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THE WEEK

AUGUST 9, 2020

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PLUS

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PLUS

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Address issues

THE WEEK-Hansa Research Survey 2020 of India's best universities was comprehensive and informative. Universities, across the country, are awaiting government directions on opening. So, this is the best time for students to be mentally prepared for the courses that they have opted for. They can even enrol for short online courses, which will benefit them a lot ('Degrees of change', July 26).

It is good to know that many Indian universities, during the lockdown, have opened full-fledged online courses. But the fact that only around 12 per cent of Indian households have uninterrupted electricity and good internet coverage is a cause for concern, and will spoil everything that we are planning in such a situation.

The government needs to address this issue, and help in bringing in a bandwidth revolution in the country.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

In the last five to six years, so many students have gone abroad for higher studies. In my own family, most children have made up their mind to study abroad. This, despite the havoc caused by the pandemic.

A recent study has revealed that only a handful of Indian colleges and universities conform to international standards. And that, in the recent past, around 17 million students have left the country for greener pastures.

It is time the government came up with many more opportunities and high-class universities for students across different fields. Or else, India will be laden with senior citizens.

S. Shashidhar,
On email.

I am a 79-year-old senior citizen who has been reading THE WEEK from the time I was in service.

To be honest, your cover story on best universities was of no

interest to me. There were only a few stories that I liked in the issue. You should be catering to the interests of all your readers.

Rajendra Bhatia,
On email.

Need a fair enquiry

This is not the first time that we have come across custodial deaths, but the gruesome death of the father-son duo at the hands of the police in Sathankulam in Tamil Nadu has shaken the conscience of the people of the country ('Capital punishment', July 26).

While everyone was expecting a proper enquiry into the alleged dastardly act, it was depressing to hear the chief minister of Tamil Nadu say that both the father and son died of illness, which is tantamount to shielding the perpetrators of the heinous crime.

It is thanks to the timely intervention of the judges of Madras High Court that the criminal

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policemen were arrested. Subsequently, the case was handed over to the CBI.

One expects that a proper enquiry would be carried out by the CBI, and that justice will be rendered to the family of the deceased.

Tharcus S. Fernando,
On email.

Feature story on women convicts

Now, Swapna Suresh will be remembered as a fugitive who was on the run before she was caught by the NIA ('Golden opportunity?', July 26). I can feel the trauma that Swapna's daughter is going through.

THE WEEK should come up with a feature story on such women convicts in our country. The first part of the story should talk about their glamour, and quick rise to power and fame. The second part should talk in detail about their fall from grace.

It will help so many women from falling into the wrong trap.

Chanpreet K.C.,
On email.

Good suggestions

The interview with Partho Sarothi Ray brought out a number of convincing points on various aspects of Covid-19 ('The August 15 deadline is a gimmick', July 19). The questions were sharp, and the answers to the point.

Handling a pandemic of such a nature is difficult, and whatever steps the government is taking should be deemed right. However, Ray has clearly pointed out several lapses in the policies pursued so far, and has suggested ways to deal with the problems more meaningfully. Perhaps, the worst is yet to come, and the points made by Ray should be taken seriously while considering future policies.

K.K. Cherian,
On email.

Ease the load

It was interesting to note that schools in Thailand have introduced partitions made from ballot boxes as part of social distancing measures ('The big picture', July 12). This is something that India can emulate when schools reopen.

There should be at least five feet distance between each student, and not all need to come to class, every day, at the same time.

More importantly, there should be a considerable depletion in the course load for each subject, as that will ease the burden on students. It is only in India that we have so many things to study. Most of us end up doing things we have hardly studied during school days.

Tanushri Nagori,
On email.

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■ **APERITIF** ■
THE BIG PICTURE

EVERY DOG HAS ITS (OFF) DAY

Daisy, a St Bernard, was descending Scafell Pike, one of England's highest peaks, when her legs gave out. Her owners called for assistance and a team of 16 rescue volunteers carried her down on July 26. Incidentally, her breed is famed for rescuing humans stuck on the icy slopes of the Alps.

PHOTO BY AFP

POINT BLANK



A group of journalists were bribed by some elements in the Trinamool Congress to malign my image. Vested interests are against me, fuelling suspicion and confusion about my role in the BJP.

Mukul Roy, BJP leader

I paint nowadays. I am also cooking and baking. It is really interesting, because earlier it was only badminton.

P.V. Sindhu, badminton player

Ask yourself, which world leader except the unpredictable Mr Donald Trump has condemned the Chinese aggression against India? If China is the spider, India is the prey that was attracted to the spider's web. Spiders never rest.

P. Chidambaram, Congress leader

I used to be cautiously optimistic. Now, I'm bordering between pessimism and realism, which is not a good place for a politician because you are supposed to take this message of eternal optimism.... I think a lot of this feeling is because I have not had a chance to sit with fellow sufferers, workers in various parts of the valley and just vent, talk.

Omar Abdullah, National Conference leader

I feel everybody should do theatre. It's a way of life, a sort of discipline. Even if you are an engineer, theatre is a must for a year or two. It's the perfect grooming ground for being disciplined, generally, in life.

Shoojit Sircar, filmmaker



We assume that our planet is a zero-sum resource, just like we feel that our mothers would tolerate many things for us, because that is the most unconditional relationship ever formed. Well, to a great extent that is true, but self-respect and self-love are the most important attributes for anyone's existence.

Bhumi Pednekar, actor

WORD PLAY

The **quarantine coif** has been the most trending—and the most hated—hairstyle during this pandemic period. It refers to a haircut administered by one's partner or child during the lockdown. The disastrous result often requires professional mending. Now, many hairstyle gurus on the internet are coming up with tips on how to tame the quarantine coif!

MILESTONES

EYES ON SPACE

Two Surat teens, Vaidehi Vekariya Sanjaybhai and Radhika Lakhani Prafulbhai, discovered a near earth asteroid (HLV2514). The girls made the discovery under the All India Asteroid Search Campaign 2020 by SPACE India.



WORLD'S BEST

Aditya, India's first solar-powered ferry won the coveted Gustave Trouve Award for excellence in the Electric Boats Designed for Paying Passengers category on July 26. Naval architect Sandith Thandassery built Aditya, which has been plying in Kerala backwaters since 2017.



CLIMATE WARRIOR

Indian climate activist Archana Soreng has been named by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as a member of his new Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. Soreng will join six other activists, aged between 18 and 28.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Check on chiefs

BJP president J.P. Nadda had a plan to convene a conclave of the party's chief ministers on July 29. But that plan has changed, and Nadda is now meeting the chief ministers one by one via videoconferencing. Unlike the Congress, the BJP has been punctual about holding meetings of its chief ministers and its deputy chief ministers in states where it is a junior partner in government. Currently the party rules 12 states and is a junior partner in Bihar. Deputy chief ministers of the BJP-headed states are also invited to take part in the conclave, normally.

The chief ministers'conclave was started by veteran leader L.K. Advani in the early 1990s. There was strong emphasis at that time on implementation of the promises made by the party in its state-level manifestos. The meetings discussed organisational issues, too. The state governments were also advised to assist party activists in neighbouring states. The tenure of A.B. Vajpayee as prime minister from 1998 to 2004 saw a different dynamic, as the chief ministers could get to interact with multiple Union ministers and demand better deals for their states.

The geographic spread of the BJP in states shrank last year, after the party lost a series of regional elections. But the inorganic growth through defections has brought back the party to power in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh.

Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa celebrated his first year by ensuring that all those who defected from the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) were accommodated in the state legislature, even while placating two dozen party loyalists with chairmanships of boards and corporations.

In Madhya Pradesh, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan accommodated loyalists of Jyotiraditya Scindia, who had helped topple the Congress government, while holding out the promise to accommodate disgruntled BJP legislators.

Since 2014, the party's central leadership has been

keen on receiving report cards from the states on implementation of the Central schemes and on how they are popularising the work and message of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The party is worried that anti-incumbency has become a greater phenomenon in the states in the last three years. Among the current chief ministers, only a few were projected prior to elections. Yogi Adityanath in Uttar Pradesh, Jai Ram Thakur in Himachal Pradesh and Trivendra Singh Rawat in Uttarakhand were all post-electoral surprise choices.

Two of the states where the BJP is in government, Bihar and Assam, are going to the polls soon and the party is anxious to retain power there. It has launched a fierce digital campaign in Bihar and has declared that the alliance will be headed by Janata Dal (United)

supremo Nitish Kumar once again. In Assam, the electoral activity will pick up after the monsoon.

The focal point in the conclaves now is Uttar Pradesh, where Adityanath has been running a brute-majority government. His main focus is on policing and economic development. His war on criminals has had its successes as well as controversies. Adityanath's

tough attitude towards minorities has also been questioned, but the party justifies it as a correction to the appeasement policies of the previous government. Adityanath has bet big on industrialisation and, supported by Modi, is jacking up infrastructure so that foreign and domestic investors flock to Uttar Pradesh. But electoral delivery will still be a challenge for him as the party's Lok Sabha sweep is credited only to Modi.

Nadda, who is out to prove himself as a strong organisation man, is pushing the chief ministers hard to popularise not only the Union government's ₹20 lakh crore stimulus package, but also the human touch of the relief provided by the government through free rations and subsidies.



THERE'S A LOT IN A NAME

What's in a name? A lot, according to Kerala's lone BJP MLA O. Rajagopal. He had voted for the Left Democratic Front candidate P. Sreeramakrishnan for the post of speaker in 2016, apparently because his name had both Rama and Krishna in it. Now, the opposition parties are planning to move a resolution against the speaker for his alleged link with one of the accused in the Kerala gold smuggling case. It remains to be seen whether the name would force Rajagopal to vote in favour of Sreeramakrishnan once again.



THE MOST ESSENTIAL ITEMS

Sales of beauty and personal care products was hit by the pandemic, as people were confined to their homes. As per Nielsen India's figures, even the sale of toothpaste fell during the lockdown. Interestingly, a theory that fell by the wayside was the one that said that lipstick sales rise during periods of uncertainty and strife as women find solace in putting it on. The theory did not factor masks. On the up are eye liners, mascara and eye shadow. Reason? Masks again.

ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL?

BJP leaders in the state are worried about the recent political activity of former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Uma Bharti. These leaders had worked hard to keep her away from the state's political landscape after she stepped down as chief minister in 2005. Now, the firebrand *sadhvi* is making her political presence known again in the state. By publicly airing her displeasure on the cabinet composition, she ensured that one of her earlier supporters was rewarded with a big post as soon as he returned to the BJP from the Congress. Jyotiraditya Scindia, too, visited her at her residence in Bhopal. Bharti has also started visiting different cities in Madhya Pradesh, mainly on religious grounds, to boost her media presence.



SPREADING 'POSITIVITY'

Neera, a drink extracted from palm trees, also known as palm nectar, is quite popular in Telangana. The drink, which turns into toddy after fermentation, has many health benefits. But preventing Covid-19 does not seem to be one of them. Recently, Hyderabad Mayor Bonthu Rammohan participated in the inauguration of neera stalls in the city. The event attracted huge crowds, including ministers. A couple of days later, the mayor tested positive for Covid-19, spreading panic among those who attended the inauguration.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Union Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju hardly got time to devote to his fitness during his stint in the home ministry. But once he became sports minister, he started undertaking fitness activities regularly. Rijiju, who is currently promoting the Fit India movement introduced by his ministry, has expanded his daily fitness regime during the lockdown.

MAN AT THE WHEEL

In a recent interview with Shiv Sena mouthpiece *Saamana*, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray said that the steering wheel of the government was in his hands. A day after this statement, Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar took to Twitter to wish Thackeray on his birthday. Pawar also posted a picture showing Thackeray seated in the front passenger seat of a car that he was driving. The picture seemed to hint at who was really calling the shots in Maharashtra's coalition government.





Crushed from within

The disagreements between Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and former deputy chief minister Sachin Pilot have added weight to a sinking ship: the Congress.

Recent political developments in Rajasthan have been dramatic. The Congress government there, which was formed on a small majority, is struggling to survive.

Gehlot's removal of Pilot from the ministry has direct links with the party's high command in Delhi, as the waning leadership is unable to keep its core players satisfied.

A major reason for Pilot's revolt is his desire to be declared the face of the party in the Rajasthan assembly elections of 2023. He also wants the high command to reward his supporters with either ministries or positions as head of corporations, besides the removal of Avinash Pandey as the general secretary and Congress in-charge in Rajasthan. Pandey's loyalties are to Gehlot.

A few months ago in Madhya Pradesh, Kamal Nath of the Congress resigned as chief minister and the BJP returned to power, thus reducing the Congress footprint in the country. The exit of this 15-month-old Congress government came a year after the party had lost its government in Karnataka, where it had played second fiddle to the Janata Dal (Secular) despite having more numbers in the assembly.

In Madhya Pradesh, Jyotiraditya Scindia was at loggerheads with Nath and Digvijaya Singh, another Congress veteran, ever since the government was formed there. Scindia ran out of patience with the Congress, as the party made Nath the chief minister despite Scindia leading from the front in the assembly elections. Scindia's supporters wanted him to be the party president in the state after being denied the post of the chief minister.

Scindia, who has always maintained his stand

as a public servant, threatened to hit the streets if the state government failed to waive farm loans, as promised in the party manifesto. But, to his disappointment, nothing worked in his favour, which must have forced him to leave the party. Finally, when it came to the crunch, Nath tendered his resignation by avoiding the crucial floor test ordered by the Supreme Court.

Uncertainty looms large over the government in Rajasthan, and the Congress is in power in only four other states—Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra, where it is just a fringe player assisting bigger allies, and the Union territory of Puducherry.

But it is a leadership crisis that is plaguing the Congress, and the party is experiencing a battle between the young and the old guard. The young leaders are feeling uneasy and are joining the BJP where they feel their efforts will be recognised under its strong leadership.

The Congress leadership is steadily crumbling in the hands of its nepotistic leaders. It has not looked beyond the

Nehru-Gandhi household in 40 years, except during 1991-98 when P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri took over the charge.

In the event of the demise of a national party like the Congress, regional outfits that have grown at the cost of the Congress will emerge as the opposition for the BJP.

The last seven Lok Sabha elections have seen the steady rise of the BJP, and consequent decline of the Congress. Yet, whatever little hope that is there for the Congress is being killed by its nepotistic leadership and the continuous failure of trust of its major players in the regional political arena. With internal clashes brewing in Chhattisgarh and Punjab as well, it will be an uphill task for the Congress to remain relevant in national reckoning.



MYSURU & MANDYA: A much-respected world of education

A city of palaces and sprawling, beautifully laid-out educational campuses that are decades old and well established, a city for a quiet retirement, city of beautiful lakes and parks, city of yoga, city of great food, the city of Dasara, of colourful tourism, city of culture—Mysuru wears many hats. The district Mandya was carved out of the larger Mysore district in the year 1939.

This multifaceted city is therefore a most sought after place for anyone wanting to study and experience a whole world in itself. It has held world renown as a region where great intellectuals and thinkers were born and visionaries encouraged, as a space that propelled a thirst for knowledge. A world steeped in its ancient culture, yet, now embracing the modern, well connected, peaceful and safe (a very important factor in our times of trouble), and full of opportunities for a wide spectrum of people. The great weather is another plus for this city, as also its cleanliness.

People from various parts of the country and the world have been assimilated easily by accommodative locals; another reason for the swelling number of international students encouraged to study at the University on scholarships and fellowships. Mysuru

and Mandya also has a reputation as hosting educational institutions that are not very commercialised—people believe they offer “quality education” and at “affordable fees”. The boarding or hostel expenses are relatively low, too. Students also have so much to see and do on any given day in this city where music and dance are part of everyday life.

Mysuru has long been renowned for its educational institutions, whether it is the University, or the engineering and medical colleges. Added to that is the attraction of the city itself, being less crowded than Bengaluru. Even if a student from Bengaluru has to stay in a hostel, the proximity to Bengaluru makes it the ideal choice as he can still meet each other without too much trouble. Mysuru has long been a hub of education and research. The Mysore Maharajas—the Wodeyars—are credited for their far-reaching vision in the field of education. It was in the princely kingdom and then State of Mysore that English education came to be established in southern India in the 1800s. An example that the old and new world happily coexist in this city is seen in the likes of the Mysore Sanskrit Pāthashāla, which was established in 1876, and still continues to provide Vedic education. In 1858, the

department of education was founded in Mysore. According to available records, by 1881, there were as many as 2,087 English medium schools in the Mysore Kingdom.

Higher education institutions, too, were set up soon in the 1800s and early 1900s—the legendary Maharaja's College, the Maharani's College and The University of Mysore (UoM). The UoM (founded in 1916) is the sixth oldest university in the country, and was the first University in the State of Karnataka. It was established in 1916 by the then Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, it is said, after two of his educational experts undertook a five-year study of higher education around the world—so all the best practices and ideas, and a variety of courses from around the world were incorporated into this landmark University. The University encompasses 180 affiliated colleges and four constituent colleges.

“Education is affordable, though that doesn't mean it's cheap. The cost of living is moderate, and modern distractions are almost nil. This place is best suited to make your student memories richer,” says Mrs. Prema Nagarajan who moved about five years ago to Mysuru with her family from Bengaluru; both her daughters study

in schools in Mysuru.

Mysuru has also held another attractive tag—that of the Cleanest City in India—it held that record for three years—2015, 2016 and 2018. The rating is assigned by the India's Ministry of Urban Development, and the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) annually.

The second largest city of the state of Karnataka, and for the longest time perceived as a tier 2 city, Mysuru is now viewed as the fastest growing hub for IT and ITES companies after the capital of Bengaluru. With foreign investments coming in, and with demands for a better quality of life for employees of large MNCs making it their home, infrastructure is being constantly upgraded. Despite all the development, it's still far more peaceful and slow-paced compared to Bengaluru, with hardly any traffic jams that plague the Capital.

Mysuru is home to a large range of institutions offering a vast number of courses in a myriad subjects—All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Central Food Technological Research Institute, JSS Medical College, JSS Academy of Higher Education & Research (Deemed to be university), JSS Science & Technology University, Mysore Krishnamachar Yoga Shala, Vidyavardhaka College of Engineering, Karnataka State Dr. Gangubai Hangal Music and Performing Arts University, The Karnataka State Open University (for distance learning) and so many more.

Mandya district, which was part of Mysore District till 1939, is also home for various educational institutions. PES College of Engineering, Mandya, was started in the year 1962 by People's Education Society, currently known as People's Education Trust®.

