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THE WEEK

JULY 12, 2020

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KASHMIR
NEW DOMICILE LAW DIVIDES FURTHER

THREAT TO LADAKH

OPTIONS BEFORE THE ARMY

Why India banned Chinese apps

China wants to shift LAC further west in Galwan Valley
General J.J. Singh (retd), former Army chief

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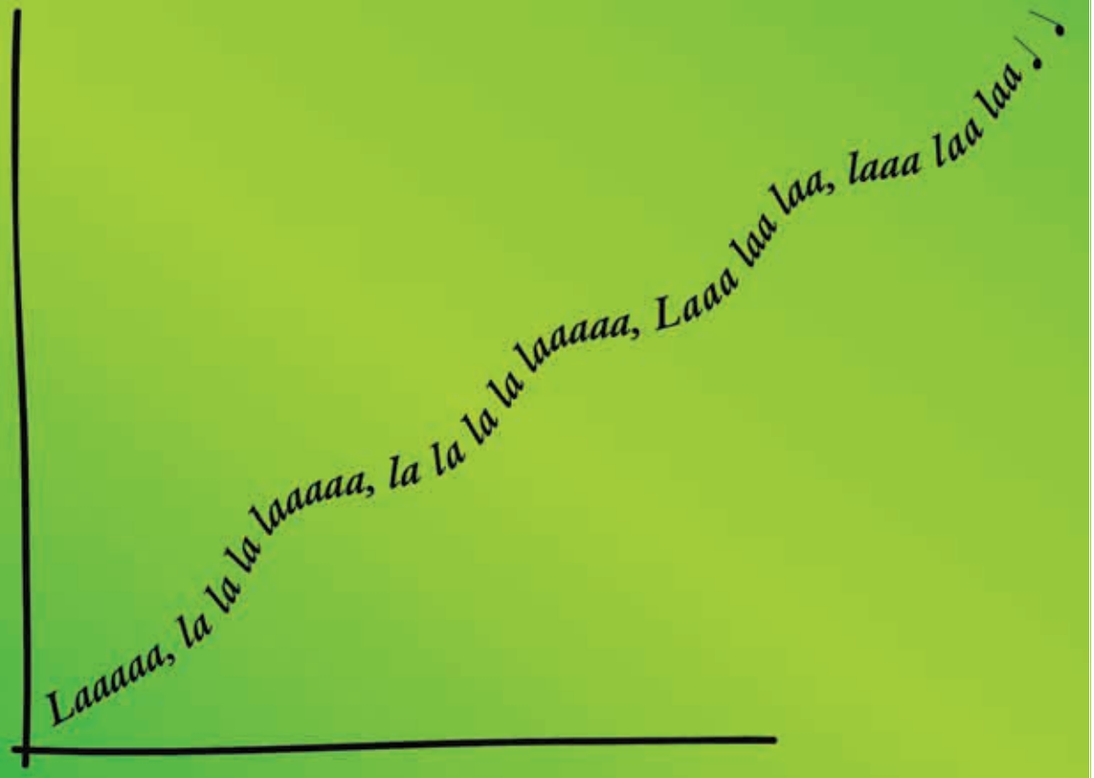

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• **Focus/Infocus features are paid marketing/PR initiatives**

Lost the trust

China will continue to get befitting responses if they provoke India ('How to tame the dragon', June 28). India has, so far, been guarded in its responses, as the country is going through a pandemic crisis. If there is another Galwan-like face-off, India should change the rules of engagement with China, and get into Chinese territory and set our base there.

The long-standing practice, as per agreements with China, in 1996 and 2005, of not using firearms during a face-off, should cease hereby. The local commanders should be given every right to respond in the manner that they prefer.

Post-Galwan, the Chinese have lost the respect of Indians. We are not going to treat them in the same manner ever again. We will be always suspicious of them.

Gaurav Trivedi,
On email.

There is no point engaging with China at this juncture. We should stop all trade with that country. India should raise the Tibet issue in the United Nations. It should insult and corner China in all international forums.

Taking on China alone is not easy. So, India should build an alliance globally to teach China a lesson. Everyone is angry with China, the number one bully in the world.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

If India goes for a full-scale war with China, it is China that is going to be humiliated. The Chinese may have a slightly superior military, but it is well known that India has an edge in high-altitude mountainous environments like the Galwan valley. Having regular conflicts with Pakistan, our Army, Air Force and Navy have far more experience in actual combat, which the Chinese forces lack.

Post Covid-19, Xi Jinping is having a really tough time. There is palpable anger against him, both within and outside China. His days as president are numbered.

Vismay Mathur,
On email.

We cannot deal with the Chinese the way we deal with the Pakistanis. A BJP government, under Narendra Modi, is expected to strike back tit-for-tat. But, if we carry out an air strike inside China as retaliation, China will come back at us hard.

India can corner China only through trade and diplomacy. We should sort out our bilateral problems with the Chinese through dialogue.

Devender Tokas,
On email.

Racism will exist

Racism is the product of prejudice, and every human being has prejudiced views ('Racism? Touch up and rip up', June 28). If someone denies having prejudice, it highlights his lack of self-consciousness. Historically, racism against blacks in the US was created to exploit them. Racism is the product of black exploitation, not its cause.

The nature of exploitation might have changed in modern US, and it might not be visibly perceptible to white Americans, yet colour prejudice exists in the minds of the whites. Still, there is conscious and unconscious denial of racism among the whites, thereby making any

HOW TO REACH US

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HINDUSTAN GROUP OF INSTITUTIONS

A standard of excellence

Dr Anand Jacob Verghese,
director and CEO, Hindustan Group of Institutions

On June 11, the Union HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal announced the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) India rankings. These rankings are prepared based on parameters like teaching, learning and resources, research and professional practice, graduation outcomes, outreach and inclusivity and perception in higher education institutions. While announcing the rankings, the minister said that these rankings could act as a guide to students looking for higher education. "We will make India's NIRF ranking so renowned that international institutes would want to be ranked in the Indian ranking instead," he said. Overall, 3,771 institutions registered in the ranking framework this year—a 20 per cent increase compared to last year.

Hindustan Group of Institutions excelled in various categories of the NIRF rankings. Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, the prestigious engineering and architecture college of the group, achieved 107th rank among 1,071 engineering institutions; it is placed under the top 10 per cent of engineering institutions in India. HITS has also achieved 20th rank in the architecture category. The group's another vertical, KCG College of Technology, has been listed in the 201-250 band among engineering institutions in India.

Analysis of the recent NIRF rankings 2020 indicates that among the deemed universities, HITS is in the 25th position at the national level and 9th position in Tamil Nadu. It is also one among the top five engineering institutes with deemed-university status in Chennai. Under architecture category, HITS is one among the top three institutions with deemed-university status in India. It is also the top deemed university in Tamil Nadu in the architecture category.

KCG College of Technology is in the 39th position in Tamil Nadu and 13th position in Chennai in engineering category among IITs, IIMs, Central, State, Private & Deemed to be Universities in India. KCG College stands 1st position in Chennai and 3rd position in Tamil Nadu among the non-autonomous colleges affiliated to Anna University. Dr Anand Jacob Verghese, director and CEO, Hindustan Group of Institutions, expressed his gratitude and congratulated the faculty, staff and students for the group's prestigious feat.

effort to remove racism absolutely impossible.

Pankaj Kumar Chatterjee,
On email.

Next chief minister

D.K. Shivakumar is a good leader who is always connected with the people. He is also a troubleshooter, who would go to any extent. The Congress needs leaders like him in every state ('Troubleshooter on the throne', June 28). Shivakumar should strengthen the party at the grassroots level. The government in Karnataka is not performing up to the mark, as BJP leaders have issues with B.S. Yediyurappa's style of functioning.

People of Karnataka, I am sure, are eager see Shivakumar as the next chief minister of the state.

R. Sairam,
On email.

Went too soon

Sushant Singh Rajput was too young to leave us like that ('Reaching for the stars', June 28).

All said and done, it is not fair to come to conclusions as to how he died or whether he was the victim of nepotism. It is mostly people who do not know Sushant who are talking about him. Nepotism exists everywhere, not just in the film industry, and we need to live with it.

In a short span, Sushant had got so many opportunities. Just because some of his recent films did not do well, one cannot come to the conclusion that he was sidelined by the biggies. If he was alive, Sushant would have gone on to perform even more memorable roles and would have ruled tinsel town for a long time.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

Sushant's death should lead us to a serious discussion on depression. There is an urgent need for such discussions to be de-stigmatised. During the lockdown period, film stars had to curb their movements a lot. None of them are used to sitting at home for a long duration. At least now, actors who are feeling low, for whatever reason, should come out and seek help.

Anjana Unnikrishnan,
On email.

Living legend

Rahul Dravid is one of the most sensible cricketers the world has ever seen. His records speak for themselves ('Hope we don't lose a lot of the cricket season', June 28). He is the right person to be at the helm of the National Cricket Academy and can nurture young talents.

Even as a cricketer, Rahul was quite calm and never used to get angry. His solid defence was legendary. So many great bowlers have had a tough time bowling to him. He was also a decent wicket-keeper.

Tanushri Nagori,
On email.

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BOXED IN

Sam Khok School in Thailand has introduced partitions made from repurposed ballot boxes as part of social distancing measures. Schools reopened nationwide on July 1 after the Thai government eased isolation measures.

PHOTO BY REUTERS

POINT BLANK

PTI

It appears that the Covid-19 crisis has underlined the truth that in the end a nation is made and saved not by a common bloodline, nor a common religion, but by equality, mutual service and respect.
Rajmohan Gandhi, biographer and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi

It is a bewildering swing between lockdown and un-lockdown and lockdown. No one knows what will open or be closed.... The rich and the upper-middle-class stay home, falling back upon their wealth or savings, and praying that the nightmare will go away.... The lower-middle-class plays hide-and-seek with their workplaces, venturing out only if absolutely necessary, and returning quickly to their homes. The prevailing emotion is fear.
P. Chidambaram, Congress leader

I was asked to contest [elections] in 2019, but I was not sure. Even if I join politics in the future, I won't be there for my name, but for the sake of my work. I have always worked with honesty, and if I join politics, I will remain honest.
Irfan Pathan, former cricketer

If we fight with one another then when will we fight against China? This is time to chase away Chinese from our land. If we fight amongst ourselves, it is of no use.
Sanjay Singh, AAP leader

When the country is facing an external threat, the priority cannot be the dislike that Rahul Gandhi has for Narendra Modi, or vice versa. The priority must be to use the vibrancy of democracy for a national response which allows for interrogation, but not divisive animosity.
Pavan K. Varma, author and former diplomat

AFP

Every profession has its share of dirty politics... It could be airlines, the modelling world or media offices. Bullying, ragging and harassment don't happen only in classrooms and high schools... it happens everywhere. The only difference is that it is sensationalised a great deal when it happens in our [film] industry because it makes for a fun copy to read.
Raveena Tandon, actor

WORD PLAY

Want to try something creative during this lockdown? Think about making a magical **moon garden** in your backyard. A moon garden is simply a garden that is meant to be enjoyed in the moonlight, or at night. Such a garden can be designed by having white- or light-coloured blooms that open at night, and plant foliage that display a unique texture and colour at night. Truly an idea that could make your nights more positive and bright.

MILESTONES

TRIAL TIME
Bharat Biotech's Covaxin became the first Indian Covid-19 vaccine candidate to receive the approval of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation to conduct human trials. The trials are set to start across the country in July.

EARLY FINDING
Scientists from China have found a new strain of swine flu virus, called G4, that could trigger a global pandemic. Though the virus possesses "all the hallmarks" to infect humans, there is no immediate threat from it, say the scientists.

STAR KID
Eight-year-old Blue Ivy Carter became the youngest artist ever to win a Black Entertainment Television (BET) Award. She shared the award with her parents, Beyoncé and Jay-Z, along with Wizkid and Saint Jhn, for the track Brown Skin Girl.

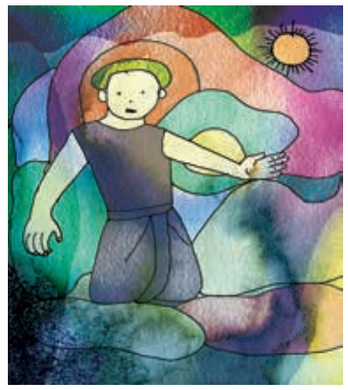
GETTY IMAGES

POWER POINT | SACHIDANANDA MURTHY

Rage for reforms

Memorialists of P.V. Narasimha Rao recall not only his prime ministership, but also how he had been politically punished by the Congress in the early 1970s for ushering in land reforms in Andhra Pradesh as the state's chief minister. There are also the sentimentalists who look at how Rao's 1991 economic reforms spurred growth, and argue that Prime Minister Narendra Modi should take a leaf out of the former's book to revive the slackening economy.

Unlike communists, land reforms have always been a tricky subject for the Congress—the party needs to balance it across the spectrum of its support base. Interestingly, the legacy of another Congress chief minister, D. Devaraj Urs—who executed major land reforms in Karnataka—has been dismantled during this pandemic period. In 1974, Urs gave land to the tillers and banned non-agriculturists from buying agricultural land. His policies dispossessed four million absentee landlords, but built a new vote bank for the Congress, which helped both his return to power and Indira Gandhi's stunning political comeback in 1978.



Karnataka was a state where those who had non-agricultural income over a modest threshold could not buy agricultural land without special dispensation from the state government. Ironically, the BJP's B.S. Yediyurappa, who was stung by a series of land-scam allegations during his first term as Karnataka chief minister, has now taken the plunge to junk the land laws of Urs, and allow free land purchase for individuals and companies. A huge edifice of laws is being junked to make rural land a free-trade commodity. The Congress in opposition says it is a counter-reform which will dispossess farmers of agricultural lands. The party also alleges that this will lead to monopoly holdings.

Urs had imposed fixed ceiling on land holdings, enforced by tribunals packed with Congressmen. But Yediyurappa's reforms have rhymed well with the Centre's decision to loosen the Essential Commodities Act, allowing free trade of many agricultural commodities across the country.

But the Karnataka initiative is a part of the growing trend among Central and state governments to force changes in well-entrenched laws. In the 2000s, change was much more incremental than under the dynamic team of Rao-Manmohan Singh-P. Chidambaram, though there was a minor encore from the A.B. Vajpayee-Yashwant Sinha-Murasoli Maran team. The pandemic situation has seen the BJP-ruled governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka being joined by the Congress-ruled Rajasthan in bringing major changes in labour laws. Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu governments have promised reforms after they stabilise the alarming outbreak of Covid-19. Amid strong protests from trade unions and lukewarm response of employers, the governments did little to implement the decision to extend working hours and suspend major labour laws. The employer bodies had more problems with the bureaucratic hurdles, rather than labour management. They pointed out that there were more issues that had to be sorted out by the ministries of finance and industries, rather than labour.

The Union government has announced privatisation of several strategic sectors including atomic energy, space, defence, coal and mines. It has also gone ahead with a controversial decision to change environmental norms, by giving more freedom for economic activity in eco-sensitive areas.

The 1991 reforms of Rao were based on the revolutionary Congress manifesto prepared for former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi—who had been assassinated in the middle of elections. The 1991 reforms clicked because the global economy was in a healthy state. But the current reforms face the headwinds unleashed by a global economic slowdown.

ILLUSTRATION **BHASKARAN**

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TIME-TESTED TEAM

Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh may well be running a mini version of the United Progressive Alliance government. He appointed Vini Mahajan as the state's first woman chief secretary, superseding several senior IAS officers. Mahajan was posted in prime minister Manmohan Singh's office during UPA rule. Mahajan's husband, Dinkar Gupta, is the Punjab police chief. Gupta was in the Intelligence Bureau during the UPA regime. The chief minister had earlier requested Manmohan Singh and Montek Singh Ahluwalia, who was deputy chairman of the Planning Commission during UPA rule, to advise the government on economic matters during the pandemic.

DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

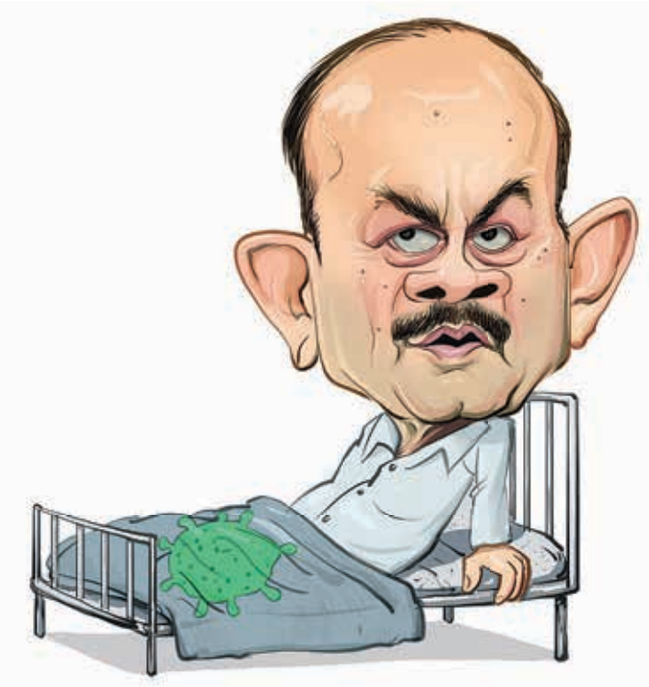
Karnataka's Medical Education Minister, Dr K. Sudhakar, is under home quarantine after his father, wife and daughter tested positive for Covid-19. But, the tech-savvy minister, who was replaced by Revenue Minister R. Ashoka as the Covid-19-in-charge, continues to keep track of the developments. He conducts video conferences with senior officials and heads of Covid-19 hospitals and reviews the situation daily. He also posts regular updates on social media. He recently surprised all by virtually attending the convocation ceremony of the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences and conferring degrees. Here is one minister who is pushing forward the idea of Digital India with great zeal.

CPI(M)'S CHINESE BLUNDER

As expected, the India-China standoff has put the left, especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist), under the scanner. The party, which is still forced to explain its tallest leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad's neutral position during the India-China war in 1962, seems to have made a similar blunder now. The party mouthpiece *People's Democracy*, edited by its former general secretary Prakash Karat, in an editorial, listed out suspected provocative steps from the Indian side that could have triggered the standoff. Though it did call China's action "egregious", the general tone of the editorial is slanting towards Namboodiripad's notorious neutrality.

SECURITY RISK

When Telangana Home Minister Mahmood Ali's gunmen tested positive for Covid-19, the media reached out to his office to inquire about his health. The response was that the minister was absolutely fine and the gunmen were never in close proximity to him. This led to quips such as, why have gunmen at all, if they were not near the asset? But, soon, the minister, too, tested positive. Now, there are no doubts on whether the gunmen were protecting their asset or not.



BATTLE IN THE CAPITAL

Surjeet Singh Deswal, an IPS officer of the 1984 batch from Haryana, is a busy man these days. Deswal is director general of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, which guards the border with China, and is the acting director general of the Border Security Force, which guards the borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh. The ITBP was also asked to arrange quarantine facilities for people returning from Wuhan. Now, the home ministry has tasked it with a battle in the capital—running Delhi's biggest Covid-19 care centre.

MAN ON THE MOVE

The French ambassador to India, Emmanuel Lenain, apparently does not like to be desk-bound. And the work-from-home impositions during the pandemic had him chomping at the bit. Lenain, who took over last October, has been making visits across Delhi, trying to get a better feel of India and its capital. He first stepped out on official work in May, visiting a water treatment plant operated with the help of a French company. Recently, he visited a fair price shop.

