance,” said Pavan Duggal, founder and chairman of the International Commission on Cyber Security Law. “Countries and citizens have to be careful of this trend, as it is likely to be further strengthened.”

According to him, laws concerning surveillance need to be strictly interpreted and implemented. “Governments need to ensure that checks and balances under existing laws continue to be respected. Courts need to ensure that governments do not use surveillance as a wonder tool to respond to all kinds of exigencies,” said Duggal.

For now, the wonder tool is helping fight Covid-19. In July, camera-mounted smart helmets were introduced in Mumbai for thermal scanning. Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation commissioner Iqbal Singh Chahal said the helmets scanned 200 people per minute. “No data or images are stored in them. It is very useful in segregating suspected Covid patients in containment zones and slums,” he said.

Safeguards and assurances aside, vulnerabilities continue to be exposed. On June 6, a Citizen Lab report uncovered a massive “hack-for-hire” operation codenamed Dark Basin, run by a Delhi-based technology firm called BellTroX InfoTech



■ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



**John Scott-Railton,**  
*senior researcher at the Citizen Lab,  
University of Toronto*

# We are looking at what approach the Indian government takes in cases of security breach

**IN SEPTEMBER 2018**, John Scott-Railton co-wrote the Citizen Lab's report on how Pegasus, a spyware developed by the Israeli tech company NSO Group, helped governments spy on WhatsApp users. In June this year, he exposed a large-scale mercenary hacking operation run by BellTroX, a Delhi-based digital security company, which was targeting government officials across continents.

"Our concern is that governments that purchase surveillance technology end up using it to not just target criminals, but also target political enemies, journalists and other

members of the civil society," he told THE WEEK in an exclusive interview. Excerpts:

## **What kind of targets and trends emerged from your WhatsApp investigation?**

We found a trend of abusive targeting with Pegasus that was not limited to India. When we started investigating that case, we found over a hundred cases like that. WhatsApp is currently suing NSO Group. This is a very muscular, unprecedented defence of users in India and around the world.

## **Has NSO Group contacted the**

Services. The report said BellTroX had targeted government officials in Europe, gambling tycoons in the Bahamas, and well-known investors in the US, including private equity giant KKR & Co and investment firm Muddy Waters. Dark Basin targeted thousands of individuals and organisations in six continents, including politicians, journalists, CEOs and rights organisations.

The Citizen Lab said BellTroX's co-owner, Sumit Gupta, had been indicted in a 2015 hacking case in the US, in which two private investigators admitted to paying him to hack the accounts of marketing executives. Gupta was declared a fugitive in 2017.

BellTroX, which was incorporated on May 1, 2013, is owned by Gupta and his wife, Veenu. According to the Citizen Lab, BellTroX and its employees used euphemisms—like psychology transcription, vulnerability assessment, malware analysis and penetration testing—to advertise their illegal services. BellTroX's small office in a crowded area in Delhi was shut when THE WEEK visited it.

Scott-Railton said India's hack-for-hire industry is making the world insecure. "I am concerned that it tarnishes the reputation of India's talented and vibrant cybersecurity sector," he said. Advocate Prashant Mali, who specialises in cybersecurity and privacy, said Indians remain most vulnerable to digital security breaches because India does not have proactive privacy laws. The data privacy bill, introduced in Parliament last year, is still pending.

According to Mali, there are no examples of Indian laws punishing a cybersecurity violator. "There is a need to make the state accountable for surveillance and snooping," he said. "But I am not hopeful that the final draft of the bill would make the government accountable." ●

## **Citizen Lab?**

The Citizen Lab has been sending letters to NSO and its owners for years now. The responses have been incomplete or misleading.

## **Why were the responses misleading?**

For years, the Citizen Lab, as well as researchers at Amnesty International and other organisations, have gathered evidence of abuses by Pegasus. Instead of admitting these issues, and taking constructive action, NSO consistently seeks to discredit our work.

## **Do you feel the Indian government needs to probe the WhatsApp breach case?**

I am curious about what steps will be taken. The WhatsApp case in India is extremely troubling. So is the case of BellTroX, and so is the case of phishing that Amnesty International reported last year. So now we have three perplexing, troubling cases that call for serious investigation. We all will be looking at what approach the Indian government takes in these cases.

## **What are the concerns about the tracking apps launched during the Covid pandemic? The Indian government developed Aarogya Setu.**

Researchers have looked into many Covid-19 tracking apps and found that security and privacy are not always a priority. The apps may be intended to help in epidemiological purposes, but they may not be well-designed from a privacy or cybersecurity point of view. In some cases, even the epidemiological justifications are shaky.

## **How can we counter the threats from new apps and technologies?**

Many of the problems in the last decade have occurred because we connected faster than we secured. That has to change for governments

and industry. There has to be pressure from stakeholders, investors and consumers. Unfortunately, consumers and businesses largely have imperfect information about security and safety. They may not know what to ask for. Even the governments may have imperfect information. Until there are very serious consequences for those who intentionally engage in unlawful and abusive surveillance, problems will persist.

## **The Citizen Lab recently exposed a massive hack-for-hire operation. How was BellTroX targeting thousands globally?**

We believe that the targeting was commissioned by private individuals and companies. In other words, BellTroX was acting as hackers for hire. What is interesting is that a substantial fraction of targets were journalists and members of civil society.

## **Who were the targets?**

Everyone you can think of, and some you probably wouldn't guess. We found divorce cases, legal fights, journalists, lots of financial institutions, banks, small businesses, and a few governments. We have seen BellTroX targeting senior officials in multiple governments around the world.

## **Do you know identities of private individuals who hired BellTroX?**

That is one of the biggest challenges of the investigation. There is a federal investigation in the US into BellTroX and those who hired it. One individual, a private investigator accused of hiring BellTroX to target people, is already in jail.

## **Did the Indian government approach the Citizen Lab after the expose?**

Given the scale of the wrongdoing we uncovered, we have been somewhat surprised to have not received any

official communication from the Indian government.

## **The report says the owner of BellTroX, Sumit Gupta, was indicted in the US. Yet he was operating freely in India.**

Given that Gupta was indicted in the US for hacking for hire in 2015 and is currently wanted by the US government, it is remarkable that he can openly run a company with a front door that engages in these illegal activities. It's remarkably brazen.

## **Are Indian mercenary hackers becoming a global concern?**

Even Google recently wrote specifically about the threat posed by Indian hack-for-hire groups, which signals that there is a special problem in India that really needs to be addressed.

## **Is investigating BellTroX an uphill task for Indian agencies?**

The people behind BellTroX are easy to find. A failure to investigate and pursue prosecutions would raise questions in many international legal, diplomatic, law enforcement and cybersecurity quarters. And BellTroX is bad for business, too. Many major international companies are among its targets.

## **Your report that WeChat was analysing user content is alarming. What is the threat from popular apps from China?**

There is an unfortunate history of apps developed for the Chinese market having built-in censorship, and in some cases, surveillance [capabilities]. It is the scale of users that makes it so troubling. This kind of surveillance was normalised and globalised by China. There are serious national security concerns for other countries that use products emerging from the Chinese market. ●





# A REVIVAL PLAN FOR CONGRESS

**D.K. SHIVAKUMAR - IN HIS NEW AVATAR**

**O**n July 2, 2020, Karnataka witnessed a unique political event. Amid the Covid-19 lockdown, around 20 lakh Congress workers took part in the 'Pratijna Dina', a virtual oath taking ceremony of D.K. Shivakumar as the president of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC).

"We will work towards a 'BJP-mukta' Karnataka," said Shivakumar, giving a clarion call to partyworkers, as the event was livestreamed to 7,800 locations in the state. "Some call me the *Kanakapura bande* (rock). I want to be a strong stepping stone for the Congress party to reach the third floor of the Vidhana Soudha, rather than be chiselled into an idol," said the leader known for his loyalty to the party.

The Karnataka Congress appears to be on the revival path under the leadership of the seven-time MLA. Shivakumar was a minister in the cabinets of S. Bangarappa, S.M. Krishna, Siddaramaiah and H.D. Kumaraswamy, handling portfolios like home, cooperative, urban development, energy, water resources and medical education.

When Shivakumar took oath, AICC chief Sonia Gandhi greeted him. Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra called in to wish him during the ceremony. It was Shivakumar, a master strategist, who had time and again bailed out the party at times of crises. The challenges before the new chief are diverse—from strong opponents

and mass defections to factional feuds and a waning support base.

The "troubleshooter" is leading the party at a time when the political battlefield has tilt towards the BJP. Moreover, the political canvas of Karnataka is divided into different regions and works on different dynamics. While, the Congress has managed to hold on to the Ahinda (Kannada acronym for backward classes, minorities and dalit) vote bank, it has alienated itself from the majority community with the rise of the saffron party. For Shivakumar, a Vokkaliga leader from South Karnataka, there is a twin challenge of expanding the party base in Old Mysuru region and the Lingayat belt in north Karnataka.

## We want judicial inquiry into BJP's corona scams

### You want to transform a mass-based party like the Congress to cadre-based party like the BJP. Why?

When we change the mass-based party to a cadre based party, every single leader emerges from the booth. No decision will be my individual decision but of the party. We will transform into a party that values a partyworker and involves him in every decision making as he is the voice of the common man. The voice of the partyworker should be the voice of the party too. I don't want to impose my ideas and decisions as I want people to hear the voice of the ordinary partyworker. We believe the Congress Party is here to look after the welfare of the people, and the focus should be on issues that concern the common man.

### What will bring back the lost support for the Congress?

Congress is a party for the masses, and has no caste or religion. We need to instil pride in every Congressman as no other party can flaunt the Tricolour in its party flag. Today, we need to reach out to every voter. We no longer have the luxury of communicating only to the head of the family and be rest assured that all the family members would support us. Now, each member of a family thinks individually. The father has an opinion, which is not shared by his son. So, we must try to reach every individual voter. We want to decentralise the system and ensure that our cadres reach out to every voter.

### As the Opposition party, what has been your role in combating Covid-19?

We extended all support to the state government to tackle the pandemic. But at the end of two months of lockdown, we realised it was time to step in as the government miserably failed to contain the virus and instead spread corruption too. We stand by our claim that there has been a major scam in the purchase of ventilators and Covid-related medical equipment. The lack of coordination between the ministers too has cost the state dearly. We demand a judiciary enquiry under a sitting High Court judge into BJP's corona scams.

### How do you rate the Covid response of the Centre and the state?

The Modi and the Yeddiyurapa governments have no eyes, ears or a heart. It is clear from their Covid response. The Centre announced a ₹20-lakh crore package and the state government has announced ₹1,680 crore package. But is the benefit reaching the people? Food kits meant for migrants being distributed among the BJP supporters and voters. If the migrants would have got the food kits and money, they would have stayed back in Karnataka and not insisting on going back home.



### What the steps were taken by the Congress to help people during the pandemic?

The government response during the mass exodus of migrant workers was most inhuman. They reluctantly organised buses and trains but overcharged the poor migrants. We stepped in and the ticket fares were either reduced or waived off. We distributed food kits among the homeless and poor families across the state. We purchased vegetables worth ₹100 crore during the lockdown, to help the distraught farmers. The Congress came up with the idea of donating an eco-friendly, corrugated bed manufactured at Doddaballapur to the hospitals. Priyank Kharge arranged for 650 such beds at Kalaburgi and Raichur. It is a cost effective option and can be set up at all taluk level Covid care centres for patients who are asymptomatic or with mild symptoms.

### What is the 'Arogya Hasta' campaign?

"Arogya Hasta" is a unique medical outreach programme launched by us has a network of 15,000 Congress Corona Warriors who will reach out to people in every ward and panchayat across Karnataka, The volunteers wearing PPE will visit people's homes to do a basic Covid check-up and create awareness on prevention and care.

### What is your latest campaign "Speak Up for Democracy" all about?

It is a nationwide campaign to protest against the BJP toppling democratically elected non-BJP governments. It started from Karnataka, and spread to Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and now to Rajasthan. We need to strongly oppose this anti-constitutional move. The world was once proud of India's democratic institutions but the BJP is misusing these institutions to subvert people's mandates. BJP is striking at the very heart of our republic. We must speak up for democracy and save India.



# SUING FOR PEACE

How one lawyer is fighting the killings of black people in America

BY MILAN SIME MARTINIC

**K**enosha, Wisconsin, is a small town used to big-time trouble. Just over the Illinois border, it was where Al Capone and his men would hide from Chicago police chases at a time when the police could not cross state lines.

Wisconsin itself has a history of racism dating back to its time as a territory; it is a state that once let non-citizen newcomers vote before it allowed black men near the ballot box. Last month, seven shots in the back of an unarmed black man brought world attention to Kenosha. Into this cloud of infamy, walked in the biggest of the big-gun civil rights lawyers of the day.

At 50, attorney Ben Crump is an imposing figure. Tall, and at once soft-spoken and forceful with his words, he projects kindness, compassion and a deep desire for justice. He is a handsome black man with a velvet quality; reassuringly flawless in his dress and perfect skin, he has perfected the art of

putting legalistic language into words everyday folk can relate to. In doing so, he commands a presence that comforts and stabilises emotionally charged situations.

He is everything families dream of—a law graduate from Florida State University, a recipient of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Thurgood Marshall Award, recipient of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Martin Luther King Servant Leader Award, one of the National Trial Lawyers' Top 100 Lawyers, and *Ebony* magazine's Power 100 Most Influential African Americans.

We have seen him on television next to those collapsing inward at the loss of a family member to a racially tinged event leached of humanity. There is something he understands that others are just beginning to see. We have seen him next to the families of Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Jacob Blake, the 29-year-old Kenosha man paralysed from the waist down by the seven, point-blank shots from

policemen who followed him to his car after a struggle.

That he was in Kenosha standing next to Jacob Blake's family to demand justice from the police department and the city, told the world that the town was in big-time trouble. "This seems to be a pattern in this town," said Crump in a television interview. "Just like it is in America, the police killing an unarmed man unnecessarily and unjustifiably."

When police shoot black people in America, Crump says they are "told not by word but by action over and over and over again, you won't be held accountable."

Crump is there because he understands that these events

take place within a larger, more monstrous reality that envelops the everyday life of people of colour, and recognises that the root cause of these actions is embedded into the laws and customs and life in American society.

Seven shots were fired into Philando Castile in eight seconds in 2016 in St Paul, Minnesota. Castile was with his fiancée and her daughter as he attempted to comply after being stopped for a broken tail light. The officer was later acquitted of charges.

In 2005, off-duty detective, father and church deacon Howard Morgan was stopped for driving the wrong way without headlights in Chicago; as a cop, he was permitted to carry

a gun. While searching his car, the police found a gun. Morgan was shot at more than 100 times; 21 times in the back. He survived, but is permanently disabled. He was charged with four counts of attempted murder, deadly use of a firearm, assault and battery. After being acquitted of some of the charges and deadlocked on others, he was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to 40 years in prison, despite having eight years of police service and being an elderly man reduced to using a walker and wearing a colostomy bag because of the shooting.

"It is one of the worst injustices I have witnessed," said Crump, despite the fact that a governor later

commuted Morgan's sentence. "Because the conviction also prevented him from bringing a civil lawsuit. The police were clearly in the wrong here, yet Morgan was punished. This devastating event shows that black people are being attacked from many fronts. The police are killing us on the streets; we are also being killed by the judges and prosecutors in the courtrooms."

Crump describes the above in his book *Open Season: Legalized Genocide of Colored People* (Amistad, 2019). In his television appearances, you can hear him readily recite the names of such victims. It is a long list, but their names roll out of his tongue in quick succession with an emphasis that tells you he can tell



#### THE LATE LAMENTED

Ben Crump with George Floyd's son Quincy Mason at the site in Minneapolis where George was killed





**HOPE LIVES ON**  
Crump listens as Rev Al Sharpton speaks at George Floyd's funeral on June 4

America's list of racial-event deaths is long. Crump has not represented them all, but he writes about the embedded injustice and systematic racism that kills them.

you all about the injustices visited upon them. In 2018, he represented the family of Stephon Clark against the city of Sacramento in California. The 22-year-old Clark was shot seven times in his grandmother's backyard because the officers thought the phone in his hand was a gun. There was no gun.

The names keep adding on. There is context to it all; it is open season genocide, he argues in his book.

America's list of racial-event deaths is long. He has not represented them all, but he writes about the embedded injustice and systematic racism that kills them: Eric Garner, Philando Castile, John

Crawford, Michael Brown, Martin Lee Anderson, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Michelle Cusseaux, Laquan McDoland, George Mann, Tanisha Anderson, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Romain Brisbon, Jerame Reid, Matthew Ajibade, Frank Smart, Natasha McKenna, Tony Robinson, Anthony Hill, Mya Hall, Phillip White, Eric Harris, Walter Scout, William Chapman II, Alexia Christia, Brendon Glenn, Victor Manuel Larosa, Johnathan Sanders, Freddie Blue, Joseph Mann, Salvado Ellswood, Sandra Bland, Albert Joseph Davis, Darrius Stewart, Billy Ray Davis, Samuel Dubose, Michael Sabbie, Brian Keith Day, Christian

Taylor, Troy Robinson, Asshams Pharoah Manley, Felix Kumi, Keith Harrison McLeod, Junior Prosper, Lamontez Jones, Patterson Brown, Dominic Hutchinson, Anthony Ashford, Alonzo Smith, Tyree Crawford, India Kager, La'vante Briggs, Michael Lee Marshall, Jamar Clark, Richard Perkins, Nathaniel Harris Pickett, Benni Lee Tignor, Miguel Espinal, Michael Noel, Kevin Matthews, Bettie Jones, Quintonio LeGrier, Keith Childress Jr., Janet Wilson, Randy Nelson, Antronie Scott, Wendell Celestine, David Joseph, Calin Roquemore, Dyzhawn Perkins, Christopher Davis, Marco Loud, Peter Gaines, Torrey Robinson,

Darius Robinson, Kevin Hicks, Mary Truxillo, Demarcus Semer, Willie Tillman, Terrill Thomas, Sylville Smooth, Alton Sterling, Terence Crutcher, Paul O'Neal, Alteria Woods, Jordan Edwards, Aaron Bailey, Ronell Foster, Stephon Clark, Antwon Rose II, Botham Jean, Pamela Turner, Dominique Clayton, Atatiana Jefferson, Christopher Whitfield, Christopher McCorvey, Eric Reason, Michael Lorenzo Dean, Breona Taylor, George Floyd.

"It is not okay for people of colour to be killed by the police or assaulted by the justice system," wrote Crump. "Absent the privilege of legal protections and designated as a

threat to society, people of colour are prime targets for genocide. As we know this pattern of unequal and disproportionate policing of people who have been racialised as well as criminalised and even exterminated based on race has a long history."

Crump represented the family of Terence Crutcher of Tulsa, Oklahoma, shown on police helicopter and car video walking toward his car with his hands raised, shot and killed in plain daylight.

In 2006, 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson went joyriding in his grandmother's car and was sent to a Panama City, Florida, boot camp for juvenile offenders. Hours after arriving, he was dead. Due to a blood disorder, said the medical examiner. In a landmark case that prompted the Florida legislature to dismantle the state department of justice's juvenile boot system and name the act the Martin Lee Anderson Act, Crump used the media masterfully after unearthing CCTV footage that showed white guards forcing him to inhale ammonia after kneeling, kicking, dragging, and hitting him. A second autopsy determined the 14-year-old was suffocated to death. With Crump's help, the family reached a \$5 million settlement with the state of Florida.