Mr Sathya Simha, an engineer based in Bengaluru, who completed his entire education in Mysuru, says the thing that distinguishes the city's institutions is the quality of teaching and approach to teaching. "Many of us in the family were taught by students of literary greats like Kuvempu, D.V. Gundappa, B.M. Shri. Mysuru is still not about modern coaching. The old world education culture lives on. ■



JSS ACADEMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH (JSSAHER)

JSS Academy of Higher Education and Research, formerly known as JSS University, is a deemed university located in Mysuru, Karnataka. It was established in the year 2008 with a founding mission to serve the needs of the community at large and envisions emerging as a unique institution in the higher education setting.

JSS Academy of Higher Education and Research, since its establishment, has significantly strengthened its teaching, research and service efforts to realise its vision and mission. The institute has made great progress in grooming graduates, postgraduates, and PhD researchers by providing effective value based education across our institutions by focusing on overall development of an individual through state-of-the-art facilities to make the learner a useful citizen to the society.

The institute is focused on medical and health-related studies, and comprises JSS Medical College, JSS Dental College and JSS College of Pharmacy at the main campus in Mysuru as well as another pharmacy college in Ootacamund, Tamil Nadu. With a view to extend the horizons in the field of Health Sciences, the Department of Water and Health, Department of Health System Management Studies and Department of Life Sciences were also started later.



Dr. Surinder Singh,
Vice Chancellor, JSSAHER

Today, more than 650 faculty members instruct approximately 3,000 undergraduate, 2,500 graduate students and around 500 research scholars.

The binding philosophy of these institutions is that of training physicians, dentists, pharmacists, nurses and other health care professionals, to provide the highest standards of patient care, whilst also pursuing cutting edge research.

JSS Academy of Higher Education & Research also ranks among top 50 universities/Higher Education Institutions in India for the last five consecutive years by NIRF, National Institutional Ranking Framework by MHRD, Government of India and is currently ranked 33rd in India for 2020. ■



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VVCE: A COLLEGE OF EXCELLENCE WITH AUTONOMOUS STATUS FROM MAY 2020-21

Vidyavardhaka College of Engineering (VVCE), Mysuru, popularly referred as VVCE, is one of the prestigious engineering colleges established in 1997 by Vidyavardhaka Sangha. It was established in 1949 by great visionaries viz., Sri K. Puttaswamy and Sri Sahukar Channaiah. VVCE has grown in leaps and bounds since its inception. VVCE has achieved a distinction as one of the best technical and management education centers in Karnataka. VVCE is affiliated to Visvesvaraya Technological University (VTU), Belagavi, with autonomous status from academic year 2020-21. Approved by AICTE, New Delhi, it is recognised by the Government of Karnataka. VVCE functions through its Board of Governors constituted as per

AICTE guidelines. The college is situated in the western part of the Heritage city of Mysuru, on an elevated sprawling campus of 23 acres.

The Institute has been accredited by National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC) with an 'A' Grade by National Board of Accreditation (NBA), New Delhi. Also, the Institute has a Silver rating by QS-I Guage which speaks volumes about the quality of education VVCE provides to its students. The college has an annual intake of 840 students for undergraduate courses in seven disciplines, viz., Electronics & Communication Engineering, Computer Science & Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Information Science & Engineering, Electrical & Electronics Engineering, Civil

Engineering & finally Computer Science & Engineering (Artificial Intelligence & Machine Learning) which is a new course introduced for 2020-21 batch.

Besides the seven UG courses, VVCE offers the following three post graduate programs viz., Master of Business Administration (MBA), MTech in Machine Design and MTech in Computer Science & Engineering. In addition, VVCE has set up research centers in nine departments to promote research activities in frontier areas and to offer MSc (Engineering) by research and doctoral programmes.

VVCE continues to innovate itself to be relevant and up to date to continue to be a leading institute in technical and management education in Karnataka, India. ■

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365
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370

A year ago the Centre struck down Jammu and Kashmir's special status by abrogating articles 370 and 35A, and made it a Union territory. **THE WEEK** takes a look at how the region is coping, and hoping for better days

BY TARIQ BHAT

AP

THE ROW MUST GO ON
A Kashmiri man on his way back from the floating vegetable market on Dal Lake in Srinagar

On August 5 last year, the Centre cut Jammu and Kashmir in two. It evoked both gasps of horror and raucous applause. How-

ever, unlike the svelte assistant in a magician's saw trick, the state did not come out unscathed. Now sliced into two Union territories, the former state had also lost Articles 370 and 35A, which had given it special status when it joined India. What followed was a tight lockdown, restrictions on movement, a communication blockade and mass arrests.

A year on, the sight of tourists fleeing Kashmir still haunts Feroz Ahmed Shanglu, a houseboat owner near the Dal Lake in Srinagar. "My business was good before Article 370 was revoked," he said. "The hotels referred tourists to my houseboat for overnight stays."

The dearth of sightseers dried up his savings; dazed and confused, he approached the Houseboat Owners Welfare Trust for help. The charity, which gives monthly aid to 600 houseboat and shikara owners, took care of him.

Later in the year, after the lockdown was eased a bit, Shanglu met owners of several hotels and guest houses, looking for work. "They used to hire me for making *kahwa* and *noon chai* (salt tea) for tourists, but none of them had any business," he said. Since June, he has found some work at weddings and small events outside Srinagar. "I get ₹700 a day (selling tea), but save only ₹500

because I have to pay for travel," he said. As fewer weddings are taking place, Shanglu has not been able to provide for his family, which includes his wife, two children and his old mother. "Without help from the charity, my family would starve," he said.

Abdul Khaliq Shora, another houseboat owner, said, "I am 70. I cannot go out looking for work. I survive on aid from the charity." Shora, who lives with his wife, divorced daughter and grandchild, said his houseboat had been lying vacant since August and needed repair.

Tariq Paltoo, who owns two houseboats and a guest house, and works as a volunteer for the charity, said, "Our charity is supported by our community members outside Kashmir. Our community is not used to aid and that is why every family listed with us is identified by a code number and food kits are delivered to them at night."

Land rides have fared no better. Ghulam Nabi Pandav, chairman, Kashmir Tourist Taxi Operators Association, said 26,000 cab drivers were without work since August. "Many drivers are working as labourers away from their homes so that nobody recognises them," he said. "We were told rivers of milk would flow in Kashmir after Article 370 [was revoked]. Where are those rivers?"

The carpet industry, one of the mainstays of business in Kashmir, is also hanging by a thread. At Pattan and Sumbal, considered the carpet belt of Kashmir, dozens of weavers have closed their looms and have taken to menial labour. "There was

no raw material as everything was shut and phones were also blocked," said Nazir Ahmed Malik, a weaver in Pattan. A half-finished carpet lay unattended as he spoke. "Even if I had completed this carpet, there would be no buyers," he said. "My son now works as a labourer in Srinagar and that is all we are surviving on."

The story repeats itself in neighbouring villages.

Every year, Kashmir exports about ₹1,600 crore worth of handicrafts, which includes shawls, papier-mâché products and wood carvings. Parvez Ahmad Bhat, president of the Artisan Rehabilitation Forum,

said there were more than the "official" 2.5 lakh artisans in Kashmir, and that the handicrafts department seemed unmoved by their plight.

Syed Kounsar Shah, who exports papier-mâché products, said some artisans had become suicidal because of unsold stocks. "We are now arranging counselling [sessions] for them," Shah said. "I am an award-winning exporter, but today, like most artisans, I feel desperate."

The lockdown aside, the suspension of high-speed internet also killed many businesses. Hundreds of WhatsApp accounts, which could not be updated, were deleted. "We used

to get orders online and the money through net banking," said a female entrepreneur. "But after the internet was blocked, we could not do any business."

Education also stalled. About 10 lakh students could not attend school and college for months last year because of curfew-like restrictions. They returned to classes in March, but the pandemic forced them back home. And though online classes have been introduced, the slow internet has played spoilsport.

The story in Kashmir's apple orchards, too, is not rosy. In October, after militant attacks on apple

traders and on truck drivers coming into Kashmir discouraged them from pursuing deals, local farmers were left without buyers. The government offered to buy the fruit, but not many growers came forward.

As the autumn leaves fell, sector after sector bled. As per a December report of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Kashmir lost between ₹14,296.10 crore and ₹17,800 crore, and 4.9 lakh jobs between August and December. In July 2020, it updated the figure to ₹40,000 crore.

In Jammu, however, most of the restrictions of the post-abrogation

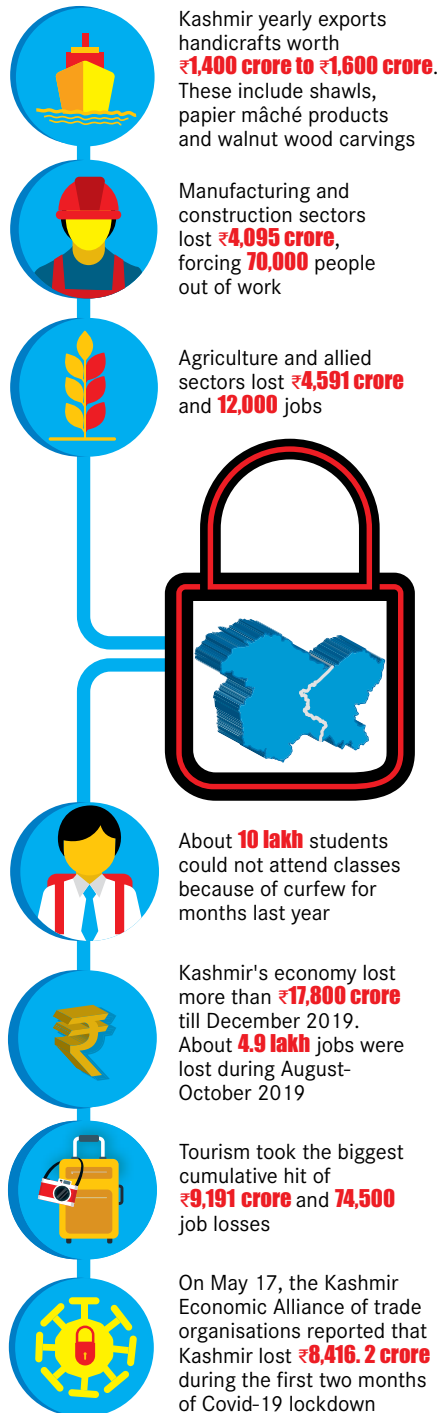
BARELY AFLOAT

Abdul Khaliq Shora, 70, is surviving on aid from a charity. His houseboat has been lying vacant since August, and needs repair



UMER ASIF

A HEAD LOCK



SOURCE KASHMIR CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.

lockdown were quickly lifted and internet connectivity was restored earlier. The region saw growth in manufacturing of plastic and steel products, pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, and animal and poultry feed. The toll on imports from other states was also abolished, making goods cheaper for consumers.

Local businesses, however, are worried about their ability to compete with cheaper goods from outside. "Our cost of manufacturing is higher than neighbouring states because we import raw material from outside," said Annil Suri, former president of the Bari Brahmana Industries Association. "We have to pay higher freight charges on raw material; skilled manpower also comes from outside." He said that, after they paid migrant workers in March, all of them were ferried out. "Now there is labour shortage in Jammu," he added.

FOR MOST people in Kashmir, the revocation of articles 370 and 35A was always about changing the demography of India's only Muslim-majority state. This impression only deepened after the Centre, on March 31, announced new domicile rules under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Adaptation of State Laws) Order, 2020.

The order defined domiciles as those who have lived in Jammu and Kashmir for 15 years and those who have studied for seven years and appeared in Class 10 and Class 12 exams in schools there. It also included any Indian citizen who had been an employee of the Central government or a public-sector undertaking in Jammu and Kashmir for 10 years. And, the children of anyone who fulfilled the criteria above.

Until last August, only permanent residents were considered domiciles. Article 35A defined a permanent resident as a person who was living in Jammu and Kashmir on May 14, 1954, or had been living there for 10 years and had lawfully acquired immovable property. The state government would issue them a Permanent Resident Certificate (PRC), which was needed to apply for government jobs and to buy immovable property.

Then, on May 18, the UT administration issued the Jammu and Kashmir Grant of Domicile Certificate (Procedure) Rules, 2020. Under these, the tehsildar has to issue the domicile certificate within 15 days of application, failing which he could lose ₹50,000 from his salary.

PAIN AND NO GAIN

A wood-carving artist at work in Srinagar. The communication blockade has severely hampered sales of handicrafts



"This is unprecedented," said a tehsildar who did not want to be named. "While issuing PRCs, it used to take weeks and sometimes months to verify the antecedents of the applicant." Another tehsildar spoke of a recent procedural headache. After she had sought documents from a man who claimed to be living in Kashmir for more than 15 years, she got a call from an Army officer asking her to issue the certificate. "I told him that the man had no documentary proof or witnesses to support his claim," she said. "I told him he would be posted elsewhere tomorrow, but I have to live here and cannot flout the rules." She said the officer understood and did not insist.

While the government has said that permanent residents will get the

domicile certificate based on their PRCs, the order has sparked fears of a National Register of Citizens in Kashmir. In fact, some revenue officials THE WEEK spoke to in Kashmir believed that it was easier for an outsider to get the domicile certificate. The rules dictate that the PRC should match with government records, but the officials feared that some records could have been lost due to a number of reasons, including floods and fires.

The immediate beneficiaries of the domicile law are the migrants living in Jammu and Kashmir. Currently, at least 17 lakh of them are eligible for a domicile certificate.

Also, with a nudge from the Centre, the underprivileged from other states could look to Jammu and Kashmir

for a better life. That will not only alter the demography of the Union territory, but also reduce the societal clout of permanent residents.

It could also affect jobs. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the unemployment rate in Jammu and Kashmir is currently 17.9 per cent, far higher than the national average of 8 per cent. The domicile law has come at a time when, according to the Union home ministry, there are 84,000 government vacancies to be filled.

As for investment from outside, sources said the revenue department had identified around 50,000 acres, mostly in Jammu, to set up industrial units. According to sources in the State Industrial Development Corporation, several companies

have shown interest in investing in a variety of sectors, including health care, hospitality, education and agriculture.

Chaitanya Sharma, manager of the Jammu and Kashmir Trade Promotion Organisation, told THE WEEK that they were in talks with companies, but the pandemic had put everything on hold.

Some local businessmen said they welcomed outside investment, but that the government should dispel fears that inviting such companies was not part of the plan to change the region's demography. "Land could be leased to outsiders to set up business even when Article 370 was in effect," said a businessman. He added that the government had also, on July 18, approved amendments to the law to allow marking of "strategic

areas," where the Army could carry out unhindered construction and related activities.

Syed Mujtaba, a lawyer in Kashmir, said the Centre could not make any law as the abrogation had been challenged in the Supreme Court. "The lieutenant governor does not represent the people of Jammu and Kashmir, but the Centre," he said. "The people have no agency." A government spokesman, however, said there were adequate safeguards in place and accused the political parties of spreading misinformation.

Unlike in Kashmir, the scrapping of the state's special status was greeted with cheer in Jammu, especially by BJP supporters. The domicile law, however, has them worried about losing jobs and business to outsiders. There has been no open dissent in

Jammu for fear of strengthening what they consider "anti-national" protests in Kashmir.

Zorawar Singh Jamwal of Team Jammu, a socio-cultural group, said that though he was concerned, the new domicile law did have safeguards. "Navin Choudhary (an IAS officer from Bihar whose domicile certificate went viral) has been living in Jammu and Kashmir for 26 years," he said. "Only then has he gotten the certificate."

However, Sushma Singh, who lives on the outskirts of Jammu, said she was worried about the future of her daughter, who recently passed her CBSE class 12 exams. "Now outsiders will also stake a claim on seats in professional colleges here," she said. "We are now feeling insecure."

Harsh Dev Singh, chairperson of



AFP

the Jammu-based National Panthers Party, said the domicile law was unfair to the educated youth of Jammu and Kashmir, and that the government should at least have retained the permanent resident status. "There has been no development and only retrenchment since last August; around 1,200 health workers were sacked," he said. "Employees

of the information and education departments have also been removed. No daily wage has been regularised."

That all is not well for the BJP in Jammu was evident when the party won only 52 of 148 seats in the block development council elections in October. This when the National Conference and the Peoples Democratic Party did not contest.

SOIL AND TOIL

A woman carries lunch for her husband working in a paddy field in central Kashmir; (above) Farooq and Molly Abdullah in October, 2019

NOTABLY, most political leaders detained in early August have been reluctant to broach the topic of abrogation even after their release several months later. The silence of the senior NC leaders and former chief ministers Farooq Abdullah and his son, Omar, has fuelled speculation that the party is hoping only for the restoration of statehood. On July 27, Omar wrote in a national daily that he would not contest assembly elections as long as Jammu and Kashmir remained a Union territory.

The party's workers, some of whom have spent their whole lives with the NC, are not pleased. "We fought separatists only because we had autonomy, our own flag and laws that protected our identity," said a leader in Srinagar. "Now we have nothing and our party is saying it will fight in court."

The reason the burden of fighting is on the NC is that it is the only party whose leadership and support base are still largely intact. And the BJP knows this. The party is now

Time for street protests has passed

Our primary fight will be in the courts because that is where we expect to get justice from. There is no point expecting justice from the very government that snatched Article 370 from the people of Jammu and Kashmir," former chief minister Farooq Abdullah told THE WEEK. "As a political party, it is but natural that we will also keep the people abreast of what we plan to do. We were among the first to approach the Supreme Court and we have one of the best-drafted petitions. If by proactive you mean street protests, then the time [for] that has passed. We are a democratic mainstream party and will use every democratic means at our disposal."

As for the 'Gupkar declaration', where regional parties of Jammu and Kashmir resolved to stand together and fight the abrogation on August 4, 2019, Farooq said: "I cannot say what its current status is. Some of the signatories to the declaration have gone to court individually and some have not bothered to challenge the abrogation at all. When all the leaders are freed from detention, the NC will meet and decide on its next course of action. But we are clear that we do not accept the changes forced on us on August 5 and will continue to oppose them."



UMER ASIF

banking on the delimitation process, which would be completed in May. As part of this, Jammu is expected to gain twice the number of seats as Kashmir. Before last August, the state assembly had 87 seats, including four from Ladakh. Kashmir had 46, Jammu 37.

The BJP hopes for votes of the West Pakistan refugees, Gorkhas and Valmikis, who have gained certain rights because of the abrogation. The party is also banking on the new domiciles, especially in the Muslim-majority areas of the Chenab valley and the Pir Panjal region of Jammu.

Only Mehbooba Mufti, PDP president and former chief minister, who is still detained under the Public Safety Act at her home in Srinagar, continues to be defiant. Analysts said she wants to salvage her image, which was sullied by her alliance with the BJP in 2014. The party, though, seems to be in disarray as many of its leaders have joined the Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party, which PDP minister Altaf Bukhari floated with the BJP's backing last year.