ILLUSTRATIONS **JAIRAJ T.G.**

Best-laid plans

The new domicile law could increase the flow of migrants into Jammu and Kashmir

BY TARIQ BHAT

SOPORE IN BARAMULLA district is well known for its apples. In the 1990s, the heyday of insurgency in Kashmir, the affluent town was also known as a hotbed of militancy. On June 22, Sopore found itself once again in the news. Aliya Tariq, a school student in Sopore, became the first person to receive an online domicile certificate under a new law that was introduced after Article 370 was scrapped last year.

Earlier, only those who had permanent resident certificates could buy land, apply for jobs and contest elections in Jammu and Kashmir. After the Union government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status and made it a Union territory, a new domicile law was introduced. Any citizen of India who has lived in Jammu and Kashmir for at least 15 years, or served as an employee of the Union government or a public-sector undertaking for 10 years, is now eligible for a domicile certificate.

Politicians and separatists in Kashmir allege that the new law allows the Centre to change the demography of the Muslim-majority Union territory. Aliya's father, Tariq Ahmed Longoo, was flayed for applying for the certificate. "A friend of mine in the revenue department told me how to apply for the domicile [certificate] online," said Longoo, who was also helped by tehsildar Shabir Ahmed Wani and patwari (record keeper) Sajad Ahmed Lone in applying for domicile certificate online. "I completed all the formalities and, later, was called to the deputy commissioner's office, where the certificate was issued."

He said his decision to apply for the certificate was not political. "I applied for it because the school where my brother's children study has asked for it," Longoo said. "I have always kept my documents up to date." Aliya said she went with her father to the deputy commissioner's office to get the certificate. "Everybody needs it," she said. "It is an important document."

The certificate was presented to Aliya in an online event that saw the participation of Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor G.C. Murmu and chief secretary B.V.R. Subramanyam. "Aliya's domicile certificate was issued by Murmu from his office," said G.N. Ittoo, deputy commissioner of Baramulla.

Three days later, IAS officer Navin K. Choudhary was granted a domicile certificate. A 1994-batch officer of the Jammu and Kashmir cadre, Choudhary hails from Bihar. "This is to certify that Shri Navin K. Choudhary, son of Shri Deokant Choudhary, resident of at present Gandhi Nagar, Jammu, is a domicile of UT of J&K," reads the certificate.

The government has received 33,157 applications for domicile certificates; more than 25,000 have been accepted. Nearly 32,000 applications are from 10 districts of Jammu Division; there are only 720 from Kashmir. The most number of certificates in Kashmir have been issued in Pulwama (153), followed by Anantnag (106), Kulgam (90) and Baramulla (39). None of the 65 applicants from Srinagar have received certificates.

> "I applied for it because the school where my brother's children study has asked for it. I have always kept my documents up to date."
>
> Tariq Ahmed Longoo (in pic with daughter Aliya)

Omar Abdullah, National Conference vice president and former chief minister, criticised the issuance of the certificate to Chaudhary. "All our misgivings about the new domicile rules in J&K are coming to the fore," he tweeted. "We in @JKNC_ opposed the changes because we could see the nefarious design behind the changes. The people of J&K on both sides of the Pir Panjal mountains will be the sufferers of the domicile rules."

Omar's father and NC president Farooq Abdullah, who represents Srinagar in the Lok Sabha, said the new domicile law was unacceptable. "The law is illegal, undemocratic and unconstitutional," he told reporters on June 28. This is the first time the Abdullahs have openly criticised the Centre after they were released from detention in March.

According to the BJP, Article 370 had denied equal rights to communities like Balmikis and Gorkhas. "We are happy that finally we have been granted domicile," said Labha Ram, president of West Pakistan Refugees Action Committee. "We are 20,000 families, but around 60 would benefit from the law as the rest don't need it."

Gharu Bhatti, president of the Balmiki Samnaj, said the community has long been waiting for this change. "We were brought here to do the jobs that locals don't," Bhatti said. "Our children who have postgraduate degrees had to do sweeping and scavenging jobs. We are 10,000 families and I hope our future generations will benefit [from the new law]."

According to the 2011 census, Jammu and Kashmir has a population of 1.23 crore. This includes 28.09 lakh migrants from other states. Currently, Muslims make up 68 per cent of the population. Since most migrants are likely to apply for domicile certificates, the share could go down significantly.

Despite militancy, Jammu and Kashmir has long been a migrant magnet because of better wages, good weather, quality infrastructure and free education. Migrant workers and tourists were seldom targeted by militants. The new domicile law could increase the flow of migrants into Jammu and Kashmir, altering the demography of the Union territory in a decade or two. The BJP sees the process as the only way to end separatism in Kashmir. But the new law has upset Kashmiri Pandits, too. Activist Satish Mahaldar said the Union government was giving domicile certificates to non-Kashmiris at the expense of Kashmiri Pandits. He said the process of issuing certificates should be stopped immediately. "The government had said that Kashmir Pandits would be rehabilitated in ten districts in Kashmir, but so far nothing has happened," he said. "We demand that the government immediately come out with a rehabilitation policy for Kashmiri Pandits."

Missed congeniality

Mamata Banerjee wants opposition leaders' help in Covid-19 management and Cyclone Amphan relief work, but they are wary of her intentions

BY RABI BANERJEE

LINED UP
Women and children assemble at a private relief camp in Sandeshkhali village to collect foodgrain

JUST BEFORE THE Lok Sabha elections in May 2019, Amit Shah, who was the BJP's president then, claimed that his party would win 23 of 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said he was daydreaming. While it was clear that Banerjee and the Trinamool Congress were struggling with an eroding support base, her popularity had remained intact. No state leader of the BJP was a match for her, and she was pinning her hopes on this to sail through.

Banerjee, however, failed to see the undercurrents. A week before the last phase of the polls in Bengal, THE WEEK published a detailed report on allegations about Trinamool leaders in the western and northern parts of the state swindling state funds, and how this would affect the party in the elections. People were clearly upset with Banerjee's party.

In the end, Shah almost pulled it off. The BJP bagged 18 seats and finished second in four by margins of less than 5,000 votes. More importantly, the results indicated that the party had a shot at wresting power from the Trinamool Congress.

The assembly elections in Bengal are only 10 months away, and things have not got any better for Banerjee. A large section of the people are unhappy about the relief distribution of Covid-19 and Cyclone Amphan. There are widespread allegations that the money has gone to many undeserved people who were close to the Trinamool. The resentment is so strong that many Trinamool leaders were beaten up and their houses ransacked in different parts of the state.

Banerjee, however, has been careful not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and has taken action against dozens of leaders. It is said that she is being advised by poll strategist Prashant Kishor. Many panchayat chiefs have been expelled and many others have been served show-cause notices.

In Hooghly district, Manoj Singh, the pradhan of the Garalgacha gram panchayat, was expelled on June 20. Singh had submitted a list of 166 people for Amphan relief—among whom were himself and his wife. He was asked to resign by the Trinamool district president Dilip Yadav. "When he refused to do that, we were left with no other option but to expel him on the grounds of corruption," said a statement by the party. Yadav added: "Along with Singh, we have received a number of allegations against panchayat chiefs and members. All inquiries will be completed within a stipulated timeframe."

Banerjee's opponents, however, say this is just eyewash. "The chief minister's punishments to her party men are laughable," said CPI(M) central committee member Sujan Chakraborty. "Did she touch the big guns?" Banerjee's crackdown has so far been limited to measures at the party level. No legal action has been taken against anyone.

The government is also being criticised for the mess in the public distribution system. Some 450 ration dealers have been suspended for malpractices. "If so many ration dealers have been suspended, who would give rations? What parallel system does the state government have? If so many ration dealers are held responsible, why is the government silent on the party men who forced the ration dealers to do corruption?" asked BJP state president Dilip Ghosh.

> **"The government is in the dock. The chief minister is becoming unpopular. So she wanted all of us to be part of that mess."**
>
> **Dilip Ghosh,** state BJP president

Opposition parties allege that dealers were forced to divert foodgrain to the party's relief channel. Food Minister Jyotipriyo Mullick denied the allegations. "No one in our party would be allowed to take relief materials meant for poor people," he said. "Stringent action will be taken against them."

A week ago, Banerjee called an all-party meeting to discuss the relief measures for Covid-19 and the Amphan cyclone. The meeting was attended by the leaders of the left parties, the Congress and the BJP. The chief minister wanted to create a committee and CPI(M)

state secretary Surjya Kanta Mishra to lead it. But Mishra turned down the offer. A leader who attended the meeting told THE WEEK that Mishra told Banerjee that it was her party which had the mandate to rule. Banerjee agreed and made Education Minister Partha Chatterjee the head of the committee, which has Mishra, Ghosh and a few others as members.

Ghosh had initially resisted Banerjee's proposal to make him a committee member. "I repeatedly told her that I could not be part of such a committee which has no locus standi," he said. "Such a committee cannot work constitutionally. But the chief minister said she would empower the committee to take decisions on behalf of the government. I have never heard of such a scheme of things anywhere in India."

He said the move is politically motivated. "The government is in the dock. The chief minister is becoming unpopular. So she wanted all of us to be part of that mess. Now she would go and campaign that she wanted to take everyone with her but the opposition refused," he said.

Banerjee, for sure, has political motives, and her main goal is to stop her rivals from taking advantage of the volatile ground situation. The state has been witnessing many incidents of mob violence over relief distribution. The BJP said Trinamool party men were behind the violence. "They attacked our party men at different places when we reached there with relief materials," said Ghosh. "We have to do this because the government has failed miserably."

One of Banerjee's intentions behind constituting the committee was to make a charter of demands to the Central government. She wanted Ghosh to be the bridge to the Centre rather than Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar. If Ghosh fails, she will be able to pin it on him and the BJP.

Dhankhar, however, has already created a report. "It is sort of a scam in the making," he said. "Ruling party workers, though not entitled, got benefits, giving rise to protests and violence at many places." He said he had advised the government to use proper channels to distribute relief money. "People complained to me that in the name of relief it is daylight loot and plunder by the ruling party workers with the support of the local administration."

The Trinamool has been critical of the governor for not supporting the chief minister's demands for more funds from the Centre for relief work. Banerjee has demanded a ₹10,000 crore package and requested the opposition leaders to jointly put pressure on the Centre for it. Dhankhar, however, denied that the government had proposed any such demand to him and said it was Banerjee's political ploy. "I am all for a considered and deserved relief package for the state. For the chief minister, it is virtually a daily rhetoric with an eye on the political radar," he said.

It remains to be seen if Banerjee's new initiative is going to work. Especially because of the opposition leaders' mistrust of her and their refusal to make any commitment. But her political game is certainly on.

PTI

TAKING STOCK
Prime Minister Modi with Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar and Mamata Banerjee during the review of the cyclone situation

FORTHWRITE

MEENAKSHI LEKHI

Funding Rajiv Gandhi Foundation

The shocking revelation that the Communist Party of China donated money to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF), in 2006-2007, has put a giant question mark on the Congress-China alliance. This was at a time when a Chinese official had remarked that the whole of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory.

Rahul Gandhi's comments against the Narendra Modi government were already giving anti-national vibes when this news broke.

Apparently, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Communist Party of China and the Congress in 2008 for exchange of high-level information, details of which are unknown. Natural questions arise as to why a country that had betrayed the Congress in the past was contributing to a foundation that belonged to a family. How did RGF utilise these funds? Also, what information was exchanged with China? I smell one more apex-level scam from the controversial Congress, but this time around it involves our arch-enemy China.

ILLUSTRATION **BHASKARAN**

The Nehru-Gandhi-ruled Congress has demonstrated an unnerving callousness with regard to national security and interests.

The shady transactions in RGF do not end here. The analysis of annual reports of RGF shows that several Central government ministries, including home affairs, health and family welfare, and environment and forests have donated to RGF. Public sector undertakings like SAIL, LIC, Oriental Bank of Commerce and ONGC, too, have contributed to RGF. All this was carried out when the Congress was in power at the Centre between 2006 and 2013. It is a matter of national interest as to why public funds were being diverted to a private organisation which can easily be branded as a personal joint account of the Gandhi family, as it is chaired by Sonia Gandhi, and has Rahul, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Manmohan Singh and P. Chidambaram as trustees.

Guess what, the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, too, donated money to RGF, which makes no sense whatsoever. The PMNRF directly releases money for the welfare of the citizens. Then, why was it donating to RGF? If the intention of RGF was to work for literacy, science, women and children, as mentioned on its website, I am surprised why they could not improve facilities on the ground the regular way when the Congress was in power. The usage of a fund to evade taxes and secure black money is not a new concept, and RGF is its perfect example. Obfuscation is a hobby for the Congress.

If we dig deeper, we find that Manmohan Singh, as the finance minister in 1992, tried to divert Rs 100 crore to RGF. Though the proposal was dismissed later, mala fide intentions of the Congress government can clearly be judged by this action. Even the first chief information commissioner was a former secretary of RGF who ruled that it does fall under the ambit of RTI.

It does not end here. The Jawahar Bhawan was provided to RGF by the urban development ministry under the Congress-led government for free, even though the property was worth ₹100 crore in 1995.

The Congress's soft reaction against the Chinese government and Rahul's secret meetings with Chinese officials during the India-Chinese standoff at Doklam raise many uncomfortable questions for the opposition, and so does RGF's transactional history. An official probe will yield the reality of RGF projects. But do we still need to decipher Congress's Chinese connect?

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Blood brothers

How plasma donors in Malappuram are reaching out to save the lives of strangers

BY CITHARA PAUL

IT WAS RAINING heavily when Vineeth Ravi got the call from Dr Shinaz Babu, the nodal officer for Covid-19 at Government Medical College, Malappuram. "I picked up the phone thinking it was a casual call," said Ravi. "He calls me up regularly to check if I am OK, though it has been almost a month since I had become Covid-19 negative."

But this was more than a regular call. Babu had a request. "Doctor told me that a Covid-19 positive patient was very critical, and asked me whether I was ready to give blood for administering plasma treatment," said Ravi, 23. "I immediately said yes. How could I say no to a doctor whose medical team risked their lives to save mine?"

Ravi, who holds a diploma in mechanical engineering, had contracted the virus during his stay in Chennai. "The situation in Chennai was so bad that I rushed back to Kerala immediately after the lockdown was lifted," he said. "I tested positive and was admitted to the medical college. I am alive now because of the care given to me by Dr Shinaz and his team."

When the request came, Ravi did not think twice, but Babu insisted that he get the permission of his parents before going ahead with it. Ravi asked his mother and she agreed. "She told me that it was my responsibility to repay those who saved my life," he said. "She also told me that there is nothing greater than saving another life."

Though Ravi's home is 60km from the hospital, he reached the hospital within two hours of the call. "I told Vineeth that I would send a vehicle for him. But he said he would come on his motorbike," said Babu. "It was raining heavily. I got worried seeing him as it had been only 22 days since he had been discharged. But Vineeth showed no signs of weakness and gave the required amount of blood."

That blood has now saved a life.

It was M.K. Sainuddeen Bhaqavi, who works as an ustad in a mosque in Oman, who received Ravi's blood. Now, Bhaqavi has been discharged, becoming the first Covid-19 patient in the state to recover after receiving plasma treatment.

Bhaqavi comes from a family of traditional ustads (religious scholars). All of his eight brothers are ustads in various mosques in Malappuram. Only Bhaqavi had gone abroad and was working at a Sunni centre in Buraimi, Oman, for more than a decade. He was the president of Santwanam, a charitable society that helps NRIs. He returned to Kerala on June 6 and went straight to the medical college as he felt feverish. He tested positive for Covid-19; his condition worsened due to comorbidities and he was shifted to the ICU. But his health deteriorated further.

It was then that Babu called Ravi. "Bhaqavi's condition was very bad," he said. "We went for plasma treatment as the last hope."

Malappuram district has one of the highest number of Covid-19 cases in the state, thanks to its NRI population. Two of the patients that the medical college had tried plasma treatment on before did not respond to the treatment. But it worked well for Bhaqavi.

"He told us that the hospital staff looked after him like a mother would look after her kids,"said Bhaqavi's brother Sharafuddeen, seated next to him. It had only been a day since Bhaqavi's discharge and he was not in a position to talk much. "He used to reassure us over phone that there was nothing to worry as he was in safe hands," said Sharafuddeen.

When Bhaqavi came to know that it was Ravi's blood that saved him, he wanted to meet him. Babu arranged for it and the duo met on the day Bhaqavi was discharged. "He held my hands for a few moments and told me that there is no greater thing than saving lives," said Ravi. "I thought of my mother then as she too had told me the same. She had prayed every day for the person who was now thanking me."

Bhaqavi gifted Ravi some chocolates, too. "I had no idea for whom I was giving blood. Blood has no religion and it was proved once again when I met him," said Ravi.

According to Babu, the meeting was a great experience. "We devel-

Unique bond
Vineeth Ravi with M.K. Sainuddeen Bhaqavi (in wheelchair) on the day of the latter's discharge from the Government Medical College in Malappuram

[Bhaqavi] held my hands for a few moments and told me that there is no greater thing than saving lives.
—Vineeth Ravi

op a special bonding with all the Covid-19 patients by the time they are discharged and it was great to see someone who got cured from here coming back to help cure others," he said.

The government medical college has done five plasma treatments so far. While two showed no response, others responded well, the doctor said. The state has so far done seven plasma treatments. So how do they choose blood donors?

"We keep track of every patient even after their discharge as part of the protocol," said Babu. "Plasma can be taken from those who have turned Covid-19 negative and fall in the 18 to 50 age group. Also, they should be having no comorbidities. So, whenever blood is required, we contact the patients who meet the requirements. We have received only positive responses from them so far."

Shahul Hameed, another former Covid-19 patient in Malappuram, said that anybody who received treatment in the medical colleges in Kerala would say yes to the requests. "Such is the care we have received from the medical team here," he said. "Right from the doctor to the sweeper, all of them have taken pains to save our lives. We owe our life to them."

Hameed, who works in a transportation company in Abu Dhabi, had returned on May 7. He tested positive while in the state-run quarantine centre, and was immediately shifted to the medical college. "When one is in isolation, one has limited contact with others, and the way those few treat you matters a lot," he said. "It is the love, care and the food provided at the hospital that has brought me back to life. Donating blood is my small effort to repay those who helped me. Also, I understand the insecurities of a Covid-19 patient very well as I was also one."

It was one Rajeev Kumar (name changed) who received blood from

Donating blood is my small effort to repay those who helped me. Also, I understand the insecurities of a Covid-19 patient very well as I was also one.
—Shahul Hameed

Hameed. An assistant sub-inspector with Delhi Police, Kumar tested positive two days after his family reached Kerala on June 17. He received blood from Mohammed Basheer, too. According to doctors, Kumar is showing good improvement after receiving plasma treatment.

"When the doctor told us that two of his former Covid-19 patients had agreed to give blood to my father, we were so relieved," said Kumar's son. "I immediately asked for their numbers and called them up to thank them. That Hameed and Basheer readily agreed to give blood to someone whom they have not even seen, immediately after recovering from an illness, is a great act of love."

"I felt so happy when I got the call from the son of the patient to whom I had given blood," said Hameed. "That call has made my life more meaningful." Ravi feels the same. "That my blood was useful in saving somebody's life has made my life worthwhile," he said.