But a jury found the seven former boot camp drill instructors and a nurse not guilty of causing the child's death, and they walked free. Crump stood in front of reporters and thundered: "You kill a dog; you go to jail. You kill a little black boy, and nothing happens." Those comments

were covered by media all over the world.

In today's America, it is Crump who calls on the conscience of the nation through skilful media appearances and publications. "Today, there is in America a persistent, prevailing, and unhealthy mindset regarding people of colour," he wrote. "To understand the presence of genocide, we must acknowledge that our society is one that is built on violence and condones arming its people. This genocide is fuelled by police brutality, unfair treatment in the judicial system, and 'stand your ground and shoot first' laws which are influenced by the gun lobby."

These laws are stuff that says "you can shoot black people and we will justify it," said Crump of the Kenosha shooting. Kenosha is a town of about one lakh people along Lake Michigan. Protesters, many from the large Black Lives Matter movement that sprouted after the killing of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, gathered in downtown Kenosha to protest police violence. The marchers later clashed with the police and the protests deteriorated into arson and destruction of private property. Armed white militia appeared in the streets of Kenosha the following night and television cameras showed police offering water to heavily armed vigilantes and saying, "We sure appreciate you guys here."

One of those guys turned out to be a 17-year-old white teenager who later killed two people and blew the





**FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE**  
Jacob Blake's sister Letetra Widman (wearing goggles) and uncle Justin Blake (to her right) at a rally in Kenosha on August 29

arm of another. After making a call where he is heard telling someone that he had just killed someone, the boy approaches the police carrying his semi-automatic rifle with crowds pointing out to the police that he had just shot someone. The police drive on, ignoring him. He was then driven home to Antioch, Illinois, by his mother.

White privilege, one might argue, considering the treatment of Blake who carried no weapon and was at the time shackled to his hospital bed. "Black men do not get the benefit of their humanity," said Crump. "Armed militia can walk freely, but a black guy heading to where he might have a knife is shot in the back."

He goes further to look at the greater injustice in the system. "Police want the family to talk, but they want to stay quiet. Don't rush to judgment. But did they not rush to judgement when they shoot? We cannot have a justice system for black America and another for white America," Crump said.

"Genocide amply describes what

transpires between the US judicial system and coloured people," Crump wrote in his book. "In effect the judicial system in this country targets, whether consciously or not, black and brown people robbing them at every level including, in the end, of their very lives.

"The physical, financial, mental and even spiritual deaths can be evidenced in newspaper articles, numerous studies, in courtrooms, and on the streets of our impoverished neighbourhoods. You can see them in our prison populations, our schools, and our communities in need of healthcare. It is legalised genocide because the system legitimises over and over again these injustices. Technical reasons are often found for their legality."

There is an undeniable pattern to atrocities perpetrated against people of colour, according to Crump. "Cooperation doesn't work," he said. "Polite responses and non-threatening retreat don't work. So often, too often, no matter how we

respond, the police shoot us and the police get off, which sends the message that it is acceptable to kill black people."

Crump says he is fighting to help transform communities marching and chanting 'No Justice, No Peace' into ones proclaiming 'Know Justice, Know Peace'. He believes that America "can be redeemed and can live up to its promise".

Looking to the start of his journey for justice, Crump looks to a time in 1978, when the supreme Court-ordered forced busing began to racially integrate schools. It was also the time the son of a hotel laundry worker who also worked a night job at a shoe factory realised that his white classmate had a weekly allowance greater than what his mother made in a week or two.

When his mother told him that the integration of white and black children was due to the work of a lawyer named Thurgood Marshall (who later became a Supreme Court justice) in a landmark case named Brown vs Board of Education,

Crump decided he would become an attorney just like Marshall. He would "fight to make life better for people from my side of the tracks". "I was going to fight for all people to have a chance for justice and an equal chance of freedom," Crump wrote.

As a lawyer, he soon learned that it was dangerous to be a coloured person in America. "The police don't shoot white men in the back," he said. People of colour are also killed softly, said Crump, quoting Frederick Douglass. "Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong that will be imposed on them," said Crump.

"Thousands of young black and brown people are killed every year, spiritually, if not physically, through racially biased judicial rulings in American courtrooms," he said. "Police write dishonest probable-cause affidavits, prosecutors justify charging them with felonies, and judges hand down excessive multi-year sentences of prison and probation."

All of that fits the description of the crime of genocide, Crump points out, as defined in Paragraph C, Article 2, of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical

**We are in a time of heightened tension. True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.**

—Ben Crump,  
civil rights lawyer

destruction in whole or in part."

According to Crump, the conditions imposed on black and brown people inflict physical destruction on the members of those communities. "Genocide is not limited to just killing," he said. "It is also genocide to cause serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group and deliberately inflict on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction."

Laws of this country and their enforcement and adjudication are used to cut into the heart and soul of the people. "Most coloured folk believe that the legal system and nearly every other institution in the United States is out to eliminate black and brown people," he said.

Crump was in Kenosha to help coloured people know justice and know peace. He has taken the cause of Jacob Blake to the 2020 March on Washington, which commemorates

two events—the 65th anniversary of the killing of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old black American lynched in Mississippi in 1955, and the anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963.

"He is black America's attorney general," said the Rev Al Sharpton introducing Crump at George Floyd's funeral. Crump's passionate press conferences during the Trayvon Martin trial are the stuff of legend. He has been a fixture on cable news interviews this year, and his pursuit of justice forms the crux of an upcoming, six-part Netflix documentary, *Who Killed Tupac?*

"We are in a time of heightened tension," wrote Crump, quoting King to explain his pursuit. "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."

He stood by Jacob Blake's family in the streets of Kenosha, as they led the crowd in prayer, shared their grief and told their stories. "This is our reality," he said. "That is why we fight."

Before television cameras and the world, he has laid bare the human fight; the fight for equality and against what he argues is a slow racist genocide in Kenosha and in every city where racism continues to rise. "We must," Crump said, "speak truth to power." 🗣️

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## Hark, hark, the native bark

Narendra Modi has been getting too close to animals of late. First he posted his photos with peacocks that strut around the vast lawns of the PM House. Then in his monthly *Mann ki Baat*, he urged dog-lovers to adopt native breeds. They would unleash an animal spirit into Atmanirbhar Bharat, he seems to think. Just what Manmohan Singh's 1991 budget did to the stock market.

The dog is supposed to be man's best friend, but we in India have kept the beast in the doghouse of our imagination. Our puranas have no dog that can be likened to Kamadhenu among cows, Uchhaishravas among horses, or Airavat among elephants. Bhairava rides a dog; Dattatreya is associated with four dogs which symbolise the four Vedas; a dog follows Yudhistira on his final walk through a brief spell in hell, and into heaven.

Elsewhere the dog appears as a pariah, literally. Sage Sankara's supreme wisdom is tested by an untouchable crossing his path with four dogs. A mongrel steals Yudhistira's sandals from outside Draupadi's bedchamber causing the worst familial shame. With the result, Indian dog-lovers have been looking to Labrador, Alsace, Dalmatia and elsewhere to pick up dogs. The Pekinese, once a preserve of the Chinese imperial family, continues to be our most sought-after toy dog even when the Chinese are threatening to "cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war!"

Now Modi has suggested that our kennel keepers look at Indian breeds that can also hunt with the hounds and cuddle up on your laps. No barking matter. He has cited how Army dogs Sophie and Vida won the service chief's commendation cards, how dog Balram spotted explosives on the Amarnath pilgrims' route, how the CRPF's Cracker sniffed out an IED which blew up and killed it, how

Rocky helped the police in Beed solve 300 cases.

To help out the country's countless caninophiles, Modi reeled out a list of "fabulous Indian breeds"—Mudhol Hound, Himachali Hound, Rajapalayam, Kanni, Chippiparai and Kombai, all of which "cost less to raise", and are better suited to our heat, dust, smell and stink than the Dalmatians, Alsatians, Pomeranians and Pekinese, all of which cost a pile and still pee on lamp-posts.

Indeed, some of these Indian breeds have impeccable pedigree. The tall Mudhol Hounds, which hail from the Karnataka-Maharashtra border, had served in Shivaji's army. Malojirao Ghorpade, the last prince of Mudhol, is said to have gifted a pair of these puppies to King George V who christened them Mudhol Hounds. Himachali Hounds, sheepdogs from the snow mountains, are massive mastiff-like dogs with thick fur which protects them from the cold. The lean and mean Rajapalayams, hailing from the town of the same name in Tamil country, had aided the Polygar heroes such

as Veerapandiya Kattabomman against the British after Tipu of Mysore fell in 1799. "The next time you think of raising a pet dog, consider bringing home one of these Indian breeds," Modi told his listeners.

Trust Modi to fill even a kennel with national spirit. "At a time when Atmanirbhar Bharat is becoming a mantra of the people, how can any domain be left untouched by its influence?" he asked. **Tailpiece:** As a prime minister whose tenure depended on outside support of the Congress, Deve Gowda often had to call on Sitaram Kesri who headed the party in 1996-98. Among the several grouses that Gowda had against Kesri, which led to their break-up, was that Kesri used to let his many Pomeranians roam free in the room even when the two were talking matters of state.



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## Two tweets and a storm

Legal experts say Supreme Court overreacted in the Prashant Bhushan case; raise concerns over freedom of speech

BY SONI MISHRA

"I QUITE REALISE how hard it is to resist, with sage silence, the shafts of acid speech; and, how alluring it is to succumb to the temptation of argumentation where the thorn, not the rose, triumphs. In contempt jurisdiction, silence is a sign of strength since our power is wide and we are prosecutor and judge," wrote Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer in a Supreme Court order that dropped contempt proceedings against a top editor in 1978.

But the three-judge bench, comprising Justices Arun Mishra, B.R. Gavai and Krishna Murari, took a different approach in the Prashant Bhushan case. It held Bhushan guilty of contempt of court and levied a fine of ₹1, failing which he would be jailed for three months and debarred from practice for three years.

Two tweets made by Bhushan this June that raised questions over the functioning of the judiciary, the court concluded, "are scandalous and are capable of shaking the very edifice of the judicial administration and also shaking the faith of the common man in administration of justice".

Legal experts, however, said that the Supreme Court overreacted and ended up getting entangled in a peculiar situation where the case could be perceived as a stand-off between the court and an individual. Bhushan's counsel, too, had urged the court not to punish him as that would make him a martyr.

Attorney General K.K. Venugopal, while disagreeing with Bhushan's pressing into service various "objectionable statements" made in his pleading, appealed to the magnanimity of the court.

Supreme Court lawyer Shilpi Jain said that the court should have ignored the tweets. "I don't think public sentiment was swayed to such a great extent by the tweets so as to conclude that they would shake the common man's confidence in the judiciary," she said.

The Attorney General's interventions in court seemed to have facilitated the middle path that was seen in the ruling that levied a token fine despite the guilty verdict.

"You go through the motions and impose a symbolic fine of ₹1 despite the fact that Bhushan was recalcitrant," said senior advocate Dinesh Dwivedi. "You tried to find a middle way. The attorney general's views were a big factor. The court entangled itself in a situation of its own making."

The alternative sentencing of imprisonment and debarment, said former additional solicitor general Bishwajit Bhattacharyya, was not only meaningless but also legally flawed. In the Supreme Court Bar Association vs Union of India case in 1998, the apex court had disapproved of a bench that debarred from practice a contemnor—advocate V.C. Mishra. The court said that the bench, within its powers,



had punished him by suspending his licence, but without giving the Bar Council of India an opportunity to deal with it. It is not permissible for the court to "take over" the role of statutory bodies, said the court, and "perform" their functions.

Bhushan described the case as a "watershed moment" for freedom of speech, saying it had encouraged many people to speak up against injustice. But others in the legal fraternity said that the case would have major repercussions on freedom of speech. "History will look at the case as a very low point in the country's jurisprudence, and this is certainly not a judgment to be celebrated," said senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan. "It is a poor judgment. It is effectively telling us that we cannot make any statements questioning the judiciary. It is a severe blow to free speech." According to Jain, the big issue arising out of the case is the need to do away with the legal provisions for criminal contempt. ●





# An educational revolution during the pandemic

**C**hennai-based Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science (HITS), which has more than 7,000 students on its rolls, has been conducting online classes for its students ever since physical classes have been stopped owing to the Covid-induced restrictions. The institute had been using Microsoft Teams for online learning for quite sometime now. So, the transition to a virtual mode was easy. Online classes became regular in the collage by April 15, and the ongoing semester was completed successfully by April end. The institute already had a licence for the Teams platform from Microsoft. The staff and students gradually

got used to the system, and now there are regular online sessions. The institute also had regular videoconferences through this platform.

Similarly, Bengaluru-based RV College of Engineering had been using various software platforms to achieve digital transformation in higher education. The faculty at the college had undergone certificate courses in digital pedagogy conducted by the National Project Implementation Unit (NPIU). The faculty is also regularly taking NPTEL courses along with the college students. The Covid-19 crisis had provided an opportunity for the college to conduct online sessions on various

topics, projects, experiential learning, seminars and virtual labs.

The current Covid-19 situation has triggered various engineering and technical institutes in south India to embrace innovative steps so that they are fully engaged with their students. The HITS was also planning to conduct online examinations. All the major engineering colleges in the south are successfully dealing with the peculiar situation arising out of the pandemic.

During the initial days of the pandemic it was all chaotic and none could anticipate the future particularly in the field of academics. Fortunately, several solutions for monitoring and delivering teaching and





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learning processes surfaced.

Like others, Bengaluru-based NITTE Meenakshi Institute of Technology acclimated to online teaching and learning scenario by using Google and Microsoft academic licence-based products. All their faculty and students are equipped with NMIT domain email ids. The teachers are trying their level best to keep the learning process uninterrupted for the students. Accordingly, the duration of online lecture sessions was reduced to 40 minutes instead of classroom teaching session length of 1 hour. Students are encouraged to participate actively during the online class through polling, replying through chat windows, and question-answer sessions. NMIT is always open to explore new online tools which facilitate better teaching and learning experience. Its faculty members are utilising different range of tools such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Cisco Webex, e-Shikshana etc.

The college succeeded in keeping its official website updated with the latest information. In addition to this, all parents and students were regularly notified through official WhatsApp and email groups through heads of departments and class teachers.

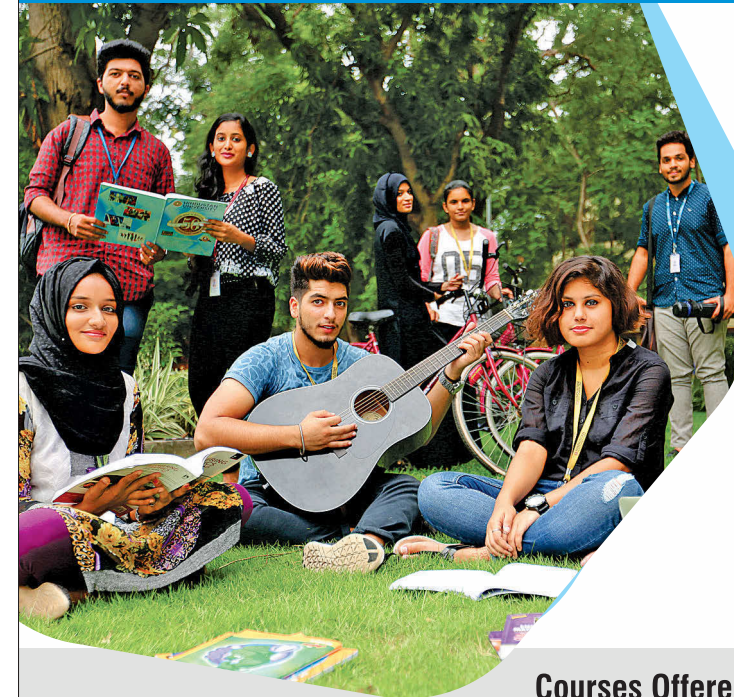
“Covid-19 cell of our college is strict about enforcing all safety measures in the campus in accordance with all sanitary and safety measures prescribed by the university, state and Central governments with utmost care. The hoardings and notices are placed at every corner of the college displaying the do’s and don’ts during this pandemic. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have regular meetings through the online mode. All our faculty members get connected through their devices to discuss various problems so as to arrive and share the innovative solutions,” said Dr H.C. Nagaraj, the principal of NMIT, Bengaluru.

Since the beginning of pandemic, the college has encouraged the online mode. The faculty have regular meetings to improve the teaching via virtual classrooms. Students are also being encouraged to participate in various online hackathons.

Teachers of NMIT have come out with different innovations during this peri-



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od. Proctored exams are one of them. These are the exams that one takes while proctoring software monitors on one's computer's desktop, webcam video and audio. The data recorded by the proctoring software is transferred to a proctoring service for review. NMIT ensured that research meetings did not halt due to growing uncertainty. NMIT's research centres are conducting doctoral committee research meetings through the online mode. Plus, the collage is conducting webinars regularly.

The NMIT also has counselling sessions for the students to come out of mental stress and depression due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally,

Virtual Labs have been used to emulate laboratory sessions. Virtual Labs is a project initiated by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, of the government of India, under the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT). NMIT teachers used Virtual labs to demonstrate the experiments to students during the times of the pandemic. Under this project, web-enabled experiments can be designed for remote operation and viewing to enthuse curiosity and innovation into students. Internet-based experimentation further permits use of resources, knowledge, software, and data available on the web.

There has been widespread usage of online compilers for executing programs plus there are recorded sessions, and online resources for the faculty. The students can use them at any time, from any where, to learn the topics. Also, the teachers and students have been encouraged to undergo Mass Online Oriented courses of varied lengths depending on their areas of interest.

Bengaluru based Dr Ambedkar Institute of Technology is also using the online mode in a big way. "The concept of confining to classroom teaching and learning is slowly fading and learning-teaching anytime-anywhere is going to be adapted. MOOCs are the best platform to make students learn the subjects of their interest with constant monitoring and guidance. Courses such as Artificial Intelligence, 3D printing, Quantum Computing, Sustainable Constructions, Cybersecurity, Data Science, Analytics, Robotics and Automation, Internet of Things (IoT) have got a boost during the pandemic," said Chikkamadaiah Nanjundaswamy, Principal, Dr Ambedkar Institute of Technology in Bengaluru.

He further feels that practical classes are the heart and soul of engineering education. The college is using the online mode for practical classes. Faculty and technical staff of Dr Ambedkar Institute of Technology are developing video-based practical classes, and many software-based modules have been developed on a real-time basis. Virtual labs experiments have also been made available to the students.