As for the separatists, the abrogation has left them in tatters. On June 29, Syed Ali Shah Geelani resigned from the chairmanship of the Hurriyat Conference (G) and accused its constituents of shying away from accountability.

The separatists had lost traction long before August 5 because of internal feuds and the inability to get public support. The Centre's crackdown on separatists through the National Investigation Agency hit both factions of the Hurriyat Conference, headed by Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq.

AS EXPECTED, the abrogation has affected the security of the region. Since January, security forces have killed at least 133 militants in Pulwama, Shopian, Kulgam and Anantnag districts of south Kashmir. After last August, the state police came under

direct control of the Centre. That freed it from political interference and increased synergy with the Army and the CRPF.

In 2019, security forces had killed 133 militants before August 5, and only 25 in the remaining months. "We resumed operations after two weeks [of the abrogation]," said a senior police officer. "The priority was to prevent 2010- and 2016-like agitations in which many civilians were killed."

The restraint, however, led to several militants infiltrating from Pakistan. Minister of State for Home G. Kishan Reddy, last December, told Parliament that there were 84 infiltration attempts and 59 militants could have slipped in.

Last October, a new militant group,

The Resistance Front (TRF), announced its presence with a grenade attack on security forces at Hari Singh High Street in Srinagar; seven people were injured. That the group had been active on Telegram while internet was suspended in Kashmir led to suggestions that its handlers were in Pakistan. The police said that Pakistan had formed the TRF to mislead the Financial Action Task Force, which had threatened to blacklist the country for supporting terrorism. "Lashkar floated the TRF with some members of the Hizbul Mujahideen," said Vijay Kumar, inspector general, Jammu and Kashmir Police.

The group gained notoriety after five of its militants and five Army men were killed in an encounter on April 4 near the Line of Control in

Kupwara. After that, security forces intensified operations.

In April, 23 militants were killed in the first 24 days. But, on May 3 and 5, eight security forces personnel and two militants were killed in two engagements with the TRF at Handwara in Kupwara.

On May 6, the security forces killed Riyaz Naikoo, Hizbul Mujahideen chief operations commander, and his associate at Beighpora in Pulwama. "While on his trail, we managed to bust six of his hideouts," said Kumar. "We interrogated some of his over-ground workers and got vital information."

On May 19, Junaid Sehrai, the Hizbul Mujahideen's divisional commander for central Kashmir, and his associate Tariq Ahmed of Pulwama,

were killed in Srinagar. "In the past two months, there have been attempts by the JeM (Jaish-e-Mohammed) to carry out a Pulwama-type attack, but we have foiled them," said a senior police officer. Security forces are on the trail of other listed militants, including Naikoo's successor Saifullah Mir alias Ghazi Haider and JeM IED expert Adnan Bhai.

There have been political casualties, too. On July 8, militants shot dead BJP state executive member Sheikh Waseem Bari, his father Sheikh Bashir Ahmad and brother Sheikh Umar, who were also office-bearers of the party, outside their Bandipora home. The attack happened a month after Ajay Pandita, a Congress sarpanch, was shot dead by militants in his village of Larkipora in

Anantnag. Deputy General of Police Dilbag Singh said the attack was the handiwork of a hybrid group of local and foreign militants working together to confuse security forces.

In another significant move, security forces have stopped handing over the bodies of local militants to their families to prevent emotional funerals, which they said motivated the youth to join militancy. Though police have cited the pandemic as the official reason, police sources said the policy was first discussed in 2018, but could not be implemented due to objections by local politicians.

Kashmir has seen many such changes in the past one year. And now, another autumn beckons. The chinar leaves must fall again; hope, though, can cling on. **1**



AFP

Security forces have stopped handing over the bodies of local militants to their families to prevent emotional funerals, which they said motivated the youth to join militancy.

ON THE PROWL
Special Operations Group personnel leave a gun-battle site on the outskirts of Srinagar, where two militants were killed on July 25

INTERVIEW

Lieutenant General B.S. Raju,
General Officer Commanding, XV Corps, Indian Army

Sino-Indian tensions have not affected the situation on the Pakistan front

BY TARIQ BHAT

LIEUTENANT GENERAL B.S. Raju, who heads the Army's Srinagar-based Chinar Corps (XV Corps), has been successful in tackling the twin challenges of infiltration operations along the Line of Control (LoC) and counterterror operations in the hinterlands. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, the commander discussed the impact of Covid-19 on operations in the valley, the improvement in the security situation in south Kashmir and whether Pakistan is trying to take advantage of Sino-Indian tensions.

Excerpts:

Q/ Do give us a sense of the current security situation against the backdrop of last August's legislative action [revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status and turning it into a Union territory] and the threat of Covid-19?

A/ The internal situation in Kashmir is stable but sensitive. Maintaining peace has been the prime goal of all government agencies. The prevention of violence in the post legisla-

tive action (situation) has been the cornerstone of our security strategy. The adversary's principal strategy is to instigate violence and cause the loss of Kashmiri life and property, which starts a cycle of violence. Our strategy is to carry out most operations based on specific intelligence and in a manner ensuring minimum use of force and taking all steps to avoid collateral damage. Precautionary and preemptive measures for the safety and security of the people have been instrumental in saving lives. The recent spurt in civilian killings is a repeat of the terror activities that happened last September, and is indicative of the desperation of terrorist controllers. They are resorting to hitting soft targets among the Kashmiri population. We are working towards neutralising this threat, too.

Covid-19 is a challenge for common citizens and soldiers alike. The Army has been involved in the dissemination of information about Covid precautions, distribution of sanitisation supplies and relief material. We have a detailed protocol of

quarantine and testing of personnel coming after leave. During operations, all precautions are taken as per the recommended protocol. However, if things get active on the LoC, we are ready for all contingencies.

Q/ There has been a sharp decline in stone-pelting incidents during anti-militancy operations.

A/ The principal strategy of Pakistani handlers and their proxies has been to instigate violence and protests that can lead to the deaths of civilians. Pakistan has been using a variety of means to instigate violent protests including stone-pelting, using money and a network of radicalised over ground workers (OGW). Concerted police action to cut off hawala and drug channels has choked funding for such anti-national activities. Good intelligence and policing has ensured identification and booking of OGWs. The civil society is actively contributing to control these violent activities. The recent success in

kinetic operations to kill terrorists, with a focus on the terror leadership, has also played a role.

Q/ Is south Kashmir free of militancy now as claimed by the police? Will the focus now shift to the north, where a mix of local and foreign militants are mounting attacks?

A/ The success in eliminating terrorists operating in the hinterland and an effective counterinfiltration grid have virtually broken the backbone of terrorism in J&K. There are pockets of turbulence in south Kashmir and we are focusing on these pockets. The security forces and other agencies have been working in tandem to maintain a robust counterterrorist grid in south Kashmir. The past one year has witnessed the elimination of all major terrorist leaders. The number of terrorists operating in the valley has gone down because of reduced recruitment and successes in counterterror operations. We are conscious of the threat to soft targets, which

normally are the civilians, and are working hard to defeat such efforts.

The success in the south is complemented by similar operations in the north, which is affected more by Pakistani terrorists who infiltrate across the LoC. This year, a robust counter infiltration grid and the domination of the LoC have curbed infiltration. There have been successful elimination of terrorists who were trying to infiltrate both in the Baramulla and the Kupwara sectors. The terror *tanzeems* (groups) are under pressure from their handlers for executing terror activities as we head towards the completion of one year of relative peace after the August 5 legislative action. We are working hard to deny any operational space to these terrorists and to provide an environment of peace and security to the people.

Q/ How is the Army dealing with the threat of infiltration and militant infrastructure in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir?

A/ Since the legislative action on August 5, 2019, Pakistan has been bel-

ligerent across diplomatic forums. It has also been under domestic pressure to instigate violence in Jammu and Kashmir. We have an all-weather, effective, multilayered counterinfiltration grid in place. We keep updating our drills and use technology to beat any fresh tactics used by the adversary. The surveillance grid has a mix of technological tools for all-weather day-and-night surveillance. The effective surveillance grid and top class weaponry ensure we respond hard and fast, in a punitive manner. The Pakistanis know it and the unlucky ones experience it.

Q/ It is said that local militant recruitment dipped in 2019.

A/ The recruitment of local boys in 2019 was less compared with 2018 and it shows the decline in terror influence. Local terror recruitment is one of our primary concerns. Our efforts are aimed at weaning the youth away from terror. Proactive steps are being taken to identify and counsel vulnerable youth. In this we seek help and support of the civil society. New recruits have very low survivability, with some getting killed within a couple of months. We are working to firstly prevent the local youth from joining terrorism and secondly to facilitate the surrender of those who have joined terror groups.

Q/ So you want to give the militants an opportunity to surrender.

A/ Promoting surrender is something that we are working on at multiple levels. In all operations, we extend every opportunity to local terrorists to give up arms and return to the mainstream. During most encounters, we halt operations and involve the parents or society elders to urge trapped local terrorists to surrender. Even before encounters, as part of our



PHOTO COURTESY PRO DEFENCE XV CORPS

counterterror operations protocol, we reach out to friends and family of a known terrorist to facilitate surrender. The family and the misguided youth are assured of state help in surrender, security from terror retribution and help in rehabilitation. To make it more attractive, we have given suggestions to the government to update the existing surrender policy. We also look at the *awam* (general public) and Kashmiri society to constructively engage with the youth to remove the false notion of ‘*jannat* in martyrdom’ spread by Pakistani and separatist propaganda.

Q/ How many local and foreign militants are active in Jammu and Kashmir?

A/ Estimates regarding active militants vary, but the figures are down because of the relentless successful operations. This is largely a result of good control over infiltration, killing of existing cadres and reduced recruitment. The number of terrorists remaining does not matter much since lower numbers do not mandate a major change in our methods; a single terrorist with a pistol can prove lethal and terrorise the population. We are working towards addressing the complete ecosystem that nurtures terrorism so that we can once again focus on development, prosperity and the well-being of the population.

Q/ How do you look at the recent resignation of Syed Ali Geelani, a vocal supporter of militancy, from the Hurriyat Conference?

A/ The resignation of a man who has already lost his relevance is an effort to regain space for the separatists. It reveals the corruption and the Pakistani roots in all actions of the separatists. The desperation of the Pakistani establishment and the separatist camp is

visible in such acts. It is also interesting to note that Geelani found no one in Jammu and Kashmir fit and ready to carry his anti-India ideology forward. The proxies in PoK are his last hope. These are also indicators of a failing structure, with infighting, slandering and the blame game coming to the fore. The Pakistan-separatist-terrorist nexus is at its lowest ebb. The Pakistan-controlled proxies are focused on re-engineering violence and generating a state of fear. We as a nation need to identify this opportunity and work hard to strengthen the progressive elements in Jammu and Kashmir.

Q/ Ceasefire violations along the LoC have increased. Is Pakistan trying to take advantage of Sino-Indian tensions?

A/ There is only one reason for the near constant ceasefire violations—Pakistan is attempting to assist more and more terrorists to infiltrate into India. The Pakistan army facilitates these infiltration attempts. Also, in the summer months, an escalation in ceasefire violations and infiltration attempts is well anticipated. The Army is well poised and fully committed to not allow any misadventure by Pakistan. The situation on the Ladakh border is also well under control. There has not been any major escalation in the situation on the Pakistan front. We are aware of some defensive deployments done by the Pakistanis. The situation in Gilgit-Baltistan is also being watched. There has not been any major perceptible escalation in the situation on the Pakistan front owing to the situation on our borders with China.

Q/ What has been the impact of Covid-19 on the Army's public

reachout programmes?

A/ The support and cooperation we have received from the *awam* in our outreach programmes has been overwhelming. Our programmes are running well within the revised safety protocols and we are helping the *awam* by spreading information about Covid, distribution of sanitisation kits/face masks and humanitarian aid to the needy, especially in far-flung areas. We have incorporated safety guidelines and have suitably modified the implementation of our outreach initiatives. The joint efforts of all stakeholders in the national fight against the pandemic will ensure that the people of Kashmir will remain safe and healthy. We are confident that with our combined efforts, we shall overcome this hurdle. The Army is constantly working alongside the civil administration to bring succour to the lives of the people. We have modified our combat drills as per Covid-19 advisories to ensure the safety of both the soldiers and the *awam* in all interactions. Force preservation in the times of the pandemic remains our concern even as we ensure the safety and security of the national borders and the hinterland.

Q/ What is your reaction to the demand for a political initiative to fill the vacuum created by the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir?

A/ Our role as security forces is to ensure a secure environment where the administration and the civil society can function without the fear of the gun. We are working on that singular aim. It is a work in progress.... On the political front, the government has clearly enunciated the objectives and the roadmap for the political landscape and we are confident that we will soon see progress on that front. It will not be apt for me to comment on the political developments or scenarios. ●



SANJAY AHLAWAT

IN PRAYER
A Ladakhi, with a praying wheel and beads, in Leh market

Keeping the faith

Ladakhis remain optimistic about the future, even as they worry about an influx of outsiders

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR/Ladakh

For the people of Ladakh, the past one year has been one of hope and apprehensions. Hope, because the erstwhile Buddhist kingdom's decades-old dream to be a Union territory finally came true on August 5 last year. "It was the result of a 70-year fight of the people of Ladakh to get their identity," said P.T. Kunzang, president of the influential Ladakh Buddhist Association, which had been spearheading the agitation.

Apprehension, because Ladakhis now worry about jobs and protecting their land and fragile ecosystem. "People who want to use the resources in Ladakh for selfish purposes are not welcome," said J.T. Namgyal of the BJP, who represents Ladakh in the Lok Sabha.

Ladakh has two districts, Leh and

Kargil. Leh is dominated by Buddhists; Kargil, by Shia Muslims. There are about 1.15 lakh Shias and 1.35 lakh Buddhists. Hindus, Sikhs, Sunni Muslims and others number around 10,000.

The past one year has not seen any big-ticket development work here. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently approved the plan for the first Central university in Ladakh, which will have a centre for Buddhist studies. This will help Ladakhis, who now have to travel hundreds of kilometres from home for higher education. The Union government has also allocated ₹6,000 crore for various development projects. "A cold desert, Ladakh only gets few months of summer to carry out development work. Activities had to wait till March because of the snow. But from March onwards, the

Covid-19 pandemic has gripped us," said Gyal P. Wangyal, chairman of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council.

According to Wangyal, Ladakh has to start from scratch. "Ladakh used to get only 2 per cent of the total budget of Jammu and Kashmir [even though it covered 65 per cent of the state's area]. So development was almost negligible here," he said.

The council, which was set up in 1995 after a series of agitations, has 30 members; re-elections are expected to be held in September or October. The ruling BJP has an edge over the Congress in the polls.

With Article 370 gone, there is fear that the influx of outsiders would lead to a change in the region's demographics. "With no special status, Ladakh will become open for all, especially in terms of real estate," said Wangyal. "That is why we need protection of land. It has to be ensured that potential buyers do not exploit us. Domicile rules for Ladakh are also required."

Abdul Qayum, president of the Anjuman Moin-ul-Islam, which represents 20,000 Sunni Muslims in Leh, Dras and Zaskar, fears that Ladakh is set to lose its cultural identity. "With enough funds from the Union government, Ladakh will develop," he said. "But I feel the 'Ladakhiness' will be lost. We have a distinct culture and identity; I don't think it is going to last."

Qayum said Leh has benefited administratively—people no longer have to travel to Srinagar to make their grievances heard. But he believes that demographic change is now imminent. Leh is easily accessible by air, and every year it hosts tourists that number four times its population.

Qayum said the only way forward is to give more teeth to the hill development council. "Unless the Union government empowers the council," he said, "I do not see any change in decision-making." ●

Testing times

Delhi's foremost challenge would be phased withdrawal of security forces from and smooth conduct of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

A year after articles 370 and 35A were struck down, a list of challenges still confronts the Centre. These include legally defending the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, assuring people of the region that the decision was not an attempt to change demography, and defeating the home-grown militancy born of a deep sense of alienation in Kashmiri Muslims.

"The alienation of the Kashmiri Muslim is nearly 100 per cent after the abrogation of Article 370," said former home secretary G.K. Pillai, who was part of discussions between the Centre and Kashmiri groups during the previous UPA government. "The Covid-19 crisis and the ensuing lockdown have been a blessing in disguise for the security situation. How the government utilises this time to generate employment, initiate developmental works and launch outreach programmes will temper the repercussions later."

With the delimitation process and new domicile law, Kashmiris feel they can be dispossessed of their rights by hegemonic control through new settlers, said M.M. Ansari, former interlocutor, Jammu and Kashmir.

Policymakers in Delhi, however, are confident that once the benefits of the new domicile law start showing, people will embrace the change.

"A variety of developmental activities were anticipated, but little happened after Jammu and Kashmir went into a second lockdown because of Covid-19," admitted a government official.

The benefits of certain Central laws are also yet to reach the grassroots. "The empowerment of the Panchayati Raj institutions is still not complete. The babus in the central secretariat do not believe in decentralisation of powers," said Anil Sharma, president of the All Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Conference. "People feel as if they did something wrong by supporting the abrogation. They cannot meet any administrative secretary for redressal of their grievances. Corruption continues at all levels." Anoop Kaul, chairman of Sampooran Kashmir Sanghathan, said the government should issue a domicile certificate to all Kashmiri Pandits living outside the Union territory. He also demanded that a truth and reconciliation commission be set up to bring out the actual reasons behind the exodus and bring all culprits to justice.

There is also growing resentment among people, especially in Jammu, about the UT status; home ministry sources indicated that Home Minister Amit Shah, who wants to control the security situation, is keen on restoring statehood. D.K. Pathak,

**PLANNING
MODE**
Prime Minister
Modi with
National Security
Advisor Ajit Doval

former Border Security Force chief, said heavy deployment of security forces had prevented terror incidents, but a wave of mass mobilisation can be expected in future.

The litmus test for the Centre would be the phased withdrawal of security forces and the smooth conduct of assembly elections. Sources said that Delhi would like to wait for the delimitation process to end and economic activity to pick up before calling elections.

Sources also said that the Centre might release a few political detainees as a symbolic gesture to get public support. By now, many of the detainees are too weak to shape public opinion.

The separatists have also lost their power. Recently, Syed Ali Shah Geelani resigned from his faction of the All Party Hurriyat Conference. Intelligence agencies have inputs on how the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence was leaning on Geelani

to control the narrative in Kashmir, which he failed at.

The ISI is now, reportedly, pooling the resources of Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba for infiltration and attacks. Pakistan seems to be worried that further integration with India would sever social ties between PoK and Jammu and Kashmir, and is trying to lure young professionals from the valley who sympathise with the Pakistani narrative on Kashmir.