Both hoped that these tales of love from Malappuram would help clear the misconceptions about the district. "Ours is a regular district like any other," said Ravi. "The proportion of one religion may be higher than the other, but that has not stopped us from loving each other." Hameed, Bhaqavi and Kumar could only concur.

Dr Pramod Sawant, *chief minister, Goa*

Testing has been ramped up in areas of community transmission

BY MINI P. THOMAS

Q/ How is the Covid-19 situation in Goa now?
A/ Currently, there are 716 active cases in Goa [as on June 30]. Of the 1,315 people who tested positive so far, 45 per cent have recovered. Three deaths have been reported. These were patients with comorbidities.

Q/ Community transmission has begun in the state. How do you plan to redesign your containment strategies?
A/ It has come to our notice that community transmission has begun in the state. Testing has been ramped up in presumed areas of community transmission. We have also redrawn the containment and micro-containment zone maps. People who test positive are being admitted to Covid-19 care centres.

Q/ How is the state dealing with the crisis?
A/ We have a dedicated 250-bed Covid-19 hospital. By converting hotels into Covid-19 care centres, we have added 1,500 beds to our existing capacity. Besides these, we have institutional quarantine centres as well.

Q/ Goa is the first Indian state to blend ayurveda with allopathy to tackle Covid-19.
A/ Ayurveda is good for boosting immunity. People in containment zones are being given ayurvedic immunity-booster dose, as per AYUSH guidelines. That said, for people admitted in Covid-19 hospitals, we offer allopathic treatment only. We follow the Indian Council of Medical Research guidelines.

Q/ Does Goa welcome tourists now?
A/ Hotels and home stays have not resumed operations, yet. But we hope to welcome tourists within a short span of time.

Q/ What is the financial commitment of the Centre to states like Goa?
A/ States across the country have been affected by the pandemic. The Centre has provided us financial and infrastructural support.

Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan packages offer financial assistance for the poor. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced ₹20 lakh crore economic relief package. Another package for labourers has also been announced by the government. Besides all these, the Centre has allowed us to use the mineral fund deposited with the state government to deal with the pandemic. That is a great relief for us.

Q/ How has the pandemic affected the tourism and mining sectors?
A/ The mining sector has not been affected much as transportation was allowed. But tourism has been hit hard—100 per cent loss has been reported in this sector.

However, we managed to support the pharma and food industries even during Lockdown 1. Now, all the industries [except tourism] are running at 90 per cent of capacity.

Q/ How are you providing support to people who lost their livelihood?
A/ It is challenging. We are exploring ways to help farmers and those in the travel and tourism, and mining industries.

Q/ What are the learnings from the pandemic?
A/ We need to come up with vaccines and immunity-booster doses to fight the infection. As the chief minister of Goa, I believe it is a great opportunity to master the lost art of self-reliant living. Our youth are practising lessons of self-reliance in their farms. We are looking at ways to export more and import less.

Handle with care

With no magic bullet to treat Covid-19, experts want more evidence for 'breakthrough' drugs

BY NAMITA KOHLI

The treatment landscape of Covid-19 has turned chaotic, and misleading claims generating false hopes are often finding favour. Every few days, a new drug seems to show "promise", leading to patients rushing to procure them, and at times, doctors prescribing them, despite lack of solid evidence.

Amid the chaos, though, several doctors concur that dexamethasone, a corticosteroid, has proven to be the best bet until now. The drug was tested in over 70 hospitals in the UK as part of the steroidal arm of RECOVERY trial, a randomised controlled trial (RCT) that began in March . The results of this arm of the trial, announced on June 16, revealed that dexamethasone reduced deaths by one-third in ventilated patients, and by one-fifth in patients receiving oxygen therapy only.

However, doctors told THE WEEK that they had been using the drug since the early days of the pandemic. "It is an old steroidal drug," said Dr Sumit Ray, head, critical care medicine, Holy Family Hospital, New Delhi. "Steroids have been known to be fairly useful in ARDS (acute respiratory distress syndrome), hence we had been using it from the beginning. We also had the benefit of learning from the experience of intensivists in European countries that faced a surge before we did."

For mild cases; helps in faster clearance of virus, according to one study

150 patients enrolled in **12** Indian hospitals

Observational study in Japan showed significant side effects like abnormal liver function

Risk of toxicity on foetus

COST

₹12,500

(₹**103** per tablet. 18 tablets on day 1; 8 for next 13 days)

In its latest protocol for clinical management of Covid-19, the Union health ministry included dexamethasone for the treatment of moderate to severe cases of Covid-19. It is being recommended as an alternative to the other corticosteroid medication, methylprednisolone.

However, timing is key, explains Ray. Covid-19 has two main phases. In the early phase or viremia, the virus attacks the body and an immune response is triggered. It is when the immune system goes into an overdrive, known as a cytokine storm, that the trouble starts. Steroids work by suppressing the immune system. "Suppressing the immune system can sometimes lead to secondary bacterial infections," said Ray. "But we know by now that in Covid-19, that does not happen very often. So, steroids work well in case of critically ill patients."

Dr Tanu Singhal, consultant, paediatrics and infectious diseases, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Mumbai, said that the drug was being used since the early days but it is not a magic bullet. "Not all patients will benefit from it, and there may be some side effects, too," she said.

The other drug that is gaining popularity, remdesivir, is an anti-viral that seems to work by stopping the replication of the virus in the early stages. Preliminary results of an RCT done in the US showed that the drug helped in reducing the duration of hospitalisation. But Dr Shruti Tandan, consultant, critical care medicine, Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre, Mumbai, is not impressed. Remdesivir, she says, was an "orphan drug" of sorts, waiting for a clinical indication for over a decade. And it seems the company (Gilead Sciences) has finally found one. Tandan says that Covid-19 progresses in stages, with the active phase beginning from 5 to 10 days, and after 7 to 8 days, the body begins to develop antibodies to combat the virus.

When the body enters the cytokine storm phase, the patient turns serious. At this point, the virus has already been cleared from the system. "The value of remdesivir is in the early phase, if given in the first 10 days," said Tandan. "But it is no magic cure because it does not reduce mortality or organ dysfunction. And that's what matters in an ICU."

While hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), also an experimental drug in Covid-19, was cheaper, easily available and had proven safety, remdesivir is expensive, difficult to procure, and has side effects such as kidney and liver toxicity that might increase the burden on ICUs. "The panic has meant that people are stockpiling pulse oximeters, oxygen cylinders and even expensive drugs, and those who need it may face shortages," she added. Though remdesivir has shown to have same benefit in RCTs, its cost-effectiveness is an issue, said Singhal.

For moderate cases; stops replication of virus, reduces duration of hospital stay

Benefits if given in the first 10 days

No benefit in mortality or organ dysfunction

COST

₹32,000

(5-day course),

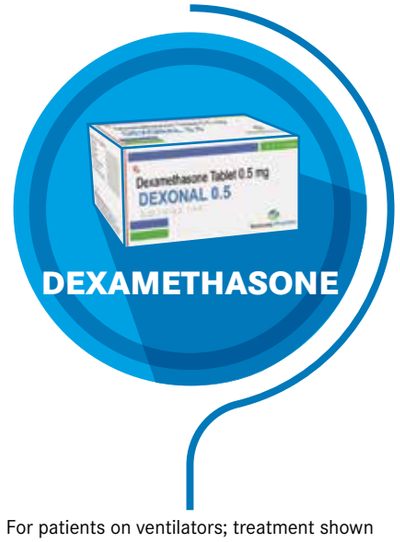
₹54,000

(10-day course)

However, it is the third drug in the fray, favipiravir, also an anti-viral, that seems to be bothering doctors the most. "In the case of favipiravir, the problem is that the drug has become so popular that even people from the villages seem to know about it, and want it," says Dr S.P. Kalantri, department of medicine, MGIMS, Sevagram, Maharashtra. "But there is no high-quality evidence to suggest that it is either safe or effective." Small, poorly designed trials have shown that the drug helps in faster clearance of the virus, and improvements in X-ray have been shown in an observational study. "But these are not meaningful clinical endpoints, these are only surrogate markers," said Kalantri. "Who cares if the virus clears on day 5 or day 7? Or if the X-ray shows improvement on day 2 or day 3? In a disease such as this, it is the mortality benefit or progression to sever disease that matters." In India, the results of a trial done on favipiravir in 12 large hospitals have managed to enrol only 150 patients, and was sponsored by the company. Singhal says that the company ought to make the results of the trial public so that experts can evaluate them.

"At ₹103 a tablet, it is not exactly cheap," said Kalantri. "Besides, the question is whether we need a medicine for mild disease at all. When such medicines are approved by the drug regulator, then family members of a patient feel pressured to buy them since the well-being of a loved one is at stake. The question is, is that kind of money worth it for a flu-like illness? In Japan, the trial showed it had significant side effects and put a foetus at risk of developing toxicity . How many doctors are aware of this?"

These are desperate times. But logical thinking and scientific rigour must not be abandoned, experts insist. If we can manage a good trial with a clear endpoint and solid evidence as in the case of dexamethasone, other drugs need to be evaluated in a similar manner.



For patients on ventilators; treatment shown to reduce mortality by about **1/3rd**

For patients requiring only oxygen, mortality cut by about **1/5th**

(Both above: According to preliminary findings)

Can have side effects. Can worsen disease if given in early stages

COST

₹10-₹100

per injection
(in hospitals, including mark-ups)

Online succour

How the Tele ICU initiative is helping Karnataka detect Covid-19 early and prevent deaths

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

KEEPING TRACK
Deputy Chief Minister Dr C.N. Ashwath Narayan after inaugurating the second Tele ICU at Gulbarga Institute of Medical Sciences; (left) a screen showing representatives of various districts with Tele ICU setup during a review meeting

A 55-year-old man with chronic liver disease and severe cough was recently rushed to the intensive care unit of the Covid-19 hospital in Karnataka's Bagalkot district. As he tested positive and his condition deteriorated, doctors feared that he might succumb to the pandemic just like the hospital's first critical patient who was admitted in March. This man, however, survived. A team of specialist doctors from Bengaluru, who are part of the state's Tele ICU initiative, helped doctors in Bagalkot treat the patient. "The patient was a former alcoholic and was in a critical state," said Dr Chandrakant Javali, senior specialist physician in Bagalkot. "But Tele ICU helped save the patient. I feel I would not have lost the first patient if Tele ICU had been there earlier."

For doctors in peripheral hospitals who battle limited infrastructure and poor access to treatment protocols, Tele ICU has been a boon. Set up in mid-April, Tele ICU is an online facility to treat critically ill patients in remote areas with the help of off-site experts and technology. The state government has roped in two private hospitals—Columbia Asia and Manipal Hospitals in Bengaluru—to act as the nerve centre of 29 district hospitals designated as Covid-19 hospitals. Tele ICU has pulmonologists, intensivists and critical care experts conducting e-rounds to monitor critical cases in remote areas twice a day.

Karnataka has had 1,568 high-risk patients; 749 of them have been discharged and 755 are being treated. Out of the 207 deaths reported till June 15, eight patients were brought dead. A good number of cases were late referrals from private hospitals.

"Covid-19 is a unique disease because at least 50 per cent of patients appear very normal, but suffer sudden deterioration because of silent hypoxemia (dip in oxygen level in blood), which can be fatal," said Dr Pradeep Rangappa, who is heading Tele ICU's Columbia Asia unit. "As low oxygen in blood goes unnoticed if not tested, we identified certain alarm markers or predictive variables for Covid-19 patients. Blood tests help us monitor these alarm indicators. Early indication helps in early intervention, which in turn reduces mortality."

Dr Trilok Chandra, Tele ICU's chief nodal officer, said high-risk groups—like the elderly, patients with co-morbidities, children and pregnant women—needed a critical care support unit. But setting up Tele ICU was challenging, as most government hospitals did not have well-equipped ICUs or the expertise to handle a new disease like Covid-19. "First, we standardised the checklist so that all hospitals followed the same set of parameters for investigation, monitoring and treatment," said Chandra. "We homogenised the care and identified alarm markers. The state-level expert committee came up with treatment protocols and standard operating procedures from time to time. The government also upgraded the ICUs in hospitals to provide bedside dialysis, X-ray and oxygen facilities. During the weekly videoconferences, the specialists guided the remote hospitals to make necessary changes to their ICUs or treatment protocol."

The 257-bed district hospital in Bagalkot, which has 43 ICU beds, 24 doctors and 100 staff nurses, was upgraded. "We procured pulse oximeters and non-invasive ventilators, and trained our staff on safety measures. Tele ICU has dramatically changed the outcomes, as it has helped in constant monitoring and early intervention," said Javali.

Rangappa said the initiative clicked because on-site and off-site experts worked cohesively. "The network of more than 150 doctors working across 29 hospitals subscribed to the concept,"he said.

"The knowledge transfer brought transformative change in treatment protocols and practice patterns, empowering bedside doctors to adopt standard operating procedures and train their staff. The involvement of the bedside doctor in decision-making helped shape effective treatment, as patients came in with challenging and multiple complications."

Tele ICUs have helped doctors adapt new technologies; for instance, non-invasive ventilation is more effective than invasive ventilation in critical cases. "We started monitoring all patients with pulse oximeter, as a sudden dip in oxygen levels can be dangerous," said Chandra. "Patients were monitored using finger clip oximeter, which gives an alert the moment the oxygen level goes below the threshold. This has improved the chances of survival. Our endeavour is to prevent patients from reaching the ventilator stage with early identification and therapeutic interventions."

The Covid-19 death rate in Karnataka is one of the lowest in India. "The Karnataka model of Tele ICU can be replicated by other states reporting high Covid-related mortality," said Rangappa. "However, deaths can be averted not just by doctors or treatment, but by the behaviour of people as well."

With the easing of the lockdown, the government is expecting a surge in the number of critical cases. It has enhanced facilities in ICUs and isolation wards, and formed district-level "therapeutic committees" involving specialists in private hospitals.

"The state is encouraging reverse quarantine—confining only the vulnerable groups to home—children under 10, persons above 55, and those with co-morbidities," said Chandra. "We are also conducting household surveys to detect the cases early. We are also sensitising private hospitals to refer symptomatic patients to the designated health facility, or follow the standard treatment protocol." T

Cover drive

With Covid-19 cases surging in India, insurance companies are offering a range of products that will help make treatment more affordable

BY ABHINAV SINGH

PEARLY GUPTA, a Mumbai-based media professional, was relieved when her 31-year-old brother returned home after being cured of Covid-19. The hospital bill, however, came as a rude shock. Her brother had spent nine days in a private hospital, and his treatment was covered by a group insurance plan provided by his employer. The plan, however, did not cover the cost of consumables—single-use items like masks and personal protective equipment.

"The total cost of the treatment was Rs2.59 lakh, in which consumables accounted for more than Rs1 lakh," said Gupta. "This had to be borne by us. I feel one should carefully go through the fine print before finalising any health insurance cover."

With Covid-19 cases surging across India, insurance companies are offering a range of plans to offset the rising cost of treatment. There are plans that cover the cost of PPE kits and even outpatient bills. Companies are developing new products as per the guidelines recently issued by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority. The IRDA has asked all general and health insurance companies to offer a standard, short-term policy—called Corona Kavach—with a minimum sum insured of Rs50,000 and a maximum of Rs5 lakh. The new plans, which will also cover home treatment expenses, will be valid till March 31, 2021.

"Our health insurance policy covers Covid-19 treatment," said Shanai Ghosh, executive director and CEO, Edelweiss General Insurance. "We also have a modular product with optional benefits that can be used to cover various illnesses, including Covid-19. Usually, most policies have a waiting period of around one month, except for accident cases. Some coronavirus-specific policies launched recently have a waiting period of 15 days. But we have obtained special approval from the IRDA to waive this for our policy."

According to Ghosh, consumables make up around 50 per cent of Covid-19 treatment costs. "So we have decided to pay reasonable charges for PPE kits for Covid-19 admissions. We are not charging additional premium to cover medical expenses related to Covid-19."

In the early days of the outbreak in India, treatment costs were low because patients were being admitted to government facilities. After the number of cases began surging, a few private facilities opened up and costs increased. With private hospitals increasingly playing a role now, treatment costs are now expected to stabilise.

Bajaj Allianz General Insurance has introduced 'Corona Care', a Covid-specific group policy that will help those who do not have a holistic health insurance policy. It has a waiting period of 15 days and covers pre- and post-hospitalisation expenses for 30 days.

The company says it has a mechanism to fast-track Covid-19 claims. "The moment a claim is notified to us, we get in touch with the hospital, check the Covid-19 report of the insured, understand the condition of the insured, and communicate to the hospital the decision [to provide] cashless treatment," said Gurdeep Singh Batra, head, retail underwriting, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance. "We also have an in-house health administration team for our customers that enables us to settle claims faster."

ICICI Lombard General Insurance is offering a policy that gives the entire sum insured if the policyholder contracts Covid-19. The company has also reduced the waiting period of its regular health insurance policies from 30 days to 15 days. "We cover costs related to Covid-19 treatment claims as per policy terms and conditions," said Sanjay Datta, chief of claims, underwriting and reinsurance, ICICI Lombard General Insurance. "We are continuing to pay for all necessary diagnostics and PPE kits for claims that we are receiving."

HDFC ERGO General Insurance offers a product that covers individuals aged 18 or above, and their dependent children from their 91st day of birth. There is no upper-age entry limit, subject to underwriting terms and conditions. "We have over 11,000 network hospitals empanelled with us and most of the private hospitals authorised by state governments [for Covid-19 treatment] are already part of this network," said Ravi Vishwanath, president, accident and health, HDFC ERGO. "We are also regularly checking the hospitals that state governments are authorising, and empanelling them on to our network, in case they are not already part of it."

Universal Sompo General Insurance Company have introduced a Covid-specific policy that covers additional expenses besides regular hospitalisation costs. Policyholders can claim expenses up to the sum insured even if they chose home treatment. "In all our existing health products, the inpatient hospitalisation expenses for Covid-19 treatment is covered as per standard policy terms and conditions," said Bisheshwari Singh, chief marketing officer, Universal Sompo General Insurance Company. "There is no change in the coverage and premium as such for the Covid-19 cover."

Singh said the company has not tied up with any government hospital because only private hospitals offer cashless facilities. "Treatment in government hospitals is often free of cost," he said. "However, out-of-pocket expenses incurred by a patient in a government hospital, including pre- and post-hospitalisation expenses, are covered under reimbursement mode, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy."

GETTY IMAGES

CAPITAL CARE
A patient being assisted by a hospital staff at BLK Hospital in New Delhi

INTERVIEW

Dilip Jose, *managing director & CEO, Manipal Hospitals*

Major drop in revenue

WHILE PUBLIC HOSPITALS have been waging a war on Covid-19, private hospitals have been fighting a perception battle. They have been facing flak for not pitching in to contain the pandemic and for placing a high price tag on treatment. But the pandemic has taken a toll on private hospitals, too, leading to a loss in revenue. In an interview, Dilip Jose, MD & CEO of Manipal Hospitals, details the challenges faced by private hospitals and the way forward. Excerpts:

Q/ How do you see the impact of Covid-19 on private hospitals?
A/ The lockdown and restriction on movement have significantly reduced the number of people accessing hospitals. The later part of March and the whole of April saw only urgent care and emergencies at most hospitals. As bulk of the costs associated with running a hospital is fixed, the drop in revenue resulted in large losses. We have been able to manage the cash flow by cost reduction and deferral with the support of all business associates and banks, and have avoided layoffs at all levels, including contract employees.