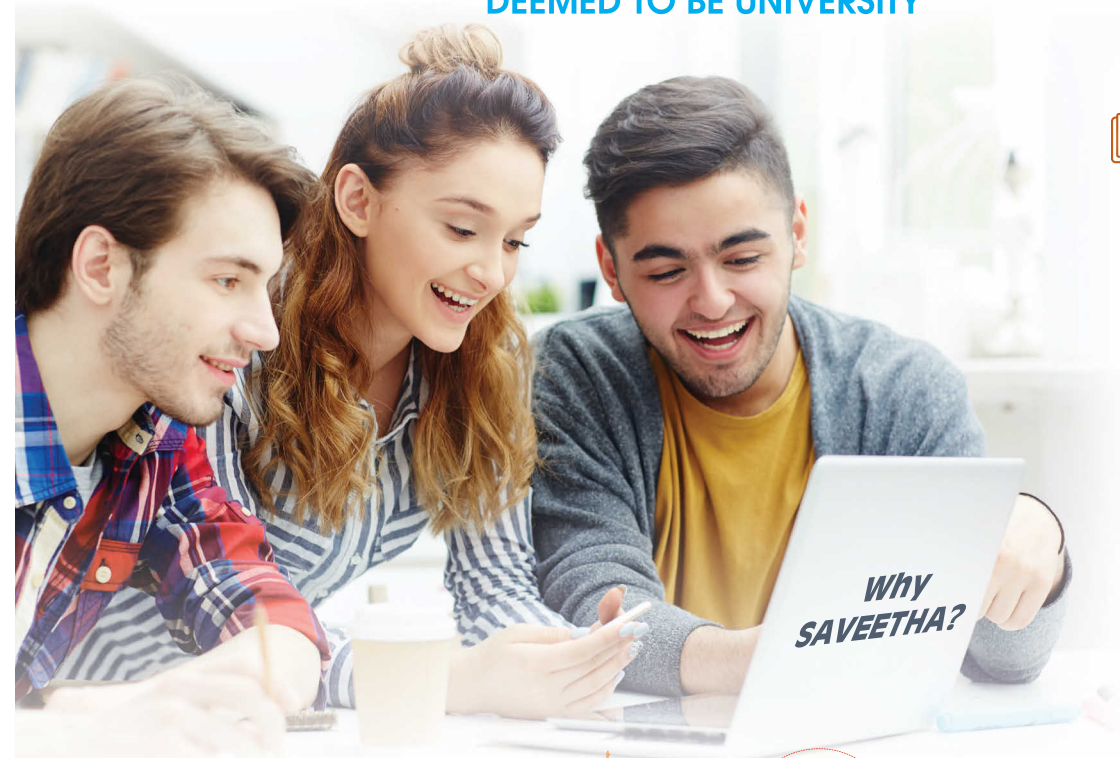
"Though online teaching and learning and evaluation was part of the education system since a long time the Covid-19 pandemic has created a wave among all faculty members to gear up themselves and adapt to the new order of the day. In this context all our departments have also organised Webinars in their subject domains. They have also organised interdisciplinary programmes," said Nanjundaswamy.

Dr Ambedkar Institute has enabled a learning system that ensures that the students and faculty can update themselves on a daily basis. Quizzes, interactive group discussion and sharing videos and animations relevant to the domain has become very popular. 📌



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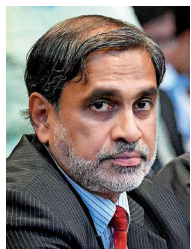
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|| PRANAB MUKHERJEE (1935 - 2020) ||

# THE PRANAB DA I KNEW

BY VENU RAJAMONY



**OUTWARDLY, PRANAB DA** was an intimidating figure. A parliamentarian with 43 years of experience, a senior minister who held the

most important portfolios in the government, a consensus builder respected across the political spectrum and a scholarly elder known for his memory, quick grasp of issues, flashes of temper and inability to tolerate fools. But, for those who worked with him, Pranab da was a kind, loving father figure with a good sense of humour and fondness for narrating stories from his rich past.

Pranab da liked to describe himself as a village boy from Bengal. He would often tell me how he had to walk miles through paddy fields and puddles to go to school. His memory of events, dates and numbers was legendary. He gave credit to his mother for his prodigious memory as she used to make him recount every evening even the minutest details of all the things he had done that day.

Books were a passion for Pranab da. He would read several at a time. One of the first projects initiated in the Rashtrapati Bhavan during his tenure was the restoration of the library. Once the library was returned to its old glory, he became the first president in over 30 years to visit the room, sit there with his chai, and indulge in his favourite pastime.

A devout Hindu, Pranab da observed rituals and enjoyed going to temples. It was known that nothing and no one could disturb him during his daily morning puja. He rarely missed going to his village for Durga Puja every year. But, he was never orthodox or fundamental. Pranab da never consumed alcohol, but would narrate with impish delight how he joined a debate in Parliament on the inclusion of a reference to *soma* and *sura* in NCERT text books. He silenced outraged MPs, pointing out that the description of Durga in the Chandi Path could be interpreted as her being drunk while killing Mahishasur. When this infuriated the MPs even more, Atal Bihari Vajpayee pulled them back saying, “Don’t mess with Pranab da. He knows what



he is talking about.”

Helping Pranab da write his memoirs gave me many opportunities to discuss the important moments in his life. I was struck by his stoicism and equanimity when faced with setbacks. I recollect him describing the shock he felt when Rajiv Gandhi dropped him without warning in 1984, although he was the senior-most member of the cabinet. He was dismissive about the accusation that he projected himself as successor to Indira Gandhi following her assassination. His matter of fact response was, “Some Congress leaders asked me what precedents existed and I pointed out the fact that Gulzarilal Nanda succeeded Nehru on his death.” Pranab da at all times had the highest respect for Manmohan Singh, who was junior to him in politics and administration, despite having lost out to him in the prime ministerial race.

Pranab da believed that Parliament made him what he was. It was there he was the happiest. I recall many occasions when he would sit wistfully in front of his television watching debates in Parliament and say, “I wish I was there”. He was fond of describing how Jawaharlal Nehru would go to Parliament whenever possible. He was touched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s gesture of prostrating on the steps of Parliament before entering the house for the first time in 2014. In his view, the ability to engage in the cut and thrust of debate was the most important skill of a parliamentarian. He enjoyed narrating stories of his role in various debates and admired Vajpayee for his skills in this regard.

Pranab da was at ease interacting with world leaders like Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping and also with those from India’s neighbourhood. I recall Obama saying how happy he was that a person of Pranab da’s wisdom and stature was at the helm of affairs in India. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh was like a member of his family.

Pranab da believed the president had an important role to play as the conscience keeper of the nation. He fulfilled this role through the speeches he delivered in which a recurring theme was the need to uphold India’s pluralism and oppose intolerance. Pranab da was second to none in his devotion to duty. The day his wife passed away, he completed all rituals and was back in his office by evening. He would not countenance any suggestion that the meetings be called off.

Pranab da remained concerned about the affairs of the nation till his last breath. He infused in everyone around him an unlimited passion for India, its democracy and the principles of freedom, equality and pluralism. It was fitting that the nation honoured him with its highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. 🇮

Rajamony is Indian Ambassador to the Netherlands.



# Man for all seasons

A fighter till his last breath, Pranab Mukherjee did not give up till he achieved his ambitious goals

BY RABI BANERJEE

Pranab Mukherjee's name does not invoke much awe among Congressmen in his home state, West Bengal, although he was the president of the country and a Bharat Ratna. Many of them think he was the "real destroyer" of the Congress in the state. When he was nominated by the Congress in 2012 as its presidential candidate, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee made her opposition public and said, "Pranab *da* did not do anything for Bengal." But when it became clear that he would win, she came around and endorsed him.

It was perhaps Mukherjee's meteoric rise in the party and in Delhi that made him an object of envy. Although Bengal has been home to a galaxy of eminent

Congressmen, Mukherjee was in a league of his own, especially in national politics. His capability to maintain cordial relations with people from across the political spectrum and to sense the political atmosphere made him indispensable to the Congress and the governments he was part of.

It was senior Congress leader Siddhartha Shankar Ray who recommended Mukherjee's name to Indira Gandhi in 1969 as a potentially efficient administrator. Indira made him a member of the Rajya Sabha and, in 1973, appointed him deputy minister of industrial development. In 1974, he was appointed minister of state for finance. Mukherjee played an important role during the Emergency as Indira's key man

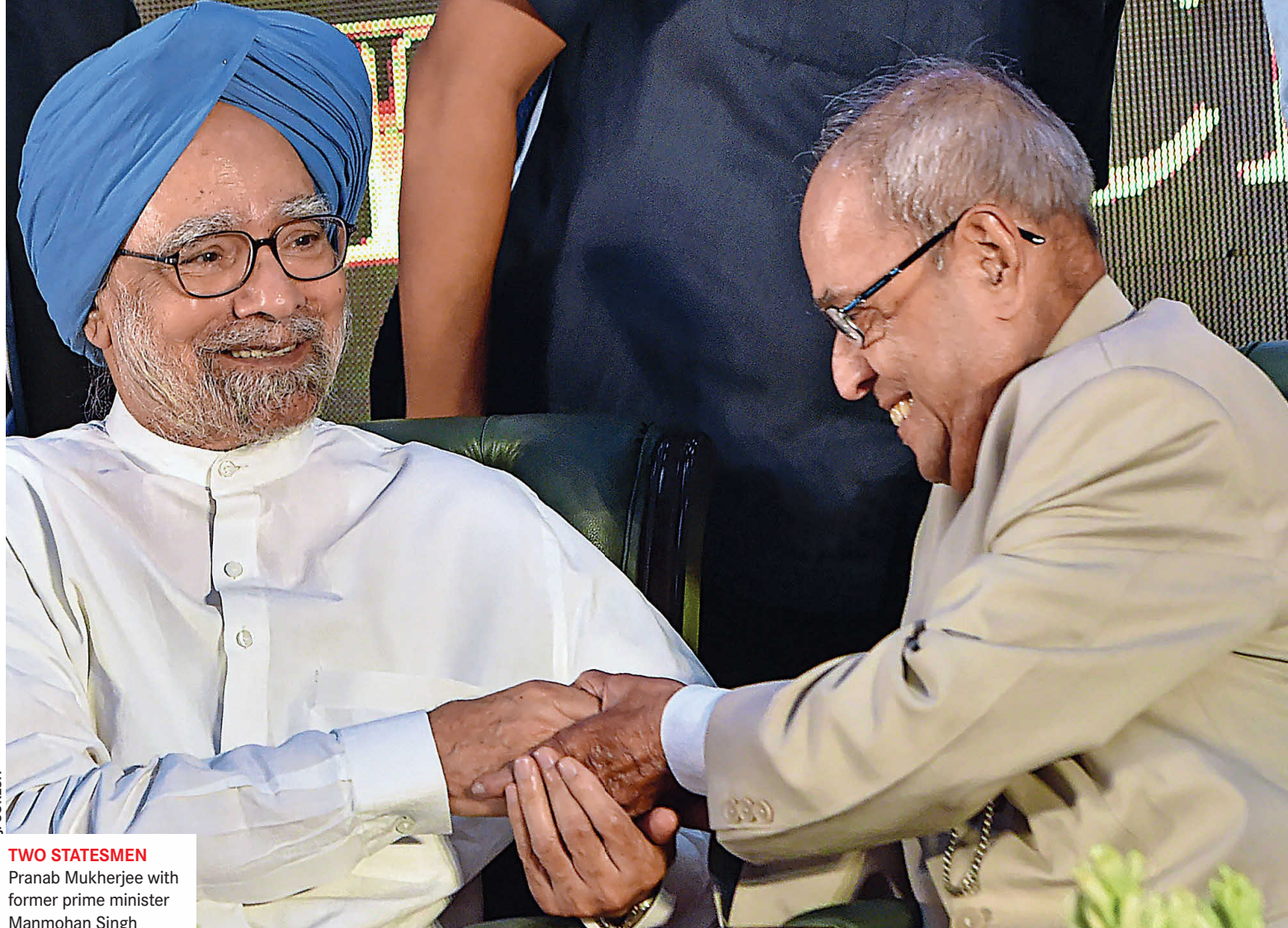
overseeing the bureaucracy. When she was voted back to power in 1980, he was inducted into the cabinet as commerce minister and two years later was made finance minister, a post he held till her death in 1984.

As finance minister, one of the major challenges before Mukherjee was to fund the Tamil revolutionaries in Sri Lanka. Indira also wanted him to finance her defence budget, which required a considerable outlay. He achieved both targets and also arranged for paying back loans owed to the International Monetary Fund. According to Congress insiders, it was Mukherjee who conceived Indira's famous 'Garibi Hatao' slogan and designed various poverty alleviation schemes.

Mukherjee played a key role in

appointing Manmohan Singh as governor of the Reserve Bank of India. It was perhaps an irony of fate that he had to serve under Manmohan a few years later. It happened because of a political miscalculation he made after Indira's death. At the time, there were rumours that Mukherjee was trying to elbow out Rajiv Gandhi, a political novice, in the race to succeed Indira. And he did nothing to dispel the rumours.

After Rajiv took over as prime minister, Mukherjee was dropped from the cabinet. When he rebelled against the decision, he was expelled from the Congress. Mukherjee reconciled with Rajiv in 1989 and was made a member of the Congress Working Committee and, later, a



J. SURESH

**TWO STATESMEN**  
Pranab Mukherjee with former prime minister Manmohan Singh

spokesperson for the party.

The maturity Mukherjee gained during his years in political wilderness was evident in the manner in which he handled the challenging transformation faced by the Congress after Rajiv's assassination. He attempted the uphill task of convincing Sonia Gandhi to take the plunge into politics. At the same time, he became the most trusted lieutenant of prime minister PV. Narasimha Rao, serving as deputy chairman of the Planning Commission and running the ministries of commerce and external affairs.

After the Congress lost the general elections in 1996, Mukherjee became close to the new party chief, Sitaram Kesri. Yet, he gave full support to Sonia when she became Congress president in 1998. The sudden shift in loyalty, however, did not earn him the top spot in 2004, when Sonia chose Manmohan as prime minister. Mukherjee, however, took it in his stride and was, in fact, happy, handling key portfolios such as defence, external affairs and finance.

During an interaction with this correspondent during his last election campaign in 2009, Mukherjee opened up about why he could not become prime minister. "Yes, there were chances," he said. "But they were lost most likely because I could not bring more MPs from my home state." Many Congressmen wanted him to be the president of India back in 2007, but Sonia did not want that to happen. "She said my service in the government was much more needed," said Mukherjee. In 2012, he was the unanimous choice as the presidential candidate of the United Progressive Alliance.

This correspondent first met Mukherjee in 2000 as a student to interview him for a dissertation on a decade of economic reforms in India. He spoke about India's

His capability to maintain cordial relations with people from across the political spectrum and to sense the political atmosphere made him indispensable to the Congress and the governments he was part of.





massive agricultural production and pointed out that reform in that sector could turn India into an economic superpower. “For that, farm workers and labourers must have money to spend on goods and services,” said Mukherjee. So when India encountered an economic recession in 2008, Manmohan tapped Mukherjee to be his finance minister, as he knew that his former boss could deliver during a recession.

During our 2009 encounter, I asked Mukherjee what could be in store if he was again given the finance portfolio. “There is a huge drop in demand and people do not have money in their hands,” he said. “I would do everything possible to infuse money into the system. To be precise, I would give money directly to their accounts.” He proposed to do so by augmenting the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and other welfare schemes. When I asked him about finding money for his plans, he said he would print more money if needed, as inflation, back then, was quite low.

As promised by Mukherjee, the second UPA government saw huge government spending. He raised MNREGA outlays to ₹40,000 crore and absorbed media criticism when inflation crossed double digits. But he helped India ward off the recession.

Mukherjee was always a careful speaker, but was also known for occasionally losing his temper. I once pestered him for his reaction to West Bengal governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi’s decision to switch off lights in the Raj Bhavan against police atrocities in Nandigram in 2007. “The role of the governor is being debated at different political platforms across India,” said Mukherjee. When pressed further, he lost his cool. “Just shut up,” he shouted.

Mukherjee, however, was quick to own up to his mistakes and make amends. I once asked him for his reaction to a comment by a former BJP minister about his performance at the finance ministry. “He should not talk like a mad man,” he said. Within ten minutes, I got a phone call from Mukherjee. “Please don’t use the word mad,” he said. “The man is a BJP leader, but he is a respected person.”

That was Mukherjee. Sensitive, intelligent and a stickler for political and personal propriety. The diminutive giant of Indian politics remained a fighter till his last breath. ●

# The people’s president

Pranab Mukherjee will forever be remembered for throwing open the doors of the Rashtrapati Bhavan to the common man

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Pranab Mukherjee’s official set of wheels as president was a gleaming black Mercedes-Benz S600 Pullman Guard. The bullet-proof vehicle had a mini-fridge, a television and seats with massage functionality. But Mukherjee never abandoned his trusty, white Ambassador. The car with a red beacon and West Bengal number plates had a special place in the presidential garage.

When his car glided across Delhi roads at top speed, Mukherjee would just read. And, reading really was at the heart of his presidential sojourn. If A.P.J. Abdul Kalam made the Rashtrapati Bhavan more democratic, Mukherjee threw open libraries.

A few months after taking over as president, he went to see the library in the presidential estate. One of the most beautiful rooms designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, it had a fireplace and was adorned by the intricate bright yellow mosaic of Jaisalmer. But it was being used as a store at the time. Mukherjee ordered its restoration and also took the lead in recovering and rediscovering the books in the Rashtrapati Bhavan. One of them, in fact, dated back to the days of Lord Curzon.

The Pranab Mukherjee Public Library was opened within the first two years of his tenure, with a special section for children. The idea was to fight the challenges of the internet and television. But he also embraced technology and had the books digitised.

History was not something Mukherjee took lightly. He recorded it, restored it, encouraged scholarship and relished it. The president was a daily diary writer, and his discipline seeped down the ranks. Almost all officers of the president’s

secretariat took to writing. And, Mukherjee was the first president to pen his memoirs—he did it in four parts.

Mukherjee was also meticulous about documentation. For the first time after the Lutyens period, an inventory of furniture, artefacts, books, textiles, paintings and even banquets of the past was prepared. He commissioned splendidly produced books in what could easily be the first formal documentation of the Rashtrapati Bhavan since independence.

The effort revealed quite a few interesting details about certain high-profile visits to the presidential palace such as the state of Bombay waiving prohibition in 1954 to allow Yugoslav president Marshal Josip Broz Tito to savour his favourite slivovitz on the train journey from Bombay to Delhi, the story of Chinese leader Zhou Enlai getting dussehri mangoes secretly loaded on his aircraft or how milk for Queen Elizabeth was brought daily from Bharatpur during her visit.

More than just providing nuggets of history, Mukherjee ensured that it enjoyed pride of place during his tenure as president. His speeches were peppered with quotes from Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. Mahatma Gandhi and former president S. Radhakrishnan, too, were his favourites. Apart from libraries, he also set up museums and donated his famous collection of pipes to one of the museums. He restored the Durbar Hall and the guest wing.

He also used the past to demonstrate how powerful a tool it was to cement relations. When the Japanese emperor Akihito and empress Michiko came on a visit in 2013, a video clip of their 1960 visit to India as crown prince and princess when they were on their honeymoon was dug up to welcome them. He also took steps to rediscover and restore the Rashtrapati Bhavan’s visual archives. Mukherjee revived the presidential tradition of using the six-horse, gold-plated buggy to travel to the Beating Retreat ceremony,

#### WELCOMING PERSONA

Mukherjee receiving the first copy of the coffee-table book *First Citizen* from former Union minister Karan Singh and Philip Mathew, editor, THE WEEK, at Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2014

braving Delhi’s chilly January weather.

He welcomed writers, artists and scholars. Amitav Ghosh once spent a few days as writer-in-residence at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. A true lover of classical arts, Mukherjee encouraged art in every form. He often asked the naval band to play something less cerebral like the yodelling Kishore Kumar. But, of course, his favourite song was “Ekla chalo re”.