Delhi's direct control of the security grid in Kashmir could give it the upper hand, but for normalcy to return, more bloodshed cannot be ruled out. However, the good news for Delhi is the burgeoning pro-independence sentiment in PoK. "Instead of keeping the [24 seats reserved for PoK in the assembly] empty, the Indian government should consider nominating the people from PoK living in exile to those seats," Amjad Ayub Mirza,

from Mirpur in PoK and living in exile in the UK, told THE WEEK.

Geo-strategic experts said the abrogation was also meant to send signals to China and Pakistan. "The Modi government wanted to tell them that after such internal reorganisation, a red line will be drawn on their interventionist policies," said Srikanth Kondapalli, a professor in Chinese studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. "However, China's approach is to put India on the defensive, and hence took the issue to the UN Security Council thrice last year. If China does not resist the lifting of Article 370, the Kashmir land it acquired from Pakistan (including Aghil, Shimshal, Ruksam and Sakshgam) will be in jeopardy." India, in a tit for tat move, raised the Hong Kong issue at the UN Human Rights Council in July.

Pillai said Modi was disillusioned with Chinese president Xi Jinping and there was a worry that India was

joining the anti-China chorus with the US. "India needs friends, and in diplomacy, there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests," he said.

Ansari said the way forward for peace in the region was a tripartite dialogue with Pakistan and China, as the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control were not internationally accepted borders. Referring to the Galwan Valley clash of June, Pillai said: "India cannot open too many fronts. It needs to be careful how it treats its neighbours. When we deal with the Kashmir situation, it is not only the domestic audience that is listening. We know the Chinese were not only listening and watching, but also preparing," Pillai said, referring to the Galwan Valley clash of June.

A section of the security establishment, however, believed that Chinese ambitions in Kashmir had nothing to do with Article 370 and that they would grab any territory if there was an opportunity.

"India will not hesitate from revisiting its China policy," said a top intelligence official. "India will pursue strategic autonomy by not working against interests of any country, but whenever Indian interests overlap, it will collaborate with others, including in military cooperation."

As for the on-ground situation in Jammu and Kashmir, a security expert in the government said National Security Advisor Ajit Doval would be the man to take the Union territory out of the double lockdown. "History is replete with examples of how princely states that merged with India grew to become world-class destinations. The IT city of Hyderabad is one example and they can thank [Sardar Vallabhbhai] Patel for it," said a government official.

The government hopes to do the same with Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. ●



**M.M. Ansari,
former
interlocutor,
Jammu and
Kashmir,
said the way
forward for
peace was
a tripartite
dialogue with
Pakistan and
China.**



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Jitendra Singh,
minister of state in Prime Minister's Office

This will be the last phase of militancy or terrorism in J&K

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

SANJAY AHLAWAT

Q/ There is concern over the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir post abrogation of Article 370.

A/ Till as late as August 5, 2019, all the prophets of doom were saying no one can touch Article 370. They had gone to the extent of saying that if somebody even touches it, there will be earthquakes, (eruption of) volcanoes and bloodshed. But... the following six months have been the most peaceful festive season in Jammu and Kashmir. This was the time when we had Diwali, Holi, Eid and Moharram. Among national [holidays], we had Independence Day and Republic Day. In the last 30 years, there has not been a single occasion when there has been no untoward incident during national [holidays]. The perpetrators of terrorism in the state and Pakistan-sponsored terror groups would always try to show their presence. This was the only year when no untoward incident took place.... This was also the year when Block Development Council elections [were held] for the first time

in Jammu and Kashmir. This itself speaks for the security situation.

Q/ When can we expect a terror-free Jammu and Kashmir?

A/ I can speak from the evidence on the ground that terrorists are on the run. This is going to be the last phase of militancy or terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

Q/ How is the government ensuring good governance?

A/ The Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, dealt by the Department of Personnel and Training handled by me, has been implemented in Jammu and Kashmir for the first time. Jammu and Kashmir had its own anti-corruption law which was lacklustre.... Now it has an act that talks of time-bound disposal of cases and after the 2018 amendment, not only the bribe taker but the bribe giver is also held guilty. Secondly, the jurisdiction of the Central Vigilance Commission has been extended. The Right to Information Act is same as at

the Centre. All these laws were either not implemented or implemented in a modified or truncated form to suit political interests. Citizenship rights were not given to refugees who settled there from Pakistan....

But now for the first time, Jammu and Kashmir is enjoying similar kind of liberty and freedom as rest of India. It is the only Union territory which has got two AIIMS. This happened after the personal intervention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the last five years, more than half a dozen medical colleges funded by the Centre were opened but there was no faculty since the local government did not allow them to purchase land. That barrier has been removed now.

Q/ There is worry that the new domicile law will change the demography of Jammu and Kashmir.

A/ This debate has been raised by those who have a huge vested political interest. It is not the population demography they are worried about,

it is the vote bank demography. They feel if someone comes from outside and gets citizenship after living there for ten years as per the domicile law—or an IAS officer is allocated AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram-Union Territory) cadre and after serving there for a couple of years, he will also get voting rights and likewise students, Pakistani refugees or Gorkha settlers get similar voting rights—that will impact their limited captive vote bank on which they have been thriving on. Otherwise, if there is a healthy change of demography happening all over the world, why should Jammu and Kashmir shy away from it? There are certain advantages of it. Now people are increasingly realising this facade of demography, and the debate is cooling down.

Q/ How big is the focus on industrial growth?

A/ Jalandhar city, which is close to Jammu, is a big business centre but the latter has not [benefited from it].

This is because investments were not allowed from outside. All that has been changed with the new domicile law. The Covid-19 lockdown has caused some interruption, otherwise a big outreach programme had been started by the Union territory government to facilitate and create awareness about investment options that were available. They were visualising a huge investment up to ₹25,000 crore and had started conducting outreach programmes in various cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru and Kolkata. New industrial hubs have been identified in small districts like Udhampur and many potential investors are already keen to set up units.

Q/ When will the assembly elections be held?

A/ They will happen in due course of time and, as you know, the delimitation exercise is also going on.

Q/ What is the plan for Pakistan-occupied-Jammu and Kashmir?

A/ PoJK is a part of India and it was forcibly occupied by Pakistan and that too when Indian forces were on the verge of retrieving it. It was one of the many Nehruvian blunders as history records it that prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru went to the Akashvani Bhavan and made the announcement of unilateral ceasefire without consulting his cabinet, home minister or defence minister and the territory was lost to Pakistan.

The question now is how to retrieve it. Even in 1994, when the Congress was in power, a resolution was passed unanimously by Parliament saying that the only pending issue between India and Pakistan is of retrieving the illegally occupied part of Jammu and Kashmir that is in Pakistan's occupation. So why were successive Congress governments quiet on it for 25 years? Now since the BJP and the NDA have shown the will to move forward and having

accomplished what it has in the last one year, I think we should look forward to it as the next agenda.

Q/ How do you see the future of separatists in the Valley and mainstream political parties like the National Conference and the PDP?

A/ Separatists have no future. Separatism in Kashmir is by convenience and not conviction.... They have been unfaithful to their own people and trying to bluff them by raising the slogan of separatism. There are many separatist leaders who are drawing pension as ex-legislators, including Geelani....

On the one hand they claim not to be subscribing to the Constitution of India, on the other hand they are very particular to make use of each and every privilege made available through the Constitution. They fooled people for three generations and now the young generation in Kashmir is not ready to be taken for a ride....

As far as the dynasties are concerned, not just in Jammu and Kashmir but all over India, the feudal hangover is over.... Today, people have learnt to test and elect their representatives on the basis of hard evidence. What has also happened is that in the last six years under Modi, there has been a whole new opening of avenues and opportunities particularly for the youth and now in the age of social media and connectivity, the youth of Kashmir are able to realise what they are missing out.

Q/ How do you see the entry of new political parties in Jammu and Kashmir?

A/ As far as we in the BJP are concerned, the more the merrier. That is the spirit of democracy.

To read the full interview

Visit www.theweek.in



Breaking holy ground

Despite muted criticism among seers, Ayodhya readies itself for a historic moment in the Ram temple saga

BY PUJA AWASTHI/Ayodhya

A BARELY palpable excitement courses through Ayodhya as it readies itself for the *bhoomi puja* (ground breaking ceremony) of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple on August 5. Municipal corporation vans weave their way through the narrow lanes, asking residents to participate in a quick beautification of the town that is readying itself for the biggest event since the demolition of the Babri mosque.

While Covid-19 has scaled back the celebrations, there is muted criticism among Ayodhya's seers of the way things are panning out. A new body, the Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust (SRJTKT), is managing the show, while older ones such as the Nirmohi Akhara have been pushed to the background.

It is a disappointment that is not voiced directly. Ambrish Singh, regional organisational secretary, Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), said that while his organisation's focus is the Ram temple, it has many other tasks to carry out such as the protection of cows and stopping religious conversions. "We will initiate a mass contact programme to ensure the emotional connect of Hindus with the *mandir* as decided by the trust," said Singh. But it papers over the fact that the VHP old guard, which has long been at the forefront of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, has been sidelined since the formation of the SRJTKT.

This body was announced on February 5, as directed by the Supreme Court judgment on the title suit. According to the gazette notification on the formation of the SRJTKT, it bears powers 'including construction of the temple and all necessary, incidental and supplemental matters thereto'.

Champat Rai, vice president, VHP, is the general secretary of this new trust. Rai was blooded into the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a child and has been an active member of the VHP and the temple movement since 1991. He is the authorised spokesperson for the SRJTKT, but rarely speaks to the media and his communication with the old guard of the temple movement is also erratic. As a result, rumours about the temple—for example, one about a time capsule being placed in the temple's foundation, which Rai later shot down—float freely. A member of the old guard said: "We know only as much is out in the newspapers. All the manpower and material power now rest with Rai. We are nothing." Mahant Nritya Gopal Das, chairperson of the SRJTKT and head of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, a trust formed in 1993, was not part of the original list of appointees to the new trust. He had openly questioned the need for a new trust. This stemmed from the guiding principle of the temple movement that went: *Mandir*

wahin, masjid nahin, jin patharon ko santan ne sweekar kiya unse hi mandir nirman (the *mandir* there, no mosque, the *mandir* to be built from the stones accepted by the seers). Though Das's current position as chairperson is held to be largely ceremonial, he dismisses any talk of discontent. "All this is just a figment of malicious imagination," he said.

The proposed temple is bigger than the one that was planned earlier. It will have one *shikhar* (spire) surrounded by four *mandaps* (congre-

gation halls). It will be 161ft high, as against the initial height of 128ft. The area of the temple was to be 140ft by 268.5ft. This will now be 235ft by 360ft. While the original structure required 1.75 lakh square feet stone, the requirement is now 3.5 lakh square feet.

While no one denies the need for a grander temple, many fear they will not live to see it. Among them is Anant Rai, who is in charge of the Nyas workshop, where the pink sandstone pillars rest. Rai, now 80,

has been at the workshop since 1990, living in the cramped quarters on its premises. "We have enough pillars for one floor," said Rai. "Those for the second were to be carved when the first would be constructed. Now there is double work to be done. The only way that will happen in my lifetime is if the work is contracted elsewhere."

Ayodhya is undergoing a limited facelift ahead of the *bhoomi puja*. The pillars and beams of the railway overbridge at Naya Ghat have been



PAWAN KUMAR

WORK, WORSHIP

An artist from Assam gives finishing touches to idols at Ram Katha Kunj in Ayodhya. These idols will find a place at the Ram temple

THE RAM TEMPLE

HEIGHT
161 FEET

LENGTH
360 FEET

WIDTH
235 FEET

CAPACITY
**80,000
TO 1 LAKH**
devotees a day

COST
Yet to be
determined

ESTIMATED
COMPLETION
Three to three and
a half years



MATERIAL

Bansi Paharpur sandstone from Bharatpur district, Rajasthan; "king of sandstone"

Bricks brought by *kar sevaks* to Ayodhya over the years will be used in masonry

STRUCTURE

Load-bearing (walls bear the weight and transfer it to the ground through the foundation). Iron will not be used

SECOND FLOOR

It is for aesthetic purposes and entry will be restricted

FIRST FLOOR

Will have the Ram Darbar comprising statues of Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman

250
columns

GROUND FLOOR

Will house the deity, and three *mandaps* (stages)

MARBLE FLOORING

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S. \ RESEARCH NANDINI OZA

30 years in the making

BY NANDINI OZA

Chandrakant Sompura, chief architect of the Ayodhya Ram temple, was reluctant to change the temple's 30-year-old design. But, considering the improved connectivity and the increased importance now attached to the temple, he agreed to make some modifications to it. He spent three months during the pandemic making changes to the original design.

"I have no words to express my feelings," said Chandrakant, an Ahmedabad native. "My effort of 30 years is going to take shape." Designing grand temples is in his blood; his grandfather, Prabhaskar, was the architect of the Somnath temple in Gujarat and his father, Baldev, too, was a renowned architect. Chandrakant followed in their footsteps and has designed more than 100 temples.

On August 5, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi lays the foundation stone for the temple, the 77-year-old will not be able to attend owing to Covid-19 protocols. His sons Nikhil and Ashish will make presentations on the design. "I have worked with Modiji on many projects like the Ambaji Temple and 51 Shaktipeeth; I will miss this occasion," said Chandrakant.

Ashish said the ground floor's area was increased after studying 10 temples with the most footfalls, like the Golden Temple. Three mandaps (stages) have been added and the height was increased for aesthetics. "Minor detailing, like the iconography, is yet to be done," he said. "It also depends on the kind of marble that is to be used for flooring."

PAVAN KUMAR



IN THE OFFING

The plot in Dhannipur village where a mosque is planned to be constructed

painted brightly. Shiv Narayan Singh, a local artist, said he had chosen Hindu symbols such as conch shells and chakras against a background of rainbow colours. "I have not painted any deities as the pillars will be desecrated by animals and humans," he said. Singh is also tasked with a few other paintings for the town but is unsure of how much he will be able to complete. "I have not been paid since March, so work has been even more difficult," he said.

The overall charge of priming the Janmabhoomi has been given to Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Avadh University in Faizabad. Manoj Dixit, vice chancellor, said that a rangoli of flowers will be made at the site and 1.25 lakh diyas will be lit there and at other prominent spots. "We will create a three-dimensional effect with the diyas, maybe write Bhaye Pragat Kripala Dindayala (The Lord has appeared from the Ramcharit Manas) with them," he said.

About 25km away from the temple site, on a dirt road that leads to the village of Dhannipur is the five-acre plot that was given to the Sunni Central Waqf Board. The land houses a shrine to a local seer called Sharda Baba. Abdul Majid, who runs a sweetmeat shop in front of it said that he has not seen anyone visit the site since the allotment. "Some weeks ago, government officials came and planted rice on it," he said. In Dhannipur, residents are firm in

their belief that no prayers offered to the seer go unanswered. Every April, the death anniversary of Sharda Baba draws devotees from afar.

Syed Mohammed Shoeb, CEO of the board, said they were yet to get physical possession of the land. On July 29, in a sudden move, probably prompted by the *bhoomi puja*, the board announced the setting up of the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation (IICF) "for building the mosque and other facilities for the benefit of the general public." The plan, it said, is to construct a mosque the same size as the demolished one, along with medical and health facilities, a community kitchen, a research centre, a museum, a library and a publishing house.

Minor irritants to the *bhoomi puja*, which will be beamed live by Doordarshan, have sprung up. One is in the form of Kunwar Mohammed Azam Khan, who leads a body called the Muslim Kar Sewak Manch. "Ram is our seer as well for we have converted from Hinduism," he said. "Muslims have as much stake in the *mandir* and this should be recorded so that years from now controversy does not erupt. The temple should be a symbol of communal harmony. If not invited to the *bhoomi puja*, I will drown myself in the Sarayu."

Meanwhile, an undeterred Ayodhya ambles towards its big date with a destiny that has eluded it for years. ❶

The grand slum

Through community engagement, Dharavi has transformed itself into a beacon of hope in the fight against Covid-19

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL



CHECK'S UP

A 200-bed hospital designated for Covid-19 treatment in Dharavi

JANAK BHAT

DHARAVI HAS AN inherent spirit to fight all odds with its camaraderie. A few months back, in April and May, it was the hotbed of Covid-19 infections in Mumbai. And now, as on July 29, Asia's largest slum has just three active cases.

Incidentally, a record number of Covid-19 survivors from Dharavi are coming out to donate their blood plasma to help fellow beings. "Most of the essential services workers from Dharavi were found Covid-19-positive, and, among them, almost 75 per cent were in the age group of 20 to 50," says Kiran Dighavkar, assistant municipal commissioner of G/South ward which comprises Dharavi. "They did not have comorbidities, and hence, their plasma was found to be good with a high load of antibodies [that can be used for plasma

therapy to treat the infected]. All the 2,100 discharged patients were asked if they were willing to donate their plasma, and almost 400 to 500 agreed." The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation authorities have already identified 50 to 60 eligible candidates from Dharavi for plasma donation, and among them 15 have already donated it. "We are quite excited about the number of volunteers who are coming forward to volunteer for this effort," says Dighavkar.

The snaking roads of Dharavi now wear a particularly clean and refreshing look. Its narrow, confined alleys look freshly washed, and its heaps of garbage have disappeared. Almost everyone wears mask, and the slum seems unusually quiet with fewer people around.

Crouching outside his tenement,

Lakshmi Kamble, a third-generation resident of Dharavi, lauds the aggressive cleaning and disinfection efforts that happened in the area. "Because of one virus suddenly everyone seems to be taking interest in Dharavi," he says. "Why did they neglect and ignore us for so long?"

Covid-19 reached Dharavi on April 1, when a 56-year-old man died on the very day he tested positive for the coronavirus. Soon, the numbers spiked and contact tracing became an enormous challenge for the authorities. "[In Dharavi,] a community toilet is usually shared by 300 to 400 people. That one factor was enough to strike off the concept of contact tracing, as was being applied elsewhere, in the city," says Dighavkar. What followed then was an aggressive effort of proactive tracing,

tracking and testing through multiple fever camps, and prompt acquisition of facilities for quarantining and isolating patients.

At the time when the pursuit of the virus was at its peak in April, there were only eight health posts in Dharavi, each manned by an assistant medical officer and a few nurses, and supported by 200 community health volunteers and 50 odd coordinators. This was not enough for the densely-populated slum. More hands were needed in distribution of essentials, too. And, that is where Dharavi's strong community engagement came into picture.