Q/ What is the cost of Covid-19 treatment in private hospitals?
A/ The cost of Covid-19 treatment would vary depending on the severity of the disease. Major increase in cost occurs when a patient ends up requiring critical care and has serious comorbidities.

Q/ At a time when hospitals are burdened with reduced revenues, there is increasing pressure to bring down the cost of Covid-19 treatment. What does that mean for private health care?
A/ The reduction in revenues of hospitals from April onwards is on account of the lockdown restrictions.... Treating Covid-19 patients is not at all expected to plug this gap in revenues. Given the criticality of the pandemic, most hospitals are stepping up to work with the state governments to ensure that everything possible is being done to care for the Covid-19 patients. Some of the recent changes in guidelines on early discharge would also help in significantly bringing down the cost of treatment.

Q/ What are the additional costs now?
A/ The increase in operating costs during the pandemic has been essentially on account of the additional safety protocols. In terms of material costs, these are for PPEs of doctors and staff treating Covid-19 patients, increased consumption of masks and gloves as well as use of sanitisers. Other costs incurred include setting up of separate fever clinics in hospitals, thermal scanning equipment as well as those related to social distancing requirement. More than these incremental costs, what has had a major impact on hospitals is the major drop in revenue as all elective and non-emergency procedures were stopped.

Q/ How are hospitals managing their expenses?
A/ Most hospitals have reported about 30 to 40 per cent of the normal revenue in April. Since the cost structure of hospitals is mostly fixed, this has led to significant cash losses in the month. There are instances of smaller hospitals and nursing homes closing down operations already. Others have managed by cutting expenses to only bare essentials, and by deferring payments, additional borrowings and even slashing payments to doctors and employees.

Q/ Do you expect the government to support the industry?
A/ The government has taken some early steps already. The moratorium announced by the Reserve Bank of India, too, would help. What is required in the short term is support with affordable working capital. In the medium term, the urgent need is to catch up on investments required to create a robust public health care infrastructure across all levels. As a percentage of GDP, our current spend is way below the requirement and a sharp focus on this area would make us better prepared to face challenges of the future, which might be even more complex than the current one.

SOUND BITE | ANITA PRATAP

This is America

During the pandemic, the rich got richer. Not only billionaires like Amazon's Jeff Bezos or Microsoft's Bill Gates, whose goods and services enjoyed unprecedented demand. The rich got richer because they could not spend. New research shows that spending by the top 25 per cent of American earners' dropped by 17 per cent; in low income groups it fell only by 4 per cent.

The rich saved money as they worked and played at home. But the livelihood of many low-wage workers depends on the lifestyle and whims of the rich. While landscaping and swimming pool services thrived, small businesses in the posh neighbourhoods—wine bars, sushi restaurants, Pilates studios, and gourmet boutiques—suffered a 70 per cent revenue drop and a 65 per cent job loss.

Research by Opportunity Insights headed by Harvard's Raj Chetty assessed the economic impact of Covid-19 and the US government's response. They analysed digital data obtained from credit card processors, payroll firms, government agencies and private companies using Big Data. Dissected data generates interactive maps, charts and infographics that are used to examine details and understand patterns. Chetty, 40, whose parents emigrated three decades ago, is described as a "star economist" destined to win a Nobel Prize.

Studying consumption patterns is kosher—it is economics, capitalism and utterly American. Two-thirds of the United States economy is fuelled by consumption. But Chetty establishes the moral significance of Big Data, using it to expose the underbelly of injustice, inequality and income-segregation. His "Opportunity Atlas" map colour-codes rich and poor neighbourhoods across the US, revealing that poverty is concentrated in the former slave-owning regions. There is an oasis of white affluence in towns like Charlotte, fringed by ghettos of black misery. His research proves that moving children to better neighbourhoods improves their future income. The younger the child, the greater the benefit. The children of one per-centers are 10 times more likely to become inventors even when their childhood math scores were the same as the poor children's. Chetty calls these underprivileged children "Lost Einsteins", cursed by their poor neighbourhoods. Today's street protests underline Leonardo da Vinci's 500-year old observation: "Inequality is the cause of all local movements."

Chetty's data show that the government response to Covid-19 was largely ineffective. The $500 billion support to big companies did not save jobs. It should have been given to small businesses. The $1,200 stimulus cheques bearing Donald Trump's name went to millions of affluent housewives, expatriates and even dead Americans. Chetty warns against forcibly restarting the economy. As long as the rich are afraid of the virus, they will not go out and spend money. So the government must bring the virus under control.

The economy will eventually return, but millions of low-paid American jobs may not. Previous shocks—globalisation, offshoring, deindustrialisation—reveal that workers find relocation and retraining difficult. In the 2000s, a million manufacturing jobs were lost in the American Rust Belt to cheap Chinese imports. Unable to find new jobs, non-college-educated, middle-aged white men became addicted to alcohol and opioids, resulting in "Deaths of Despair".

Researchers despair over the ruins of the American Dream. The dream extols the ideal that regardless of where they are born, capable children can succeed and earn more than their parents. Chetty busts this myth. He has shown that children born in 1940 had a 90 per cent chance of earning more than their parents. In 1990, only 50 per cent stood that chance. How then does one achieve the American Dream? Chetty says: Move to Canada.

ILLUSTRATION **BHASKARAN**

Pratap is an author and journalist.

Ready to rumble

Despite promises of troop reduction, China has further strengthened its deployment on border flash points by setting up permanent bunkers, pillboxes and observation posts. THE WEEK looks at options before the Indian Army to impose a bigger cost on the enemy for the Galwan "betrayal"

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

PTI

COMFORT CALL
Army chief M.M. Naravane interacts with an injured soldier at the Military Hospital in Leh

STANDING GUARD
Indian soldiers in Ladakh

OMRI ELIYAHU/SHUTTERSTOCK

After returning to Delhi from his two-day visit to the forward areas of eastern Ladakh on June 25, Army chief General M.M. Naravane first briefed Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. The duo then went to Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a detailed situation report. After interacting with soldiers injured in the Galwan clash and with his local commanders, General Naravane concluded that the situation in the Ladakh sector was way too serious. Despite promises of troop reduction, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has further strengthened its deployment on the flash points by setting up permanent bunkers, pillboxes and observation posts. The prevailing sentiment on the ground on the Indian side is to impose a bigger cost on the enemy for the Galwan "betrayal".

Eyeball-to-eyeball situation prevails in multiple locations where troops are separated by barely 100m, although at the June 22 meeting between corps commanders, there was an understanding to maintain a distance of at least 2.5km to 3km. What is most worrying for India is the deployment of Chinese armoured vehicles and artillery units in areas facing the Gogra Post-Hot Springs region. In response, India has moved forward its newly-inducted M777 howitzers, T-90 Bhishma tanks and other armoured vehicles. While China has deployed the S-400 air defence system, India has in place its Akash air defence system.

Even as New Delhi is exploring diplomatic and economic options to put pressure on Beijing to return to the pre-April status quo, the Army has been devising ways to show its prowess to the enemy. "Either you exercise military options or you wait and watch through negotiations. But in the wait-and-watch scenario, another Galwan type clash cannot be ruled out," said a former deputy Army chief. "Military options, however, always have the risk of escalation."

The PLA has 2.3 lakh troops under its western theatre command and the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts. It has recently deployed its 4th Motorised Infantry Division opposite Daulat Beg Oldie-Debang, while the 6th Mechanised Infantry Division is positioned between Pangong Tso and Chumar. There is another Chinese division opposite Demchok. A military observer said the PLA's objective could be to threaten a section of the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road and cut off the DBO sector, restricting India's access to the Karakoram Pass.

Military analysts believe that India has an edge over China as it has fought and won several wars with Pakistan. Moreover, it has many fighter aircraft capable of flying at high altitudes. Chinese pilots have to fly with limited supplies and fuel because of difficult weather at their air bases in Tibet.

HOLDING THE LINE

With heavy deployment, the enemy

can be restricted to wherever they are, which is known as holding the line in military strategy. To ramp up its deployment along the 826km-long front on the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, the Army, apart from its regular deployment, has moved at least two of its divisions from their peacetime locations in Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh towards the Ladakh sector, along with two engineer regiments.

Animal Transport Units, which have not been used for several years, have been reactivated to move arms and ammunition to places without proper roads. The units, consisting of sturdy mules, have been assigned to support remote outposts located at heights of up to 19,000 feet.

The Army has moved an infantry division to look after the Galwan and DBO sector, and there is another division to take on aggression in Hot Springs, Chushul, Pangong Tso and Spanggur Gap. Another division is based at Chumur and Demchok. The frontline troops are reinforced by infantry and armoured brigades, three tank regiments and a mechanised regiment.

A few months ago, there was an integrated exercise of all arms by the Army in a "super high altitude area" in eastern Ladakh involving tanks, infantry soldiers, paratroopers and mechanised infantry as part of a readiness exercise to test its capabilities against China. "Holding the line is a defensive, but deterrent strategy," said former northern Army commander Lieutenant General (retd) D.S. Hooda. "The huge deployment of troops, artillery and armoured vehicles may somehow create fear in the enemy's mind, preventing it from moving further."

Holding the Line is a defensive but a deterrent strategy. With huge deployment of troops, artillery and armoured vehicles, it may somehow create fear in the enemy's mind, preventing him to move further.

Lt Gen D.S. Hooda, former northern Army commander

PTI

QUID PRO QUO

Quid pro quo option in military parlance means tit for tat. To counter China's 'adamant' behaviour on the border, India can strike at places where it enjoys tactical advantage. "We can occupy some of their areas where we can dominate them with sheer numbers. By occupying Chinese territory, our bargaining power becomes stronger and gives us negotiating leverage," said a general. But it is an act of military escalation and may have its consequences.

Top defence ministry sources said the Army was working on places on the LAC where it had the upper hand. Military strategists believe that even in some areas in the Ladakh sector, like the plains of Depsang, India has the tactical edge. The Army enjoys numerical advantage in Depsang, Trig Heights, Dumchele, Chumar, Spanggur Gap and the south of Pangong Tso. Apart from the Tawang sector, which is heavily guarded by both sides, there are several places in the rest of Arunachal Pradesh, including Lohit, Subansiri and the Dibang valley, where the Indian Army can surprise the Chinese. Barahoti, Kaurik and Shipki La in the middle sector and the Chumbi valley near Sikkim can also be considered.

"The Chinese are not moving back, and military and diplomatic talks have not yielded much," said Lieutenant General (retd) Mohinder Puri, former deputy chief of the Army. "I would feel comfortable if we think of a quid pro quo on the other side. Plenty of areas are available where we can surprise them." Some military analysts, however, feel that exercising the quid pro quo option is a little difficult now because the Chinese are also on

THE BASE TO GUARD

If localised conflict breaks out, one of China's main objectives will be to take Daulat Beg Oldie

Ladakh sector

XIV Corps (Leh)
3 Infantry Division
8 Mountain Division

Map is illustrative

India has the edge over China in military airlift to the Himalayan border. While India can transport entire brigades, China can airlift just about one division in one airlift. The rest will have to move by road and rail, both of which are vulnerable to interdiction by Indian Air Force

Till 2009, the People's Liberation Army had three major airfields in Tibet—**Kongka, Hoping and Pangta**. Since then, they have built five more—**Donshoon, Nagchuka, Shiquanhe, Bayixincun, and Dangxiong**. So, it is assumed that in the event of hostilities breaking out, there will be several military transport landings in these airfields. But these would be easily picked up by Indian satellites

Though India has built the **Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DS-DBO) Road**, the lifeline will be the airfields of **Nyoma** and **DBO** and the landing ground at **Fukche**. The problem is that night landings are difficult in these places

Following the Depsang crisis of 2013, India fortified **Burtse** and **DBO**. If a localised conflict breaks out, one of China's main objectives will be to take DBO. That will prevent India from sending supplies to the **Burtse garrison**. Supplies will then have to be brought from **Leh** and **Thoise**

SOURCE **GOOGLE MAPS**

GRAPHICS **SREEMANIKANDAN S.**

alert in every sector.

Lieutenant General (retd) Vinod Bhatia, who was director general of military operations, said for a viable quid pro quo option, India needed a mountain strike corps, which had the capability for such operations. A mountain strike corps named XVII Corps was sanctioned in July 2013 after the Chinese incursion in Depsang. But the corps, headquartered in Panagarh in West Bengal, could raise only a single division in seven years. The project is now on the backburner as the Army is focusing on small Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs).

One plan under the quid pro quo strategy is to recapture Aksai Chin, which India lost in 1962. But the risk of a full-fledged war is probably stopping military planners from going ahead. Moreover, Aksai Chin, which links China's Xinjiang district with Tibet, is not as strategically important for India as it is for China. "For China, Aksai Chin is very critical and the Chinese will certainly make every effort to retain it," said an official.

LIMITED CONFLICT

It means forcibly evicting PLA troops from India's territory and securing the heights through a calibrated conflict. Military strategists believe that the Indian infantry and special forces could launch coordinated surprise infantry or special-forces attacks on each one of the occupied positions, with artillery and armour support in the rear as a deterrent against escalation. This is the most vocal argument among military planners. In fact, during his visit to the forward locations in the eastern Ladakh sector, General Naravane got a sense from his men that China needed to be unequivocally told that the Indian Army was no pushover and that the PLA could not keep on unilaterally changing the status quo along the border. India can look at limited conflict options, which will be limited in time and geography.

The newly set up IBG is the most workable option available, as it has elements of airpower, armour, artillery, mechanised and traditional infantry engineering and ordnance units that can be activated without delay. An Army official said the IBGs could perform both offensive roles involving cross-border operations and the defensive role of withstanding an attack.

TALKING HEADS Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, along with chiefs of the defence forces, launches No Objection Certificate portal for Research Survey Exploration and Exploitation activities in territorial waters of the country in New Delhi

PHOTOS **PTI**

A general who supports limited conflict said the option was either to accept the ground situation or to keep fighting to get back lost territory. "When all your diplomatic channels fail, you are left with military options. Limited conflict option seems the obvious one. If you are determined to kick them out, you go for limited conflict options. Infantry and special forces can be supported with armoured elements and the newly-inducted Apache attack helicopters," said the general. The limited conflict option, however, has the maximum chance of escalation and can result in a full-fledged war.

> **AThough we recognise that China has a much larger defence expenditure than us, we also have the capability to surprise China.**
> **General (retd) Deepak Kapoor,** former Army chief

"Military options are very much there. But the key issue is whether it should be exercised at this point of time. Military options like quid pro quo or limited conflict can be considered at an appropriate time," said Hooda. When asked about the use of airpower, he said it was an option if India decided to escalate. "I do not think we should start with airpower. It is not a Balakot-type situation, and China is not Pakistan."

COVERT OPERATION

A section of the military believes that hitting Chinese investments in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir through covert operations can also be a viable option. Targeting the 3,000km-long China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that connects the two countries with railway lines, roads, pipelines and optical fibre networks can be a message to Beijing. The CPEC, which is a key element of China's Belt and Road Initiative, passes through PoK.

"China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects worth $11 to 12 billion in PoK even before the BRI was launched. We can activate our assets in Gilgit-Baltistan to carry out a covert operation," said an official. Balochi nationalists can also be tapped to target Chinese interests. Observers, however, point out that China and Pakistan have taken every possible precaution to ensure CPEC's security. China has recently supplied armed drones to Pakistan specifically for the purpose.

Another option before India is to target restive regions in China like Xinjiang and Tibet. "If China can raise the issue of Kashmir, we can also start talking about Tibet and Xinjiang," said a military strategist.

MARITIME OPTION

Another option before India is to put pressure on China with naval operations in the Strait of Malacca and other chokepoints in the Indian Ocean Region, which are critical for Chinese energy supply. India can also target the new Chinese oil terminal in Made Island in the Bay of Bengal off the Myanmarese coast, which receives tankers from Africa and the Middle East and transports oil through pipelines to Kunming in China. "We can use our naval assets to block Chinese vessels in these chokepoints," said an observer. "China is dependent on the sea lanes of communications in the Indian Ocean Region for its energy imports. Targeting its interests will be a viable option."

Besides working on immediate options, military planners believe that India should be ready for the 'long haul'. Former Army chief General (retd) Deepak Kapoor said the 2017 Doklam standoff took 73 days to resolve, and the ongoing crisis could last much longer. "I will look at it as a long-term problem which is not going to be sorted out overnight. It will take months. I do not foresee a solution anytime soon," he said. He added that even if military action was required, it had to be supported with diplomacy. "If nothing gets resolved through talks or negotiations, then the possibility of military option remains. We have multiple options and the capability to strike at the right time. Though we recognise that China has a much larger defence expenditure than us, we also have the capability to surprise China," he said.

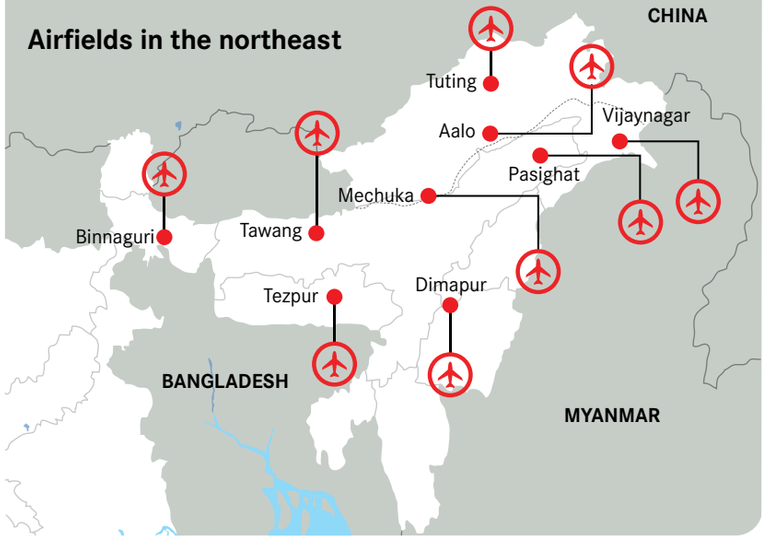
As winter approaches, it will not be possible for China to keep occupying the heights, as temperatures will drop to minus 40 degrees Celsius. "First of all, the PLA is not used to such high altitudes," said Bhatia. "The cost of occupying the heights is manifold and if China is ready to pay it, let us see."

STRENGTH IN THE EAST

Eastern and middle sector

III Corps	IV Corps	XXXIII Corps	XVII Corps
(Dimapur)	(Tezpur)	(Siliguri)	Partly raised
2 Mountain Div	71 Mountain Div	17 Mountain Div	mountain strike
56 Mountain Div	5 Mountain Div	20 Mountain Div	corps with
57 Mountain Div	21 Mountain Div	27 Mountain Div	59 Division

Airfields in the northeast



Map is illustrative

GRAPHICS **SYAM KRISHNAN**

AFP

IN THE DOCK TikTok, which India banned, has denied sharing information on Indian users with the Chinese government

Secure line

India may hang up on Chinese telecom equipment and system providers

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

Dezinformatsiya, which means disinformation in Russian, is a term widely used to describe an alleged covert online campaign to sway the results of the 2016 US Presidential elections. American cybersecurity experts have blamed Russian intelligence for spreading disinformation on social media to manipulate voters and turn the tide in favour of Donald Trump.