He was up at 5am every day and would leave for his morning walk by 5:30. He came back and read. He travelled widely. He broke the rules of ‘At Home’ receptions, choosing to mingle with his guests rather than remaining aloof. And he will forever be remembered for throwing open the doors of the Rashtrapati Bhavan to let people gaze at the marvel. He loved durbars, and would likely be regaling everyone with his endless collection of anecdotes now, wherever he is. ●







EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Arvind Kejriwal,  
Delhi chief minister

# GOVERNMENTS NEED TO AVOID IMPOSING ARBITRARY LOCKDOWNS

BY NAMITA KOHLI

**D**elhi is well past its Covid-19 peak. The peak had come in June, when a deluge of cases had exposed an acute shortage of hospital beds and testing kits. The prognosis looked grim: Cases were expected to surge to five lakh by the end of July.

By August, though, the state government had turned things around. The test positivity rate, which stood at 31.66 per cent on June 14, fell to around 6 per cent two months later. A high positivity rate indicates that only the potentially sick are being tested; a low positivity rate points to the slowdown of the spread.

The slowdown in Delhi has been significant. On September 1, it reported 2,312 new cases, up from the seven-day average of 1,855, but well below the peak in June (3,947 cases). With 14,626 patients, Delhi is now fourteenth among states in terms of the number of active cases. There have been 1.77 lakh cases and nearly 4,500 deaths.

“Things changed when the focus shifted from providing only tertiary care to giving primary-level care for those with mild disease,” says Dr K. Srinath Reddy, president, Public Health Foundation of India. “The strategy of segregating people with mild symptoms for home isolation, providing them pulse oximeters and thermometers, and following up with them worked.”

The involvement of AYUSH medical practitioners helped preempt shortage of manpower. “Kerala, for instance, involved only allopathic doctors initially, giving rise to a shortage. In Delhi, AYUSH doctors have been involved, since April 14, in testing centres, Covid care centres and even hospitals,” says Dr Amar Bodhi R., associate professor at the Delhi government’s Dr B.R. Sur Homoeopathic Medical College and Research Centre.

Bodhi, who was in charge of six testing centres in Delhi, said the practice of segregating patients worked.



“If patients did not show symptoms or had just mild ones, and if they had a separate toilet at home, we would send them into home isolation,” he said. “If they had elderly relatives at home, we would put them in institutional isolation. If they had co-morbidities, or symptoms such as fever over 102 degrees Fahrenheit, blood pressure less than 90/60, pulse rate more than 120 and [oxygen level] less than 95, then they would be sent to a hospital.”

The number of cases came down also because of the natural course of the Covid-19 spread. “In many urban conglomerations, the infection peaks after a certain number of people are infected; then it begins to stabilise,” said Dr Sumit Ray, head, critical care, Holy Family Hospital. “In New York, the infections peaked at about 20 per cent seropositivity (the instance of blood serum testing positive for a virus). In Delhi, it happened after 23 per cent seropositivity. We were right at the point of being overwhelmed when cases began to stabilise. A younger population also meant fewer deaths. Medical management in the country, as in the city, was better because we had the advantage of learning from the experience of European countries.”

Since August 21, though, there has been a rise in the number of cases and containment zones. Positivity rate has risen to around 11 per cent, owing to the phasing out of the lockdown and the influx of patients from outside the state. To tackle the situation, the government will increase testing from 20,000 tests a day to 40,000.

But a significant number of these

tests will be rapid antigen tests, which experts say are less than accurate. The gold standard is the reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test. But Delhi, which has two crore people, conducts only 5,000 to 6,000 RT-PCR tests a day. The number is grossly inadequate, said a health ministry official. Chennai, for instance, conducts 8,000 to 10,000 tests; it has a population of 80 lakh.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal knows that the fight is far from over. In an exclusive interview, he spoke about his plan to refine the Covid strategy to save lives and livelihoods. “Aggressive testing is a pillar of the Delhi model,” he told THE WEEK. “That is the only way we can identify and isolate patients early on.”

Excerpts from the interview:

**Q/ Covid-19 cases in Delhi had stabilised, but a slight increase is now causing concern. How is the government handling the situation?**

**A/**The overall situation is far better than it was in June, [when] we had the second highest active cases in the country. Today we are ranked 14th. Our recovery rate is around 90 per cent, the best in the country, as compared to 76 per cent nationally. Over 70 per cent of our hospital beds are vacant.

Yes, there has been a slight increase in cases. We are repeatedly urging the public not to get complacent and to strictly wear masks, maintain social distancing and sanitise hands regularly.

**Q/ Which Covid-19 strategies have worked for Delhi, and what are the key learnings? Do you see any cor-**

“When the US announced its decision to promote plasma therapy among critical patients, I felt proud. What Delhi did yesterday, the US is doing today.”



**OPEN SEASON**

People at Connaught Place in Delhi on September 1. The phasing out of the lockdown has led to a rise in Covid cases

**relation between rising cases and the unlock process?**

**A/**Till the end of May, the situation in Delhi was under control. We had anticipated a rise in the number of cases with the opening of the lockdown, but the surge was more than expected. That is when the entire city and its two crore people came together to bring Covid under control in what is now popularly called the Delhi model. There are three key principles that constitute the model.

The first principle and foundation of the model is teamwork. So we reached out to everyone—the Central government, non-governmental organisations, resident associations, health workers and, of course, the two crore people of Delhi. Everyone came together to fight Covid-19.

The second principle was acknowledging, appreciating and encouraging constructive criticism. And working towards fixing the problems highlighted by others. For instance, in early June, we started receiving a lot of complaints about Lok Nayak Hospital, the Delhi government’s largest Covid hospital with 2,000 beds. Rather than clashing with those highlighting issues, we fixed all issues one by one. The media was particularly helpful in mediating concerns and pointing us in the right direction.

The third principle is that no matter how bad the situation turns, the government cannot give up. The Karnataka health minister recently said: ‘Now only God can save us.’ I can understand the anxiety and helplessness of that minister. But as a government, you cannot give up.

**Q/ Delhi was among the first to use rapid antigen tests to augment testing. How do you plan to modulate your testing strategy in the coming days?**

**A/**In June, Delhi became the first in the country to start using rapid antigen tests. We found that when cases surged, many people started complaining about having to wait for RT-PCR tests. That is because we have limited lab capacity in Delhi. But rapid tests allowed us to immediately scale up testing from around 10,000 tests to 20,000 tests a day. We have created testing facilities in schools and dispensaries, where we are encouraging people to get rapid test done for free. At 81,000 tests per million, we are testing more than anywhere else in the country.

In light of the slight increase in cases, we have decided to further double the number of tests to 40,000 a day, and to extend the timings of dispensaries, clinics and hospitals, where these tests are being done for free.

**Q/ There has been a huge debate on plasma therapy across the world. You are an advocate of the therapy. How has it been used in Delhi?**

**A/**We studied the experiences of many countries and found plasma therapy to be a promising option. I am not saying that it is the treatment for Covid-19; but even if there is a small chance of saving someone’s life, we should try it. Today, Delhi has shown the way as far as plasma therapy is concerned. Delhi was the first to initiate trials of convalescent plasma therapy at Lok Nayak Hospital in April; the trials showed encouraging results.

Subsequently, we launched the country’s first two plasma banks in Delhi in early July, so that patients in need of plasma can get it free of cost and without hassle. We are running awareness campaigns to encourage recovered patients to donate their plasma. So far, more than 900 recovered patients have donated plasma, and around 710 units of plasma have been used in the recovery of patients across hospitals in Delhi. The recovery rate in Delhi has gone up to 90 per

ARVIND JAIN



cent; it has been possible because of measures like plasma therapy.

Last week, when the US announced its decision to promote plasma therapy among critical patients, I felt proud. What Delhi did yesterday, the US is doing today.

**Q/ Your home quarantine strategy is a highlight of the Delhi model.**

**A/**Home isolation was the cornerstone of Delhi's Covid turnaround. We studied what was going wrong in Italy, Spain and New York. There, they would take every Covid patient, whether mild or severe, to hospitals and quarantine facilities. So when patients who actually needed critical care reached hospitals, there was no space for them.

Delhi's home isolation model has set an example for the whole world. More than 90 per cent of Covid patients either have no symptoms or show mild symptoms like fever or cough. They can stay home and look after themselves. We explained to patients what to do during home isolation and what precautions to take. Our team of doctors checks on patients every day.

We also provided pulse oximeters free of cost to every single patient in home isolation. The biggest problem faced by a patient is a sudden drop in oxygen levels, also called 'happy hypoxia'. If the oxygen level falls to 90, it is considered serious; if it falls below 85, it is considered very serious, and you will experience trouble breathing. It was observed that some patients had no symptoms at all, but their oxygen levels dropped drastically. Before they could be taken to hospital, they succumbed to Covid.

Today, more than 90 per cent of



AAYUSH GOEL

**PARKS AND RECREATION**

With gyms in Delhi closed, people have been attending fitness sessions in public parks

home isolation model was key to our overall Covid strategy, but the Central government cancelled the programme because of some misapprehensions. So we sat down with them and explained to them each and every element of our home isolation programme, and convinced them of its need. The media and the people of Delhi also voiced their support. I am glad the Centre reversed its decision.

**Q/ Non-BJP chief ministers have opposed the Centre on two key issues—holding the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and the shortfall in goods and services tax collections.**

**A/**I feel that the health and life of students is sacrosanct and we just can't compromise on that. We understand that conducting exams is necessary, but [it should not] put lives at risk. We suggest postponing exams or finding an alternate way of conducting them at least for this year.

Under the Constitution, the Centre is obligated to give states GST compensation for lost revenues. It is the states that are at the forefront of fighting Covid, so the Centre should go even beyond its constitutional obligations and support states in all possible ways. Unfortunately, at the last meeting of the GST council, the Centre refused to meet its obligations. This is a huge betrayal.

**Q/ What would be the big challenges for your government in the coming days?**

**A/**The biggest challenge at this moment is to get the economy back on track and restore the lost livelihoods of lakhs of people, including migrant labourers who were the most affected by the pandemic. Only if the economy improves will government revenues improve. And only then will we be able to work on many other important issues in Delhi, like environment, sanitation and infrastructure development. ●

patients in Delhi are recovering in home isolation. A significant achievement is that no patient in home isolation has died since July 14.

**Q/ A big concern has been the availability of beds, particularly ICU beds. How did the Delhi government tackle this? What are your views on pricing issues and the need to regulate private hospitals?**

**A/**When the number of deaths started increasing in June, I spoke to doctors and health experts. A major recommendation that came was the need to increase ICU beds. We also found that many deaths were taking place in wards rather than in ICUs.

That is when we decided to increase ICU beds in Delhi on a war footing. From less than 500 ICU beds in early June, Delhi today has more 2,100 ICU beds, about 1,200 of which are vacant. We saw reports from many cities, where patients ran from one hospital to another to locate a vacant bed. We avoided that in Delhi by launching Delhi Corona, an app

that gives real-time status of vacant ICU beds in government and private hospitals.

Affordability of health care is very important, especially so in times of a pandemic. But any kind of price capping should be done with caution and in consultation with private hospitals. In Delhi, we talked to all stakeholders before deciding to cap the prices of isolation beds and ICUs in private hospitals.

**Q/ You want the Delhi metro reopened. Given the metro's huge ridership and the concerns about the spread of the virus in closed spaces, how do you plan to manage the situation if it reopens?**

**A/**Metro rail and buses are the life-line of Delhi. I have said this earlier also: We need to learn to live with Covid and let the economy find its feet. Crores of people across the country have lost jobs because of this pandemic. But we can't go back to our old ways. That is why even when the Delhi metro reopens, it will

have very strict standard operating procedures regarding passenger screening and enforcement of social distancing. We had resumed Delhi's bus services in June with strict SOPs; we haven't heard of cases spreading because of buses.

**Q/ What is your view on reopening schools?**

**A/**I don't think anything can replace the experience of learning in a classroom or playing with your friends. But the risks [of reopening schools] are far too high. Till Covid is completely under control, we are not going to open schools and colleges.

**Q/ How do you plan to bolster the economic situation in Delhi?**

**A/**Reviving Delhi's economy, even as we keep Covid in check, is our biggest priority now. I think two factors are going to be most important. First, people will need to stop fearing the virus. Only then can businesses open and consumers start spending. We are beginning to see this happen in Delhi, since the situation here has substantially improved.

Second, governments need to avoid imposing arbitrary lockdowns. I am seeing many states imposing two- and five-day lockdowns. This will only hurt the economy further.

Delhi is the best example of how to control the spread of Covid without resorting to lockdowns.

Each state will need to take specific measures to revive its economy. We have already taken many decisions. We reduced VAT (value added tax) on diesel by ₹8.38 a litre in one go in July; allowed street vendors and weekly markets to start operating, and hotels and banquet halls linked to Covid hospitals to start functioning normally; and launched 'Rozgar Bazaar', a jobs portal that connects employers and jobseekers. In just one month, 10.5 lakh jobseekers have registered and there are over eight lakh active job vacancies. In addition, I am holding regular meetings with traders, industry associations and businesses, and listening to their suggestions so that together we can get Delhi's economy back on track.

**Q/ The Delhi government and the Union home ministry had several disagreements about managing the pandemic. How were these disagreements reconciled?**

**A/**We have worked closely with the Central government and all other stakeholders in the fight against Covid. Naturally, there will be some disagreements in terms of what strategy to deploy. For example, Delhi's

“ [Arbitrary lockdowns] will only hurt the economy further. Delhi is the best example of how to control the spread of Covid without resorting to lockdowns.



# Metros vs microbe

Covid-19 found its perfect breeding ground in India's bustling metropolises. A look at how the big cities fared so far

BY NAMITA KOHLI

**THE SURGE IS** here. Of tests for Covid-19 and of new cases. On August 30, India conducted 8.4 lakh tests, recorded 78,761 new cases—a single-day high for any country—and saw 948 people die of the disease. The distribution of the case load and the deaths has not been uniform. The Union health ministry says that about 70 per cent of the cases are concentrated in seven states—Maharashtra (21 per cent), Andhra Pradesh (13.5 per cent), Karnataka (11.27 per cent), Tamil Nadu (8.27 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (8.27 per cent), West Bengal (3.84 per cent) and Odisha (3.84 per cent). Half the deaths reported are from Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Even as these states struggle to manage their case load, India's Covid-19 story can be traced to its burgeoning metropolises, from where it is slowly spreading out to smaller districts and rural areas. The contagion entered the country with the international traveller through some of its busiest airports, and began ravaging its bustling cities. For the virus, the mega cities proved to be fertile grounds to replicate—crammed hutments in slums standing cheek-by-jowl with plush housing societies, busy markets and sardines-in-a-can scenes in its public transport systems.

Oblivious to the administrative or geographic boundaries and unde-

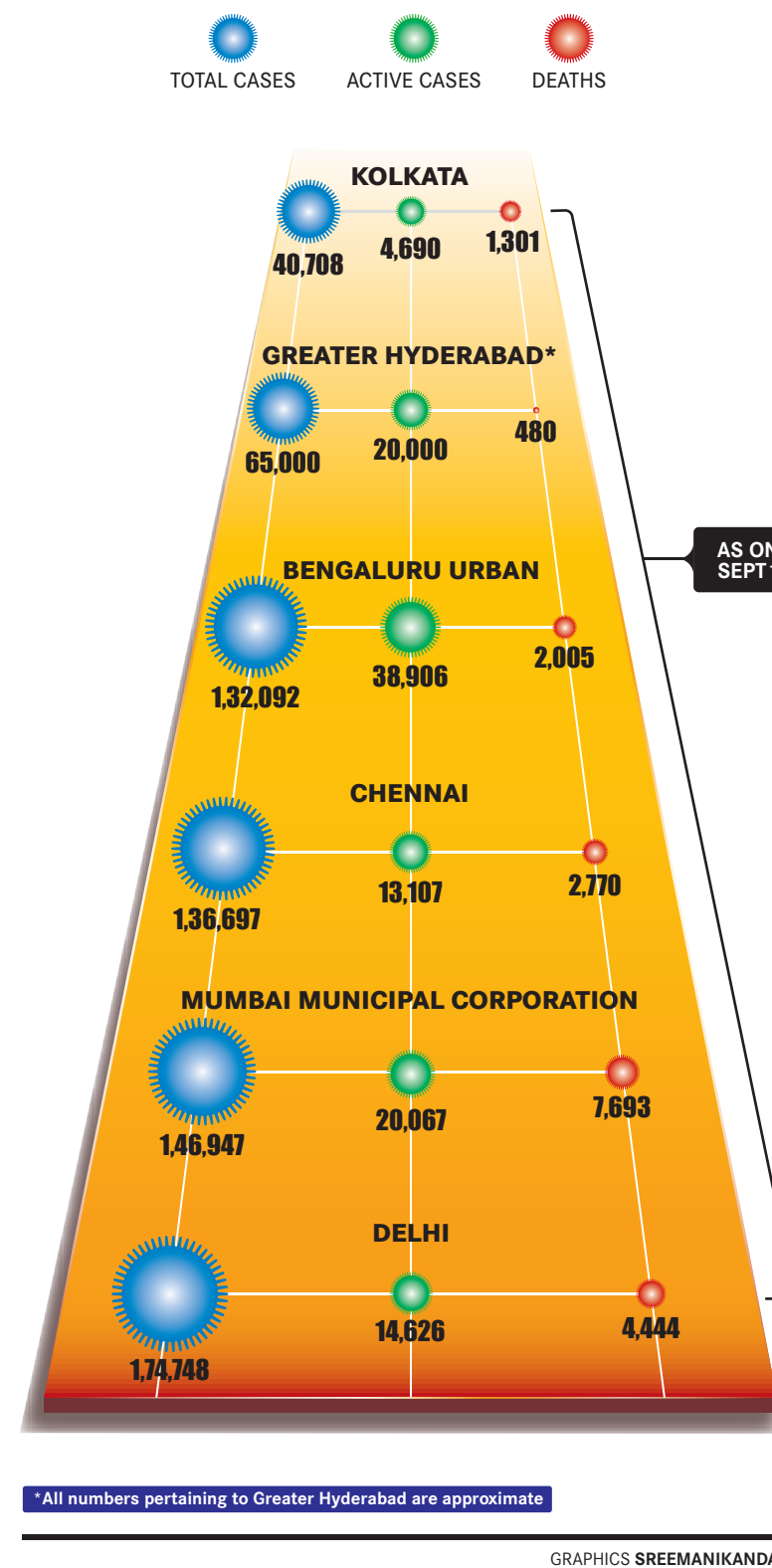
terred by a nationwide lockdown, the contagion 'bloomed' in the disease hotspots—from the densely packed slums of Mumbai to the crowded wholesale vegetable markets of Delhi's Azadpur mandi and Chennai's Koyambedu. Sero survey reports suggest that the undetected cases in our cities are several fold higher than the RT-PCR detected cases—about 30 per cent people in Delhi are sero-positive, 16 to 57 per cent are so in Mumbai, 51.5 per cent in Pune (albeit in a smaller, much less representative sample) and one-fifth of Chennai's population has been exposed to the virus. The Delhi sero-survey, for instance, suggests that about 58 lakh people have the antibodies and virus exposure, while the reported cases are only around 1.7 lakh as of August end.