At a time when most private clinics and hospitals remained shut in Mumbai, 24 private doctors based in Dharavi came forward to lend a helping hand to fight Covid-19. They

screened close to 48,000 people within the first week itself in six high-risk zones. And an additional 350 clinics, which had shut down, started screening people for Covid-19, and they coordinated their efforts via WhatsApp. "We thought it was better to serve our own people than remain cooped up indoors," says Dr Yusuf Khan, an AYUSH doctor who has a small clinic in Dharavi. "The people here believe us. So, when we say that 'yes, you must get quarantined,' people obey."

As with doctors, the BMC also got abundant volunteers to do the legwork for various other things. "People from within the community came forward to work for the community, and manpower was never an issue," says Vanessa D'Souza, who helms the NGO SNEHA that works with

the residents of Dharavi. The World Health Organization, too, lauded this very aspect in Dharavi's fight against Covid-19. "Children, almost 50 of them, from the community came over asking for work, and we paid them Rs300 per day for distributing food," says Dighavkar. "We had no shortage of manpower; when we advertised for 50 ward boys, 450 people queued up outside my office."

Money, too, was available as a number of people, including many celebrities, contributed towards salvaging the crisis in Dharavi. "Everyone wanted to donate to Dharavi only," says Dighavkar. "We acquired a few private hospitals in the area, including the 51-bed Sai Hospital and Prabhat Nursing Home, and a number of other facilities including lodges, hostel rooms, marriage halls and hotels. So, logistics was never an issue, and we were equipped to have an instant end-to-end solution in Dharavi itself from treatment to discharge." By the first week of June, a 200-bed hospital was set up complete with oxygen supply machinery, some of which were donated by Bollywood celebrities.

Measures such as appointing community coordinators from within Dharavi to be in-charge of sealed-off containment zones worked well, too. "There was a sense of belonging and ownership involved among these coordinators, and that is why we observed that there was strict adherence to rules," says D'Souza.

After witnessing high numbers in April and May, it was only on and after June 3 that the community started witnessing a dip in Covid-positive cases. And, now, Dharavi is inching towards zero active cases. But the fight is not over.

"It is too early to celebrate," says Vinod Shetty of ACORN India. "The government can now seriously think about upping the hygiene and sanitation levels in Dharavi so as to improve the living conditions of people there." **1**



A hero lives on

Alive, **Anujith** saved hundreds from a train accident a decade ago. In death, the organ donor gifted life to seven more people

BY CITHARA PAUL

NOT EVEN DEATH could stop Anujith from caring for his fellow beings. The 27-year-old from Kerala's Kollam district crashed his motorcycle on July 17 while swerving to save a pedestrian; he succumbed to his injuries three days later. But Anujith's heart now beats in another man's body, his arms went to a young boy who lost his hands in a mishap, his small intestine now functions in a young woman, his kidneys have saved the lives of two people and his eyes have given new light to two others. The magnanimity of a single donor has transformed

the lives of seven recipients.

Anujith had registered himself as a donor with Mrithasanjeevani, Kerala government's organ transplant programme, and had made his family and friends promise that they would donate his organs in the event of his death. "He always lived for others. He had made me swear that I would donate his organs," said Anujith's wife, Princy. "It was my duty to fulfill his wishes."

Anujith's sister Ajalya echoed the same sentiments. "I am sure this is what my brother wanted. He would be very happy now," she said. But fulfilling Anujith's

wishes was not easy for them because of the increasing number of Covid-19 infections in Kerala. "We tried our best to convince them that it was not advisable to do this in the time of Covid. There were many technical and medical issues involved to do organ transplants during this time," said Dr Noble Gracious, nodal officer of the Mrithasanjeevani programme.

Another problem was that the eligible recipients were spread across the state, while Anujith's body was in Thiruvananthapuram. "But his family and friends were determined to see to it

that Anujith's organs reached the needy. It was very rare to see such commitment," said Gracious.

The family and friends approached Health Minister K.K. Shailaja's office for help. After she alerted the chief minister's office, permission was granted to use the police helicopter for transporting the organs. Covid tests were subsequently performed for Anujith, the intended recipients and the medical staff involved. All, luckily, tested negative.

After a five-hour-long surgery, the heart, the hands and the small intestine were airlifted to Kochi. One kidney was transported to Kollam, while the second kidney was transplanted in a patient in Thiruvananthapuram. The corneas, too, were donated to patients in the capital.

Anujith's heart started beating in the body of 55-year-old Job Mathew (name changed as per protocol) after a four-hour-long surgery. Mathew has been suffering from dilated cardiomyopathy since 2012 and his heart function was reduced to 15 per cent. "We don't know how to thank Anujith and his family. We want to meet them once my father is out of hospital," said his son. The patients who received Anujith's forearms and small intestine are also recovering well. Doctors said hand transplants were rarely performed because family members of the dead usually did not like to see the body without hands.

"All the patients are doing well and have been shifted out of ICUs, thanks to the coordinated effort of the medical teams involved in the mission. But none of this would have happened without the love and determination of Anujith's family and friends. This is an unforgettable experience in our professional lives," said Gracious.

Anujith's friends and family said



"I want to meet all of them [recipients], especially the person who received his hands. I want to hold those hands."

Princy, Anujith's wife

there was no better way to honour a person like him who always lived for others. "He was a rare soul," said Ajith, one of Anujith's close friends. "There is not a single person in our village who had not received some help from him."

No wonder help came pouring in following Anujith's accident. It was friends and acquaintances who took care of the expenses during his hospitalisation and burial. Now they are trying to repay the loan he took last year to build his house.

Saving lives, in fact, was nothing new to Anujith. Back in 2010, he saved hundreds of lives when he stopped a local train by waving

his red school bag after he found a crack on the tracks. Next day, the picture of him carrying his tattered bag was carried by all newspapers. "I saw the reports and admired this guy who saved so many lives," said Princy. Admiration turned gradually into love, but religious differences stood in the way. The young lovers, however, did not budge and got married despite the challenges.

"We had just begun our life," said Princy. "He was such a nice soul, helping everyone around him. Why did this happen?" Speaking of her husband's sacrifice, Princy believes that all who received Anujith's organs will turn out to be healthy. "I want to meet all of them, especially the person who received his hands. I want to hold those hands," she said. Gracious said the meeting might happen once the recipients had recuperated fully. "What is more important is the fact that the donor's family comes to terms with the loss. Such meetings are quite emotional for both the donor's family and the recipients," he said.

Princy, meanwhile, tries to find solace in the fact that Anujith's heart is still beating. "I tell my son that his father is not dead, that he is living through many others. I do not know whether my son understands anything. But what I said did make him smile," she said.

The three-year-old may or may not have understood the enormity of his father's sacrifice. But many others certainly have. Inspired by Anujith, 110 young people from his village have pledged to donate their organs. And, as Princy would love to believe, "He is happy up there, knowing that he has helped seven others even in death." 🕯

The good doctor

As a child, Ajoy Mistry was thrashed and humiliated by his villagers. Today he is their saviour

BY RABI BANERJEE

IN THE LATE 1970S, little Ajoy Mistry was a household help to a wealthy family in Hanspukur village in South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. One day, he was sent to the local market to do the family's shopping. Ajoy, who was 12, spent 10 paisa on a sapodilla plum (chikoo). The sweet taste was short-lived; as his employers thrashed him over the missing 10 paisa.

"No one rescued me even though I was crying profusely," said Mistry, 55. "The locals knew the story behind my thrashing, but no one supported me." Today, the little boy is Dr Ajoy Mistry and life has come full circle. He is now seen as the saviour of the villagers who had once turned their backs on him.

Covid-19 hit Hanspukur hard in May, a few days after super cyclone Amphan swept through South 24 Parganas. Mistry led relief operations across the area. Wearing personal protective equipment, Mistry ferried food, medicines, masks and sanitisers in an ambulance. Within a month, he reached around 4,000 patients, including pregnant women.

Bishnupur town, under which Hanspukur falls, is a major hotspot in South 24 Parganas. The spike in cases has been linked to the large number of migrant labourers who had returned home. Pathar Pratima,

Kakdwip and Namkhana are also emerging as hotspots in the district. Mistry runs a 50-bed hospital in Hanspukur—Humanity Hospital—and a clinic-cum-hospital at Pathar Pratima.

Mistry's mother Subhasini, 75, has been credited with founding Humanity Hospital with her meagre earnings as a vegetable vendor. Several news reports echoed this when she was awarded the Padma Shri in 2018. But, Mistry said there was more to the story than what was reported. "My mother's hard work has always been my strength," he said. "But the hospital was the result of my relentless struggle, [through] torture and insult. It is completely different from what people know." Subhasini, too, said her dream of starting a hospital for the poor became a reality only because her second son became a doctor.

Today, the two hospitals give hope to thousands. Humanity Hospital is a government-approved Covid-19 hospital. It even has an intensive care unit, a rarity in any part of West Bengal, let alone a rural area; only half-a-dozen hospitals outside Kolkata have ICU facilities.

Bishnupur MLA Dilip Mondal said that he held a meeting with the local administration before designating Humanity Hospital as a Covid-19 centre. "Dr Mistry agreed; we are grateful

to such people as they never questioned our decision," said Mondal. "The doctor's story is a guiding force for all of us. Moreover, the hospital is run efficiently."

Mondal, who is a member of many health committees of South 24 Parganas, said: "Since this hospital has oxygen and other related facilities, we have decided to admit not only mild patients but also severe cases here," he said. "We will shift them to Kolkata only if the situation worsens." He added that though the hospital had necessary facilities, the administration would supplement it with more doctors and equipment.

On July 16, when THE WEEK spoke to Mistry, he was busy treating critical patients. "We have to fight day and night to save lives," he said. "So, it is difficult to talk to you." The rush of patients is forcing Mistry to stay at the hospital around the clock. "More patients are coming in every day, making it difficult for me to go out with my ambulance like I did at first," he said.

But, he has already made a huge difference in the district. "He has traveled all over (the district) to track people with Covid-like symptoms," said Sukumar Mondal, a panchayat member in Kakdwip. "He also gave people advice on how to cope with the disease. He gave nutritious food to poor mothers and pregnant women."

Said Mistry: "I have felt poverty and humiliation; it prompted me to try to make a difference in society. I could have joined a good hospital and made money, but I did not do that."

Mistry was four when he lost his father, Sadhan, to an abdominal infection. Sadhan had lost his land because he could not pay tax, and the family had no means of livelihood. Subhasini got Mistry a job at a tea stall as a dishwasher. "One day I broke a glass," he said. "The owner hit me on my head and cheeks. I was crying, but the man had no heart. I

also lost the job."

His mother then found work for him at several households. Mistakes were punished in the same manner—public thrashings. His ragged clothes earned him the moniker "dustbin boy". While everyone ridiculed him, no one bought him clothes, said Mistry. "I belong to a scheduled caste," he said. "Perhaps, if I belonged to the upper caste, people

would have helped me."

The turning point came when he was admitted to an orphanage at Bishnupur. The man who ran the orphanage took him under his wing. "It was the greatness of Jyotish Chandra Ray, who I used to call uncle," said Mistry. "He allowed me to stay at his home and study in school." Mistry excelled at studies. "I not only used to study, I used to work in

villages and go to remote places to bring many boys like me to the same orphanage," he said.

Meanwhile, after leaving her son at the orphanage, Subhasini and her two daughters went to Tiljala near Park Circus in Kolkata to earn a living selling vegetables. Mistry completed his schooling with distinction, cleared the all India medical entrance examination and received a



SALIL BERA



FOR THE PEOPLE
Mistry distributing
free medicines in
South 24 Parganas

scholarship from a German organisation. He moved out of the orphanage and started tutoring the nephew of a rich farmer, who was childless. He was given accommodation and food in return.

Thanks to Mistry's efforts, the boy who used to fail exams started scoring more than 90 per cent. His uncle was pleased and wanted to give Mistry one of his many houses in the area. Mistry saw a chance to build a hospital for the poor and put forth the idea. The man accepted, but later backtracked because his relatives felt that Mistry was trying to grab his land. "One day, they beat me up while I was going to write an examination in the medical college," he said. As per the advice of his professors, he lodged an FIR against them. "But, they were in positions of power in the panchayat; the police did not take any action," said Mistry.

Instead, he was attacked again on his way to college. But this time, he retaliated. "As a result, a police complaint was lodged against me as well," he said. As his enemies were linked to the Congress, he got the support of the local Communist

I have felt poverty and humiliation; it prompted me to try to make a difference in society.

—Dr Ajoy Mistry

Party of India (Marxist) leaders. As his education progressed, he began tutoring more students to make ends meet. In the early 1990s, he bought a small patch of land in the village. The CPI(M) leaders told him that they would build a hospital and name it after his father. But, he refused. "I told them I have no desire to name it after my father and it would only be for humanity," said Mistry.

He built a thatched-roof hut and brought his mother to stay with him. By that time, his elder brother had started a small business and his sisters were married. On December 31, 1992, while he was still in medical school, he said he would see patients

free of cost from his hut. It made local communist leaders angry. The potential threats were dealt with when, with the help of one of his professors, Mistry brought then health minister Prasanta Sur to lay the foundation stone of the hospital.

Soon, he received donations from many people and was able to build a permanent structure. He completed his MBBS from Calcutta Medical College and Hospital in 1995 and his MD from the same college two years later. Many of his former professors also began frequenting his hospital as guest doctors. It took 20 years to get the hospital going in full swing. However, he could not save his elder brother who had congenital heart disease. He refused to undergo surgery as he felt it was too risky and died two years ago.

What about the people who called him "dustbin boy" or thrashed him? Mistry said he sees them looking at him while he is working. "Some give threatening looks," he said. "Others have apologised, but I tell them they are not guilty. I was the victim of a society which taught them to do so." ❶

Avoiding hospitals has affected heart patients in a big way

Cardiologist Dr Upendra Kaul on the need to differentiate between symptoms of Covid-19 and heart disease

AAYUSH GOEL



WHEN WE TALK about heart patients, we must remember that these are people who also have high blood pressure and diabetes. The threat of infection has meant that while people have been advised to avoid hospitals, it has affected non-Covid patients of heart disease in a big way.

For chronic patients though, staying away from a hospital physically is not that much of a problem. In their case, telemedicine works because only a follow-up is needed for monitoring their condition. They can also monitor their blood pressure regularly at home. Gadgets to check their blood sugar levels are also available.

Seek early care in case of a heart attack

However, it is the patients of heart attack that seem to be suffering the most because they have been avoiding hospitals. I have data from 60 hospitals that shows that between January and March and April and June heart attack

cases came down by 70 per cent. Now, it is not that heart attacks have just disappeared. Rather, the reason is that people have been delaying going to a hospital or not going at all. Some of them are now coming in and reporting worsening of their condition and complications such as bad valves and holes in the heart. If care is delayed, then bypass or angioplasty becomes very difficult. There is also a high chance of death if such patients do not receive care at the right time.

Do not ignore symptoms that cause concern; report to the hospital to ensure immediate care. Most hospitals now have processes and facilities to ensure that Covid-19 patients, suspects and non-Covid patients are dealt with appropriately.

Do not ignore symptoms

If people have shortness of breath, they should not confuse it with Covid-19, since that is also a symptom of the infectious disease. It is

Do not ignore symptoms (of heart disease) that cause concern; report to the hospital to ensure immediate care.

important to remember that differentiating between the two is a doctor's call. I would strongly urge people to report to the doctor immediately if there is discomfort in the chest, if a person who could climb three flights of stairs is now out of breath after climbing just one, if an elderly person complains of abdominal distress after having food—one that is relieved after belching or sitting down, since these are all symptoms of heart disease. Weight gain and lack of physical activity is also emerging as an additional factor.

I would also advise people to wear their masks properly—and not on their neck—and try to stay safe because though a majority of the young people may be asymptomatic, they do meet their parents and grandparents who are vulnerable because of their age and comorbidities. We cannot afford to be in denial about Covid-19, or non-Covid diseases.

— As told to Namita Kohli

The doctor is out

Overworked and fearing infection, a growing number of doctors are not reporting for duty

BY MINI P. THOMAS

DR YOGESH JAIN does not mince words as he analyses the impact of Covid-19 on health services in the country. “I fear there may be large-scale desertion by doctors and nurses from most public hospitals if the surge continues. We are going to have a tough time from August to October,” said Jain, cofounder of the Jan Swasthya Sahyog.

The situation at Thane, India’s worst Covid-19 hotspot with over 80,000 positive cases, seems to confirm Jain’s worst fears. “Fifty per cent of general practitioners in Thane have shut their clinics since the pandemic began,” says Sandip Malvi, deputy commissioner, Thane Municipal Corporation. The Maharashtra government recently issued an order making it mandatory for doctors to treat Covid-19 patients for at least 15 days in a month. Of the 25,000 private practitioners in Mumbai and Thane, only 2,000 have signed up for Covid-19 duty. Several civic and health bodies in the country have warned of action against doctors refusing duty, under the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897. Eight doctors of the Patna Medical College Hospital were suspended in May for refusing Covid-19 duty.

“Some doctors are paranoid and are genuinely scared,” said Dr V. Mohan of Dr Mohan’s Diabetes Specialities Centre, Chennai. When the lockdown restrictions were eased and the clinics opened, a few of his doctors refused to resume duty. “They said: ‘The risk is too much. Even if you pay us full, we will not come. We are

not going to come anywhere near the hospital,” he said. “They simply refused. We have doctors who have elderly parents, grandparents or toddlers at home. If they get infected, the outcome can be grim.”

In Bengaluru, 25 hospitals and nursing homes have shut down because of staff shortage since March, according to Dr R. Ravindra, president, Private Hospitals and Nursing Homes Association. Dr Nagaraj H.N. of Deepak Hospital, a multispecialty hospital in Bengaluru, said that during the initial days of the outbreak, he managed to keep the morale of doctors and nurses high, and admitted all patients. “But within a month, doctors started getting scared and many ran away without even informing us,” said Nagaraj. “Even doctors who worked with us for 20 years started disappearing.” The 55-bed hospital that had 22 doctors and 67 nurses on its rolls till recently is now left with just three doctors and eight nurses.

Fear has gripped health care workers like never before. “Patients complain of health care workers hesitating to check pulse or perform physical examination,” said Jain. “In cities like Mumbai and Delhi, there is a wide gap between the proportion of people who require respiratory support and those who actually get it. Many doctors maintain a lot of distance from patients.”

Health care workers also have to deal with apathy and hostility. When an orthopaedic in Chennai died of Covid-19, local residents protested the cremation of the body citing that

STAFF CRUNCH

Deepak Hospital in Bengaluru had 22 doctors and 67 nurses on its rolls, but is now left with only three doctors and eight nurses. Dr Nagaraj H.N. (right) hopes they would return soon; (below) Dr Vithal Salve quit his job at Shaheed Hospital in Dalli Rajhara, Chhattisgarh, following burnout



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA



the virus could spread through the air. “The government should have intervened,” said Nagaraj. “When a person dies, the energy within the cells dies within two minutes and the tissues cease to function. The virus cannot survive in a dead body.”