As India is trying to block Chinese manoeuvrers in the Galwan valley and on the Line of Actual Control, intelligence agencies are worried about the People's Liberation Army using the backdoor of popular Chinese applications to access critical information and manipulate the sentiments of Indian users. As a defensive step, India has blocked 59 Chinese applications, including popular ones like TikTok, Helo, WeChat, ShareIT, UC Browser and Club Factory. The decision came after intelligence agencies noticed that all these applications were capable of transferring data to servers outside India.

On May 7, The Citizen Lab, an interdisciplinary laboratory based at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, came out with shocking disclosures on how non-China users of WeChat were subject to pervasive content surveillance. WeChat, a multi-purpose app for messaging, social media and mobile payment, is the most popular social media platform in China and the third most popular in the world.

John Scott-Railton, senior researcher at The Citizen Lab, told THE WEEK that applications developed for the Chinese market had built-in censorship and, in some cases, surveillance tools.

John Scott-Railton, senior researcher at The Citizen Lab, told THE WEEK that applications developed for the Chinese market had built-in censorship and, in some cases, surveillance tools. "This is just another example of that problem," he said. "It is the scale of users that makes it so troubling." He said there were serious national security concerns for other countries that use such products.

A report prepared by Indian security agencies has raised concerns over Chinese corporations having a Communist Party cell to monitor and ensure that the party line is maintained. It refers to the Cybersecurity Law of People's Republic of China, which came into effect on June 1, 2017, and mandates all Chinese companies to cooperate with and collaborate in national intelligence work. "This means that China can weaponise their data for information warfare," said a senior cyber security official.

For instance, TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese internet giant ByteDance, has around 119 million active users in India. If the Chinese government or the Communist Party has access to these accounts, they can read the popular sentiments in the country by analysing the data or spread disinformation to manipulate these sentiments.

TikTok strongly denied the allegations. Nikhil Gandhi, head of TikTok India, said the platform complied with all data privacy and security requirements under Indian law and had not shared any information of its users with any foreign government, including the Chinese. Meanwhile, the Chinese foreign ministry said New Delhi's decision to ban Chinese apps was discriminatory and it ran against fair and transparent procedure requirements.

China's giant telecommunication companies like Huawei and ZTE are also bound by the Chinese Cybersecurity Law, and India is not the only country worried about it. On June 30, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) designated Huawei, ZTE and their affiliates and subsidiaries as national security threats and blocked their deals of expanding internet access in rural America. "Both companies have close ties to the Chinese Communist Party and China's military apparatus, and both companies are broadly subject to Chinese law obligating them to cooperate with the country's intelligence services," said FCC chairman Ajit Pai.

Huawei and ZTE are among the world's biggest suppliers of telecom gear and have a strong presence in 5G telecom technology.

While the ban on Chinese applica-

tions is the first step, the government may further tighten the noose around the Chinese telecom equipment and system providers. A report prepared by security agencies has noted that over the past decade, Huawei had teamed with members of various organs of the PLA on at least 10 research projects on subjects like artificial intelligence and radio communications. "They include a joint effort with the investigative branch of the Central Military Commission—the armed forces' supreme body—to extract and classify emotions in online video comments," said the report.

The report also pointed towards the initiatives taken by these companies in collaboration with the National University of Defence Technology in Changsha, Hunan, to explore the ways of collecting and analysing satellite images and geographical coordinates. "These projects are just a few of the publicly disclosed studies that shed light on how staff at China's largest technology companies teamed with the PLA on research into an array of potential military and security applications," said an official. "It would be naive on the part of anyone to consider that there would be no backdoor from a Huawei 5G core network to the PLA."

Huawei and ZTE did not respond to the calls from this correspondent.

Cyber security officials say it is important for India to develop its own applications and have its own servers to prevent misuse of data. Moreover, dependency on imported 5G network equipment will put India at the risk of collateral damage if Chinese and western countries target each other's equipment.

"We need to put in place a robust technological system for our security and safety," said Pamela Kumar, director general of Telecommunications Standards Development Society. "A system for setting testing standards, policies, testing, certification and continuous surveillance, and for ensuring that application configurations, methods and processes are there to check any leakage is happening. The security lacunae can be plugged by setting up exclusive labs to test and ratify equipment and technologies. The certification process for security clearance should be strong. Only then we will be able to take pre-emptive steps and avoid knee-jerk reactions." She said India needed to build its own cyber security force. "Unless we prioritise and invest in that the visible and invisible threats will continue."

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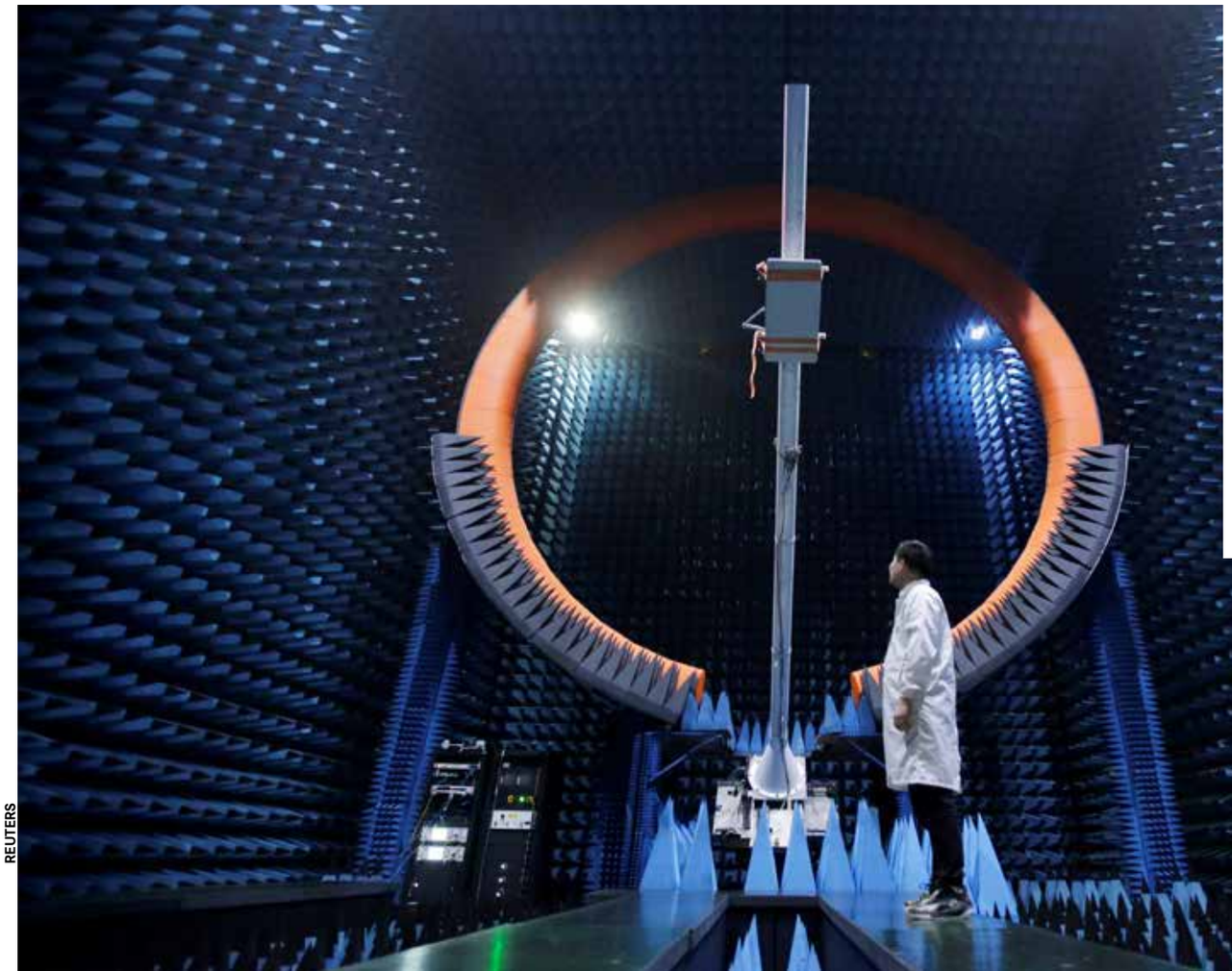
Pamela Kumar, director general of Telecommunications Standards Development Society



REUTERS

ON THE RADAR
An engineer at a Huawei manufacturing centre in Guangdong province, China

Much at stake

What banning Huawei could mean for India

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

The revelry had started early at Huawei's India offices for New Year 2020. IT and Telecom Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad ended the company's long wait by giving the go-ahead for it to participate in India's 5G trials, a day before New Year's Eve. It came two months after the Modi-Xi meeting at Mamallapuram. Now, after the skirmish in Ladakh, that celebration may just turn out to have been premature. India is firing economic shots at China. Chinese telecom companies Huawei and ZTE could soon be in the crosshairs.

According to sources, the June 29 ministerial meeting in Delhi which banned 59 Chinese apps had also deliberated on Huawei's involvement in 5G trials. An email questionnaire sent to Huawei did not elicit any response.

Huawei has been called out for its links to the Chinese apparatus before. It was a crucial element in the trade war between the US and China. Among other things, the US accused Huawei of siphoning data to China, and has been asking countries around the world to shun the company. On June 30, the US designated Huawei and ZTE as national security threats. Australia, New Zealand and Japan banned Huawei from installing their 5G infrastructure, while Canada's top mobile operators chose Ericsson and Nokia.

"It is likely that India could target Chinese telecom infra giants, which could bring it closer to the US," said Kunal Kislay, cofounder and CEO of Integration Wizards Solution, an Indian AI firm. "In the short term, this will have a disrupting effect on our existing telecom players, who have significant investments in technologies provided by these organisations."

Indian telecom companies fear costs could mount by 30 per cent if Huawei is taken out of the equation. The Chinese company's prowess in the next-generation mobile standard of 5G is supposed to be cutting edge. Huawei accounts for 30 per cent of Airtel's infrastructure and 40 per cent of that of Vodafone-Idea. Its eyes were firmly fixed on India's lucrative 5G rollout pie. Interestingly, Reliance Jio has steered clear of using any Chinese infrastructure.

India is already behind many other countries in its 5G rollout, with spectrum sales now postponed till next year. However, sentiments are now firmly stacked up against the Chinese company, despite it having been present in India for decades. Huawei also retails smartphones in India under two brands, Huawei and Honor.

"There are legitimate fears regarding foreign surveillance," said Kazim Rizvi, founder of The Dialogue, a policy think-tank. "Considering how 5G will be a bedrock of India's plans for smart cities, transport and infrastructure, we need a strategic approach. The Central government has to decide whether it is prudent to allow Chinese investment in technology that is closely linked with nation development. A formal policy on this [has to] consider non-technical aspects such as the political, economic and geopolitical landscape."

GUEST COLUMN • **BY GENERAL J.J. SINGH (RETD)**

Settle border dispute politically and urgently

A historical fact that is often overlooked is that India and China were never neighbours. There existed the kingdom of Tibet, which acted as a buffer between the two ancient and prosperous civilisations. Tibet lay between two massive mountain chains—Himalayas to its south and Kuen Lun to its north. It was only in 1951 when China militarily occupied and 'liberated' Tibet that the Chinese army was seen along India's northern frontiers. Till then, neither its administrative machinery nor military was present at Aksai Chin, Demchok (Ladakh), and going eastwards along the Himalayas at Shipki La (Central sector), Nathu La (Sikkim) and Pemako-Zayul regions (opposite northeast India).

Historically, Asiatic nations did not follow a concept of well-demarcated boundaries, and instead had traditionally accepted undefined boundaries. Consequently, neither China nor India has been able to convincingly prove to the other the historical and legal rights on which they claim their respective boundaries. On balance, India has a stronger case both on the northeast frontier on the basis of the McMahon Line, and in the Ladakh region, based on the Ardagh-Johnson Line. However, the dispute continues to linger on despite the Treaty of Peace and Tranquillity (1993), Treaty on Confidence Building Measures (1996), Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Boundary Question (2005) and a Shared Vision for the 21st Century (2008).

What was surprising was that Xi Jinping gave a go-ahead to his military to mobilise a large force in the Ladakh region and carry out intrusions in the Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso during the first week of May. These actions eventually led to the violent clashes in the Galwan Valley. It is now evident that the premeditated attack by the Chinese was part of a grand design to alter the status of the LAC. A face-off between Indian and Chinese troops also took place at the Naku La pass in Sikkim on May 9. The Indian Army stood firm and conveyed to the Chinese to withdraw back to the positions they were deployed at in April and thereby restore status quo ante along the frontier.

The crux of the problem lies in the control of the region of Aksai Chin, situated between the Karakoram and the Kuen Lun ranges, and through which passes a strategic north-south communication artery linking Xinjiang with Tibet. This old caravan route, joining Lhasa and Leh with Yarkand and Kashgar, was used by the Chinese to invade Tibet in 1951. Thereafter, the Chinese converted it into a motorable road; today it is super highway Number 219. To keep the construction of this road a secret, the Chinese asked India to close the Indian Consulate at Kashgar and stopped all trade and movement through the Aksai Chin area. We complied with the Chinese proposal and did not care to join the dots and deduce their intention as we were naively pushing forward the 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' slogan. The Chinese inaugurated the road in 1957 in a grandiose manner and that is when India woke up to comprehend the strategic design behind it.

The LAC was evolved after the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire in November 1962, after having secured Indian territory that was of interest to them. In the east, they withdrew their forces behind the McMahon Line, except for the Thagla ridge that they retained, and in the Ladakh region they drew a line west of their 1956 and 1960 claim lines. When questioned about this cartographical aggression, they responded that the 1956 line was a simpler version and that the 1960 line was the precise claim line of their boundary. The Chinese also claimed areas further west of the 1960 line. This salami slicing westwards was basically designed to give greater depth to their strategic road artery described above, so that it would deny the Indian Army surveillance of the highway and possible interdiction by ground patrols, long-range artillery and aerial photography. Thus one realises that their latest claim line does not follow any geographical feature such as watersheds, ridge lines or mountain passes and cuts across in an arbitrary manner. The recent endeavour was to change the status quo of the LAC and shift it even further west in the Galwan Valley to be able to dominate and if required interdict the newly constructed Indian road along the Shyok river that connects to the military and air base of Daulat Beg Oldie.

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It was a bold gamble by Xi and his western region commander General Zhao Zongqi to move a large force from the exercise area in Tibet and occupy the territory that would help them achieve their tactical aims. It goes to the credit of the alert forward troops of the Indian Army who reacted with alacrity and stalled the devious design of the dragon in a close unarmed combat during the night of June 15/16. The Chinese soldiers were armed with iron rods, spiked batons and knives. The Indian soldiers retaliated in a ferocious manner and caused about 40 fatal casualties of the Chinese army, while we lost 20 of our brave soldiers. The Chinese would not forget this misadventure in a hurry and think twice before repeating it.

The way forward lies in sincerely implementing the decisions arrived at during the second round of military corps commander level talks held on June 22 and maintaining peace along the LAC after the disengagement process is completed. Thereafter, diplomatic and military parleys should be commenced to demarcate the LAC without prejudice to the original boundary claims of both countries. These ought to be settled at the highest political level with a sense of urgency, and not when 'the time is ripe' atypical of the Chinese philosophy of procrastination.

Gen J.J. Singh is former governor of Arunachal Pradesh and former chief of the Indian Army.

Shah's showtime

By being closely involved in Covid-19 relief measures in Delhi, Amit Shah is taking a swipe at the Kejriwal government

BY SONI MISHRA

ON JUNE 27, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal together inspected a 10,000-bed makeshift hospital for Covid-19 patients that is coming up at the Radha Soami Satsang Beas campus on the outskirts of the capital. On the face of it, the two leaders were a picture of bonhomie. However, scratch the surface, and the political fault lines become evident. Even the run-up to the joint inspection had its share of obvious and not so obvious efforts to claim ownership of the initiative.

Kejriwal had tweeted to invite Shah for the inspection, and requested him to provide health care staff for it from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force and the Indian Army. Shah had promptly responded, reminding Kejriwal that it had already been decided at a meeting between them that doctors and nurses from the ITBPF would be deployed at the facility. He also spelt out details of when he expects it to be functional. Shah's response was evidently aimed at giving the impression that he was in charge of the Covid-containment measures in the capital. On the other hand, Kejriwal wanted to convey the same, and also highlight that he was keen on the Centre's collaboration.

Shah stepped into Delhi's Covid-19 scene three months after the coronavirus arrived in the capital, at a time when the situation appeared to be getting out of control. There was a surge in the number of cases and the Kejriwal government was swamped with reports of people failing to get beds in hospitals and finding it difficult to get tested for the virus. Critics said the Aam Aadmi Party regime had slackened its testing and tracing efforts. And, the government's decision to reserve Delhi's hospitals for Delhiites was seen as a reflection of the city's lack of capacity to deal with the disease.

Politically, it presented Shah with a great opportunity to emerge as Delhi's saviour during an unprecedented health crisis and show the Kejriwal government in a bad light. Just a few months back, Shah had helmed the BJP's campaign in the assembly polls in Delhi. In that contest, Kejriwal had comprehensively beaten Shah.

The Centre entered the scene after Lieutenant Governor Anil Baijal overturned the Kejriwal government's decisions to reserve hospitals in the city for Delhi's residents and narrow the criteria for testing. Shah's first high-level meeting involving Delhi's stakeholders, including Baijal and Kejriwal, was on June 14, when a slew of measures were announced, primarily with regard to increasing testing, enhancing the number of beds and intensifying tracing, surveillance and containment efforts, and putting a cap on testing and hospitalisation rates.

Shah has since then been actively involved. His surprise visit to the Delhi government-run Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital, a prime Covid-19 facility, was broadcast live on his YouTube channel. The home ministry has been regularly putting out releases regarding the progress made in Delhi.

PTI

JOINT EFFORT Amit Shah and Arvind Kejriwal visit the Sardar Patel Covid Care Centre and Hospital

> **The Centre had to intervene since the Kejriwal government was more interested in getting political mileage out of the situation.**
>
> —**Vijender Gupta,** BJP leader

"The Kejriwal government relaxed the lockdown without the necessary arrangements in place," said Delhi BJP leader Vijender Gupta. "The Centre had to intervene since the Kejriwal government was more interested in getting political mileage out of the situation."

However, the politics behind Shah's initiatives was clear as BJP leaders responded to his visit to LNJP Hospital by asking how many times Kejriwal had visited the hospital. It was apparent that the choice of the hospital was guided by political considerations. The Supreme Court had, taking suo motu cognisance of media reports, said patients were being kept in horrific conditions in the hospital. Delhi's BJP MPs were despatched to the antigen testing centres in the city to emphasise upon the BJP's imprint on the enhanced testing.

For AAP's political opponents, the Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to question its claims of having improved the health care infrastructure in Delhi. Shah expressed it in a TV interview: "I am not running Delhi. Let us not use such words.... Arvind Kejriwal is always kept in the loop. He is also involved in decision making. Some political statements may have been made, but no impact on decision making.... [Delhi's Deputy Chief Minister Manish] Sisodia's statement [that Delhi will have 5.5 lakh cases by July end] had created some panic. That is not going to happen."

Delhi Congress President Anil Chaudhary said the AAP's claims on improving the health care infrastructure in the capital stands exposed, and while the Kejriwal government indulges in a blame game with the Centre, the people are suffering.