Cases in Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata have plateaued in the past few weeks, though Mumbai, Pune and Bengaluru continue to struggle. Even as some cities pause to catch their breath, and unlock the economy, experts say it is not yet time to lower our guard. As people begin to move out of homes, testing will remain the key to managing the spread of the virus. "If we look at Chennai, epidemic management can be divided into two phases—pre and post June 20, when we saw the biggest peak. It has been over a month now that we have seen cases stabilise," says Dr Prabhdeep

Kaur, public health expert at the ICMR-National Institute of Epidemiology, Chennai. "What has worked for the city is that for a population of 80 lakh, we are doing 8,000-10,000 tests per day. Positivity rate, which should ideally be under 5 per cent, stands at 8-11 per cent in the city. Mask compliance and people's [willingness] to come forward and get tested have also made a major difference."

Apart from RT-PCR tests, several states are now doing rapid antigen testing, although the chances of false negatives can be high in the latter. "It does help rule out the positives, but unless the symptomatic negatives are re-tested, which many states are not doing, it does not work. The Tamil Nadu government has made a conscious decision of not doing rapid antigen tests," says Kaur.

States that were able to use the lockdown to prepare their health systems are faring better, says Dr Giridhar R. Babu, professor and head, lifecourse epidemiology, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI). But he adds that it is a misconception that any city has undertaken miraculous strategies, what with the basics being the same—testing, contact tracing, isolating and treating. The temporary plateau in a few cities could be attributed to the less movement of people, and as and when people step out, the cases would increase.



Both Babu and Kaur insist that a rise in cases is not a fact to be hidden or feared. "There is a perception that states that are reporting higher numbers are somehow not doing good. But increased numbers are only a function of enhanced testing. Focus has to be on reducing deaths," says Babu. "Look at Andhra Pradesh, for instance, where a case fatality rate of 0.9 per cent has been reported. Once the sero-positivity results are out, this number will come down even further." The Union government, too, has asked states with high case loads and deaths to bring down their case fatality rate under 1 per cent across all districts.

Following simple public health strategies has worked for some cities. For instance, Delhi, which opened up really fast, saw a rise in cases, but managed the situation with the home isolation model, providing people pulse oximeters and thermometers at home and monitoring their condition, says Dr K. Srinath Reddy, president, PHFI, who is part of the ICMR's task force for Covid-19.

Reddy says that testing, coupled with contact tracing, isolating, mask compliance and physical distancing, can alone let us live with a virus that is here to stay. "We need to test intelligently, given that sensitivity for RT-PCR tests is 60-65 per cent and for rapid antigen tests it is about 50 per cent," he says. "The company that manufactures the RT-PCR test itself says that a negative test does not mean much. Which is why clinical investigation such as chest CT scans and monitoring for symptoms is important."

Strict measures such as enforcing lockdown and current strategies of testing and isolation have failed, says Dr Jayaprakash Muliyl, former principal and head of the department of community health, CMC, Vellore. "This is a disease of the elderly, causing high mortality among those over 60. Those aged less than 50 are by



and large affected mildly. The focus has to be on protecting the vulnerable," he says. "Instead what some states did initially was to admit even those with sub-clinical infection. That did not help and in some places even overwhelmed the systems."

To deal with the virus effectively, the country has to incorporate certain strategies in its public health response, says Muliyl. "First, there has to be a change in attitude," he says. "Instead of stigmatising those who have recovered, we need to understand that once infected, the recovered individual will have long-lasting immunity. This long-lasting immunity is also the reason why vaccines will work to protect against this disease."

Muliyl says that both herd immunity by natural infection and immunity through vaccines will help in dealing with the disease. "Herd immunity varies: in some diseases such as measles it is 90 per cent, but in the case of influenza, it is 40 per cent. In the case of H1N1, once 40 per cent of the population got it, the disease disappeared for a year. A year later, with new births, that balance tilted and we saw fresh cases. Similarly, in this case by the time we reach that point, there will be a vaccine. So the scenario looks pretty positive," he says.

In rural areas, the transmission would be slower, as they are not as crowded and are sparsely populated. Healthcare systems in smaller towns would need support in dealing with pneumonia and early management of severe cases.

"What is clear is that you cannot isolate human beings for too long in a bid to 'catch the virus'," says Muliyl. "There is a need to be honest about community transmission, about the protection of the vulnerable and the elderly, and the need to save lives. At this point, communities and local administration need to deal with the disease together, not in isolation or dictated by fear." ❏

# M U M B A I Newer targets

## Though there is a dip in cases in high-density areas, Mumbai continues to grapple with spread in other regions

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

**WITH CLOSE TO** 1.5 lakh cases within city limits and an additional 1.8 lakh in the extended metropolitan region, Mumbai's fight with Covid-19 has been a staggering one. Every day, the city reports between 1,100 and 1,300 new cases and nearly 50 people die from the virus. In many ways, Covid-19 has exposed the dream city's vulnerabilities.

In the initial months after the first case was recorded in the city on March 11, Mumbai scrambled to hold together its shaky health infrastructure. It battled lack of medical equipment, dearth of frontline health workers in leading public hospitals, a huge migrant crisis, food shortage in high-density areas, the threat of transmission in slums, sudden transfers of municipal commissioners, undercounting of deaths, and frequently changing testing policies that were sometimes at variance with ICMR guidelines.

"I think Mumbai took a long time to take decisions and decentralise the control of Covid-19," says Sayli Mankikar, senior fellow at Observer Research Foundation. "It was too little too late when it began. But after Iqbal Chahal (current municipal commissioner) took over [in early May], a new protocol was put in place, which worked. I feel we need to innovate and disrupt further."

In the six months since the first case, Mumbai has created temporary medical infrastructure and has contained transmission in Dharavi and other high-density areas through an aggressive 'test, trace, track and treat' policy. But the city is now tackling three immediate problems—containing the infection spread in non-slum, high-rise areas; arresting the growing number of critical patients; and bringing down an ever-increasing fatality rate.

"The best part of Mumbai's fight is that 80 per cent of the non-health care responsibility has been handled by the non-profit sector and activist citizens," says Shishir Joshi, founder of the non-profit Project Mumbai. "The state busied itself with catering to the shortages in basic health care infrastructure. There was a complete breakdown in communication from the authorities and the excuse that the virus [gave] us no time to prepare does not hold ground in a mega-city like Mumbai. It only brings into focus the 25 years of incompetence of the municipal government in power."

However, a Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation official, on the condition of anonymity, said: "The BMC has left no stone unturned in its efforts to contain the transmission of the virus in the city; Dharavi is the best example of it. And if we



AMEY MANSABDAR

**BACK IN BUSINESS**

A shopping mall in Mumbai

have a high number of infections, we also have an equally high number of those who have recovered and have been discharged from hospitals. The recovery rate stands at 81 per cent. So, one only needs perspective to analyse the work done by the corporation."

As of now, Mumbai's fatality rate stands at 5.3 per cent, which is higher than the state (3.2 per cent) and national average (1.8 per cent). Late admissions to hospitals and infrequent check-ups of patients at home have contributed to the high mortality, say experts. The aim is to bring it below 3 per cent.

To do this, the BMC has urged private hospitals to refer critical patients to civic-run Covid-19 health centres and major hospitals. This is part of the civic body's 'Mission Save Lives', a nine-point strategy launched on June 30, which aims to reduce fatalities through video surveillance of patients and mandatory audit of every death.

"More than half of all fatalities have been among those under the age of 60, which is very high in comparison to most countries," says Dr Murad Banaji, a mathematician at Middlesex University London who works in disease modelling. Examining the sero-survey that detected 57 per cent infection in high-density slums across three wards, including Dharavi, Banaji says that it is likely that there were over 50,000 infections in the city by the end of March. "The spread in Mumbai was quite rapid in the slums between late March and early April," he says. "The report was a shock even for researchers. What we missed is that there was a slow ongoing spread in housing societies as well. The reason for the slow decline in the cases in Mumbai is that we still have spread in housing societies."

Currently, the BMC is looking after discharged patients through 'Mumbai Maitri', a dedicated remote-monitoring set-up that has trained health

care workers calling home-quarantined patients and doing regular follow-ups. Around 20 lakh citizens in the city have completed their quarantine; more than 1.5 lakh are currently under home quarantine.

Convinced that Dharavi is flattening the curve, the BMC has decided to shut down the jumbo facilities created to tackle the pandemic there. The citizens, however, see a sense of fatigue among those in-charge. "I feel everyone has given up, really," says a 23-year-old woman in Dombivli. "My relative who tested positive some time back has not received a single call from the authorities asking how he is feeling post-Covid-19."

Mankikar, however, says: "Mumbai is in a much better situation and the administration has got a stronger grip on all the services. Our numbers are still high but we have at least sorted issues in the high-density areas. We still have a long way to go to completely open up, but we are inching closer to that goal." ❏

**The best part of Mumbai's fight is that 80 per cent of the non-health care responsibility has been handled by the non-profit sector and activist citizens.**

—Shishir Joshi, founder of the non-profit Project Mumbai



# K O L K A T A Not there yet

## Kolkata could be flattening the curve, but problems remain

BY RABI BANERJEE

**“THINGS ARE NOT** as bad as you might think,” asserted Debraj Jash, principal pulmonologist at Kolkata’s Apollo Gleneagles Hospital. “With more tests in the past ten days, the [growth rate] of infections has become static in Kolkata. We are optimistic seeing the situation. If we tackle the impending unlocking carefully, we might be able to win the race as the Covid-19 curve in Kolkata

has been plateauing a bit.”

Jash even claimed that the city had reached its Covid-19 peak. While West Bengal has been reporting about 3,500 cases a day, Kolkata has seen around 550. While daily testing in the state a few months ago was 5,000, it is now around 45,000.

“[However,] many battles have to be fought in the future,” he said, “especially when the government unlocks the whole system. So, we need to keep an eye on emerging issues.”

He said that the treatment protocol for Covid-19 had advanced a lot since March. “Initially, we did not use steroids,” he said. “Now we know how to use them, what medicine to use and how long such steroids should be used. That has been reflected in the change of scenario.”

Hospitals are also trying to admit fewer people. Many are treated in the outpatient department, and others are urged to stay at home. “The patient needs to take certain medicines at home,” said Jash. “If the patient’s oxygen level is going down or if there is shortness of breath, he would have to report to the hospital. Otherwise, we are treating them at home.”

Said Indranil Khan, a cancer specialist: “I have many patients who, despite their comorbidities, won the fight against Covid-19 because they

got tested early and did not panic. All of my patients, who are mostly immunocompromised, have won the battle thanks to early detection.”

State Chief Secretary Rajiva Sinha said that most of those who have died of Covid-19 had reported to hospital late. “So, the administration’s biggest challenge is to bring them treatment without wasting any time,” he said.

One of the reasons for late reporting in Kolkata is the social stigma associated with Covid-19.

Another worry is the expensive fees in private hospitals. Many patients have complained to the state health commission about private hospitals denying them treatment unless they paid upfront. “They would ask if you have money for down payment,” said Sushil Roy, a resident of north Kolkata. “Once you say you have insurance, they would say no bed is available. My bill for 15 days was close to ₹10 lakh.” Roy, a retired PSU officer, had to use his personal contacts to get admission in the hospital. “But think of people who do not have the contacts of high-profile people,” he said.

Khan, however, noted that even if the medicines were cheap, the hospitals had to do a lot of tests and had other patient-related expenses. He said the hospitals charging for these was acceptable as long as they were not eyeing profits. “I suggest the government have a designated officer to look into the billing of each private hospital,” he said.

West Bengal now has to consult the Union government before imposing lockdowns outside containment zones. Medical experts said the situation might be troublesome if unlocking is not handled properly. “Many infected persons are staying at home,” said Jash. “A large number of them are asymptomatic. But once everything is open, they would have to come out for work. This would cause a second wave.”



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

**FIGHTING FIT**  
A sparring session at a gym in Bengaluru

# B E N G A L U R U Cautious optimism

## With its falling mortality rate and high recovery rate, Bengaluru seems to be on the right path in taming Covid-19

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

**BENGALURU CROSSED ONE** lakh Covid-19 cases on August 21, accounting for 37 per cent of the total cases in Karnataka. In May, the city had been praised as a model for managing the pandemic as it had reported only 280 cases and 11 deaths. But since mid-July, the city has found itself battling a surge.

The surge followed the lifting of the lockdown, the resumption of economic activities, interstate migration, fatigue of Covid warriors, complacency in contact tracing and the callous attitude of the citizens. Health officials, however, hint that the pandemic may have peaked in the city. “The ongoing sero survey can indicate the peak or the prevalence and immunity levels in the community. But our focus now should be to contain the virus, reduce mortality and adhere to the social distancing

norms,” said Dr M.K. Sudarshan, chairman of Karnataka’s Covid-19 technical advisory committee.

Delhi, which has a population of 1.9 crore, had nearly 3,500 daily positive cases at the peak of the pandemic. Daily positive cases in Bengaluru, with a population of 1.3 crore, seem to have plateaued at around 3,500, although testing has been scaled up. “In the beginning of July, we used to conduct 4,000 tests per day. Now we are conducting 25,000 tests. We are also tracing more contacts per patient,” said Munish Moudgil, special officer for the Covid-19 war room.

Shortage of beds has been a major challenge. It is now being addressed with a real-time centralised bed allocation system, which helps patients locate hospitals with bed availability. A change in the quarantine norms has been rewarding, too.

“Home isolation has reduced deaths. Patients are regularly monitored using pulse oximeters and are rushed to hospitals only if their oxygen saturation level drops,” said Dr C. Nagaraj, a member of Karnataka’s treatment protocol committee. “At least 40 per cent of the Covid patients who came to hospitals used to die within a day. But now, ward-wise medical triage teams are helping in early intervention and also in freeing up hospital beds for critical patients.”

The Bengaluru team has found that high flow nasal cannula and non-invasive ventilation are more effective than ventilators for critical patients. “We started monitoring all patients with finger clip pulse oximeters, which give an alert the moment oxygen levels go below the threshold level. This has improved the chances of survival,” said Dr Trilok Chandra, chief nodal officer of Tele ICU, an online facility to treat critically ill patients in remote areas.

The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike has stopped barricading containment zones and labelling homes under quarantine to destigmatise Covid and encourage people to seek early medical intervention.

Karnataka Medical Education Minister Dr K. Sudhakar, who has been the face of the battle against the pandemic in the state, said Bengaluru was leading from the front in providing innovative solutions to fight Covid-19. “Bengaluru accounts for only 10 per cent of the total deaths among the top four metro cities in the country,” said Sudhakar. “The mortality rate in Bengaluru has come down from 3.11 per cent on May 31 to 1.55 per cent in August. The recovery rate is 66.12 per cent, with less than 1 per cent of the cases being treated in ICUs. So Bengaluru is definitely doing well in containing the pandemic.”



SALIL BERA

**ROUGH RIDE**  
Horse riders train at the Calcutta Polo Club





**CHECKING IN ON HEROES**  
Tamil Nadu Health Minister C. Vijayabaskar interacts with health care workers

C H E N N A I

# Proceeding with caution

Chennai has done well, but the death rate is still worrying

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

**IN RECENT DAYS**, Health Minister C. Vijayabaskar and his team have been hailed as the saviours of Tamil Nadu. The state has, in the past six months, done the most testing—nearly 80,000 every day since August 29. It has also been locked down the most. While the growth rate of cases has plateaued in the past few weeks, the number of deaths—7,322—is still worrying.

The state's battle against the virus took a turn in mid-April, when J. Radhakrishnan replaced Beela Rajesh as health secretary. The former has experience in handling disasters, and he was immediately faced with one. The Koyambedu wholesale market in Chennai became a hot-spot, and the city began recording more than 2,000 cases daily. "This is when we decided to go for door-to-

door screening," Vijayabaskar told THE WEEK. The health department set up fever camps in every ward of Chennai. About five months later, the Greater Chennai Corporation has nearly 190 fever camps in the city. Any person can walk in and get tested. The result of the RT-PCR test, which took three days in April, takes six to 12 hours now. "This is because we have government-run testing centres in every district," said Vijayabaskar.

There are 150 approved testing centres across the state; 87 of these are private. The government bears the cost of testing there, too. The state spends ₹7 crore every day on testing, said Vijayabaskar.

When a person tests positive for the virus, the authorities call him and dispatch an ambulance. A bed is

allotted, based on availability, before he reaches the hospital. A pack of medicines, which includes vitamin and zinc tablets, is kept ready for the patient. A blood test and a CT scan are done, based on which the medicine dosage is decided. "We give remdesivir and tocilizumab based on requirement," said Vijayabaskar. "Earlier, we did not have ample stock of these drugs. But now we are self-sufficient."

Testing apart, the minister explained how the government handled Covid-19 clusters. The Koyambedu market aside, there was focus on micro-clusters, particularly in crowded slums. "We set up toilets within containment zones," he said. "We ensured people got everything, so that they do not come out. Food supply to every household in the micro-clusters was ensured."

But now, as the city reopens, the health system would have to be wary. "I do not know if there will be rapid spread, but we are well prepared to handle it," said Vijayabaskar. He added that the health infrastructure, which has been scaled up by 30 per cent, will be expanded to 50 per cent in the next two weeks.

At the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital in Chennai, for instance, there are 2,000 beds exclusively for Covid-19 patients; the number was 50 in March. "We ensure that 30 per cent of the beds are available to accommodate new patients," said Dr T.S. Selvavinayagam, director of public health. "So, when the hospital gets 70 per cent filled up, we immediately increase the number of beds by scaling up the infrastructure in every hospital. The lockdown helped us work out strategies to contain the spread and scale up infrastructure." 🗨️

H Y D E R A B A D

# Hoping against hope

With Covid-19 cases decreasing in the city, it seems to have turned a corner. But, it could also be a false dawn

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

**THE GREATER HYDERABAD** region has been an area of great concern for the Telangana government with respect to Covid-19 cases. With a population of more than 1 crore—almost a quarter of the state's population—it accounted for more than half of the total cases in the state. Of the 836 deaths in the state till September 1, around 60 per cent have been in and around the city.

Till a few weeks back, the state capital had only one multispecialty hospital and two state-run hospitals dedicated to Covid-19. Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao had expressed concern about the rise in cases in Hyderabad and pitched for continuing the lockdown and night curfew in

the city even after Unlock 1.

However, the authorities seem to have turned things around. The city now has more than 100 labs testing for Covid-19 and around the same number of enlisted hospitals. According to rough estimates, around 15,000 positive patients in the city are in home quarantine. The police have busted a couple of rackets which were selling Covid-19 drugs in the black market and have campaigned to encourage plasma donation.

Moreover, cases have fallen in Hyderabad, while increasing in the rest

**CLEANLINESS DRIVE**

A health worker sprays disinfectant in a containment zone in Hyderabad



of the state. In the last week of June, over 700 cases were recorded daily in Greater Hyderabad after testing less than 5,000 samples. On August 28, over 62,000 samples were tested in the state, a significant number from Greater Hyderabad, and only 432 were positive.

G. Srinivas Rao, director of public health, Telangana, recently hinted that the curve is already flattening in Hyderabad. Health Minister E. Rajender, who had been heavily criticised for the surge in cases, is a confident man today. "A multi-pronged approach got us to this stage," he said. "We educated people about the virus, and are continuously improving treatment facilities and testing more." He added that the government had also tackled the issue of private hospitals charging exorbitant fees. "There is no shortage of beds or oxygen support," he said.