Those working in Covid-19 wards often find themselves in precarious situations. A non-Covid-19 patient contracting the infection can prompt violence. At Hyderabad’s Gandhi Hospital, an on-duty doctor was

attacked with an iron stool by the relatives of a deceased Covid-19 patient. After the family vandalised the hospital, 300 doctors who were treating Covid-19 cases refused to resume duty.

Preeti Sudan, health secretary of India, said that no government staff has refused Covid-19 duty. “They have gone beyond duty,” she said. “We are grateful to our doctors, nurses, lab technicians, surveillance officers, ASHAs and field staff for this

exemplary selfless service.”

According to Dr Ranjan Sharma, president, Indian Medical Association, 93 doctors who were on Covid-19 duty have died as on July 13 due to the infection. Of the 1,279 doctors who tested positive, 771 were younger than 35. Because of the shortage of physicians, even specialists are being asked to treat Covid-19 patients.

“Medical personnel should not work for more than six hours in a PPE kit,” said Rohit Mundhada, a surgical oncology resident at Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, who is currently admitted in an isolation ward. “But in India, they put in eight to ten hours in a Covid-19 ward, by choice, wearing PPE.” Many doctors are working tirelessly with scant regard for personal safety, he added.

That holds true for states such as Bihar. Besides health centres being heavily understaffed, the lack of protective gear and ventilators are causes for concern. Microbiologists and sample collectors are also contracting the infection. Doctors who

die on Covid-19 duty have no health insurance coverage, said Dr Diwakar Tejaswi, a physician based in Patna. “They are middle-class people and their families have nothing to bank on,” he said.

Dr Vithal S. Salve, who holds an MD in physiology, said he suffered burnout and quit his job at Shaheed Hospital, a 150-bed maternity hospital in Dalli Rajhara, Chhattisgarh. Before the outbreak, Salve would visit his family in Maharashtra once a month. “From February 21 to June 23, I did not take a single day off,” he said. “The hospital was short staffed and overburdened. We were open 24x7, and during that period we had almost 200 deliveries a month, besides some emergency surgical operations. The working hours ranged from eight to 22 hours a day.”

Despite these circumstances, Nagaraj points out that doctors and nurses have a responsibility. “How will the common man survive if we shy away from our responsibility?” he asks, as he continues to hope that his doctors would return. ●

Need two years to administer the Covid-19 vaccine across India

BY ABHINAV SINGH

Adar Poonawalla's Serum Institute of India (SII) is part of the Oxford University-AstraZeneca initiative to develop a Covid-19 vaccine. SII is also working along with the US-based firm Codagenix whose vaccine is still in the pre-trial phase. Poonawalla spoke to THE WEEK about the developmental progress of the vaccine candidates and the challenges in administering it.

Edited excerpts:

What is the status of your Covid-19 vaccine projects?

The Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine (COVISHIELD) is showing promising results based on the ongoing trials and has been cleared for the final phase. We are hopeful that it will be an efficacious and immunogenic vaccine that is viable for mass use.

We seek to apply for licensure trials within a week. With the government fast-tracking everything, we are hoping to get approvals for this soon. Post this, we will begin the phase-III of human trials in India with around 4,000 to 5,000 people.

Once we get necessary regulatory approvals, we will start manufacturing it in large volumes. As per our arrangement with AstraZeneca, we will be making one billion doses over

the next one year for India and other low- and middle-income [GAVI, The Vaccine Alliance] countries. We will manufacture about 60-70 million doses per month (which might stretch to 100 million doses later). With this, we are looking to manufacture around 300 to 400 million doses by the end of this year. Based on the success of the trials, we are expecting to launch this vaccine by the end of this year. I believe by the first quarter of the next year, the vaccine will start reaching the masses. Meanwhile, the Codagenix vaccine candidate is in its pre-trial phase, and it is expected to progress to the human trial phase towards the end of this year.

What makes COVISHIELD unique?

We will have to wait for all the trials and test results for a clearer understanding of its efficacy. So far, based on the trials conducted, we believe it would be an immunogenic vaccine. As per the data from the results, we have found that it has given only mild reactions such as fever, and headache, which is expected out of vaccines. This vaccine candidate has not caused any severe side-effects. In addition, the T-cell response is much better



Closest to success

COVISHIELD is one among the four Covid-19 vaccine candidates (as on July 24) in phase III, the most advanced stage of clinical trials



OFFICIAL NAME
AZD1222

DEVELOPERS
University of Oxford, AstraZeneca
Work started in: January 2020

BASED ON

A weakened version of a common cold virus that affects chimpanzees; contains genetic material of SARS-CoV-2 virus spike protein
Interim results (phase I/II)

WITH A SINGLE DOSE OF VACCINE

- Four-fold increase in antibodies to the coronavirus spike protein in 95 per cent of participants one month after injection
- In all participants, a T-cell response was induced, peaking by day 14, and maintained two months after injection

PARTICIPANTS (PHASE I/II)
1,077 healthy individuals aged 18-55 in five UK hospitals

EXPECTED PRICE

Less than ₹1,000 per dose
SII's production plan
In a year: 1 billion doses
In a month: gradual increase from 60 million to 100 million doses

SOURCE WHO, AstraZeneca, Oxford University

in COVISHIELD, which is an indicator of providing long-term protection to people.

How much time will it take to vaccinate India?

Holistically, it will take around two years or so to administer the vaccine countrywide. In the initial phase, it will be part of a government-administered vaccine programme. It is very important to ensure that the vaccine reaches the most vulnerable and the remotest corner of the country.

In an earlier interview with THE WEEK (April 28), you said that the vaccine may be available by September-October. Is it possible for you to fast track the work for the vaccine?

Usually it takes a minimum of five to seven years for a vaccine to be approved and made available for mass use. However, owing to the current situation and circumstances, the approval processes are being fast-tracked. But none of the tests, trials or similar requisites are being fast-tracked for this. Our aim is to provide an effective and safe vaccine for all. Based on the positive results of phase II and III results, we hope to provide the vaccines across markets by the end of this year.

Will you provide the vaccine

at a subsidised rate to the government?

It is too early to comment on the vaccine's price. However, we will keep it under ₹1,000.... We are certain that it will be procured and distributed by governments free of charge.

SII has invested heavily in Covid-19 vaccine research.

We have invested close to \$200 million in the current phase of producing the COVISHIELD vaccine. Once the vaccine goes into the developmental phase, we will be able to elaborate more.

We are also working on two of our own vaccines. We seek to release them by the end of 2021. In addition, we are conducting phase-III trials of the recombinant BCG vaccine shots to improve the innate ability to fight the virus and reduce the severity of Covid-19 in India. This is an extremely safe vaccine since it is given to newborn babies, and we have been selling this in more than 100 countries for many decades. Based on our trials, we will be certain on the efficacy and viability of the vaccine, post which we will initiate mass production.

We are working with Mylab Discovery Solutions and are producing two lakh Covid-19 test kits per day. As per our associations, we are to manufacture and distribute the Novavax candidate (which is just a month or two behind AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine) across GAVI countries. Codagenix vaccine is in pre-clinical trials and we have worldwide rights for it. We have also tied up with a company for a mRNA [vaccine] candidate and hope to announce it soon. **Q**

Rajesh Subramaniam
president and chief operating officer, FedEx Corporation

What we expected to happen in three years happened in three months

BY ABHINAV SINGH

India-born Rajesh Subramaniam started his career in FedEx as an entry level marketing analyst 29 years ago. He rose through the ranks to become president and chief operating officer of the courier behemoth last year. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, Subramaniam talks about his company's strategy during the pandemic, its prospects and his early life in Kerala and Mumbai. Excerpts:

Q/ The past few months must have been challenging for FedEx. How did you deal with it?

A/ Currently, we have found ourselves on the frontline of the war against pandemic, with more than five lakh employees delivering aid and medical supplies across the globe and keeping commerce in motion. Our organisation has helped transport 31.8 kilotonnes of PPE kits since February 1, including over 1 billion masks, across the globe. At the same time, we have orchestrated more than 100 chartered flights and 1,000 ocean containers to supply critical PPE kits.

We have also facilitated the transport of more than 7,300 humanitarian aid shipments globally through collaborations with our non-profit partners. At the same time, we have continued to see a significant surge in e-commerce shipments as people stay at home and order online.

Our strategy was built for this growth. We were skating to where the puck was going, but instead, the puck came to us. What we expected to happen in the next three years happened in a matter of three months. We are also reimagining FedEx at the intersection of physical and digital networks. We are also excited about

our recently announced alliance with Microsoft to leverage data and technology to add value.

Q/ What kind of changes have you made in the style of functioning at FedEx?

A/ I believe in three roles of the leader—vision, team, and execution. It is critical to establish the vision, and make sure we have the right team in place to take the vision forward and execute it. I am also highly focused on a culture fuelled by collaboration and teamwork. I believe we are stronger together, and the best ideas and results come when we share ideas and work together across the company.

Q/ You studied chemical engineering. How did the transition to FedEx happen?

A/ When growing up in India studying maths, physics and chemistry, you are on a straight and narrow path. If you do reasonably well at the IIT, then you are likely to get a scholarship to go to the US. That was my case. I arrived in the US with a \$2 bill in my pocket, which I still have, to attend Syracuse University for my master's. It was only after that point that I began to think 'is this a career I want to be in, or do I want to broaden myself and go into the world of business?' It quickly dawned on me that I needed to be thinking broader, that I needed to look for opportunities outside of engineering. I figured the logical path to take would be to get an MBA. I found the cheapest of the top 20 schools I could go to—the University of Texas in Austin.

I graduated in 1991 when the US was in the middle of a recession. Jobs were very tough to come by, especially for somebody like me who did not have a green card. I had been through several interviews and

many times I was asked about my green card. So when I walked into my interview with FedEx, my euphoria was already down. I didn't say good morning or even hello. Instead, I walked in and right off the bat told them I did not have a green card and did not want to waste their time if that was going to be an issue. They

looked at me, baffled, and said, "Son, let's first figure out whether you have what it takes to work at FedEx, then we will worry about the paperwork." I was hired as an entry-level associate marketing analyst.

Q/ How were your growing-up years in India?

A/ I was born in Thiruvananthapuram and it was a simple way of life focused on education. My father retired as DGP of Kerala and my mother a doctor. From the beginning I had a big focus on sports. My father is an ace sportsman, and sports have been our passion. I played everything, but focused primarily on cricket and badminton. At age 15, after my

education at the Loyola School in Thiruvananthapuram, my father thought that it was prudent for me to move on to Mumbai. Overnight I moved from a nice, comfortable house in Thiruvananthapuram to a 200-square-foot apartment in the middle of a teeming city. Honestly speaking, I enjoyed my time in Mumbai. This change was made very quickly, so the ability to adapt to change and thrive in new circumstances was instilled in me at a very young age.

I was also fortunate to be selected to IIT Bombay. It was a fantastic experience of four years with wonderful colleagues who remain lifelong friends. My biggest learning from IIT Bombay was how to compete in a tough environment. I also learned how to be logical, analytical and strategic. While I studied chemical engineering, I do think these core skills were instilled in me for the rest of my life.

My wife, Uma, who is an IIM Ahmedabad graduate, was at FedEx in the early 90s. When we moved to Hong Kong, we decided that one of us had to take the back seat. It could have easily been the other way, and she would have been more successful than me. We have two children whom we are very proud of. 📌



The great wall of India



BIG PLANS
Chinese concrete machinery maker Sany has six units in India

The barriers are up, but uprooting Chinese interests in India would be a long process

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

IT SEEMED LIKE A detail so small that scant attention was paid to it. Amid a long list of proposals, reforms, wish lists and tax and duty rejigs in Nirmala Sitharaman's last budget presentation, there was an innocuous item—customs duty on toys, tricycles, dolls and scale models imported into India was sought to be hiked from 20 per cent to 60 per cent.

It was one of the first salvos India had fired against China in what has now become a trade war, though it took a while for many to realise the significance. The Indian toy market, worth ₹1.12 lakh crore, had been flooded by Chinese products. Additionally, the government started enforcing high BIS quality standards on all toy imports, even while offering subsidies and land at concessional rates to Indian toy makers.

China's deep involvement in India's business scape goes beyond

the usually-talked-about trade deficit, the dominance of Chinese majors in India's telecom sector and the dragon's deep coffers fuelling India's startup success stories. "Chinese business presence in India is huge," said trade economist Anusree Paul. "There are more than 75 companies in e-commerce, fintech, aggregation services and logistics." The total Chinese money invested in India is around ₹6 lakh crore, spawning 1.87 lakh jobs.

While Chinese tech and telecom brands like Xiaomi, Oppo and Vivo

are household names in India, names like Sany, Dezan Shira or Benling are unlikely to ring a bell. Yet, these are the flag-bearers of the Chinese juggernaut in India. "Apps and mobile handset makers apart, China's 'smart' investment has been in garnering the lucrative B2B contracts and infrastructure projects from India," said a government official who did not wish to be named. "The public may not be familiar with these brands, but that is where big bucks and deep inroads can be made." Sany, for instance, is among the world's biggest concrete machinery makers and it has six units in India, with the main manufacturing plant in Chakan, Pune.

Chinese investments in metals and renewable energy sectors are more than ₹55,000 crore each, way above telecom and auto sectors that get talked about more. "Manufacturing generated the highest number of total jobs and greatest investment, with a total of 1.46 lakh jobs and \$22 billion dollars of investment," said a report by fDi for CII. "Electricity and construction have the largest project size on average in terms of investment and jobs creation."

Interestingly, even while improving its technological prowess with research labs like those of Huawei in Bengaluru, China has also been following a two-pronged strategy to make the maximum out of the Indian ecosystem. One, using their experience in executing cost-effective and big-scale construction, these firms bid for big government infrastructure projects. And two, making long-term investments in sunrise sectors like electric vehicles and solar/wind energy projects.

A paper by Brookings Institute (March 2020) says Chinese companies like Lany, Longi and CETC aim to invest \$3.2 billion dollars in India's renewable energy sector. Chinese automakers in India have lined up EVs. Ironically, two out of three memoranda of understanding that Maharashtra signed with Chinese companies on the very day of the Galwan clash involved Chinese automakers Great Wall and Photon.

With the tide turning, that strategy may just come face to face with the great wall of India. While the ban on Chinese apps like TikTok made headlines, even more significant were the restrictions India brought about on Chinese companies in the infrastructure and heavy industries area. The Maharashtra MoUs were the first to be put on hold, along with the ₹471-crore signalling work on the Kanpur-DDU railway line given to Beijing National Railway Research.

Nitin Gadkari, Union minister for transport and MSME, also banned Chinese firms from road construction, saying he will tweak norms. "Construction norms are not good, so I have asked to change it...so we can encourage Indian contractors," he said. With ₹100 lakh crore set to be invested in constructing roads, it is a blow to Chinese business interests.

The power ministry has announced a ban on power equipment sourced from Chinese companies besides cancelling an order for 20 lakh smart meters. The state-run telecom operator BSNL was forced to put on hold its ₹8,697 crore 4G tender, when the Telecom Export Promotion Council alleged that it ignored 'Make in India' norms to favour foreign (read Chinese) companies. NITI-Aayog also pitched in, suggesting that BSNL rework its tender to use only India-made equipment. TRAI chairman R.S. Sharma put in his own bit by saying local telecom gear makers must be given preferential market access.

The trick with these piecemeal responses, which were followed by a sweeping order on July 23 limiting Chinese companies from

DEEP IMPACT.....Big Chinese investments in India (actual and proposed) in \$ million

Infrastructure	CCTEB 288	Tsingshan 3,000	Xinxing 1,250	Liugong 78		
Automobile	SAIC 288	BYD 29				
Real estate	CNTC 1,360	Fosun 115				
Consumer goods	Huawei 300	Oppo 1,070	Vivo 619	Haier 530	CRRC 63	Midea 115
Energy	TBEA 400	CETC 46	Longi Solar 224			

bagging government contracts and making security clearance from the home and external affairs ministries mandatory, seem to be to get the economic boycott message across loud and clear, even while keeping India immune from accusations of targeting China or contravening the World Trade Organisation norms. That is why none of the government decisions mentions China directly. An order in April banning automatic FDI, as well as the end-July amendment on government orders, speak only of countries India shares land border with, while the ban on power equipment says it is applicable to ‘prior reference countries.’ Even the 100 per cent inspection of Chinese shipments at Indian ports was carried out without any written order.

The biggest lacunae in India’s strategy, however, is that the balance of trade is heavily lopsided in China’s favour. Even if India stops all imports from China, it just forms 3 per cent of the total exports of the People’s Republic. In contrast, 14 per cent of the materials India imports are from China, including crucial raw materials on which India’s pharmaceutical industry is dependent, and components for anything from electronic products to mobile phones and automobiles made in India.

The bigger question is if Indian industry will give up Chinese imports and raw material that give them immense cost advantage. JSW Group chairman and managing director Sajjan Jindal announced that his company would bring down its \$400 million import of clinkers, the base rock for manufacturing cement, from China down to zero in two years. A few others also have made similar statements.

“We have faltered as a country by going for the ‘cheapest’ as the only criteria,” said Vinod Sharma, managing director of Deki Electronics. “That is not very strategic. We have to always be careful not to put all our eggs in one basket.” His game plan? Work towards an alternative over the next 18-24 months, with the government providing incentives ranging from ‘star rating’ to GST rebates for companies going for increased localisation.

Mukesh Aghi, CEO and president of the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum concurred. “You have to divert from China,” he said. “There is no other option. We have to move from cheap goods to quality goods. It is not just cost that should define your process. Look at it strategically. Let us say your profit goes down 5-7 per cent, it is still worthwhile. Once you do that, you will find ways to innovate, to become efficient and competitive.”

However, knee-jerk responses like slowing down imports from China at Indian ports only seem to have boomeranged. “That, and measures like cancelling MoUs, only make us lose credibility when we go back on our word,” said Chandrakant Salunkhe, president of the India China Business Council. “We support any move in our national interest, but

“The total Chinese money invested in India is around ₹6 lakh crore, spawning 1.87 lakh jobs.”

it should be systematic. Let China learn the lesson from our strong points.”

India knows well the limits of its economic muscle, and is hoping for a strategic leverage. But the developments could mark a turning point in India’s trade plans. “We must move in mission mode to be *atma nirbhar* in at least 15 critical sectors,” said Deepak Sood, secretary general of Assocham. “We should work on a twin track of not only investing more to ramp up capacity, but also ensuring that the end consumers get best quality products at internationally competitive prices.” Assocham has come up with a two-year roadmap to ramp up domestic capacity in 15 large import items, ranging from oil and electronics to steel.