Kejriwal, on the other hand, is playing a balancing act; he is aware that his government needs the Centre's help in handling the pandemic. "The chief minister believes that the fight against Covid-19 is a massive one, and no one person or agency can deal with the disease on its own," said Sisodia. "It is with this sentiment that he wants to take everyone along, and he is finding success in his efforts. We can see that the situation is now stabilising."

However, the unease in the AAP with Shah's growing involvement in Delhi's affairs has shown through in its comparison between the BJP government erecting a statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the Kejriwal regime naming the 10,000-bed makeshift hospital after the country's first home minister. The AAP leaders have called the Baijal's order on compulsory institutional isolation of Covid-19 patients the "Shah model", as against the "Kejriwal model" of allowing home isolation for asymptomatic and mild cases.

The assessment within the AAP is that the Delhi government gave the Centre an opportunity to rush in. For the time being, Kejriwal and his party have opted to grin and bear it as Shah has his sweet revenge.

Well-oiled machine

Having become net debt free, Reliance has embarked on the next phase of its journey

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

Mukesh Ambani takes deadlines seriously—not just the ones he gives his employees, but also those he sets for himself. In the annual general meeting of Reliance Industries Ltd on August 12, 2019, Ambani, the company's chairman and managing director, said he had "a clear roadmap to becoming a zero net debt company within 18 months". On June 19, 2020, Ambani announced RIL had become net debt free, nine months ahead of the scheduled date.

What helped him achieve the feat was not just his core business of petroleum and petrochemicals, but also the telecom company he launched just four years ago. Jio is now India's largest telecom company with more than 380 million subscribers; the strong base, which Ambani amassed using disruptive business tactics, helped him attract marquee investors. While Facebook acquired 9.99 per cent in Jio Platforms, a clutch of private equity players and sovereign wealth funds have picked up stakes of varying magnitude, pumping in ₹1,15,693.95 crore altogether.

RIL also raised ₹53,124.20 crore through a rights issue, which was the largest ever in India. Earlier, in December 2019, RIL inked a definitive agreement with BP to form a new petroleum retailing joint venture in India. In total, RIL has raised about ₹1.75 lakh crore. It is also working on a deal with Saudi Arabia's Aramco to sell 20 per cent stake in its oil and petrochemical business.

The fundraising could not have been timed better, as RIL's traditional petroleum refining and oil and gas businesses were hit hard by the crash in oil prices and the lack of demand for fuel. "The trend over the next few years is towards cleaner fuels,"-said Mayuresh Joshi, head of equity research at William O'Neil and Co. "Ambani had read the trends well. He had also read the trends that online and consumer discretionary are going to be the new oil. He invested a lot more in these businesses."

Jio today is not just a telecom company. In the past few years, it made many key acquisitions like Haptik, Radisys, Reverie Technologies, Embibe and C-Square, which will help it build a strong portfolio of future tech like artificial intelligence, internet of things, natural language processing and virtual and mixed reality. Jio has partnered with Microsoft to offer cloud-based solutions to small enterprises as well.

While beefing up the technological backbone, Jio has also ensured a constant supply of content to its customers, through its deals with Balaji Telefilms and the music streaming app Saavn, and the Network18 media and entertainment business it already owns. RIL has majority stakes in cable TV companies Hathway and Den Networks. "The marquee investors see Jio Platforms as a unique consumer platform with distribution strength that can be leveraged across connectivity, commerce and credit using technology prowess to stay ahead of the curve,"said Axis Capital analysts Shashi Bhusan and Anand Shah.

Having become debt free, Ambani has now set his sights on bigger things. In a letter to shareholders on June 23, he said the Jio-Facebook partnership would "digitally enable and empower India's 60 million micro, small and medium enterprises, 120 million farmers, 30 million small merchants and millions of SMEs in the informal sector, in addition to empowering people seeking various digital services".

A month earlier, RIL had launched JioMart, a digital platform connecting neighbourhood grocery shops with consumers across 200 towns and cities, which will take on the likes of Big Basket, Grofers and Amazon. JioMart will act as a centralised procurement and delivery platform between manufacturers and merchant partners. It will also enable digitisation of merchants through Jio point of sale (PoS terminals) at the back end and JioMart app at the front end.

Reliance Retail, RIL's retail arm, is already the largest organised retailer in the country, operating 11,784 stores. The Jio-Facebook tie-up will give Reliance Retail huge opportunities through WhatsApp and Instagram, which Facebook owns.

Goldman Sachs analyst Nikhil Bhandari forecast Reliance Retail's gross merchandise value (GMV) to surge to $83 billion in financial year 2029, from $5 billion last year. Online grocery will alone account for $45 billion in GMV. "Reliance and organised retail overall still have a significant opportunity to gain share from the unorganised and fragmented market, especially in grocery and fashion," Bhandari said. "Reliance's market share in tier 3 and tier 4 cities is a real differentiator when compared with other modern retailers, online and offline, with Reliance having a significant lead in developing the ecosystem in these towns." Ambani has plans to list the retail business within five years.

The platform approach will be RIL's biggest advantage while taking on its e-commerce rivals. "RIL has scale in telecom and brick and mortar stores, and it has brands. With Facebook, it now gets access to social media platforms and it owns media companies. So, it is as far reaching as Amazon is in the US or Alibaba is in China," said Govind Shrikhande, a retail industry veteran and former managing director of Shoppers Stop.

RIL recently identified financial services as a separate business. It had joined hands with State Bank of India for Jio Payments Bank in 2018. It has also ventured into consumer lending and insurance broking. The segment reported a revenue of ₹1,271 crore in the year ended in March 2020, and analysts reckon it is well placed for strong growth, riding on the strengths of the digital and retail platforms.

"The model of new commerce platforms can aid RIL's financial services business to capture consumer loan origination,"said the Axis Capital analysts. "Moreover, as the platform achieves scale, it may also aid in capturing loan requirements for the small businesses."

GOLDEN TOUCH OF TRADITION

YEARS OF FOAM FILLED WITH LOVE

The strong and steady 50 years of AVA Cholayil Group and their flagship product, Medimix

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

A row of women wait, watch, cut soap cakes, punch them, wrap them and pack them—all with an excellent hand-eye co-ordination. These women run the factory in the Thirumazhisai SIDCO industrial estate near Chennai, that produces Medimix—the country's most popular handmade soap. Their day begins with a 15-minute yoga session, and as their eight-hour shift finishes, they end up rolling out at least one lakh soap bars, all wrapped in blue- and green-coloured paper.

The aroma of fresh herbal oil fills the air at the factory. Jade green coloured cakes are seen lying in containers. "We are in our 50th year. Expansion and retaining the market alone is our target. Along with this we have plans for supporting our employees, who are our backbones," says Dr A.V. Anoop, managing director of AVA Cholyail Group, which owns Medimix. The company has factories spread across south India—Chennai, Villupuram, Puducherry and Bengaluru. It sells more than 20 crore handmade soaps annually in south India, and is the largest handmade soap maker globally.

Medimix contains oil extracts from different medicinal herbs. AVA Cholayil Health Care Pvt Ltd produces 850 tonnes of soaps monthly and its output crossed 10,000 tonnes for the financial year 2018 -2019. With its turnover crossing the ₹300 crore, the company has set a target of 65 per cent increase in turnover from its south Indian operations in the coming years. Currently, Medimix holds 5 per cent market share among soaps across states and it is the market leader in the category of ayurvedic soaps. Right from its founder's kitchen to a well-mannered factory, Medimix's journey is a success story, retaining its originality over the years.

Medimix's origin is an interesting and motivating story. Dr V.P. Sidhan, who was trained in ayurvedic medicine, was working with the Indian Railways in Chennai in the late 1960s. The plight of the conservancy workers on the railway platform became a cause of worry for Sidhan every day. Hailing from a family of ayurvedic practitioners in Thrissur, Kerala, Sidhan thought of a cure for the workers who were severely affected with skin diseases. He distributed the medicinal oil and saw the results. But applying the oil and going to work was difficult for the workers. So, on suggestion from his friends, Sidhan made soaps from the oil extracts. The first soap was rolled out from his kitchen in 1969 by his wife. Every week, his wife would heat the medicinal extract, make soaps out of it in her kitchen and Sidhan would take it out to the workers. Over the days, as demand increased, the couple employed one person at their house for help. Soon, the demand further increased and Sidhan found a bigger space for manufacturing.

In a country where soap making is predominantly mechanised, AVA Cholayil has done the impossible by scaling up its handmade soap making process to an industrial level. In an age when handmade soap manufacturing has remained a cottage industry, and big-time manufacturers like Wipro, Hindustan Unilever Ltd and others have moved to mechanised production, only 8,000 tonnes of soaps are handmade in India and Medimix is clearly the leader. "We want to maintain the quality, which comes through the manufacturing process. We have mechanised some parts of the production process. But largely it is handmade," says Anoop.

In the late 1980s the group was split amicably among Dr Sidhan's son-in-law Anoop and his son V.S. Pradeep. There started a transformation phase. Medimix entered the FMCG market after Anoop took over. With factories in Chennai, Bengaluru and Puducherry, Anoop ensures that Medimix doesn't skip from its tag 'handmade'. "We expanded our business by adding more factories. But we still retain the handmaking process," he says.

Anoop's decision to continue with the handmade process had other reasons as well. Handmade soaps, are more ayurvedic and skin friendly as the process allows the use of high proportion of coconut oil and other herbal oils. Apparently, Medimix is manufactured with the oil extract of more than 21 herbs, especially cultivated and carefully transported to maintain the quality of the soap.

When mechanised soap making could fetch a big revenue in a competitive industry, Anoop was firm in his decision to continue with handmade as he did not want to let go off the 300-odd employees the company had. In fact, as the company celebrates its 50th anniversary, Anoop has huge plans for employee welfare, too.

The Cholayil Group supports not just its employees but also their families. Apparently, the workforce has improvised and the employees themselves bring in innovations. In the past three decades, every machine that is hand operated was an outcome of the innovations of the workforce at the factory. "The workers came up with solutions that even management consultants could not," says Anoop. Mixing hot oil, transforming them into huge drums, making them into massive bars and then cutting them into pieces was laborious till the early 1990s. But with ideas from their own employees, the work was made less stressful. Ramps, hand-rotated pumps and hand-rotated wheels were created to make the process easy.

Though challenges stood in his way, Anoop ensured that the employees would stay with the company at every point. He gives great importance to supporting the local population in the area, where the factories are located. "Most of my workers are from the lower strata of the society. I ensure that their children get good education," says Anoop. Apparently, AVA Cholayil Group has a charitable arm called AVA Charitable Trust which supports a range of people and extends help in terms of health and education.

Though his company has brought in new products like face wash, handwash and other skin care products, Anoop ensures that the group clings on to the traditional green version. With different medicinal and glycerine soaps, Anoop wants Medimix to continue with the conservative setup that Dr Sidhan created. With a PhD in philosophy from the Medicina Alternativa Institute, an affiliate of The Open International University for Complimentary Medicines in Sri Lanka, Anoop is an avid supporter of ayurveda.

Apart from Medimix brand of soaps, the group also owns Melam spices, the delicious south Indian spices, which it acquired a few years ago. Anoop also has plans for more personal care products. The group recently forayed into health care with its brand of ayurvedic hospitals. It recently launched the Sanjeevanam hospital in Kochi. "We are planning for expansion in the health care sector. Our focus will be on traditional treatments and not just massage," he says.

While Medimix continues to be the leader in the health care and beauty industry with the touch of tradition, he has also forayed into the cinema industry with his film production company, AVA Productions. It has made several Malayalam feature films including *Godha, Esra, Ishq, Ambili* and documentaries like *Where The Trees Sing.*

"We expanded our business by adding more factories. But we still retain the handmaking process."

DR A.V. ANOOP, MD,
AVA Cholayil Health Care

OBSTACLE COURSE

The swift economic revival through the MSME sector in Uttar Pradesh is remarkable, but long-term challenges remain

BY PUJA AWASTHI

IT HAPPENS, BUT RARELY, that a state learns from its official animal. But Uttar Pradesh is assigning to itself the most marked characteristic of the barasingha, the 12-horned deer that flourishes in swamps. From the sludge of the ruin left by the Covid-19 pandemic, the state is forging a path to economic growth through its micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector.

Drawing equal parts applause and bewilderment, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath seems to have outrun the Centre and other states on the track to achieving a swift economic revival. On April 16, as the contours of the crisis were emerging, he first spoke of turning it into opportunity. The chief minister insisted that the first of the two big road projects to the east, the Purvanchal Expressway, become operational by the end of the year. Connectivity would bring investment to the state's most deprived region and also harness the power of its workforce, which forms one of the largest chunks of out-migrants in the country.

This was followed by a rush of announcements, including a Covid-19 response and industrial revival strategy, a relook at labour laws, a single-window approval system for projects, an online portal (MSME Sathi) for grievance redressal, mapping the skills of returning workers and matching them to available jobs, exploring the possibility of attracting companies shifting their production bases from China and the launch of a startup fund.

Sidharth Nath Singh, UP's MSME minister, said that all of this was being driven and marked by Adityanath himself (see interview). Navneet Sehgal, the state's principal secretary for MSME, said that the response was possible because Adityanath foresaw the situation. "The chief minister had a clear vision of the magnitude of the challenge," he said.

One example of the sure footedness of this response is the speed with which the state's self-help groups affiliated with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) turned to making masks, sanitisers and personal protective equipment (PPE) kits almost as soon as the lockdown was announced. At last count, they had earned ₹8 crore from sales.

The state has sought to build new partnerships while strengthening old ones. Mukesh Aghi, president and CEO, US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) told THE WEEK that the body was "encouraged by the focused efforts of the state in ease of doing business and actual grounding of investments". He said, "The government has been in close contact with us and has been supporting our membership on all aspects of investment facilitation as well as for issue resolution related to business continuity matters during this pandemic."

The state industries department has displayed a high level of preparedness to tackle the uncertainties of the pandemic and infuse its own non-fiscal measures to steady economic processes. The issuing of e-passes and enabling production, movement and distribution of essential goods were quick and fuss free. It was also quick to operationalise industries such as packaging, without which essential goods could not be delivered.

On the issue of continuous process industries, the department's officials took their own calls. In the Kanpur division, Sarveshwar Shukla, joint commissioner for industries, permitted fertiliser and chemical factories to run to avert a potential disaster like the chemical plant gas leak in Visakhapatnam on May 7. "Such industries require a 15-day shutdown or startup time. If not monitored properly, the industrial scale gases used in production can cause damage, said Shukla.

PAWAN KUMAR

COMEBACK PLAN Workers at an aluminium factory that recently reopened in Lucknow

The state industries department has displayed a high level of preparedness to tackle the uncertainties of the pandemic and infuse its own non-fiscal measures to steady economic processes.

However, for all its ability to survive in the bog, the barasingha is an animal of middling pace, much like the government's investment efforts. In February 2018, the state hosted its first investor summit, in which 1,045 memorandums of understanding (MoUs) worth ₹4.28 lakh crore were signed. Only 371 of those have matured into investment announcements and by May 2020, only 106 had started commercial operations.

Alok Agarwal, president of the Indian Industries Association (IIA), Kanpur, one of the bodies that has signed an MoU for matching the skills of three lakh workers said: "The chief minister is well intentioned, but his government believes too much in grand gestures. A single-window online system of clearance (Nivesh Mitra) has been in place for a while now, but there is no time limit as to how long it might take to process an application. This defeats the purpose of a transparent mechanism."

The state's MSME sector is its surest driver for change. In 2018-19, there were 89.99 lakh units in UP—the most for any state—which provided employment to 1.65 crore people. There is however distressing fine print in these numbers. Land is plentiful in the state, but its allotment is knotty. Loans given to the sector are easy on paper, but banks are distrustful of entrepreneurs.

In January 2018, the government launched a 'One District One Product' (ODOP) scheme that is now the centrepiece of this sector. Under this scheme, 57 products with a strong traditional skill and production base across the 75 districts have been identified, and entrepreneurs helped out. The initiative is modelled loosely on China's one-town one-product

scheme, and the state is hoping it will draw investors now pulling away from China.

Sehgal said that the scheme's operational life had given the government a clear start on fine-tuning it during the crisis by sanctioning common facilitation centres that would enhance the quality of the products. Fourteen such centres have been sanctioned for ₹92.07 crore. "In Sambhal, we make unique buttons from animal bones, which were sent to China for finishing, as button makers could not afford the machine for it. Now that will be possible in the district itself. Such common centres will generate both direct and indirect employment," said Sehgal. Almost 80 per cent of the state's export basket is made of these products, which include silks from Varanasi and leather shoes from Agra and Kanpur. However, that is not necessarily an unalloyed positive.

Arvind Mohan, economics professor at Lucknow University, pointed out that the state needed to identify products to cater to the needs of its 22 crore people. According to Mohan, the key to an economic flourish in the state would be a "new kind of public-private partnership". "Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for example, a percentage of the state's labour can create permanent and productive assets for use in the MSMEs and thus reduce their input costs," he said.

Brij Kumar Bajpai, director of the Giri Institute of Development Studies (GIDS), said that much of what the government could do had already been suggested by previous studies it had commissioned. He cited one such research on the doubling of farmers' income by 2022-23, conducted by GIDS in the state in 2019. "The report contains suggestions on coordinated commercial agriculture of fishery, animal farming and orchards; effective control on post-harvest losses, partnership with private sector to create infrastructure for food processing... but these were not paid any attention till a section of the media reported on it. The government must use the advice of the specialists it has and not just rely on bureaucracy," said Bajpai.

Sunil Vaishya, former chairperson, IIA (Kanpur), said that while the state's pandemic rush was notable, it needed to get the more mundane bits in order. "Investment comes when basic needs like law and order, electricity supply and infrastructure are met. Jobs come in when manufacturing units are set up, but the state has received more investment in the service sector. The state should nurture and build relationships with investors within the state, who are its biggest investors," he said.

One way of solving old problems has been offered by tweaks in the labour laws in the state. Amit Shukla, legal consultant to corporates and the Lucknow-based district secretary of the Confederation of Indian Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises said: "Labour laws have scared off investors from UP. It is almost impossible to fire a non-performing worker. Successive governments have not overhauled [the laws] for fear of a political backlash. This government has shown the will to bring changes."

The immediate goal seems to be to protect the state's migrant workers from suffering like they have during this crisis. However, these workers may not want to stay back when it is business as usual. On June 1, when the Pushpak Express to Mumbai restarted, many of those who boarded it at Lucknow were UP natives. Among them was Hari Om Soni, a 50-year-old jewellery maker from Basti, who had worked in Mumbai for 35 years. He was returning with his 23-year-old son to his two younger daughters and to living quarters that measures 10 by 12 feet. "What will my small slice of land in the village get me? When old and weak, I might return permanently. For now, there is work to be done," he said.

And till there is that, the charm of the barasingha might not be readily visible.

■ INTERVIEW

Sidharth Nath Singh,
cabinet minister, MSME, investment and export, textile, khadi and Gram Udyog, Uttar Pradesh

We have a realistic idea of where we are headed

BY PUJA AWASTHI

Q/The state's MSME sector has moved quickly to respond to the economic challenges of the pandemic. How was it made possible?
A/The leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has pushed us. He has wanted us to come up with something out of the box every day. We have a good team. We had a job to do much like doctors, to keep the economy healthy and running.
There have been variable figures about how many people could be employed through the sector.