The minister said: "We feel that the virus is now less virulent. It does not look as dangerous as it was before." Though discreet about it, state health officials are also pinning their hopes on herd immunity. A recent study by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology concluded that around six lakh people (about 6 per cent of the city's population) might have been infected already. A health official said that this number, if true, shows that the city has survived the pandemic "with just a scratch" as deaths were much lower than predicted.

Giridhar R. Babu, epidemiologist and professor, Public Health Foundation of India does not agree with the government's view. "The available data is insufficient to assess the spread of Covid-19 in Hyderabad," he said. "But I wouldn't assume that the curve is flattening so fast. As people come out slowly there is a higher risk of more people getting infected. It does not look like we have reached a stage of herd immunity as the number of positive cases being reported are still high." 🗨️





## Public decency has just perished

Watching Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in London I was thoroughly shaken by it. The play is a fictional dramatisation of the Salem witch trials that took place in Colonial Massachusetts during 1692-93. The town had been gripped by rumours of people practising witchcraft, and soon a mass hysteria developed, which had legal repercussions and led to deaths of many innocent women and men.

In the hearings more than 200 people were accused of witchcraft. Thirty were found guilty, nineteen of whom were executed by hanging. These trials are remembered for being the deadliest witch-hunt and the most dangerous example of 'mass hysteria' in the history of colonial North America.

*The Crucible* opens with a group of young girls attempting a pagan ritual to plant a curse on the wife of a local farmer—John Proctor. They come home as one of them—the 10-year-old daughter of the local priest—has become unconscious. The preacher knows of the ritual-game but rumours of witchcraft have spread and crowds have gathered outside the house. In the questioning, we learn that all the villagers have a grouse against one or the other neighbour and most have their own secrets to hide. In trying to protect her affair with Proctor, whose wife she wanted cursed, Abigail Williams, a 17-year-old girl, accuses the black female slave of the house of witchcraft. The slave, Tituba, under the threat of being 'whipped to death,' confesses falsely to being possessed by the devil and accuses others.

With that begins the spread of mass hysteria, and as the play progresses we see how personal enmities influence the accusations; how mass hysteria blinds men and women and kills their rationality and empathy, and leads to a bizarre situation of innocents being hung to death. The play ends with a chilling climax where the protagonist Proctor is hanged for refusing to confess to witchcraft.

In recent weeks, I've often thought of *The Crucible* as I watched the public sentiment around the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, ostensibly by suicide, turn from emotional outpouring of grief by fans into a media-fuelled hysteria and blind certitude that he

was murdered.

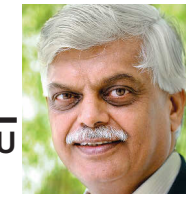
Initially Bollywood insiders and 'nepotism' were seen as the reason for Rajput's death. But, soon a case was filed against his girlfriend, actress Rhea Chakraborty, for abetment to suicide. This led to a shocking slander campaign and hysterical media trial that has practically declared Rhea to be a murderess, with no proof, based on contorted facts, rank misinformation and what are now being proven to be lies. Rhea has been investigated by three agencies—Mumbai Police, Enforcement Directorate and the CBI—and may soon be examined by the Narcotics Bureau. She has been vilified and called slanderous names by social media ecosystems and #JusticeForSushant 'warriors'. Salacious conspiracy theories about her have done the rounds and she, her family and staff at her building have been physically hounded by shameless media personnel.

Rhea's WhatsApp chats have been selectively leaked and despite her appearing on TV and rejecting the falsehoods more conspiracy theories have surfaced. At the time of writing, the CBI has not found any proof of murder in the case. But evidence that suggests that Rajput's family has lied is emerging. Watching this case play out and turn into a senseless, hysterical, conspiracy-heavy TV soap-like reality-show, one cannot help but wonder at the human condition.

More than 300 years after the Salem witch trials, we find ourselves gripped by mass hysteria in a manner that has shorn us of rational thinking, basic logic, objectivity and even human decency. As a society, our latent voyeurism is unabashed and as educated people our quickness to abandon rationality is shameful. Technology and constant access to information ought to have elevated our thinking, instead we have used technology to sink to our basest self—leaking and sharing images of Rajput's corpse in WhatsApp group chats, and leering at Mahesh Bhatt hugging Rhea, assuming the worst.

It seems that along with Rajput, public decency has also died. The people of Salem in the 17th century acted in ignorance and due to religious fanaticism. What in 2020 is our excuse?

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



## Our man in Tokyo

No prime minister of Japan has ever made anywhere near the impression on Indian public opinion as Shinzo Abe did. It was not just that he is the longest serving prime minister in Japan's history since the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century. Never have millions of Indians had the opportunity to see a Japanese prime minister for an entire evening watching the glorious ceremony of the Ganga Arati at Varanasi's Dashashwamedh Ghat. As he steps down from office this month, after a tenure of over nine years, Abe will be wished well by a people that have come to appreciate his abiding commitment to Japan-India friendship.

Over the past quarter century Japan has had 17 prime ministers. Of them, eight served terms of less than a year and most others of less than two. Only Junichiro Koizumi enjoyed a decent tenure of five years in office. Into that office with a revolving door that was constantly spinning around Abe stepped in first in September 2007.

However, ill-health made him step down a year later. Over the next five years Japan had five prime ministers, of uneven competence. Abe returned to office in December 2012 to become Japan's longest serving prime minister.

Even in that brief first year in office Abe left a mark as far as Japan-India relations are concerned. Addressing the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Abe enunciated the now popular and widely recognised idea of an Indo-Pacific geopolitical space. Giving his address the title of a book by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh—*A Confluence of the Two Seas*—Abe spoke of the historic, cultural, economic and geopolitical links between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Abe's successors in the period 2007-2012 did not follow up on that idea and many have come to associate it with Hillary Clinton who, as United States secretary of state,

spoke about the Indo-Pacific to a gathering in Chennai in 2011.

It was on his return to office in 2012 that Abe gave concrete shape to his ideas and has since laid the firm foundation of India's probably most consequential bilateral relationship. Indians may be divided in their views on the country's relations with the United States, Russia, Europe and even China. But there would now be universal agreement that Japan is an important partner country for India. Abe deserves all the credit for shaping that view. Which is why Indian diplomats will watch closely who his successor is going to be, and whether he would remain loyal to Abe's vision of Japan-India relations.

There is good reason for India remaining wary till the new prime minister unveils his vision for the bilateral relationship. Within the Japanese elite—its business class, political leadership, intellectuals and diplomats—there is an influential pro-China lobby of individuals and companies that have made their millions and billions in

China. In 2007, when Abe stepped down, his first successor Yasuo Fukuda did an about-turn on India and cozied up to China. However, since then Xi Jinping has happened!

While Japanese business, like most business, remains frustrated with the "unease of doing business" in India, the economic relationship has become stronger. More importantly, the defence, technological and people-to-people relationship has also grown stronger. The Quad—a new strategic foursome of Australia, India, Japan and the US in the Indo-Pacific region—is acquiring greater relevance and profile thanks to the unrelenting assertiveness of Xi's China. India's political leadership would want an early affirmation by the new Japanese prime minister of his commitment to the Abe vision of a confluence of values and interests between Asia's great democracies.



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

PHOTO AP



**Anil Kumar Chawla**  
*flag officer commanding-in-chief,  
 Southern Naval Command*

# We continue to ensure that the Indian Ocean region remains open and free

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY

**VICE ADMIRAL ANIL KUMAR CHAWLA** took over the reins of the Southern Naval Command in July 2018, two months after the US military renamed the Pacific Command—its largest and oldest unified combat command—as the Indo-Pacific Command.

Diplomatically, the name change was largely symbolic, done “in recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans” and India’s growing importance in “maintaining regional stability”, as US defence secretary Jim Mattis put it. But it has raw implications in maritime matters. China has been widening its footprint in the Indian Ocean region, increasing India’s geopolitical relevance for the US.

For the Indian Navy, challenges are now manifold. As the SNC’s commanding-in-chief, Chawla is also in charge of training all Navy personnel to meet these challenges. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, he spoke about the Navy’s plans for sustaining its maritime edge, its growing role as a regional stabiliser, its response to Covid-19, and why “hot wars” have given way to cold, tactical manoeuvres. Excerpts from the interview:

**Q/ You recently inaugurated a training lab for the Naval Communication Network—a secure, captive grid that will give the Navy digital supremacy over its rivals. What are the processes involved in building NCN and how will it achieve its objectives?**

**A/** NCN was sanctioned by the (Union) government many years ago. In exchange for the spectrum held by the armed forces, we were given a set of landlines, so that the (spectrum) would be of better use to the civilian population.

So, a [land-based, military] communication backbone is being laid out countrywide. The Army and the Air Force, too, have networks of their own. This backbone will enable us expand our operations and improve processes. NCN is a terrestrial network; it would be connected to ships through satellites. It is an advanced communication solution, with a higher level of classification (security).

The Navy’s Signal School in Kochi trains all our communicators. The school will also train personnel for NCN.

**Q/ Covid-19 has significantly impacted seafarers, because of the**

**compact environment and ventilation systems in ships. How has the Navy addressed these challenges?**

This is a particular challenge for ships and aircraft. The closed-loop system of air conditioning is required because of the electronic systems and (to ensure) comfort of the personnel. So, we have evolved safety protocols.

People are quarantined for 14 to 21 days and then tested before they go on board. They have to stay on board until their duty ends; no contact with outside parties at all. Similarly, any item that comes from ships is disinfected. We have set up a few mechanisms for that.

**Q/ Like the indigenously-made, ultraviolet-germicidal chamber for sanitising baggage.**

**A/** Yes, there are a number of innovations, like foot-operated doors for bathrooms on ships. Ultraviolet cabinets for sanitising small items; bags are irradiated and sprayed with sanitiser in tunnels with conveyor belts.

Another interesting innovation is the aerial evacuation pod. Patients can be evacuated from remote areas like islands in these sealed pods. We have supplied these pods to the Army and the Air Force, the Nagaland

government and ONGC, and also to countries like Iran, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. But we do hope these pods will never have to be used (smiles).

**Q/ The Indian Ocean region is increasingly becoming a geostrategic focal point. For example, the US renamed its Pacific Command.**

**A/** The US has realised that the economic growth in Asia—10 of the top-20 economies today in the world are in Asia—[depends] on trade, energy and security, and on the traffic between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions.

The Indian Navy believes that the Indian Ocean region is a place where we need to be a major force—for good. India is a democratic country; we never had expansionist designs. We have excellent relations with everybody, except for a couple of countries. We have fundamentally strong relations with the entire Africa, southeast Asia, countries in the Persian Gulf, the island countries in the Indian Ocean region, Australia and, of course, with the US, Russia and the European Union. All these countries have accepted that the Indian Navy is a stabilising force, not an aggressive force.

The Navy will continue to keep the Indian Ocean region open and free for navigation for all countries, and ensure that the rule of law is maintained.

**Q/ Have the maritime challenges in the region increased in recent times?**

**A/** Historically, there have always been challenges. World War I, the colonial era, World War II, the post-colonial era, the Cold War, the Gulf war...

Yes, challenges today are manifold. New powers are emerging, new economic interests are shaping up. There is a challenge [because of the rivalry] between the entrenched powers and the new powers. Chal-



SANJOY GHOSH

lenges like global warming and Covid-19 can cause huge dislocation of populations and massive economic disruptions.

Resources are drying up on land, so there is a lot of pressure on the seas. It will become a security issue at some stage. Take fishing, for instance. Some years ago, there was a ban on fishing in the North Sea, imposed by the UK; there is a ban now imposed in the South China Sea by China.

**Q/ You mentioned World War II. Is the situation becoming as conflict-ridden as it was before the war?**

**A/** It is not a world of hot wars now. Weapons have become too destructive to be used indiscriminately. So, it is now more a war of deterrence; a war of minds; of information campaigns; of economics. The ambit is much larger.

Policymakers (must look at) major factors that are shaping the security environment, and then see the threats we face, and plan how to

respond to them. The simple answer for everything is that we need to be strong and self-reliant.

**Q/ The Navy has long been trying to become self-reliant. Seventy-five per cent of the components on the indigenous aircraft carrier were made in India. But if you look at the other Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean powers, India’s naval expenditure is quite low—15 per cent of its total defence budget. The US spends 30 per cent; Australia and Japan spend around 25 per cent each. Are budgetary constraints affecting the Navy’s ambitions?**

**A/** The government can give only as much money as it has. We can always say that more money will help. But we are also aware of the government’s constraints. As professionals, our job is to try and meet our requirements with the money we have.

As the saying goes, when you are poor you think [about how to spend the money well]. The Navy is not poor, but we do have to think about cost-effective (choices). ●



# Hyundai is working on affordable electric technology

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

The Covid-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown hit the automobile industry hard, as demand slumped and companies were forced to suspend operations in much of April and May. Hyundai Motor India, however, is not stepping off the gas. India's second largest carmaker launched four products this year, and the second generation Creta SUV, launched just before the lockdown in March, received some 70,000 bookings in five months.

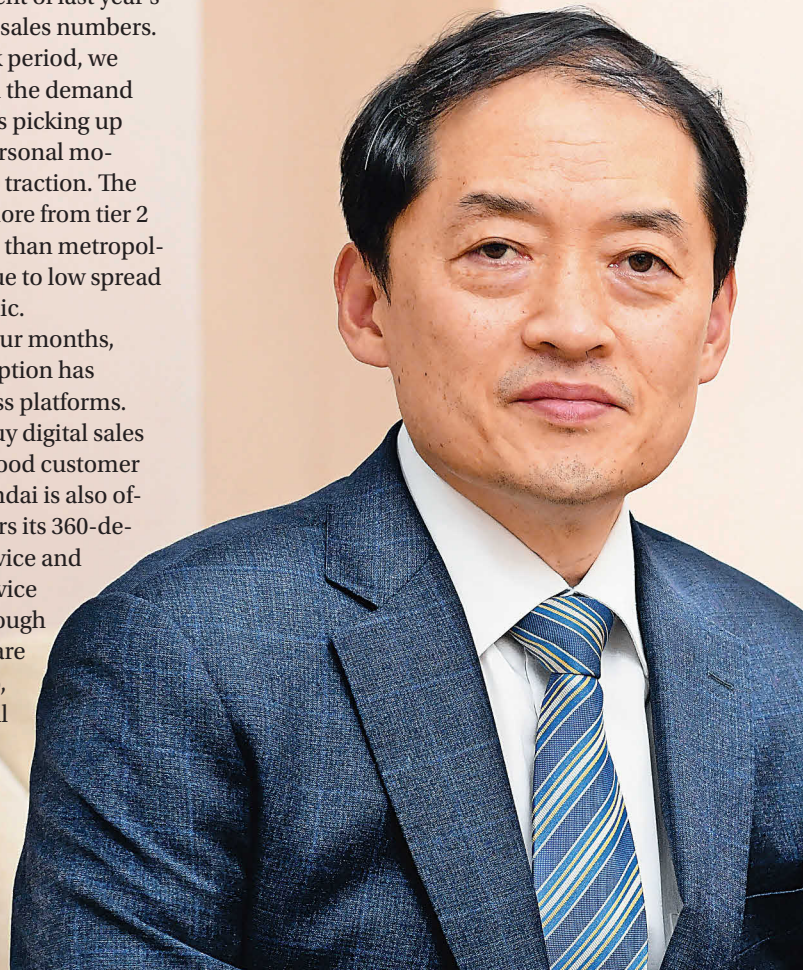
S.S. Kim, managing director and CEO of Hyundai Motor India, says the pandemic has not altered the company's plans and it will invest ₹5,000 crore in the next few years. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

**July data suggest that vehicle sales are on the cusp of getting back to normal. Some experts, however, say it is because of the pent-up demand. What is your opinion?**

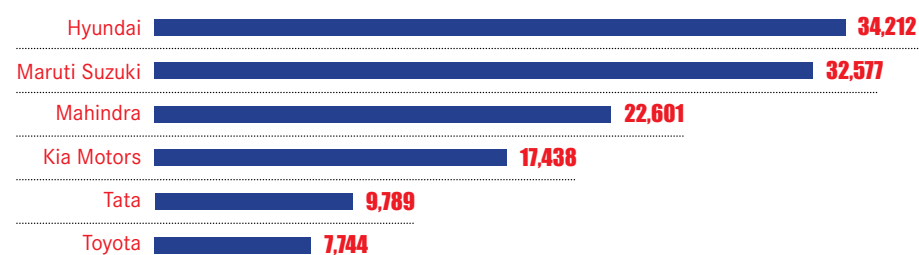
In July 2020, the Indian auto industry reached 80 per cent of the monthly average of calendar year 2019. However, Hyundai did better than the industry by reaching 90 per cent of monthly average of 2019 with over 38,000 units in the domestic market, marking an achievement of

nearly 98 per cent of last year's corresponding sales numbers. Post the unlock period, we have witnessed the demand for automobiles picking up gradually as personal mobility is gaining traction. The demand was more from tier 2 and tier 3 cities than metropolitan markets due to low spread rate of pandemic.

In the past four months, digital consumption has increased across platforms. Our Click To Buy digital sales platform saw good customer response. Hyundai is also offering customers its 360-degree digital service and contactless service experience through the Hyundai Care app, WhatsApp, website or a call to dealers.



## UTILITY VEHICLE SALES APRIL-JULY 2020



**Indian auto sector was battling a slowdown even before Covid-19 hit. Is India's auto market geared up for a quick revival?**

Last year, the Indian automotive sector witnessed uncertainty and slowdown due to factors such as transition from BS IV to BS VI emissions and revised banking norms. However, the growth of motorisation is progressing positively in India, the potential buyers per thousand population is still lower than the US and Europe. In the current situation, we are introducing new technologies, connected features and advanced powertrains to excite and surprise our customers. I would like to add that despite this challenging situation we have launched eight new products in India.

**How do you intend to keep the leadership in SUVs?**

Hyundai India has contributed strongly in the utility vehicle segment with four super performer SUVs—the Creta, the Venue, the Tucson and the Kona Electric—registering sales of 34,212 units (April-July, 2020). With the five lakh sales mark, the Creta has set yet another benchmark in the industry. The new Creta has received over 70,000 bookings in 5 months.

Hyundai is offering customers a wide array of highly efficient and powerful powertrain options. The contribution of diesel in the new Creta bookings continues to soar and is now at 60 per cent. The BS VI diesel technology is primarily preferred by the Indian customers for its power delivery, driving

pleasure, fuel efficiency and lower emissions.

**India has been one of the largest markets for Hyundai. In a post Covid-19 world, are things going to change?**

India is an extremely important market for Hyundai. We have a long-term product roadmap for the domestic market and we will abide by these plans and continue launching exciting products for our valued customers. Our focus is towards introducing safety and health features benefitting our customers. Additionally, we are enhancing our product offerings with a renewed emphasis on connectivity and product differentiation through our technological prowess.

**What are the key pillars that will help Hyundai's sales, even as Covid-19-related uncertainties are likely to continue for some time?**

Our first priority is to resolve customer anxiety in this challenging environment. Under the ambit of Hyundai Cares, we have introduced multiple financial schemes to enhance customer confidence through programs such as EMI Assurance and associations with banks to offer unique customer centric car finance schemes. Hyundai was the first company to enter subscription space in 2019 to mitigate the financial burden of customers offering peace of mind. We have witnessed an increase in interest from customers towards our offering in subscription model.