The move to reduce dependency on China could be significant in a post-Covid-19 world order. “India will have to muscle its way onto the high table,” said Aghi, “and make sure it does not instead end up being part of the menu.”



■ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
Gordon G. Chang,
Chinese American author and China expert

Xi Jinping sees breaking up India to be of great benefit

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

Q/ Where is the US-China technology war headed?

A/ The winner of the US-China tech war will dominate our era. Beijing was not considered a tech contender a decade ago. Now, some call it a leader. America is already behind in critical areas. Focused on other matters, Americans did not mobilise themselves to meet Beijing’s challenges. Now, the Trump administration is thinking of how to get back control of cutting-edge technologies. Just look at how the US is now going after Huawei Technologies. At the beginning of the year, Huawei looked like it was going to dominate 5G. Now the company is in retreat in the world’s most important markets.

Q/ How should India respond to Chinese aggression—military versus economic costs?

A/ India needs to put more forces on its border than China has. Ultimately, however, it will be economic pressure that forces the Chinese military to pull back. Boycott of Chinese goods, banning of China’s apps, removal of Huawei equipment from India’s telecom

backbone, ejection of Chinese businesses and the like will pressure China to return to its side of the border for good. India must teach China a lesson it will never forget.

The costs imposed on China must be greater than the benefits Beijing believes it obtains with its hostile conduct. Because Xi sees breaking up India to be of great benefit, New Delhi—and the Indian people—must be willing to impose severe measures on him and his dangerous regime. India’s only option is to be strong. If it is not strong now, China will dismember India. India is in the same position as the rest of the world when it comes to China. India cannot think it can escape decades of misguided policy towards Beijing without cost.

Q/ How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted China’s relations with the rest of the world?

A/ An arrogant Xi Jinping, who has always believed his China should dominate the world, saw an opportunity during the coronavirus pandemic to extend Chinese influence while countries were

stricken by and preoccupied with the disease. China’s generals thought they would catch the Indian Army snoozing on the border.

Q/ Is China overtaking a declining US?

A/ No. China has reached the limits of what it can do. There is wide disagreement on why China has gone full “wolf warrior”, as it is called. Some believe China went on this bender because Xi thought China was strong, and others argue he did so because he thought his regime weak. I am in the latter camp. I think Xi saw a closing window of opportunity. The arrogant leader knew China’s economy was stumbling, the environment was giving out, the Chinese people were restless, and the country’s demography was entering a long period of accelerating decline.

India is of particular concern for Xi. The Chinese people take great pride in being the world’s most populous tribe, and he knew that India was just about to overtake his country in population size. Xi could see that demographic trends, which he could do nothing about, would mean India would soon leave China in the dust. For Xi, it was now or never, the last moment to humble India.

Q/ What does the future hold for China’s ambitions of emerging as a superpower?

A/ China has reached the limits of its power, and in the ordinary course of events would be starting down a decades-long slide into weaknesses. We should, however, be aware that a declining China is still a dangerous one—perhaps even more dangerous than a strong one. Xi, presiding over a deteriorating situation, now has all the reason in the world to lash out, especially because he has seen that Chinese intimidation has worked in the past. If India stands its ground, it will prevail.

Metal dictator

Gold reigns supreme in an uncertain economy; but invest in it carefully

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

Gold, almost as a rule, gains when there is an uncertainty in the economy. The economic turmoil triggered by the pandemic has been no exception. On July 27, gold prices hit a new high of \$1,944 an ounce, beating the previous record of \$1,921 in 2011. So far in 2020, global gold prices have surged 27 per cent. Spot gold prices in India topped ₹52,000 for 10 grams on July 27. In rupee terms, gold has rallied 28 per cent this year, on top of the 25 per cent rally it had in 2019.

“The rally in gold is ferocious and we are seeing a relentless demand for the safety from coronavirus turmoil,” said Rahul Gupta, head of research (currency) at Emkay Global Financial Services. “The political decisions to increase stimulus packages is keeping gold prices higher.”

Over the past few months, central banks around the world have slashed interest rates. In many developed economies, they are currently near zero. The stimulus signals in the US is more pain ahead for investors and that is making them rush to gold. In the Indian

market, the depreciation in rupee also weighs on gold prices. “Weak macro indicators, global uncertainties due to trade war, geopolitical tensions, fears of global slowdown and a U-turn in monetary policy stance by the US Federal Reserve augured well for gold prices,” said Dhiraj Relli, managing director and CEO, HDFC Securities.

In the first six months of 2020, global gold exchange traded funds saw inflows of \$39.5 billion. In India, much of the gold is held in physical form. Indian Gold ETFs saw inflows of ₹2,040 crore in April-June, taking their total assets under management to ₹10,857.44 crore.

Experts say gold prices could rally further over the next few months. “The overall situation remains supportive for gold,” said Anuj Gupta, deputy vice-president (commodities and currencies research), Angel Broking. “Till Diwali, gold may test \$2,000 an ounce and in the domestic market we are expecting around ₹53,000-₹54,000 per 10 gram level. My recommendation is to book some profit; if someone holds gold,

then she could book profit on 30-40 per cent of the holding.”

Compared with fixed income instruments, on an average, gold has done 2-3 per cent better in the past 20 years. But this might not be the time to invest in gold because the risk reward is not in favour. “Gold may go up another 5 per cent or maybe 10 per cent. But, small investors are not going to exit when gold goes up 5-10 per cent. This Covid-19 will be a thing of the past maybe in eight or 12 months and when the economic rebound happens, assets like gold, which don’t serve any productive purposes, will come down,” said Raghendra Nath, managing director of Ladderup Wealth Management.

Experts say that there would be long periods of underperformance by gold. For instance, the last time gold topped \$1,900 per ounce was in 2011. If one had invested at that peak, he hardly has made any money in the nine-year period that followed.

One can invest in gold by buying the physical metal or buying digital gold through platforms like Paytm, MMTC-Pamp and SafeGold. There are also gold ETFs and gold funds that are offered by mutual fund houses. The sovereign gold bonds are a good bet, considering that these bonds offer an annual interest of 2.50 per cent, which can act as a hedge when the investment underperforms. **■**

SOUND BITE

ANITA PRATAP



The showdown is on

The “Thucydides Trap” states that a rising power is doomed to conflict with the established hegemon. This theory has stood the test of time for 2,500 years. Experts now fear a doomed conflict between the United States and China, in a new version of the Cold War.

Closing each other’s consulates is vintage Cold War. But the new twist is that China cannot be “contained” because it is deeply integrated into the global economy. As US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo admitted: “The USSR was closed off from the free world. Communist China is already within our borders.”

And making full use of it—snooping, spying, selling and stealing. FBI Director Christopher A. Wray says China’s intellectual property theft is “so massive that it represents one of the largest wealth transfers in human history”. China’s thieving costs an estimated \$250-\$600 billion a year and robs millions of American jobs. The new US war chant: China is “raiding, not trading”.

Two-thirds of Americans view China as a “major threat”, which explains the bipartisan consensus to get tough on China. Reducing American dependence by helping companies to shift out supply chains and isolating China commands public support. In the run up to the November presidential elections, China-bashing by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden will intensify, but the accelerating shift heralds worsening US-China relations thereafter.

A shift has also taken place in China, away from former premier Deng Xiaoping’s mantra—“Hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead.” Under Xi Jinping, China is done biding its time, rising peacefully. It has risen.

It is flexing its muscle—military, economic and rhetorical—and cracking its whip within, in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, in its neighbourhood and be-

yond, and as far as Australia and Britain.

In what will probably be called the “Pompeo Doctrine”, America’s top diplomat, who harbours presidential ambitions, proclaimed the new battle cry against China. Until now, US-China relations have been defined by a complex coupling of financial and economic mutual interdependence. In a seminal speech at the Richard Nixon Library and Museum, Pompeo outlined his decoupling doctrine by announcing an ideological war between “freedom and tyranny. The Chinese Communist Party is the enemy, the Chinese people the friend”.

The Trump administration that has spurned, insulted and sanctioned its allies now beckons them to join an alliance of democratic nations to take on China. America still has friends across the world. So does China, which has drawn many countries into its Belt and Road Initiative. It also has allies in the corrupt, authoritarian world. The China bloc is not equal, but it cannot be dismissed.

Experts say the emerging bipolar world is divided not so much by ideology as by the great firewall of technology. The west’s rejection of Huawei is the opening shot of the decoupling. 5G is the battle terrain for the two blocs. China has developed cutting-edge hard, soft and internet-related technologies involving social media, deliveries, payments, infrastructure and entertainment.

The assumption that innovation thrives only in the petri dish of freedom, or that a Facebook can emerge only in America, is questionable. Chinese drones were deployed to take close-up videos of the burning Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. The footage helped firemen pinpoint their water hoses and thus save the structure. The drones were made by Chinese student entrepreneurs in their university dorms. As Thucydides wrote, people being people, similar sort of things—from creativity to conflict—happen, again and again.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

Pratap is an author and journalist.



The ever-combative Kapur

An Oscar is the kiss of death in Bollywood,” tweeted the award-winning actor-producer-director Shekhar Kapur to one of the most talented musicians alive, A.R. Rahman, who responded somewhat laconically. This exchange highlighted the increasing polarisation in Bollywood, as actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s tragic death continues to raise important issues of nasty behaviour and blatant discrimination in India’s billion-dollar film industry.

Kapur comes with impeccable credentials as a filmmaker—he has deftly directed great actors, from Cate Blanchett (*Elizabeth*, 1998) and Heath Ledger (*The Four Feathers*, 2002), to Seema Biswas (*Bandit Queen*, 1994) and Sridevi (*Mr India*, 1987). He was keen on directing Rajput in the much-delayed *Paani*. The two had reportedly spent four months discussing and prepping for the project that did not get off the ground. He has gone on record to claim he knew people who had “wronged” the 34-year-old actor: “What happened to you was their karma. Not yours,” read his cryptic tweet, after the tragedy.

Regardless of how this saga pans out, it is great to know that the 74-year-old Kapur continues to be combative—as he can well afford to be. With a net worth estimated at \$25 million, he is in an enviable position to say and do as he please. He is also one of the few people in Bollywood to take a stand when required, as he famously did when a “trilogy” of his superhit directorial venture, *Mr India*, was grandly announced without informing him. He asked an important and very valid question: “Where is the director’s ownership on material he has created?” This did not go down well with the community, with people like Javed Akhtar questioning his stand.

Given Kapur’s education and background (CA from London), he is entirely at home in an interna-

tional arena, unlike some of his Bollywood counterparts. Yes, he is fastidious and picky when it comes to projects—because he can afford to be just that. Why compromise with one’s vision, particularly if the same vision has paid rich dividends in the past?

The last time I met Kapur was a few months ago at a mutual friend’s dinner. As always, I found the genial Kapur at his relaxed best, happy to talk shop. But equally happy not to. Among other invitees, there was author Amitav Ghosh with his wife, since the dinner was in his honour after a book launch. It was

a small group with most guests having long associations. The exquisite Hyderabadi banquet was the uncontested star of the night, as the host and hostess (filmmaker Zafar Hai and his lovely wife Colleen) graciously looked after guests. Kapur, who was born in Lahore, was in full flow, but quietly so—there was zero attempt to hog the spotlight or dominate the discourse. He and I were meeting after a gap of several years, but it hardly mattered. The connect was immediate and cordial. It was yet another marvellous soiree that underlined a dying Mumbai tradi-

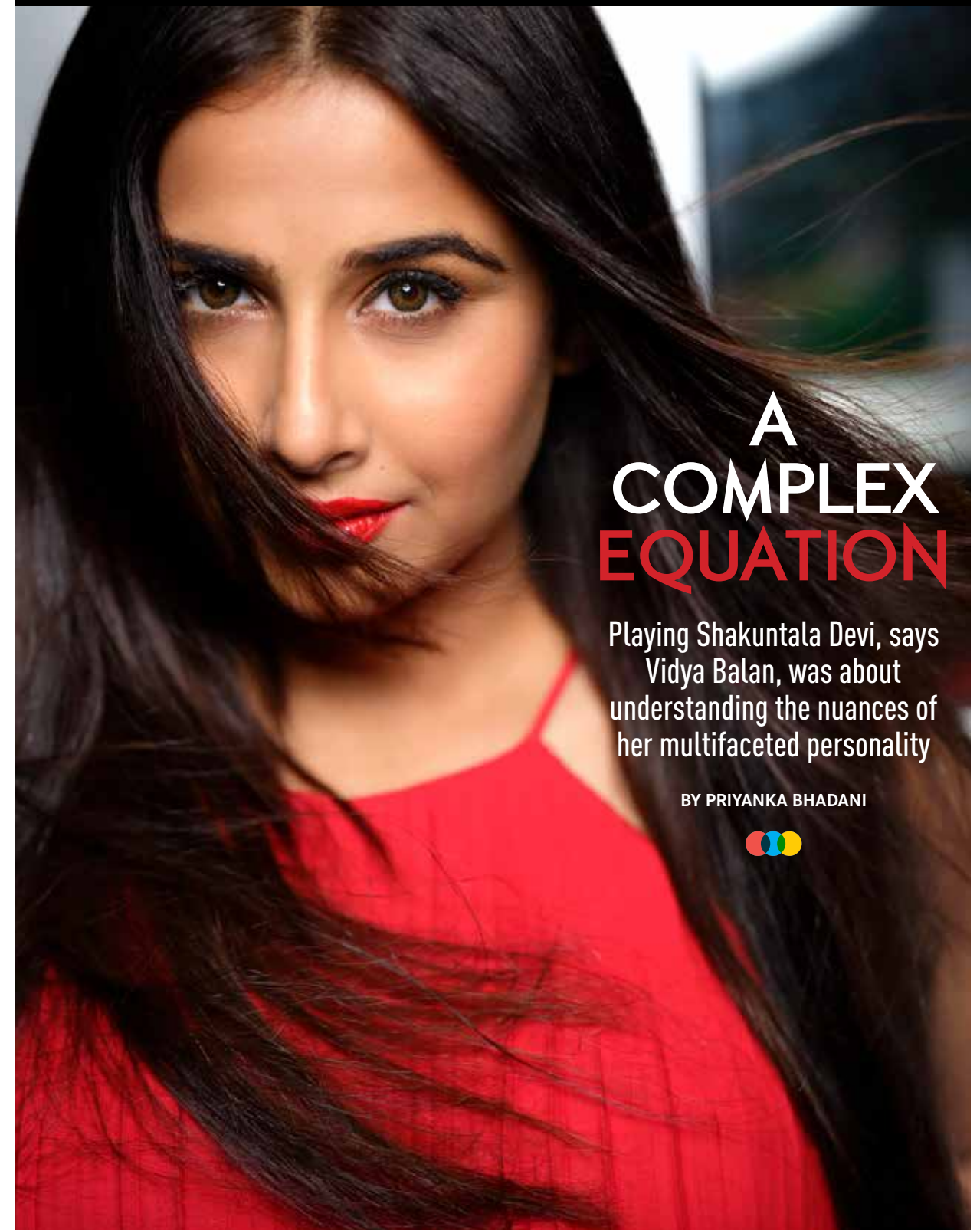
tion, and reminded all of us of an earlier era where evenings such as this one were enjoyed by like-minded people, learning from one another and celebrating each other’s success in an open, generous way.

One hears Kapur will be giving his statement in writing to the Mumbai police regarding his association with Rajput. So far, more than 40 individuals have been summoned by the cops. I am not sure for what exactly! Are the police as starstruck as the rest of the country? Or, do they want to demonstrate their efficiency in “cracking” this tricky case by getting statements from stars like Kangana Ranaut? Let us see what is unearthed. But our man Kapur has declared he will dedicate *Paani* to the memory of the actor who did not live long enough to star in what promises to be Kapur’s magnum opus.



Director Shekhar Kapur/PHOTO AFP

www.shobaade.blogspot.com



A COMPLEX EQUATION

Playing Shakuntala Devi, says Vidya Balan, was about understanding the nuances of her multifaceted personality

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI



Unlike everyone around her who has memories of meeting mathematician Shakuntala Devi when she visited their school or at one of her talks, filmmaker Anu Menon does not have any such recollection. An engineering graduate, Menon had not even read any of her books. But knowledge about Devi, she says, is like one of those old Hindi songs “that you just know”. After directing the critically acclaimed *Waiting* (2015) and co-directing the first season of *Four More Shots Please!* (2019), Menon was looking for the story of a woman in maths “because we rarely tell such stories”. The first name that came up was that of Devi. The fact that the mathematician’s daughter, Anupama Banerji, lived in London, where Menon is based, helped. The film *Shakuntala Devi* premieres on Amazon Prime Video on July 31.

Devi, a math wizard known as the “human computer”, simplified complex mathematical equations for countless students. Her name was included in the Guinness Book of World Records in 1982 for multiplying two 13-digit numbers in just 28 seconds. In the 1970s, Devi’s husband, Paritosh Banerji, an IAS officer, came out as gay. It inspired her to write a book on homosexuality called *The World of Homosexuals*—an empathetic “inquiry into the lives of a minority of her fellow humans who have lived half-hiding throughout their lives”.

“We had so much information that we had to figure out what was actually going into the film,” says Menon, who did interviews lasting several hours with Banerji. “We got an intimate peep into everything there was to [know about] Shakuntala Devi. We matched [our research] with what Anupama provided us—her memories, anecdotes, and a wealth of photographs.”

During the three years of research into Devi’s life, Menon discovered her zany sense of humour and her zest for life. “When I started out, I did not know

DOING
THE MATH
Balan as
Shakuntala Devi

she was so gregarious and flamboyant,” says Menon. That is why she could think of no one better than Vidya Balan, who often displays a similar exuberance, to play Devi. “Vidya is equally funny and witty and we felt she could carry off the role really well,” says Menon. It was important for her to contact Balan during the early stages itself because she was not sure if the actor would consent to play the mother of a woman in her 20s. She sounded out Balan in early 2018, and the actor was instantly attracted to the role.

“You have a sense that it was a life well lived,” says Balan, who, too, has a knack with numbers. “She had a wicked sense of humour and was like a complex equation.” The film covers

Devi’s life from the age of five to 60-something. Actor Araina plays the young Devi and Balan takes over from the age of 20. It was important for Balan to understand the nuances of her character—where she was at each stage of her life, physically, mentally and emotionally. “When you go through so many stages of a character’s [life], it becomes very challenging and fulfilling,” she says. To prepare for the role, Balan listened to the taped interviews of Anupama and her husband by Menon and co-writer Nayanika Mahtani, interacted with Anupama to understand her mother and watched all the available videos on Devi.