Q/Are there realistic numbers to work with?
A/We have signed four MoUs for providing 11 lakh jobs. There are 40 lakh people being employed through MGNREGS. From the start of the lockdown, we processed 19,000 loan applications and gave them to the banks. As a thumb rule, every loan provided will generate employment for eight to 10 people. We are mapping the skills of 15 lakh workers who have returned. So yes, we have a realistic idea of where we are headed. There is convergence of departments such as panchayati raj and rural development to provide jobs.

Q/There is apprehension that the Migrant Commission will take away the freedom of the state's workers by negotiating on their behalf.
A/We are not here to negotiate the freedom of workers; we are only concerned about migrants not being provided every social security they are entitled to, in whichever state they are. This is something we will be taking up with other states. We are looking after the welfare of our workers, not holding them back.

Q/What about concerns that changes in labour laws will curtail rights of labourers?
A/There are many clauses in our labour laws that are redundant and create unnecessary problems for investment and entrepreneurship. These needed checks and by doing so we have given the message that UP is a progressive state and open to changes. There are no changes to the minimum wages to be paid or the number of working hours.

Q/What about attracting foreign investment, given that UP is competing for investment moving out of China?
A/A committee headed by the chief minister has examined the domestic competition and the competition with southeast Asia. We have quickly introduced sectoral reforms where needed. Among the states, we have been the first to initiate dialogue with Japan, which is giving $2.2 billion to firms moving out of China. Among the European nations we have been in touch with, Denmark has shown interest to transfer its expertise on high technology MSMEs, for which we have signed an MoU.

Q/Allotment of land to set up enterprises has been a major challenge. How is that to be tackled?
A/We have received a legacy with the UP State Industrial Development Corporation (land allotting agency in the state), which we are trying to reform. We have started with GIS mapping of land to make its availability transparent.

Q/The state's other challenge is the imbalance between the east and the west. How will it be rectified?
A/This has been addressed by this government's employment and industrial policies. We are developing a water pipeline project in Bundelkhand in addition to an expressway (connecting to Delhi). The Purvanchal Expressway will be operational soon. These will contribute to correcting intra-state imbalances.

GETTY IMAGES

NEED OF THE HOUR
A factory that makes protective equipment, in operation in Noida, Uttar Pradesh

COURTESY: NBA

Going for the rebound

Satnam Singh is eager to prove that his career is far from over, despite his fall from grace

BY NEERU BHATIA

"My father told me, 'Satnam, now you have a responsibility—to your family, your coaches and towards your country.' I say, 'That's a lot... that's a lot.'"

—Satnam Singh Bhamara, in the documentary *One in a Billion*

Satnam Singh Bhamara weighed 104kg and was nearly seven feet tall when he was sent to the IMG basketball training academy in Bradenton, Florida, in 2010. He was just 15. The dream to play in the land of opportunity was inching towards reality; the tie-up between the Basketball Federation of India (BFI) and IMG-Reliance got him a scholarship.

At 20, the dream came true for the heavyset Indian cager, who hails from a modest family of farmers in Balloke village in Barnala, Punjab. In July 2015, he became the first Indian-born player to be drafted into the National Basketball Association (NBA). He was picked by the Dallas Mavericks. Satnam was also the first player—since age restrictions were introduced in 2005—to enter the league without having played collegiate basketball or in an overseas professional league or in the NBA development league (D-League).

But his stint with the Mavericks was short-lived. In October 2015, he was acquired by Texas Legends, the D-League affiliate of the Mavericks. Deemed slow, he played only nine games that season. He was signed on for the next season, but he got very little game time and returned to Balloke a frustrated man. In 2017, he played in the United Basketball Alliance Pro Basketball League in India, and in 2018 he was signed by St. John's Edge of the National Basketball League of Canada for one season.

Now, five years after his NBA pick, the 25-year-old Satnam is back home without a professional contract and is also out of the Indian senior national team, facing a doping suspension. The National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) suspended him after he failed a dope test during a preparatory camp for the South Asian Games in November 2019. The Anti-Doping Disciplinary Panel (ADDP) has not heard him yet.

Satnam's impact on Indian basketball has been immense. Following his example, the likes of Amjyot Singh, Amritpal Singh and Vishesh Bhriguvanshi went on to feature in Japanese and Australian leagues. But Amritpal, who became the first Indian to play in Australia's National Basketball League, too, has tested positive for using terbutaline, during an out-of-competition test by NADA, and has been provisionally suspended.

"Satnam's ban came in November 2019. It is June now. It has been seven months, but there is no word on his hearing," said lawyer Viduspat Singhania, who represents Satnam and Amritpal. "It is the same case with Amritpal, who was suspended in February. NADA is playing with athletes' careers. Satnam has already stated that he [consumed] the banned substance inadvertently. As per the NADA code, he could get a sentence banning him for a few months, but what is the use if the hearing does not take place for a year?"

The details of Satnam's case have not been released by NADA, but it is learnt that he took a supplement that he ordered online, which could have been contaminated. Chander Mukhi Sharma, secretary general, BFI, supports Satnam's claim of innocence. "He is not educated enough, and in all likelihood when he took the supplement, he was not aware it was contaminated," said Sharma. "It takes years to build a good team and the

GETTY IMAGES

FAMILY TO THE FORE
Satnam's father, Balbir Singh Bhamara, with wife and two children. His father's income from farming supports the family now

loss of two key players while we await their ADDP hearing is a huge setback for the Indian team."

Satnam is learning to face the hard knocks of life. He may be a towering presence with a heavy voice, but the sense of befuddlement is unmistakeable when he speaks about his struggles so far.

"I trained well in high school in the USA," said Satnam. "I tried to do much more than what the coaches [expected of me]. In life, if you go up, you can also go down. I understand that. I have spent 16-18 years playing the game. [But] I have got nothing from the leagues or the government. I feel these things can really bring me down."

He said he exchanged all his earnings on additional training in the US or to meet the expenses of his family. His father's income from farming supports the family now. "When I got drafted, I was happy," he said. "I got India's name up there, and paved the way for others. I thought maybe the government would give me a job or an award. [But] no one has asked about me since 2015. I am dependent on my family."

His main aim is to help his brother settle financially and to get his sister married. His elderly father is finding farming tough at his age. But it was he who encouraged Satnam to take up basketball and has been his major support system. "My father told me, 'if there is something you are destined to get, you will get it, either today, tomorrow or years later'," said Satnam. "I listen to him. I get up at 5am for physical training, and train in the evening also. My brother and I practise together. He is a body builder, so he helps me with weight training."

There is no basketball court near his village. He runs alongside a stream, and for physical training he uses a small basic gymnasium in a government school—a far cry from the facilities in the US and Canada. But he is not complaining.

Satnam remains determined to go back abroad and get a professional contract. "I do not know when I will get it," he admits. "If I think I can earn from basketball, I will. Even if it means that I may have to do the most difficult things. But I will earn money and ensure I can take care of my family." Meanwhile, he awaits a date for his hearing as any future contract or his place in the Indian side depends entirely on it.

BUG STUDIO

When it comes to spiders and such, these photographers could very well turn your 'eek' into 'wow'

BY OSHIN GRACE DANIELL

LADYBIRD BEETLE BY VENKAT

S. Venkatraaman

CRIMSON MARSH GLIDER BY VENKAT

LYCHEE BUG BY VENKAT

FLYING ANT BY JAGADEESH

WINGED CARPENTER ANT BY JAGADEESH

While most people squirm and scream at the sight of a spider, there are a few who reach for their cameras. While hobbyists use macrophotography or extreme close-up photography to showcase the unseen beauty in everything from rice grains to vegetables and flowers, these entomophiles (lovers of insects) want to introduce you to the vibrant world of insects.

Bugs are the most challenging subjects, as they are rarely stationary. Chennai-based photographer S. Venkatraaman says one has to go from crouching and crawling to even holding one's breath while photographing a bug. "The bug is not going to say 'Do you want to try another shot?' and strike a pose," he says. "Therefore, it is important for the photographer to not move a lot. I suggest you stop breathing when you click the picture. With analogue cameras, the challenge was to get it right in the first shot itself, as we would get to see the result only after it got printed."

Venkat, 55, who is single now and lives with his mother, says that the photographer should study the behaviour and surroundings of the bug. Despite the fact that some of his initial assignments involved shooting lab specimens, he is against killing insects. The entomophile believes in photographing insects in their natural surroundings and working towards their conservation. The first camera that he ever used was the Agfa Click-III. Later, for macrophotography, he used the Pentax P-30 with Takumar 55mm f/2 macro lens.

But this was not love at first sight. A sound engineer by profession, it was his fascination with astronomy that triggered an interest in photography. "I sold all my audio equipment to buy my first analogue camera and other photography gear," he says. "At the time, I had started off doing a lot of reprography work (the reproduction of documents and graphics through means like photography) as copy machines were not popular during that time. It was then that I attended a mathematics workshop, where I met a scientist who was doing research on arachnids. She wanted my help with the duplication of her slides. Little did I know what I was getting myself into."

While duplicating 200 slides of spiders, he wondered why anyone would be interested to study a creature so grotesque. But before he knew it, he got caught up in the intricacies of arachnid anatomy. What started out as an assignment turned into a fascination. Taking a torch and a camera, he walked into his garden that night to discover a whole new world beneath his feet. Since then, there was no turning back.

"Apart from the duplication work, I clicked some pictures of spiders in my garden with my analogue camera," says Venkat. "I showed the pictures to the scientist and she was very impressed. I vividly remember her asking me, 'Are you not scared of these creatures?' Interestingly, I was not scared at all."

Thanks to his frequent visits to Chennai's Guindy National Park, the officials there christened him 'Poochi Venkat' (*poochi* is Tamil for bug). "It was the most hilarious thing I heard. Every time our team went there to study or take photographs of the bugs in their natural setting, the officers would say, 'Poochi sir has come.' The name just stuck," he says. The moniker appears on the cover of his book, *Insects: Guardians of Nature*, a compilation of insect photographs from across Chennai. "I wanted to show people that despite the city's concrete trapping, the most beautiful creatures still thrive and exist here," he says.

Venkat has created a small insect ecosystem at home; he calls it the 'insect hotel.' "I have spiders, beetles, ants and several other interesting bugs in my room," he says. "The best part about it is that nobody enters my room fearing what might possibly jump out at them. It gives me a lot of privacy. I have created a small space with leaves and twigs for the bugs to settle in and be comfortable."

After over 25 years photographing and conserving bugs, nature has blessed him by making him resistant to most insect-induced allergies. He says he survived a viral infection from the pox family in 1997. "I was in Karian Shola for a survey during the monsoon," he says. "The doctors were dumbfounded when they found the virus. Apparently, it had never been documented in humans before."

According to Venkat, the praying mantis is one of the most dangerous

GEAR **TALK**

JAGADEESH'S PICKS

Canon 5D mark3
Tamron sp 45mm
Tamron 28-75mm
Rokinon 85mm
Canon 100mm macro
Third party extension tubes
Reversal ring
Godox ad200 external flash
Customised diffusers

VENKAT'S PICKS

Nikon D810 DSLR
Canon 5D-MkIII DSLR
Sony a-7R Mk-3 MILC
Lumix LX-5 compact
Tamron 90mm macro
Nikon 80-200mm
Canon 100mm macro
Canon 70-200mm

Jagadeesh Bommisetti

HONEY BEE BY JAGADEESH

bugs. "It can nibble off your flesh," he says. But mantis is a favourite of Hyderabad-based cinematographer and photographer Jagadeesh Bommisetti. "There are so many species of the mantis," he says. "I love how it studies our movement and behaves accordingly. I recently stumbled upon what I thought was a baby mantis, but it was actually a full-grown one of a different species."

The 27-year-old entomophile calls Venkat his biggest inspiration. "I mostly photograph both live and dead insects sizing between 2mm and 5cm," he says. "Personally, finding live insects is my biggest challenge. The dead ones are easy to find. I, too, have set up a small ecosystem in my room, so that some of the insects that I find during my walks in the park or garden get habituated to the room. After I photograph it, I let the insect go back to where I picked it from. I usually keep the insects for two to three days."

Apart from a customised macro studio setup in his house, Jagadeesh has found ways to cut costs while buying photography gear. "Generally, macrophotography requires a dedicated macro lens, but I achieve life-size images of 3x to 5x magnification by using different hacks like extension tubes, reversal rings and focus bracketing techniques," he says. "When it comes to extreme macro, one needs to take multiple images (layers) of the same subject. As I do not use macro lens or a macro rail, it takes around three to four hours to photograph an insect. And then the stacking of the layers and processing take another one or two hours based on the complexity of the bug. One photograph can be between 15 and 20 layers."

Apart from the technical know-how, Jagadeesh says patience is key in the entire process. According to him, macrophotography is very different from normal photography. "I work with two extreme sets of subjects—one that listens to instructions and strikes poses accordingly and the other that has its own mind. Sometimes, I have to keep reminding myself that the insects are not actors," he says.

Unlike Venkat, Jagadeesh is not into full-time macrophotography, but currently he is in the process of documenting bugs found in the wetlands of Andhra Pradesh. "There is no fixed income in this field; it mostly depends on the assignments we get," he says. "Depending on the difficulty of the task, the remuneration fluctuates. As of now there are not many photographers in our country who have ventured into this field. This means that entomologists need our help."

As for Venkat, he is busy with a couple of projects with the Agriculture Department of Tamil Nadu and some other entomological work, apart from his personal lockdown documentation of bugs. With a kitty full of bug stories, achievements and experiences, Venkat also trains and inspires young photographers to take up this niche area of photography. "Thanks to advanced digital technology, we can now see photographs beforehand and take multiple shots without the tension of wasting film. There is so much that can be done," he says. Who thought bugs would be treated like celebrities? Time to take a closer look. Literally.

Gunning for the king

Valorant has done the unthinkable—challenge Counter-Strike's throne

BY VARUN RAMESH BALAN

For 20 years, the Counter-Strike (CS) series has been the definitive tactical shooter experience for millions of gamers. Its simplicity stands out as much as its depth—you can pick up the game in minutes, but it could take years to master.

Two teams of five fight for control of a map: either by finishing off all opponents or by exploding/defusing a bomb. Weapons must be bought at the start of each round. Both teams have the same budgets to begin with, but an in-game economy regulates purchases in subsequent rounds.

As the years passed, the series' dedicated fan base started to experience niggles. From an invasion of hackers to the ever-present problem of lag and ultimately, a framework that has remained fundamentally unchanged since the last title came out in 2012. CS needed an update, or, a competitor.

Enter Riot Games, makers of League of Legends—one of the world's most popular eSports titles. With Valorant, launched in June, Riot Games manage a mix of familiarity and novelty that makes for a refreshing take on the premise.

Much like CS, Valorant features two teams of five battling to take control of a map and a regulatory in-game economy. Unlike CS, however, are the 'Agents' and special abilities, which add a dash of complexity to the core gameplay.

For example, one agent's special ability is that he can deploy a floating spy camera to monitor enemy positions; another agent—Omen—can fire projectiles that pass through walls, and teleport around the map. Some agents are best-equipped to pick up kills, others to stay behind and support the team.

Valorant's greatest strength is its balanced gameplay. Infrequently-available 'ultimate' moves, like Omen's teleportation, are staggeringly useful, but when pitted against or in tandem with one another, you get a game that cannot be truly one-sided; anything is possible, in every round. And while these abilities add to the complexity, players with good aim can still prevail.

Valorant was designed from the ground up to be fair: The agents' abilities are constantly being balanced by meta updates. Servers are designed to minimise chances of an internet issue costing you the round and a special anti-cheat system has earned Valorant a good rep (prompting CS developer Valve to update its system).

Will Valorant last long enough to match CS's pedigree? Only time will tell. But, with an eSports tournament already on the charts in India (over 400 teams and a ₹70,000 purse), a free-to-play model and low system requirements that make the game accessible, and unprecedented pre-launch hype courtesy the world's biggest video game streamers being given early access, Valorant has a better shot at dethroning the king than any game before it.

Stories from the core

Paatal Lok's creator Sudip Sharma is inherently drawn to complex, grey-shaded stories from society

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

JIGNESH C. PANCHAL

INTO THE DARK WEB Sudip Sharma on the sets of *Paatal Lok*; (below) a still from the series

It was 1998. Sudip Sharma was pursuing his under graduation at Hindu College in Delhi. Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* was the latest movie in town and every youngster was making a beeline for the theatres. Sharma did too, little aware that it would become the turning point in his life. "I remember being stunned by its visual language, the craft of the storytelling, and the great texture that the film had," Sharma says over the phone, almost a month after *Paatal Lok's* release. The Amazon Prime Video show, of which Sharma is the creator (directed by Prosit Roy and Avinash Arun), has already earned critical acclaim, and people are dissecting its scenes and characters, just like with *Satya*.

Sharma grew up in Guwahati, where his father was posted. While his passion for films started at a young age, the movies screened in Guwahati were entirely Bollywood, and he had almost no exposure to art-house films and world cinema. Sharma, however, recalls watching a few classics on Doordarshan.

His student days in Delhi, however, made him a film literate. At Priya Cinema in Delhi, he would watch acclaimed films from the west. Meanwhile, his academic journey progressed—he got into Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. He was restless in those couple of years, thinking about the path he should choose. During those days, he kept watching a lot of movies—from early Korean and Japanese cinema to Tamil films. "I cannot say I was unhappy [there], but I was just trying to find my feet, figure out what I wanted to do with my life." It took a while to figure all that out. In between, he picked up a string of corporate jobs.

With a very unsure attempt at making a short film, he, however, had found his calling—that it is writing that draws him. Soon, he quit his job to become a writer, something that would temporarily strain his relationship with his parents. "That is the easiest thing in the world to do—to announce yourself as a writer. But at the same time, it is really difficult to be a half-decent writer, [at least]," he says. Apparently, his wife, with a corporate profile, stood by him, all through his struggling days.

He confesses that cinema is a very uncertain business. The first time someone told him that he is making a movie and that Sharma is going to write it, he got super-excited. "I threw a little party for some of my friends," he says. "We all got drunk, and I paid the bill. Then I realised that no money ever came and no film ever got made."

It took four to five years for him to figure out the craft. In 2010, he co-wrote the film *Semshook* (directed by Siddharth Anand Kumar) along with Rahul Singh. Sharma had been in search for collaborators he could work with on a long-time basis. Incidentally, he met Navdeep Singh—who directed *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007)—on Facebook. Singh and Sharma would soon collaborate on a few scripts, that include an unreleased zombie-comedy, *Rock the Shaadi*; work on another film titled *Kaneda*; and then finally do *NH10* (2015).

"He [Sharma] was a little raw at the time [of their first meeting]," says Singh. "But the potential whether you have it as a writer or not, that basic talent was inherently there." For *Paatal Lok*, Singh came onboard as a script consultant.

Meeting Singh really helped Sharma. "He had experience over me," he says. "He had already made one wonderful film. It really helped me hone my craft and get down to the root of it." Sharma helps the writers he works with now to do the same.

On Facebook, Hardik Mehta—one of the four writers of *Paatal Lok*, along with Gunjit Chopra, Sagar Haveli and Sharma—wrote about how they were given a freehand in the research process to go to places like Chitrakoot to understand the world and the characters. "For me, *Paatal Lok* was the culmination of everything else that I had done in my life," says Sharma. The show is set mainly in Delhi, Punjab, Bundelkhand and Chitrakoot. All these places were familiar for Sharma as he had done rigorous research on these places for his previous projects. "I urged the other three writers to do these rounds because it is important that they should also be on the same page," he says.