**In the past four months, digital consumption has increased across platforms.**



**The growth of motorisation is progressing positively in India.**



**We will continue with our investment plan of 05,000 crore for India.**

This is on account of increased need towards personal and safe mobility without owning a car. Additionally, Click To Buy has pioneered online car buying with an end-to-end solution offering customers the ability to purchase cars online and even get loans through a single platform without the need to visit dealerships.

**Over the next 3-5 years, what will be the key focus areas you will be investing in?**

We are deeply committed to the country and have a strong line-up of future products for the customers. Regardless of this pandemic, we will continue with our investment plan of ₹5,000 crore for India as committed in 2019. We want to continue being the preferred brand for the customers, offering them smart mobility solutions through product differentiation with our technological prowess.

**There has been a lot of talk on EVs gaining momentum. Based on the experience with Kona, will we see more EVs being rolled out by Hyundai?**

Hyundai Kona is India's first full range electric SUV that has received tremendous response and created a perception change about the concept of EVs in India by addressing concerns and myths about charging and range anxiety. We are committed to meeting the needs of today's urban and progressive customers and are fully aligned with the government on its vision of steering in an electric vehicle culture in India. With our experience of introducing the Kona Electric and its overwhelming acceptance in India, we are now working towards bringing-in new affordable electric technology for our future customers. 📍





**There has been a faster rebound than expected, especially in the SUV segment.**

—Gaurav Gupta, chief commercial officer, MG Motor India



**There is a huge uptick in pre-owned cars. And, first-time buyers are increasing.**

—Shashank Srivastava, executive director, Maruti Suzuki



**To expect freebies or deals will be a fallacy, at least for a majority of OEMs.**

—Santosh Iyer, vice president (sales & marketing), Mercedes-Benz India



**The pandemic has made us much more agile, more innovative and more flexible.**

—Tarun Garg, director (sales and marketing, and service), Hyundai Motor India

# In for the long drive

At THE WEEK auto webinar, automakers say they are cautiously optimistic about the future

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

**THE MANTRA** we are looking at is rethink, reimagine and recalibrate your business," said Shashank Srivastava, executive director of Maruti Suzuki, at THE WEEK auto webinar on 'Powering Past the Pandemic'. As the lockdown and its business travails ricochet across the board, this is a philosophy that is helping not just Maruti, but all automakers to weather the Covid storm.

'So far so good' seemed to be the consensus in the webinar panel, which included Gaurav Gupta, chief commercial officer of MG Motor India, Santosh Iyer, vice president (sales & marketing) of Mercedes-Benz India, and Tarun Garg, director (sales and marketing, and service) of Hyundai Motor India, besides

Srivastava. Rebound has been positive, and better than expected, they all agreed. Yet, with the precarious state of the economy, change in consumer behaviour, worries over a second wave of infections, and more crucially, uncertainty over the arrival date of a vaccine, there was no magic mantra anyone was proffering to break the coronavirus spell.

"I am not an astrologer or a scientist," quipped Garg. "I wish I could know how many days away a vaccine is. But, I would say that the Indian economy has been resilient in the past. I believe very strongly that car penetration being what it is, customers are still looking to buy a car."

But the rules of the game have changed, perhaps irrevocably.

Despite being the third largest in the world, the past few years have not been good for the Indian auto industry. Even before the pandemic hit, it had become the poster boy of the country's economic slowdown, with sales in a free fall right from the autumn of 2018. Since then, it has been all downhill, with threats of newer technologies like electric mobility, youngsters preferring shared cabs to buying a vehicle, stricter emission norms and the hike in the cost of insurance and loan, all taking a toll.

THE WEEK webinar, thus, came at a crucial juncture—what the industry is planning to do will have a domino effect not just on the auto sector, but the very trajectory of the economy and the consumption patterns. And, the four doyens had all the answers.

## Unusual business

"The pandemic and the lockdown have given us a great chance to re-

look at what we were doing," pointed out Gupta. Even while helping local communities and tying up with ventilator makers, auto companies also started looking inwards. This meant new ways of doing business, from cutting costs and newer models to increased digitisation.

"The pandemic has made us much more agile, more innovative and more flexible," said Garg. For instance, a launch usually would have meant fancy hotels, inviting scores of journalists and influencers, test drives and road shows. But Hyundai was forced to launch a new model through an online webcast during the lockdown, only to realise that it could reach millions of potential buyers instantly.

## What buyers want

The triple effect of a global disease spread, the lockdown and the resultant churn in the jobs market were bound to change customer behaviour. The thing is, auto makers are still figuring it out.

Take, for instance, the spiralling popularity of sports or multi utility vehicles. Though as a category it

went up 8-9 per cent in the past few years, it dramatically shot up by 26 per cent as sales re-started after the lockdown, something Srivastava found "surprising". "There is a huge uptick in pre-owned cars. And, first-time buyers are increasing," he said. With the fear of infection topmost in public mind, it seems the shared cabs success story has been brought to a fateful halt, at least for now.

"Customers are looking for brands that can provide solutions, something very different," suggested Garg. This has already translated into subscription models, balloon schemes, and different formats of loans and EMIs.

## Rebound

Clutching at green shoots, auto companies have been relieved by the sales rebound in June, July and August. September, November and December make the festive season when sales normally stay robust. But worries abound. "There has been a faster rebound than expected, especially in the SUV segment," said Gupta. "Having said that, we are still not out of the woods."

And the carmakers have modest expectations. "Even if we can come to last year's level (when the slowdown had already led to decline in sales), I would call it great," said Iyer.

## Festive offers

Of course, there is one tried and tested formula to push sales—give discounts. The problem? While sales are down, costs have gone up, right from the investment in BS6 technologies to currency exchange

fluctuations that make import of components costlier.

"We will have to increase prices," said Iyer. "There is a lot of stress in the system. So, to expect freebies or deals will be a fallacy, at least for a majority of OEMs."

The other companies, however, are still in a dilemma. "We need to get volumes up, but cost has also gone up. We are debating on how to balance this out," said Srivastava. There would be more offers on the financing aspect, mobility membership programmes, add-ons and faster delivery, rather than outright price discounts.

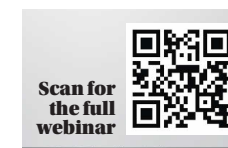
## Moving forward

"The auto industry-GDP co-relation is very high," said Srivastava. "Going forward, auto demand will depend on the GDP performance, as also on (public) sentiment. Cars are a discretionary purchase."

While the rebound after the lockdown has been satisfactory, there is a worry that there could still be a dip after the festive season, once the rural harvest bonanza and the urban Diwali bonuses run out. As such, projections are that the overall industry will be down by around 23 per cent this financial year. Adding to the uncertainty is that it could still go either way—a vaccine upside (if it hits the market faster) and a virus downside (if the spread continues unabated).

If there is one sentiment that is powering all the four honchos to look beyond the woes of the pandemic, that is hope and optimism, though tempered with some caution. "We remain optimistic!" exclaimed Gupta. "This is like a T20 match; you play every over and try to get the maximum runs."

Iyer summed it up succinctly: "Why waste a good crisis? If we can figure out new ways of doing business, that would be a positive outcome to this crisis." 🗣️





# Soak up the sun; stay mobile

How to keep your bones healthy while stuck at home during pandemic

**WE SPEND** too much time indoors nowadays, owing to the Covid-19 scare. Work-from-home and online food and grocery shopping have made us literally immobile. Being homebound for months can impact one's bone health.

**Let the sun shine on you** Vitamin D, known as 'sunshine vitamin', is an essential hormone. People with Vitamin D deficiency are hit harder by Covid-19. Vitamin D helps in the absorption of calcium and phosphate as well. It reduces the risk of a fall in the elderly and thus fractures. Vitamin D deficiency could weaken bones and affect other organs. Exposure to the sun allows the body to convert cholesterol into vitamin D. You need an uninterrupted exposure to the sun for 30-45 minutes, between 10am and 3pm. Ensure your face, neck, upper parts of the trunk and arms are exposed to sunlight.

Optimal levels of vitamin

D are between 25-30 nanogram/mL. If your Vitamin D levels are below 20, you need to take supplements (60,000 international units) once a week. Continue it for 12 weeks and then bring it down to one dose every month.

**Keep moving, but exercise caution**

Movement is essential for bone health. Joint movements help circulate the synovial fluid that nourishes the cartilage and keeps it healthy. When somebody is bedridden, the knee joints start degenerating from disuse. Sitting for long periods can take a toll on your bones and joints. Use a sit-stand desk, which allows you to switch between sitting and standing. Anybody who stands for more than a couple of hours continuously or jogs at a speed of more than 3-4km per hour or climbs more than 15 stories in a day is damaging his knees.



“  
Optimal levels of vitamin D are between 25-30 nanogram/mL. If your Vitamin D levels are below 20, you need to take supplements (60,000 international units) once a week.  
”

## Why women should exercise?

Postmenopausal women tend to have lower levels of oestrogen, which, in turn, could lead to weaker bones and osteoporosis. Regular exercise can help keep bone diseases at bay. Kick-start your day with *suryanam-askar*. Do dumbbell exercises to strengthen your upper body and core muscles. For those who are younger and fitter, skipping is a good exercise. Wearable weights help strengthen the bones.

## Life after a knee or hip replacement surgery

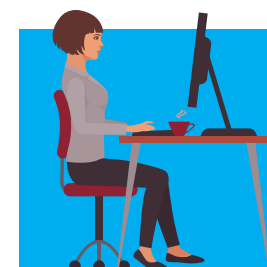
Exercise your muscles so you get full benefit of your replacements. If you do not stretch your knee joint in the months after the surgery, it could get a slight bend and could reduce your ability to walk.

## Food for stronger bones

Include milk and milk products in your diet. Salmon, liver, cheese and egg yolks are rich in vitamin D. Indian food like chapati and rajma (kidney beans curry) contain phytates that block the absorption of vitamin D and calcium. By soaking and sprouting the kidney beans, you can reduce the amount of phytates in rajma.

—As told to Mini P. Thomas

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



Sitting for long periods can take a toll on your bones and joints; use a sit-stand desk

Exposure to the sun allows the body to convert cholesterol into vitamin D; an uninterrupted exposure to the sun for 30-45 minutes is ideal

Regular exercise—skipping, yoga or dumbbell workouts—can help keep bone diseases at bay

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ON THE LOOKOUT

Lockdown birders on NINOX's nature trail at Mangar, Haryana, trying to locate the elusive jungle nightjar



HEAR THE BIRDS SING

The silence of the lockdown helped India's birders expand the country's birdsong database

BY VARUN RAMESH BALAN







Amidst one of the darkest moments of World War II, as Allied troops were about to evacuate the beaches of Dunkirk, Ludwig Koch, a kindly German sound recordist living in the UK, wrote a letter to *The Times* urging the public to take a moment to listen to the birds. “War or no war, bird life is going on and even the armed power of the three dictators cannot prevent it. I would like to advise everybody in a position to do so, to relax his nerves, in listening to the songs, now so beautiful, of the British birds,” he wrote.

Tellingly, in times of man-made crises, humans find solace in the sounds of nature. Amid the isolation imposed by Covid-19, birders have found a silver lining. The drone of cities and human machines has been silenced, allowing the sound of bird song to permeate living rooms and balconies once again.

“The birds were always here, but now we are able to hear them,” says Sharad Apte, a retired banker living in Sangli, Maharashtra. Considered among the pioneers of recording bird song in India, his collection of bird recordings spans 422 species and subspecies, with over 52GB of data containing more than 3,000 sound files. “Files are saved with details like species, type of call, date and time, location and comments on behaviour. I developed my own website (birdcalls.info) to share my recordings,” he tells THE WEEK.

Self-taught, he began recording bird song in 1998, acquiring better equipment and protocols over the years, so as to create a lasting archive of sounds. Over time, he came to know a calendar of bird activity: Knowing which birds would sing;

where, and when.

When Apte started recording bird song, he says there were only a few people like him. Now, there are hundreds. On August 9, he held a Zoom workshop on the equipment and practices needed to take a good recording, with over 60 participants eagerly taking notes.

His favourite bird is the White-rumped Shama, because it can mimic other birds perfectly. Apty, this is also the first bird whose call was ever recorded—by none other than Koch in 1889. Song birds can be excellent mimics—Apte recalls a Black Drongo that would frighten away predatory cats by imitating an angry cat.

Like how a human mother will teach her baby its mother tongue, song birds too learn to sing from their parents and surroundings. Writes Myron C. Baker in *Bird Behaviour*, “... in the animal world we humans are virtually alone with the songbirds in the manner by which we obtain our auditory communication signals, the fascinating processes of vocal learning.”

Vocal learning means that the same species of bird will often have a different song in different regions. Pratap Singh, a retired Forest Service officer who served with the Wildlife Institute of India, had researched for his PhD how warblers in the north-western Himalayas sang more complex songs than their peers in the eastern ranges. The reason? “We hypothesised this could be due to noisy

## BEING A BIRD IS AKIN TO BEING A SONGWRITER—YOU SING TO ATTRACT AN AUDIENCE AND YOU MUST GIVE THE AUDIENCE WHAT IT WANTS.



BIRD PHOTOS: ABHISHEK GULSHAN (NINOX-OWL ABOUT NATURE)



environments. In eastern India, a lot of organisms are communicating at once, not just the birds. If you want to stand out, you need a simple signal. If you are calling out to a friend in a crowd, you wouldn't shout an entire sentence,” he tells THE WEEK.

Being a bird is akin to being a songwriter—you sing to attract an



**BIRDS AND BIRDERS**  
(Clockwise from above) Sharad Apte with his recording equipment; a spotted owl, a shikra and a coppersmith barbet

audience and you must give the audience what it wants. Some species, like the female Zebra finch, judge males by the accuracy with which they produce complex and precise renditions of their species' calls. Some birds, as Apte notes, prefer males who can sing for longer durations—as it implies that they are well-fed.

Like humans, birds too can spread 'viral' tunes. A recent study in Canada observed a curious phenomenon over the last two decades, where white-throated sparrows across parts

of the country replaced their three-note calls with a two-note one. Since the new tune did not appear to improve a male sparrow's chance of mating, the researchers could not explain its new popularity. Perhaps it was just novel, they speculated.

Crucially, what made such observations possible—changes in bird song over time and place—was the ability to crowdsource recordings. With bird songs from across the world documented on sites like

Xeno-Canto and eBird, researchers have an ever-growing body of work to study.

“When you are recording bird song, you are not only recording the song but everything else in the background—insects, cicadas, dogs, whatever creatures there may be. The particular area you are recording in, that point of time, is a unique event. That may not ever repeat... That information is very valuable if you want to track change,” says Singh.

Technology has made birding more accessible than ever-before. Websites like eBird and Xeno-Canto list birds and bird calls by region; an app by Cornell University can identify a bird from a picture, and mobile phones can produce an (albeit crude) recording of bird calls.

Abhishek Gulshan, the Delhi-NCR reviewer for eBird and founder of nature awareness initiative NINOX-Owl about Nature, suggests that new birders spend time with their subjects. “A lot of people see the bird and then move on. That is not something I would advise birdwatchers to do—even if it means spending eight hours or a couple days on one species, do so, because you will understand so many different aspects about it.”

It was by watching birds in the field that Gulshan found the details that most fascinated him—how male weaver birds can make nest after nest until a female approves it (and how abandoned nests can be 'upcycled' by other birds like munias for reuse); how female red-necked falcons will ration the food that their male brings them, feeding him only a little despite his begs for more (possibly to keep him fit so he hunts better); or how Drongos mimic Shikras to ward off other marauding birds.

If you are ready to explore this fascinating world of birds, song and ecology, the silence triggered by a lockdown/containment zone may be your best shot at hearing the songs of nature. 🦉



# INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

Pankaj Mishra's new book is a searing indictment of the zealotry of liberals

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY

For a long time, Pankaj Mishra was known as the young maven who 'discovered' Arundhati Roy.

Mishra was in his mid-twenties, fresh off the success of his first book (*Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, a travelogue), when he began a six-month stint as the India head of HarperCollins. Among the manuscripts he read was a melancholy tale of a backwater village in Kerala. Mishra thought its author—a screenwriter in her mid-thirties who had been moonlighting as an aerobics instructor—“had little notion of what the market required”.

Impressed, he called up Roy to congratulate her on writing “the greatest novel since *Midnight's Children*”. The manuscript soon flew to London, and returned with the legendary agent David Godwin attached to it. Mishra and Godwin secured Roy an advance of ₹1.25 lakh—the largest for a work of fiction in India at that time—for what would be *The God of Small Things*.

Mishra's own debut novel came two years after Roy burst onto the fiction scene. *The Romantics*, about the sentimental self-discovery of a young Brahmin in Banaras, was part autobiography. Mishra himself had come of age as a thinker when he was

20 years old, during the four months he had spent searching books in the dusty corridors of the Banaras Hindu University library. “I read randomly, whatever I could find,” Mishra would later write, “and with the furious intensity of a small-town boy to whom books are the sole means of communicating with, and understanding, the larger world.”

As it turned out, novel was too constricting an aesthetic form for both Mishra and Roy. They spent the next two decades churning out voluminous essays and reportage—the truth, after all, is often stranger than fiction. They meditated on the strange realities in places like Bastar, Kashmir and Ayodhya, and China, Tibet and Hong Kong.

Roy returned to fiction three years ago, with *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Mishra, however, has established himself as a historian of ideas, and of the after-effects of the east-west encounters. His six works of nonfiction have not only expanded the understanding about Asia's evolution, but also weakened the western belief that modernity and progress go hand in hand.

At 52, Mishra is widely admired for his illuminating views and his mellifluous prose. His latest collection of essays, *Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race*



MAYA MISHRA

and *Empire*, is a finely crafted arraignment of western notions about the east. The 16 devastating pieces in *Bland Fanatics* have no trace of the timid, inexperienced 20-year-old who used to devour books in Banaras, his lack of “basic knowledge of politics and history... a secret source of shame”.

“I am still a keen learner,” Mishra tells THE WEEK. “As a writer you are obliged to learn all the time, primarily about how to outwit yourself. Being apprenticed to the modern west and its intellectual traditions was a necessary step to challenging them, or interrogating their applicability outside the west.”

**MISHRA'S INTERROGATIONS** have won him as many brickbats as plaudits. In 2010, the economist Jagdish Bhagwati denounced Mishra's work as “fiction masquerading as non-fiction”. In 2011, the historian Niall Ferguson threatened a libel suit after Mishra described him as a neo-imperialist whose shifts in allegiances had recorded political and cultural changes more accurately than his books had done. Patrick French said Mishra had come a long way in life to live “at the heart of the British establishment, married to a cousin of the prime minister David Cameron”, but he seemed “oddly resentful of the

idea of social mobility for other Indians”. In 2012, Salman Rushdie termed Mishra's writing as “garbage”.

Mishra views this as an occupational hazard: his work challenges conventional wisdom, “so there is going to be some kind of friction”. “What someone of my background brings to this conversation is his or her own experience, which is not only of the western world but the vastly greater realms outside it,” he says.

Mishra straddles multiple realms. He was born in a once-wealthy Brahmin family in Uttar Pradesh that was reduced to penury by the land reform act of 1951. He was expected

AS A WRITER YOU ARE OBLIGED TO LEARN ALL THE TIME, PRIMARILY ABOUT HOW TO OUTWIT YOURSELF.