Interestingly, Balan had said in an earlier interaction that she did not know how to act in a biopic and “live the life of a real person”

until *No One Killed Jessica* and *The Dirty Picture* happened in 2011. *The Dirty Picture*, inspired by the life of south Indian actor Silk Smitha, not only catapulted Balan into the hall of fame, but was also a watershed moment for women-centric cinema in India. The trick, says the actor, is to capture the essence of the person. You might not look like her, but you can adopt some of her mannerisms. And that is what she has tried doing with her portrayal of Devi. Balan’s multifaceted nature helped her inhabit the character. “After a point, I referred to Vidya as Shakuntala. They became one and the same for me,” says Menon.

Balan’s journey of getting into the skin of the character was slow. “What I knew [initially]

of Shakuntala Devi was that she was a human computer,” she says. “Slowly, I started discovering so many layers. At one point, I turned to Anu and asked, ‘Ok tell me, what has she not done?’” Balan says what attracted her was how Devi embraced her flaws and limitations as well as her gifts and her genius. “I think that is what makes her so inspiring,” she says. “That she did not think she was a saint. She thought, ‘Main jaisi hoon great hoon’ (I am great as I am). She wanted to try everything and live every moment like it was her last. So, she wrote books, she was an astrologer, and at some point, she joined politics. She was travelling the world and meeting presidents and prime ministers of various nations.”

One of the striking points in the trailer is when Anupama (played by Sanya Malhotra) accuses her mother of not being like other moms who are selfless and always at the beck and call of their children. Devi, on the other hand, balanced both motherhood and her career, refusing to give one up for the other. “Even if you are not able to personally identify with the character’s predicament, you can draw from what you have seen around,” says Balan. “I have seen this a lot with friends who are working moms, whose children expect them to be only mothers. I think the expectations from a mother are very unfair.”

Although she is not a mother, Balan is no stranger to the complexities of being a wife and a working professional. “Even though I have come a long way, I still think there are times when I feel that maybe I should do some more,” says Balan. She deals with it by having open conversations with husband, film producer Siddharth Roy Kapur.

Playing Devi might just be a defining moment in Balan’s career. The makers, on their part, have left no stone unturned to imbue her character with nuance and authenticity. “This film is not a puff piece, neither is it an ode to Shakuntala Devi,” says Menon. “We have gone into the darker spaces, ready to make it a bit real.”



GETTY IMAGES

“SHE DID NOT THINK SHE WAS A SAINT... SHE WANTED TO TRY EVERYTHING AND LIVE EVERY MOMENT LIKE IT WAS HER LAST.”

—Vidya Balan on Shakuntala Devi (in pic)



THE TASTE OF FREEDOM

These women digital chefs are finding liberation on YouTube

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

In May this year, during the lockdown, searches for the frothy Dalgona coffee saw a 5,000 per cent spike on Google, as coffee aficionados tried their hand at whipping up the creamy two-toned coffee with its butterscotch-hued foam. Just when the popularity of the drink peaked on Google Trends, Madhavi, an unassuming homemaker, got over 21 lakh people hooked to her ingenious spin on the drink—a Dalgona coffee cake—on her YouTube channel, ‘Madhavi’s Kitchen.’

For a growing breed of homemakers uploading recipes on YouTube daily, the kitchen has turned into a sanctuary, and they are enjoying unprecedented popularity. “I don’t think I have ever had as many viewers as during the lockdown. The viewership has more than doubled. As if people are just noticing their own kitchens and are relishing the joys of making their own food,” says Kabita Singh, 39, whose YouTube channel, ‘Kabita’s Kitchen,’ has more than 80 lakh subscribers. With recipes that teach one how to rustle up instant jalebis and potato chips in less than 10 minutes, her average monthly viewership, which was close to two crore before the lockdown, has shot up to nearly seven crore in the past four months.

In the last five years or so, these women—essentially stay-at-home mothers, many of whom have quit plush corporate jobs—have been cooking up a storm in their kitchens, even as their husbands play a supporting role. The lockdown further amplified their popularity on YouTube as the demand for home-cooked meals that are quick and easy to put together shot up. So did an interest in learning fun ways of experimenting with everyday ingredients.

For many, like Vishakha Singh, 28, who has been consistently uploading “high on oil, but extremely satisfying non-vegetarian recipes” on YouTube since 2016, the recognition has brought a boost of self-confidence and a sense of identity. “It just made me feel so much more valued,” says Singh. “I can earn my own money by doing something that has been taken for granted [till now].”

Her feelings are shared by Madhura Bachal, who has been at the forefront of popularising Maharashtrian recipes since 2014. Food, she says, has always been the centre of her universe. Whether it is the homemade Lamington chocolate cake, honey chilli potatoes or the immunity-boosting raw mango panna with a twist, a casual scroll down her

YouTube feed leaves one in no doubt about the popularity of her recipes. “I had a secure banking job which I left to follow my passion in cooking,” she says. “Of course nobody believed in me back then, but as time passed and my popularity grew, those around me began taking me seriously and realised the power of the digital medium.”

A typical day in the life of a home-based digital chef, especially since the start of the pandemic, stretches well into 14 to 15 hours of work daily, which involves preparing meals for the family and shooting at least two to three different videos. While in normal times, the creator has the help of an extended team comprising videographers, a video editor and social media managers, in the past four months, the digital chefs have been doing everything themselves. This includes chopping vegetables and preparing the ingredients, handling the DSLRs, editing, uploading and marketing. “But that has also been a self-revelation,” says Athira Vishnu, mother of a three-year-old, who has gained 800 plus followers since starting her YouTube channel last month. “I never thought I could



VISHNU V. NAIR

COOKING UP A STORM

(Clockwise from left) Athira Vishnu; Ruchi Bharani; Kabita Singh



FOR A GROWING BREED OF HOMEMAKERS UPLOADING RECIPES ON YOUTUBE DAILY, THE KITCHEN HAS BECOME A SANCTUARY.



be a pro at it,” she says. “It gives such a sense of achievement to be able to do what you want the way you want without having to depend on or face the condescension of anyone.”

According to Chef Ajay Chopra, a former MasterChef India judge on the show’s first two seasons, the lockdown has shifted the focus from chef-centric and exotic restaurant

fare to the joys of everyday cooking and home-based meals. “These women are so much more relatable in the way they come across and their essentially home-grown style of cooking,” he says. “Also, the fact that many of them are churning out fascinating stuff in regional cuisines like Assamese, Marathi and Kerala is phenomenal. They are very consistent with their videos—be it daily, weekly or fortnightly—and that is essential for YouTube to take them seriously as digital chefs.”

Banker Manish Singh, Kabita’s husband and father of their two children, has taken to helping his wife by managing her brand endorsements and handling the finances. “It is she who conceptualises everything. I only play the support function,” he says. “On YouTube, popularity makes



JANAK BHAT

all the difference. Kabita gets a six digit income per month for uploading at least three videos a week. She has been able to hire a few employees and contribute to the family’s income.” Close to 90 lakh people viewed Kabita’s post on instant jalebis which, according to her, can be prepared in 10 minutes.

“We have even made an e-booklet of my recipes to inspire users on WhatsApp during this time of staying indoors,” says Ruchi Bharani, an interior designer and chef with the digital platform Rajshri Food. Her tryst with cooking began after marriage when she lent her mother-in-law a hand in her kitchen, where the aroma of homemade Sindhi cuisine would linger for hours. Her recipe for dal fry, which she put up around eight years ago, was the first to get over a million views. “That time there were not as many YouTube chefs as now. So it was relatively easy to get popular,” she says.

But for Vishakha and many others like her, their top-notch cooking videos that have helped them put their stuff out there have afforded true liberation. “I am a very shy person,” says Vishakha. “So, for someone like me, it has been exhilarating to be popular only for my work and not my looks.”



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SCHIZO-NATION | ANUJA CHAUHAN



The cheerleader effect

Everybody loves a boy band. From the Beatles, to Backstreet Boys and Boyz II Men, to BTS and One Direction who made the hashtag #10yearsof1D trend just a few days ago, we love the freshness, energy and sheer frisson they bring into our jaded lives. There is just something about the combined impact created by a grouping of four or five comely youths, with freshly broken voices, tousled hair and eager eyes (seemingly) seeking true love, that creates a veritable pheromone storm in the bosoms of women everywhere. Girls want them, boys want to be them and everybody across the board is quite comprehensively enchanted.

Of course, the cheerleader effect, also known as the group attractiveness effect—a cognitive bias which causes people to think individuals are more attractive when they are in a group—has a major role to play here. The term was first coined by that fictional “high-functioning-socio-path” Barney Stinson on the show *How I Met Your Mother*. Canny, womanising Barney pointed out knowledgeably to his more naïve friends that women (like cheerleaders) always look more attractive in a group, but when separated out, and met one-on-one, cease to look as attractive.

Like a grouping of scatter cushions on a couch, if you are into home décor. Or a group of fighter planes flying in formation, if you are into the action stuff. Anyway, the point I am trying to make here is that record producer and media personality Simon Cowell knew what he was doing when he picked out a motley crew of ordinary-ish British lads with strong singing voices and put them together to create hysteria and history with One Direction ten years ago, and that Rahul Gandhi is looking pretty sad now that he has been separated from Sachin Pilot and Jyotiraditya Scindia—and they are cutting a pretty sorry figure on their own, too. Rumours of Milind Deora and Jitin

Prasada getting itchy feet are not helping either.

See, if you are a very strong talent, you do not need a boy band. They then fade into the background to become merely your accompanists—like Bruce Springsteen and the E street band, for example. Or Indira Gandhi and the sycophants. Or Narendra Modi and the Pink Lotus Gang. But if the group is greater than the sum of its parts, and nobody is a stand-out performer on their own, then it makes sense to stick with the band. Ditch it, and you end up in obscurity or, to paraphrase a One D superhit, you end up feeling “so low, since you went solo, hole in the middle of your heart like a polo”.



Rahul—the Harry Styles of the Congress Party Boy Band, if you will—put out a solo album recently, namely, his China videos. They seem vaguely reminiscent of Harry Styles’s first solo ballad, the overproduced, world-weary-ish ‘stop your crying, it’s a sign of the times’, ie, hardcore Harry fans felt vindicated in their belief that Harry was the talent that powered One D,

but everybody else on the planet was left pretty much unshaken.

Meanwhile, Sachin and Jyotiraditya are prowling around radiating a sort of sullen, wronged Zayn Malik vibe, all broody angst and enigmatic utterances, intermittently belting out Sufi-style wails and romancing beautiful women, and wondering why their life has been reduced to just “f#@king and fighting on, it’s a paradise and it’s a war zone”.

I was never a groupie of the Congress Party Boy Band, but I did dig a couple of their early hits. My advice to them would be to put their petulance and egos aside, kiss and make up and reunite as a band. Sure, they are older, and stouter, and staler, but they are definitely better together. None of them are going to create history on their own.

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

editor@theweek.in



Chords of love

Ananya Birla will soon be out with her latest electro-pop single, *Let There Be Love*. “I feel like we are all going through this collective trauma right now and I wanted to give a voice to that, but also showcase the sparks of hope and positivity that are being born right in the middle of this chaos,” she said. The song, recorded at her makeshift home studio in Los Angeles, is produced by the Grammy-winning Aaron Pearce, who has worked with the likes of Justin Bieber and Pitbull.



Rocking it

Duleshwar Tandi or Dule Rocker has been setting the internet ablaze with his lockdown rap videos. A Dalit migrant worker from Odisha’s Kalahandi district, the 27-year-old passionately croons about the plight of migrant workers and records his songs on a mobile phone outside his hut. Tandi had to return to his village, Borda, from Raipur on March 23. He started performing rap early, with gigs in cities like Chandigarh.



RASIKA DUGAL, actor

Spreading cheer

When people’s moods started plummeting during the lockdown, Rasika Dugal and husband Mukul Chadda came up with the delightfully light-hearted short film, *Banana Bread*. But that is not all. Dugal has much more up her sleeve. There is Mira Nair’s *A Suitable Boy*, the comedy-drama *Lootcase* and the second season of *Delhi Crime*. In between, she has been dubbing for the second season of *Mirzapur*. She will soon begin work on *Lord Curzon Ki Haveli*.

Were you scared about going out to dub for *Mirzapur* 2?

I was going out after a long time and hence had taken extra precautions, [almost to the point of] overdoing it. (Laughs) The good thing was that the producers were extra nice. I discussed the safety measures and the things that would make me comfortable.... I asked them to shift the dubbing to a studio closer to my house in case I wanted to use the loo and they did. It was strange to step out though. The streets looked so different.

So many people are struggling for work and you have four projects back-to-back.

I am so grateful. I have nothing to complain about, especially because I am getting to do such a variety of roles. Recently, we released a small clip of a song from *Lootcase*, where I am doing a little dance, something that I have not done earlier. *Lootcase*’s Lata is a blunt and straightforward person. [On the other hand], Savita in *A Suitable Boy* is a gentle, calm and loving person. It is lovely to play such diverse characters across formats.

You wrote and acted in *Banana Bread* with Mukul.



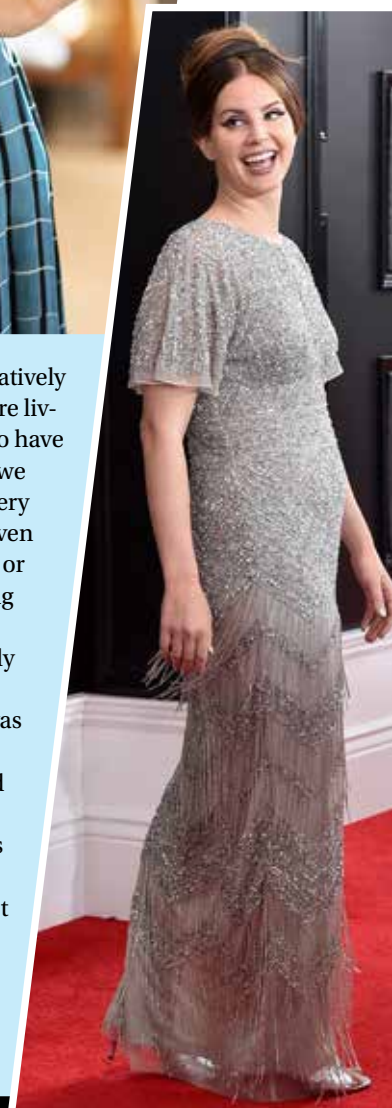
It was really a need to respond creatively to the very strange times that we are living in. And I consciously wanted to have a light-hearted take on it because we could all do with a little of that. Every day, there is something which is even more devastating, at an economic or a human rights level. In the coming months, we are going to feel the impact of all this severely. We really need something in such times to cheer us up. On a lighter note, it was a break from the constant housework. I had always been interested in being a part of something right from the ideation stage because as actors, you enter a project when the work is half done. So, you don’t have much agency. Mukul has written a few things previously, but for me this was exciting and thus *Banana Bread* happened.

— PRIYANKA BHADANI



Mind mystery

Actor **Aftab Shivdasani** announced the first film, *Dhundh*, to be produced by Mount Zen Media, the production company which he had recently launched with wife, Nin Dusanj. Shivdasani shared a poster of the film on Instagram and captioned it, “Evil Has An Address, Your Mind. The Mind works in mysterious ways. Excited to present *Dhundh*....” The film, to be produced in association with Mandiraa Entertainment, is set to release in October.



Honest sonnets

Singer-songwriter **Lana Del Rey**, whose melancholic love ballads have enthralled many, has come out with an audiobook of 14 poems performed by her and accompanied by music from Grammy Award-winning songwriter Jack Antonoff. The poems, titled *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*, are “eclectic and honest and not trying to be anything other than they are....,” said Del Rey. The hardcover of the poetry collection will be available on September 29.



In droll Londongrad

London steals a march over Washington, DC with its drollery, if that is the *mot juste* that Jeeves would have approved. Nothing is allowed to get too serious. Most issues are talked down, understated, joked about. It is classy to be self-deprecating; the weighty traditions of Westminster and Whitehall are mollified with calculated casualness.

Washington, DC, by contrast, is a serious town, overrun by crusaders wrapped in earnestness. The ponderous senator, the clean-cut Congress staffer, the bow-tied lobbyist, the pensive columnist, the think tank academic—their righteous shoulders seem weighed down with the burden of protecting the free world. Probity, transparency, accountability are the catchwords and breaches are examined with a gimlet eye; if someone is caught, he apologises on camera, with a faraway look and quivering lower lip, the long-suffering wife at his side.

When allegations surfaced of Vladimir Putin playing favourites in the 2016 US election, the Americans got all hot under the collar as if the very heart of their democracy was under threat. The intelligence agencies rolled up their sleeves, spat on their palms, and produced a report within two months. “Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate secretary [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump,” they concluded.

President Donald Trump bounced this hot potato from one teleprompter screen to the other for three years. There was a lot of broken china: NSA Michael Flynn, FBI director James Comey and finally Attorney General Jeff Sessions lost their jobs; a special counsel, Robert Mueller, was appointed and Trump tweeted 300 times, fulminating against the “witch hunt”. A bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee produced five voluminous reports upholding the findings of

the intelligence agencies. The Russian ambassador quickly ran out of lunch companions, his very shadow the kiss of death. All so New World, almost nouveau riche.

On the other hand, allegations of Russian meddling in the Brexit referendum were treated with old world elegance. Ministers looked away and the intelligence agencies took the hint—as befits a nation on whose empire the indefatigable sun never set. No point poking around, since anyway the bets on the referendum had already been placed at Ladbrokes and Wimbledon was around the corner.

Finally, the Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) investigated, but Downing Street stalled the release of its report for nine months; haste is so gauche. The press conference on the report was an appropriately underplayed affair in the library of the Army and Navy Club, a green curtain drawn to partially hide the bookshelves. The sound arrangements were iffy—it is bad form to appear terribly efficient.

The hard-hitting report revealed much, except on how deep and successful was Moscow’s meddling. Naturally, since no one asked that question in the first place, hence no one knew: MI5’s input to the committee was all of six lines. The fact is that Russian billionaires—both friends or enemies of Putin—wield tremendous influence in London. Owning mansions and football clubs they keep an army of Londoners, including peers, in profitable business while donating liberally to political parties and cultural causes. Secret agents have free run of Londongrad, so nicknamed: the Salisbury and Polonium poisonings are clear evidence. Meanwhile, the ISC report breezily concludes that UK’s stretched agencies “took their eye off the ball.” The problem is that the Russians do not get this; you see, they do not play cricket.

But there is still time for a G and T.



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