Sharma is inherently drawn to complex stories from society, stories that are beyond the binaries of white and black. In the process, he has faced criticism, too. Over the last one month, people have questioned him over the depiction of violence against women in *Paatal Lok*; some have called him "Hindu-phobic"; and cases have been filed accusing him of portraying people from northeast India in a bad light. But nothing bothers him. "I consider myself a fairly responsible writer," he says. "When I am writing something, the idea is never to sensationalise, at least not in my head. I have a very close and experienced group of readers who read all my scripts. These are the opinions I trust. I always knew what we had done. My own sense of judgement and responsibility told me that what we are trying to show is a very responsible gaze. How do you show discrimination without showing discrimination?"

It is not easy to research and write such stories that go deep into society. He remembers the disturbing experience he had during *Udta Punjab* (2016). "Day after day, I was meeting juvenile boys, 14 and 15 years old, who were addicted to drugs, who do not see a life ahead of them," he says. "You are talking to them and you are seeing their desperation. It did take a toll on me. But then, you have to pull yourself up and tell yourself that your job is to tell the story."

The idea of more and deep research fascinates him. "You cannot tell a story well if you do not understand it yourself," he says, adding that he is looking forward to tell more such complex stories. "I am not interested in being super successful at the box-office in India. I want to tell stories that resonate beyond boundaries."

The lore in four

Four filmmakers announcing films on the same controversial figure has stirred a hornet's nest in Kerala

BY CITHARA PAUL

The Malayalam film industry might be having its *Rashomon* moment. Much like Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's famous movie, in which four people tell different versions of the same story, four Mollywood filmmakers have, almost simultaneously, announced movies on the same person, Variyamkunnath Kunjahammed Haji. He was an early 20th century freedom fighter from Malabar who played a crucial role in the Malabar rebellion against the British. He had even established a short-lived regime called Malayalanadu before being shot dead by the British in 1921.

The ruckus in Mollywood started with Prithviraj, one of the leading actors of the Malayalam film industry, announcing a movie on Haji titled *Variyamkunnan*. It would be directed by Aashiq Abu, one of the ace directors of Mollywood, with Prithviraj playing the title role. The film is expected to release in 2021, to coincide with the 100th year anniversary of the Malabar rebellion.

The announcement was immediately met with resistance from right wingers, who consider Haji as having massacred Hindus during the riot. Prithviraj's Facebook page was flooded with hate messages. When supporters of the movie joined in, it became nothing less than a virtual firefight.

Other than the "anti-Hindu image" of Haji, what irked many was the ideology of the filmmakers. The leaning of co-director Muhsin Parari and scriptwriter Ramees towards political Islam provoked many to question the film's intention. Many lamented that Prithviraj had become a "pawn in the hands of Islamists".

But what followed was nothing short of astonishing. The next day, three more films were announced by three different directors on the same person. The first one to enter the fray was two-time MLA and award-winning filmmaker P. T. Kunju Muhammed, with *Shahid Vaariyamkunnan*. The second film, titled *The Great Vaariyamkunnan,* was announced by director Ibrahim Vengara.

While the first three films will portray the title character as a hero, the fourth entrant has a different take on it. To be directed by Ali Akbar, a pro-BJP film director, the movie will, apparently, "expose Haji's real face". Akbar said he would be making the film through crowd-funding.

Interestingly, a film called *1921* was made in 1988 on the same subject. Directed by I.V. Sasi and starring Mammootty in the lead, the movie had gone on to become a super hit. The debate took a political turn with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan affirming that Haji was a warrior who led a brave battle against the British. "Kerala has always recognised him as a warrior," he said. "There is no need to give a communal angle to that historic fact." As expected, BJP leaders reacted strongly against it. "The Hindus have suffered a lot during the Malabar riots. If these films are being planned to make the oppressor a hero, then we will not allow it," said senior BJP leader Sobha Surendran.

SUPPORT STRUCTURE
A collage of fan-made pictures on Prithviraj's Facebook page

Film lovers and critics, however, feel the more the merrier. "There is no one narrative to any incident. Let there be multiple narratives about this historic persona.... It is for the viewer to judge which is a better film," said noted film critic C.S. Venkiteswaran. He pointed out that when the movie *1921* was released, there was no controversy. "If the same subject becomes controversial now, it only reflects how polemical Kerala society has become," he said.

The Film Employees Federation of Kerala, (FEFKA), meanwhile, has welcomed the move to make four movies on the same theme. FEFKA stated that it respected the creative freedom of all the filmmakers involved in these projects, and hoped that this would give a much needed boost to the film industry, which is struggling post Covid-19.

WORLD CINEMA'S FINEST

LES MISÉRABLES (French, 2019)

TEEN UPRISING

A POLICE OFFICER moves to a new town and is assigned to a trigger-happy, anti-crime brigade led by a man with questionable morals. They drive around town, making a few shakedowns and interacting with criminal elements. Things take an unexpected turn when they attempt to apprehend a teen thief. A kerfuffle ensues between the cops and a group of teenagers, forcing a cop to shoot a flash-ball

at one of the boys. With the help of local criminals, the cops are able to cover up the deed at first, but not for long.

Director Ladj Ly borrows the town of Montfermeil from Victor Hugo's novel for the setting. But in Ly's *Les Miserables*, the teen protagonist is not looking for eventual redemption like Hugo's Jean Valjean. The movie, which was screened at the Cannes Film Festival and was the French entry to the 92nd Academy Awards, often reminds one of *Training Day* because of the way it blurs the line between cops and crooks and *The Wire*, because of the similar backdrop. It is a story about the abuse of power, and the resultant violent uprising.

Tech couture

Nila, India's first digital model, makes her debut on social media

BY SNEHA BHURA

Miquela Sousa or Lil Miquela—a 19-year-old Brazilian-American model, "musical artist", and influencer—was the world's first ever virtual supermodel. Created in 2016, she lived in Los Angeles, wore clothes by luxury brands like Chanel and hobnobbed with musicians and artists in upscale restaurants. Shudu Gram, the first virtual Black CGI supermodel, was once a muse for Rihanna's cosmetic brand, Fenty Beauty. To be sure, creating a digital supermodel is fraught with ethical risks. But we now live in surreal times, when technology is both aiding and threatening the human race.

So when Nila, "India's first digital model", was launched last week by Inega, a 20-year-old modelling agency, there was some interest on social media to create spin-offs and counter-claims. Another digital model named Leena Khurana popped up on Instagram claiming to be "India's first CGI fashion girl—Delhi brat, Bombay bred". There is an attempt to humanise and build a story around Nila. "Nila's guiding principle, as she learns more about the world, is to treat those around her with fairness. And, consequently, to be treated fairly," says Ankit Mehta, CEO of Inega and part of the production team that helped conceptualise Nila.

On June 22, Nila introduced herself on Instagram thus: "Hi. I'm Nila. Happy to be here", followed by a close-up of her chiselled face and full lips. Her features were sculpted using a tool called ZBrush and rendered out of a technology called Arnold. Mehta says Nila might not make her debut on a runway, although she does come just in time for India's first ever digital fashion week in August. "It could be an ad campaign or a magazine cover. Who knows?" he says, building on the mystique. He points out how globally, brands such as Valentino, Dior and Prada have already welcomed virtual models in their campaigns, to complement real models, and how there is a huge untapped opportunity for the fashion industry here.

The fraternity has so far registered mixed reactions. Rahul Mishra, the first Indian to win the International Woolmark Prize in 2014 at the Milan Fashion Week, is interested but cautious. "I feel that this makes me curious, at the least, to find out what prospects lie ahead of us with this new advancement," says Mishra, before adding a caveat. "We often take three to four days to cast models for our shows in Paris, going through about 400 girls to shortlist the right girl. They are not just hangers, they are breathing beings who are responsible for bringing life to a look.

Designer Ashdeen Z. Lilaowala, of the label Ashdeen which specialises in Parsi Gara saris, is not much enthused. "Being a purist, virtual models do not quite excite me," he says. "Fads like this come and go. To generate a digital person who is controlled in some way makes no sense to me." But "fashion", by definition, also means to manufacture, cast, construct and fabricate. Is it not built on creating an illusion of both perfection and casual abandon?

Bobde and the bike

The Beatles wrote the evocative anthem, When I'm 64, in 1967. It opens with the lines, "When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now..." and innocently asks, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64..."

The Chief Justice of India, Sharad Arvind Bobde, who assumed office on November 18, 2019, is 64, and from the snazzy pictures of him riding a limited edition Harley Davidson CVO 2020 recently, it would appear he is still a rockstar with a headful of hair. Take that, Paul McCartney and John Lennon! A man of 64 in this day and age is certainly a far cry from the version depicted by the British popstars. And going by Bobde's varied interests, which range from vintage automobiles, to mean machines like the bike he was 'caught' on this week, it is obvious our chief justice is quite a dude we like!

There are several versions of what exactly the Easy Rider was doing on a bike that sells at approximately ₹51 lakh. One version says he was not exactly riding it, but was astride the beauty. Another hastily clarifies that the bike does not belong to the CJI in the first place and the real owner is the son of a BJP bloke in Nagpur. Another post blames the dealer of the bike, claiming he milked an innocuous enquiry from the CJI to gain mileage from the publicity garnered. While yet another post talks about the bike being a part of the CJI's post-retirement plan. Whatever! Can't a guy go for a roaring spin on something as sexy without so many questions being raised? Our CJI sounds like a really cool person, being an environmentalist, music lover, keen photographer.... What more do you want?

His track record as a judge is as interesting as he is. So is his lineage. His great grandfather was a noted lawyer, and his father, a respected advocate general of India. As the 47th and current CJI, who is due to retire in April 2021, Bobde has been in the news for delivering several important (and controversial) judgments in recent times.

It is pretty refreshing when men and women in such hallowed positions allow their more informal sides to be viewed in the public domain. Our Nagpur-born CJI is one such individual and I do hope all this publicity does not inhibit him from sharing his rockstar persona with the public.

For too long, we have slotted our judges into pre-determined compartments and not allowed them to breathe and just be! The image of the chief justice of India racing down a highway on a sleek bike is pretty modern and attractive. It breaks the mould and instantly strikes a rapport with the young of the country.

I would love to see many more judges and other eminent personalities pursuing their passions without feeling coy. My only grouse in this case? Someone attempting to 'justify' the photograph suggested the CJI did not actually take that gorgeous monster for a ride, he merely climbed on! That is a little like that unforgettable Bill Clinton admission more than 25 years ago when the former president of the US sweetly assured his loyal countrymen that he "didn't inhale..." marijuana smoke! Come on, guys. We are all adults with our own favourite leisure activities, okay? If bikes are the CJI's big thing, so be it! How amazing!

Roarrrrrr away, dear sir. We are keeping an eye on you... and the speed limit. Next time you decide to go for a chakker, do take our vahini, your wife Kamini, with you. Easy Rider... have a great time!

www.shobaade.blogspot.com

Mind grind

Akshay Kumar says that playing a transgender in his upcoming film, *Laxmmi Bomb*, was his most "mentally intense" role till date. "I have never experienced something like this before," he said. "The credit goes to my director (Raghava) Lawrence sir. He introduced me to a version of myself which I did not know existed." The film, about a ghost seeking revenge, is a remake of the 2011 Tamil film, *Kanchana*, and is set to release on Disney+Hotstar.

The lady and the city

After playing a sequence of arresting characters, actor **Shilpa Shukla** will next be seen in Mahesh Dattani's teleplay, *The Big Fat City*, a "dark comedy that deftly conveys the shadowed realities of upper-class Mumbai". Shukla plays Lolita Jagdal, a desperate, has-been actor. "My character in *The Big Fat City* took me on a delightful roller-coaster and I would not have had it any other way," said Shukla. "The narrative is a fitting portrayal of the beautiful chaos that is Mumbai." *The Big Fat City* will air on Tata Sky Theatre this month.

COMPILED BY / ***ANJULY MATHAI***

TÊTE-À-TÊTE

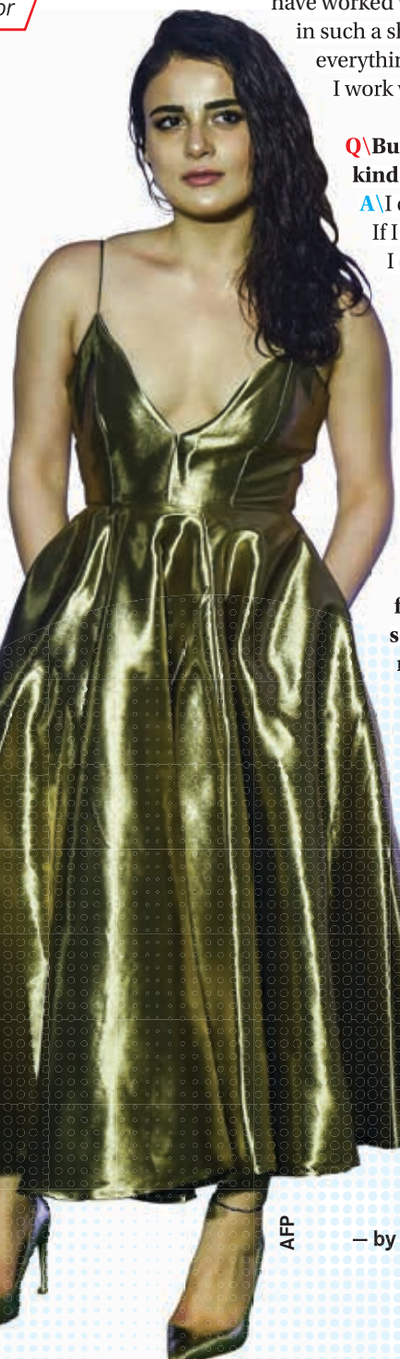
Radhika Madan, *actor*

Chasing glory

Radhika Madan made a wonderful debut with Vishal Bharadwaj's *Pataakha* (2018), followed by a power-packed performance in Vasan Bala's *Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota* (2018). Her third film, *Angrezi Medium*, released in the week the lockdown was announced. But instead of getting disheartened by the film's short run in the theatres, the actor is looking at the positives, like the time she got to learn to play the piano. She even came up with a rendition of the song, Lag Ja Gale, with singer Jasleen Royal.

Q\What made you learn the piano?

A\I have always wanted to learn it. I kept talking about it. When the lockdown happened, I realised I have all the time in the world right now. It was time to practise what I preached. I was just posting a few pictures with the piano when Jasleen messaged me asking why not do something [together]. She wanted to learn the accordion. Then, we thought of collaborating for Lag Ja Gale, [which] is one of my favourites; hers too.



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Q\You have already had three releases in less than two years. How do you see your journey so far?

A\It has been beautiful. I have got the opportunity to play quite a few characters. They have all been very different from each other. I also feel very fortunate to have worked with really amazing people in such a short time. I try and imbibe everything that I can from each person I work with.

Q\But has it been easy to find the kind of work you want to do?

A\I do not have any complaints. If I learn of a project that I think I could be a part of, I chase the people associated with it to let me audition for it. I do not beg or ask to get the role. I just ask for a chance to audition. And I do not mind doing it.

Q\The recent death of Sushant Singh Rajput has sparked many debates in Bollywood. One of them is how actors who transition from TV to films are not taken seriously. Since you have made this transition, do you think that is true?

A\Of course this was the case. Sushant, in fact, inspired many of us to take that leap into films. He paved that path for us. But when I was transitioning, I often tried to get to the roots of why it has been like that and why people think like that. Maybe one needs to perform for television in a certain way and project a bit more when compared with movies, [which is subtler]. But as actors, you understand those differences.

— by Priyanka Bhadani

Singh is king

Ranveer Singh's *Simmba* (2018) will soon re-release in Fiji and Australia. Singh shared two posters of the film on Instagram, which stated "Fiji Blockbuster Returns" in one and "Australia bringing cheers back" in the other. *Simmba* is a revenge drama starring Singh as a depraved cop. The film is reportedly his biggest blockbuster.

Pirate queen

Move over Johnny Depp, we have a new pirate onboard. **Margot Robbie** is all set to play the first female lead in Disney's new *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. Jerry Bruckheimer, who produced all the five previous movies in the series, is likely to produce this one, too. Apparently, the film will have a different cast altogether from the previous movies starring Depp as Jack Sparrow. And while she prepares to rule the high seas, Robbie will next be seen in the sequel to *Suicide Squad* (2016).

GETTY IMAGES

LAST WORD | NAVTEJ SARNA

Kiss, tell, earn

But for the occasional, accidental one, we do not get too many revealing books by insiders of high offices. Perhaps because our insiders are mostly career officers, used to a lifetime of discretion. Perhaps most of them do not plan to go anywhere but hope to continue in another avatar. Or perhaps the publishing advances are not tempting enough to risk the ire of former bosses.

But in that treacherous swamp within the Washington Beltway, which Donald Trump wanted to drain before he became its prize exhibit, tell-all books are a way of life. People, it seems, join high office only so that they can get a book out of it; they are already telling even before they have stopped kissing. *The Room Where It Happened*, the recent book by Trump's third NSA John Bolton, is a case in point. It hangs out all the dirty linen of the White House and confirms, if confirmation were still needed, the chaos that passes for decision-making. Trump's response: Bolton is a liar, a washed-up creepster, lowlife, wacko and above all, a sick puppy. Meanwhile, Bolton is richer by $2 million in advance royalties, though an incomplete pre-approval process could still cause problems.

A reader may well wonder: why did Bolton paddle so hard to get the NSA job when he knew the pitfalls. After all, Trump had broken free of the "axis of adults"—James Mattis, Rex Tillerson, John Kelly; even the trusted duo of Steve Bannon and Reince Priebus were out. The President was in moody swing mode, petulantly tweeting in every direction at odd hours; it was clear that his third NSA would have about as much job security as a wife of Henry VIII.

Possibly because in Washington, DC, which despite its imperial architecture and allusions of Rome is actually quite a small town, these jobs are a big thing. The bubble of policy makers—administration officials, policy wonks, Congressmen—is limited and incestuous. A well-oiled revolving door separates those in government and those without; the latter bide their time in Massachusetts Avenue think-tanks, universities, corporate boardrooms and lobbying firms. When the door revolves with an administration turnover, there is a fierce scramble for government positions which offer power, presidential proximity, a CV upgrade and material for a lucrative book.

When Trump surprised everyone, including himself, by coming out of the left field in November 2016, Bolton, as he modestly puts it, "offered his services to be secretary of state". Actually, he lobbied hard, attracting Trump's attention through tough talk on Fox News and enlisting support of conservative funders. The job went to Tillerson; Bolton's Senate confirmation posed a problem as did Trump's dislike of Bolton's moustache, the envy of any self-respecting walrus.

But Bolton hung around the Oval office, looking for the NSA job which would not need a Senate confirmation, and got it on H.R. McMaster's departure. A "hardline interventionist with a palpable desire for war," Bolton favours military options on Iran and North Korea, and espouses a generally tough line. He famously said that it would be no great loss if the UN building lost ten stories. In his 17 months—not bad in Trumpland—he ticked off some pet boxes, helping pull the US out of the Iran nuclear accord, the INF Treaty and the Human Rights Council until inevitable clashes with Trump led to his resignation. Trump maintains he fired Bolton. In any case, the president will be aghast that Americans paid the $2 million for this trashing of his presidency, targeted to abort his second term, while the rest of the world got it free on WhatsApp.

ILLUSTRATION **BHASKARAN**

The author is the former Ambassador of India to the US and High Commissioner to the UK.

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