—Pankaj Mishra

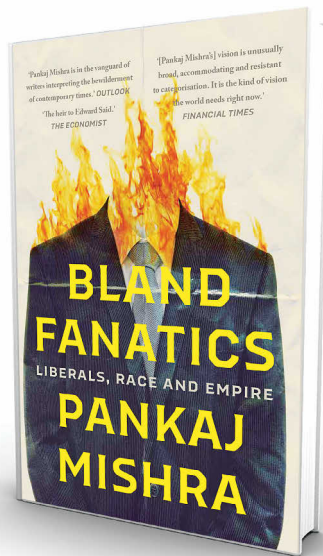
to study and work his way back into the middle class, but Mishra grew to dislike the world of careers and jobs as an undergraduate in Allahabad University.

“Bribery and nepotism played a major part in the disbursement of [government] jobs,” he would later write. “Students from the lately impoverished upper castes suffered most in this respect: if poverty wasn't enough, they were further disadvantaged by the large quotas for lower caste candidates.”

Many of Mishra's relatives, his father included, had right-wing leanings. His uncles were jailed after Gandhi was killed and the RSS was banned. His sisters attended a school where students were encouraged to disfigure sketches of Muslim rulers in history books. Mishra went to an English-medium school, where he was taught to view religion “as something one outgrows”.

The bookish months in Banaras after graduation transformed his life. He loved the Old Banaras “of chess games in the alleys, the all-night concerts in temples, the dancing girls at elaborately formal weddings, the gently decadent pleasures of betel leaves and opium”, and loathed the “fast-food outlets, video-game parlours and boutiques, the most garish symbols of the entrepreneurial energies unleashed by the liberalisa-





**Bland Fanatics:  
Liberals, Race and Empire**  
By Pankaj Mishra  
Published by  
Juggernaut  
Price ₹599; pages 224

tion of the Indian economy”.

Visceral feelings have driven Mishra’s intellectual journey. He views modernity as a great, interrupting force that stunted and then irreversibly damaged the natural progress of eastern civilisations like India. According to him, the long British rule made Indians assume that “institutions (parliamentary democracy, nation-state), philosophical principles (secularism, liberalism), economic ideologies (socialism, followed by free-market capitalism) and aesthetic forms (the novel)... belonged to the natural and indeed superior order of things”.

But then, does he believe that the east was capable of developing its own modernity? “It depends on what you mean by modernity,” Mishra tells THE WEEK, “and whether we should take the modernity proposed by the west as our only measure—by which nations succeed or fail. China, for instance, arrived at a sophisticated theory of state and statecraft long before the modern age.”

In 2005, Mishra moved to London and married Mary Mount, a books editor and daughter of the conservative columnist and baronet Ferdinand Mount. The nobility he was denied in Uttar Pradesh is now accessible to Mishra in Britain,

but he remains a vociferous critic of the British ruling class. He once described David Cameron, his wife’s cousin, as a “ghastly figure”.

Mishra believes that the vulnerabilities of modernity are particularly evident in India. B.R. Ambedkar had written that India’s liberal constitution gave people political equality, even as it left untouched the gaping social and economic inequalities. “We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment; else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political inequality,” he warned.

The delay in heeding that warning has been lethal, says Mishra. “India is trapped by its grandiose middle-class

**MISHRA REMAINS A VOCIFEROUS CRITIC OF THE BRITISH RULING CLASS. HE ONCE DESCRIBED DAVID CAMERON, HIS WIFE’S COUSIN, AS A “GHASTLY FIGURE”.**

dream of national greatness. It doesn’t have the material means to realise it, nor can it develop a more pragmatic sense of what it can achieve by way of security and dignity for its citizens,” he says. “What it does have is much coercive power to suppress disaffected citizens, especially in border states. Given the mass support for Delhi’s actions, India won’t cease its brutal blundering in Kashmir and the northeast. Nations are not diverted from their popular follies until they know catastrophe.”

REINHOLD NIEBUHR, the iconic American philosopher and theologian, believed that the bigger culprits of history were communists and fascists. In 1957, though, he wrote about the lesser culprits—“the bland fanatics of western civilisation, who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence”.

Mishra believes that these bland fanatics of liberalism made the modern, chaotic world. His new book delves into the consequences of this fanaticism—dysfunctional democracies, extreme inequality, lure of fascist mysticism, and suchlike. “What has become clearer since the coronavirus crisis is that modern democracies have for decades been lurching towards moral and ideological bankruptcy,” he writes.

The essays in *Bland Fanatics* are incandescent—Mishra’s piercing analysis and razor-sharp prose emit the heat of his personal experiences and the welcome light of his singular vision. “The essays don’t offer a taxonomy of liberalism—such an attempt is doomed anyway,” he says. “What it shows is how those who call themselves liberals, and claim to profess liberalism, have dabbled in all kinds of political tendencies—especially those they might be expected to be hostile to, such as imperialism and imperialist wars.”

# Mex & match

## Mexican meets Indian in chef Kavya’s kitchen

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

**W**ould you try a paneer burrito? How about prawn-and-pani puri tacos? These combinations might sound unusual, but the taste is anything but. Chef Kavya Verghese’s new venture in Chennai, Mex it Up, dishes up and delivers a cuisine that very few conventional restaurants handle. The Indian-Mexican combination that comes out of Kavya’s home kitchen is both delightful and creative.

Launched during the lockdown, Mex It Up’s burritos and taquitos have garnered a loyal following in Chennai. And, just one burrito can make you full. “I have been getting online orders continuously and it keeps me busy throughout the day,” says Kavya.

Born and raised in Chennai, Kavya travelled the world as a culinary chef. A few weeks before the Covid-19 lockdown began, she quit her job at the Dubai Hilton Jumeriah. She specialises in Mexican, Thai and French cuisines, but she says that most Indians are not adventurous when it comes to trying new dishes. And Chennaiites are no exception to this. “I felt people might not like authentic Mexican or French or Thai cuisine as they are,” she says. “So, I mixed some favourite Indian flavours with Mexican.”

In addition to the paneer burrito, the Chettinad mutton burrito is another must-try. It is packed with rice, mutton, beans, jalapenos, pickled onions, cilantro and mozzarella, all wrapped in a nutritious multigrain tortilla. The chicken 65 burrito and



the chilli garlic potato burrito, too, are spiced with Indian flavours.

Apart from burritos, Kavya’s menu includes an Indian take on tacos. A small bite-sized puri is stuffed with a Mexican filling; the traditional tamarind water is also given a Mexican twist. The result is a pani puri that explodes in your mouth in a flood

**APART FROM BURRITOS, KAVYA’S MENU INCLUDES AN INDIAN TAKE ON TACOS. THE RESULT IS A PANI PURI THAT EXPLODES IN YOUR MOUTH IN A FLOOD OF NEW FLAVOURS.**

of new flavours. The prawn taquitos, filled with sautéed buttered prawns, refried beans, salsa, sour cream and corn in a puri, is crunchy and juicy. The mushroom and tofu taquitos are even more delicious. The two taquitos go with jalapeno-and-cheese samosas and soya lettuce wraps. The samosas are crispy and served with tangy salsa, while the wrap is lettuce filled with minced soya, crunchy vegetables and vegan sour cream.

You can wash it all down with a drink, too—either ice tea with your choice of Mexican fries or a watermelon basil paloma or even a cold coffee horchata. Not to mention desserts like the crispy churros or almond brownies to end your meal on a high. With the glut of orders coming in, Kavya is a happy chef these days. And she promises that Mex It Up will move out of her home kitchen once the pandemic blows over.



# BRILLIANCE, LIKE A BREEZE

For Malayalam actor Fahadh Faasil, it is important to organically portray relatable characters for his audiences

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

**I**t is all very unusual for Fahadh Faasil: To give back-to-back interviews, to talk about his film when the world has not watched it yet, and to get on the hyperactive promotional bandwagon for every release. Part of his discomfort could be attributed to the Malayalam film industry's more subtle film promotions. But most of it is because he is too reserved with his own thought process, and takes time to analyse whether he has achieved what he had intended to in a film.

"Half the time, I am not even sure about the film I have just done; it is just something you vaguely know," Faasil tells THE WEEK. "It is only after the film goes out to the audience that you realise things—what is working, what is not working. That is when I would ideally want to talk, but by then I already start working on the next film!" He was speaking ahead of the release of *C U Soon*, a Malayalam thriller that would release on Amazon Prime Video on September 1.

Faasil says he "works like a dog",

investing so much energy in the making of a film that he has never really understood the need to explain the film to people all over again. But this time, he wanted to see how it works. Also because *C U Soon* is not a regular film shot on sets or with a big crew. It was an experiment, shot in 22 days during the lockdown on phone cameras and computers.

The thriller that unfolds on device screens—much like the 2018 Hollywood film *Searching*—is directed by Mahesh Narayanan and produced by Faasil and his wife, Nazriya Nazim. It is ironical how the film makes a case for technology and how creativity knows no boundaries even as it taps into the vulnerabilities that humans are exposed to with their lives almost

unfolding on digital platforms.

Jimmy (Roshan Mathew), an Indian in the UAE, has fallen head over heels for Anu (Darshana Rajendran), whom he has only met virtually, first on a dating website and later on several video calls. Suspicious about this, Jimmy's mother seeks help from

**"I DON'T THINK I UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE (HINDI) AND WOULD BE ABLE TO DO JUSTICE TO CHARACTERS."**

—Fahadh Faasil,  
on doing Hindi films

**DIGITAL DIVIDE**  
Faasil in a still from *C U Soon*; (below) Darshana Rajendran and Roshan Mathew

*Off* and the yet-to-release *Malik*. "As a filmmaker, he keeps the possibilities of trying out new things open."

*C U Soon* started as a project that could be modified on the edit table with Narayanan primarily being an editor. From there, the situation developed differently. "While acting in front of the computer screen, I realised that I am not a good actor," says Faasil and he laughs. He mentions that it was a challenging film to put together "because no character is alone". "There is another character always on the phone," he says.

Faasil's confession of not being a good actor may be a lesson in humility. In the last few years, as streaming platforms gained momentum and subtitled films from different parts of India became more accessible, Faasil has become one of the most revered actors of his time. Each of his recent roles has stood for something profound. It is, perhaps, an outcome of being a star rooted in Malayalam cinema with no ambition of crossing over to the Hindi film industry. "I don't think I understand the language and would be able to do justice to characters," he says, evading the topic.

Most of the characters Faasil plays—be it in *Maheshinte Prathikaaram*, *Super Deluxe* (Tamil), *Kumbalangi Nights*, *Njan Prakashan* or *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum*—are not the regular hero roles and have yet been appealing to the masses. Through these, he has explored the

dark lateral of human behaviour, from vengence to toxic masculinity. In *C U Soon* as well, he plays a complex character that is unlikable and misogynistic, but evolves as a fine, relatable man over the course of the film.

For him, as an actor, the only thing

that matters is making his characters look believable. "These are realities [expressed] in a manner that is not offensive to anyone," he says. "The characters should be organic without taking the fun out of them. They have to be as smooth as wind." For Faasil, it is necessary to gauge the importance of a story to decide whether it needs to be told. He talks about his role in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (translates to revenge of Mahesh). "When you see Mahesh (a naive, simple man), you would not believe that he could be vengeful," says Faasil. "But he is. And the character has come from our surroundings. We have seen these things. It becomes important then to tell this story."

During our conversation, Faasil pauses frequently and deliberates over his answers. While talking about his journey in films, he pauses to check if he is making sense. Launched by his father, noted film director Fazil, at age 19 with *Kaiyethum Doorath* (2002), he failed to make a mark. So, he went for further studies to the United States. That did not go as planned either, and he returned to India after several years.

The seven-year gap between his first two movies was spent meeting people, discovering places and watching many films, which changed his outlook towards cinema. "I don't think if I had gone to Dubai, I would have come back wanting to make films," he quips, adding, "I would see it as a normal journey that a teenager went through. It was not something outstanding."

Returning in 2009, he started afresh with small roles. "I had nothing to lose. I was trying out everything that came my way." But then *Chaappa Kurishu* (2011) about two men living contrasting lives happened, which put him on the path to immense success. There has been no turning back since then, and Faasil says he will continue to make films for as long as he can. ●







PTI

## Getting cooler

Even though **Mahendra Singh Dhoni** has retired from international cricket, his brand value remains high. Many brands paid tribute to Captain Cool on social media. While IndiGo tweeted an ad featuring the cricketer with the classic tagline, "The helicopter has landed", KFC posted a picture of an empty bucket of fried chicken with the caption, "The great finisher". Other brands like Paytm, GoAir, Zomato and Manforce Condoms also joined in the fun. Apparently, Dhoni's brand valuation was \$41.2 million last year.

## THE WRITE NOTE

Singer **Mariah Carey** is releasing her memoir, *The Meaning of Mariah Carey*, later this month. "This book is composed of my memories, my mishaps, my struggles, my survival, and my songs. Unfiltered," said Carey. "Writing this memoir was incredibly hard, humbling and healing. My sincere hope is that you are moved to a new understanding, not only about me, but also about the resilience of the human spirit." The reader is sure to have enough gold to mine from the book of this multiple Grammy-winning superstar.



GETTY IMAGES

## Poop talk

**Akshay Kumar** shared the trailer of an episode of *Into The Wild With Bear Grylls* featuring him and the British adventurer. The actor, who is seen crossing rivers and trekking across forests, tweeted that he visualised stiff challenges prior to the episode, but Grylls surprised him with the "elephant poop tea". "This whole adventure, I will remember for the rest of my life," said Kumar, adding that Grylls is the real hero while he is only a reel hero. Quite generous considering that Grylls threw away his own elephant poop tea while Kumar was not looking.



MEGHNA NAIDU,  
actor and life coach

## Ball's in her court

**M**eghna Naidu marked her arrival in the early 2000s with the remix of the song *Kaliyon Ka Chaman*. Since then, she has figured in popular films in Bollywood and in the south, and in television series like *Jodha Akbar* and *Fear Factor: Khatron Ke Khiladi*. Married to Portuguese tennis player Luis Miguel Reis, she now lives in Dubai, where she is a personal trainer and life coach, and runs a dance academy. Excerpts from an interview:

**Q** It has been a while since we saw you in films. Was it a conscious decision to stay away from limelight?

**A** In the last few years, I have been living in Dubai with my husband Luis. So I have been busy with my personal life. I travel to India mainly

COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



AP

## Lone star

**Aparshakti Khurana** is resuming the shoot of his film, *Helmet*, the first one in which he will be the solo hero. "I am really excited to be back on the sets and start shooting again after such a long time," he said. "I have really missed this and will soon be heading to Mumbai to shoot the final schedule of *Helmet*, which mainly includes the climax." In the promo of the film, Khurana is seen asking for a condom at a chemist's without directly referring to it. The light-hearted film set in the Indian heartland is directed by Satram Ramani and co-stars Anurita Jha and Abhishek Banerjee.



to see my parents and for work. By living so far away I cannot really balance work and personal life, so I made a conscious decision to focus just on one for now.

**Q** You announced your marriage last year, after keeping it secret for a while. How has married life been?

**A** In December, it will be three years since we married. But we have been together for 11 years. It was not a secret with my family and close friends, but it is just that I had not announced it in the media. Married life is wonderful and with the right partner, it is even more exciting.

**Q** Your father is a tennis coach and you also play tennis. Was it the game that attracted you to Luis?

**A** Yes, my dad (Ethiraj Naidu) has been coaching competition players in India for the last 30 years, or maybe even more. I

have always been a tennis fan because of him. He also taught me how to play the game. In fact, my dad was the reason why Luis and I met. He introduced us on the tennis court 22 years ago and since then we have been in touch, and the rest is history. Luis is Portuguese and his family lives in Portugal. He has been in Dubai for 22 years, and has his own tennis academies there.

**Q** The death of Sushant Singh Rajput has triggered a debate on how star kids have an advantage over outsiders in the industry. Have you been a victim of nepotism?

**A** Sushant's demise came as a shock to each and every person in the country. Nepotism exists not only in our industry but everywhere. It depends on how people take it. I have faced it, too, in my initial days, and it made me very sad, because I lost out on a few good projects which would have enhanced my career.

—By Anirudha Karindalam







## Counting conundrum

Birth, population and death, wrote T.S. Eliot. Since 1969, there has been a statute that requires birth and death registration. Marriage registration is messier. It should be—said the National Commission for Women, the Supreme Court and the Rajya Sabha. It should be—said states like Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and Kerala, and acted accordingly.

Vital statistics are about births, deaths, marriages and divorces, and are required to track a population's development and deprivation parameters. Depending on location and circumstances, law devolves death registration responsibility on the head of the household, the individual in charge of the hospital/nursing home/health centre and/or the keeper of crematorium/burial ground. Every possible agent seems to have been covered under the law, even if death does not occur in an institutional setting.

A minor statistical issue. If death has occurred, but has not been registered, how do we know death has taken place? There is the civil registration system (CRS) to register births and deaths. This is akin to complete enumeration. There is the sample registration system (SRS), a sample used to validate CRS, or question its effectiveness. Instinctively, most people will think that birth registration is more successful than death registration, and that instinct is right.

In 2011, 83.6 per cent of births were registered. But despite increase over time, only 67.4 per cent of deaths were registered. There was 100 per cent registration of deaths (as estimated by SRS) only in Kerala, Mizoram, Andaman and Nicobar, Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, Delhi and Puducherry. With a threshold at 90 per cent, you can add Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Nagaland, Punjab and Tamil Nadu.

These are figures from 2011 and nine years have passed. It is possible these 90-per cent-states have moved into the 100-per cent-bracket. But Arunachal Pradesh was at 21.6 per cent and Bihar at 23.6 per cent. How much will they have improved? Arunachal suffers from difficult geographical terrain. Why should Bihar be at 23.6 per cent? Uttar Pradesh, often bracketed with Bihar, was at 47.1 per cent. States may try every kind of publicity to propagate mandatory death registration. However, every law is only as good as penalty imposed against violation. The stick (fines) has been effectively used only in Rajasthan, Kerala and Punjab, or so that 2011 report tells us.

With Covid-19, a question is sometimes asked. Are we capturing all deaths? In general, if we do

not register all deaths, it is unreasonable to expect Covid-19 will dramatically improve matters. However, I do not buy the argument about a state deliberately under-counting deaths.

There are two distinct questions: (a) Are we registering deaths? (b) Are we ascribing death to the right cause? One should read the registrar general's

2017 report on medical certification of cause of death (MCCD). The coverage of MCCD is neither universal nor uniform across states. India does not mean Goa, where 100 per cent of deaths are medically certified. It also means Bihar (6.8 per cent), Jharkhand (4.7 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (9.4 per cent), Uttarakhand (7.1 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (8.6 per cent).

MCCD requires us to follow an international classification of diseases. For example, for Covid-19, World Health Organization has suggested U07 as an emergency code for "virus not identified". Is this being consistently followed in all states? Almost certainly not. The odd instance apart, is there deliberate mala fide intent? I doubt it.

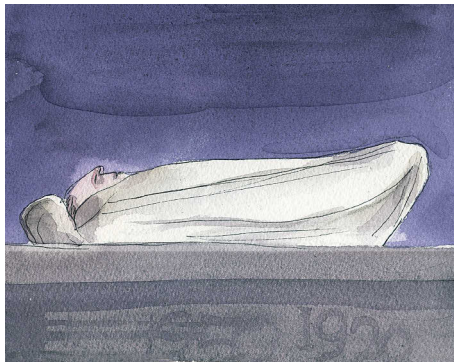


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