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AUGUST 15 DEADLINE FOR COVID VACCINE IS A GIMMICK

INDIA-CHINA STANDOFF
THE WEEK REPORTS FROM LADAKH

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EARLY RELEASE?

WHAT MAKES
MEGHA MAJUMDAR'S
DEBUT NOVEL CLICK

THEWEEK

JULY 19, 2020



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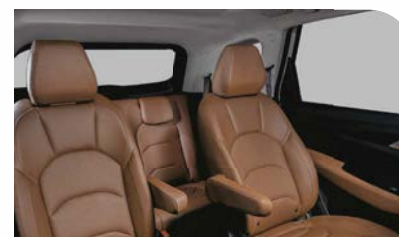
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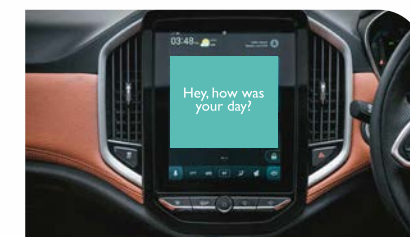
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Recalibrate, reinvent

It has become increasingly evident that India-China camaraderie will remain a chimera so long as the festering wound of border dispute is not healed ('Beijing's blame game', July 5). To deal with the rising supremacist tendencies of China, India needs to recalibrate, and even reinvent its diplomatic tool box in a big way.

It is easier said than done to boycott China economically, as that could end up as a self-goal. But to make 'local' more 'vocal' is not only a sensible option, but also an unavoidable one in today's circumstances.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

stand towards China could have spun the situation on the LAC out of control.

As a permanent resolution looks a remote possibility right now, more bloody skirmishes like the one in Galwan Valley cannot be ruled out in the near future. War may loom in the background, but the battle is well and truly on.

Vijai Pant,
On email.

In the case of Kargil, the conflict was with a known enemy, but in the Galwan Valley the ground situation is altogether different. Here, China didn't comply with the agreement.

Declaring spontaneous action is best left to strategists and tacticians.

S.K. Rajput,
On email.

Once bitten, twice shy is the saying. But, I suppose, it does not apply to Indians. We have been betrayed and back-stabbed several times, but we have not learnt anything. The Chinese, from ancient times, were looked upon suspiciously, but we trusted them on many occasions only to repent later. We consider Pakistan as an enemy nation but why not even China? Maybe it was

wrong to call the Chinese our friends in the first place. Look how Japan deals with China. We should be like that. It is high time we came out of our illusions.

K. Aravinda Upadhyaya,
On email.

Why such a photograph?

I have my reservations against the photograph you have published ('The big picture', July 5). It was gory and very unsettling to see in a national newsweekly.

During any pandemic, many couples seek the help of midwives. I fail to understand the urge to publish such a photograph.

Vismay Mathur,
On email.

Need effective mechanism

I would like to congratulate K. Sunil Thomas for his thought-provoking article on states attempting never-tried-before economic measures to stay afloat during the pandemic ('Precarious States', July 5).

It not only provides the first-hand account of the worries of our fund-starving states but also brings us face-to-face with the economic calamity in the country.

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The pandemic has multiplied our troubles but the government must overcome the effect of negative stimuli created by such a situation.

The current economic situation demands an imperative introspection and an effective mechanism to bring back the economy on the track within the parameters of the democratic structure.

D.K. Mishra,
On email.

This is the future

Video-calling is a lifeline for prisoners and it has to be encouraged ('Prison un-break', July 5). Digitalisations of visits to jails should have happened long ago. When a prisoner video-calls his family, he will be able to see all his family members. There are bound to be more restrictions in jails in the coming years, for safety reasons, and video-calling is here to stay.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Apples in Karnataka

It is common knowledge that a few owners of estates in Kodagu, Chikmagalur and South Canara have successfully been growing apples for many years ('Apples in the Deccan', July 5). These fruits are also being grown in a limited way near Bengaluru.

It has been reported that the apple trees in Kodagu have been bearing fruits throughout the year, unlike in Himachal Pradesh. The horticulture depart-

ment would do well to encourage farmers to go for rearing apple trees in a big way and make apples affordable to the poor.

Jothindra P.L.,
Mysuru, Karnataka.

Let's limit it

A disease like Covid-19 will have a major influence on architecture ('Space gaze', July 5). Office spaces are going to shrink in size in the days to come.

Many offices in India are jam-packed, which is not how they should be. Also, temples, churches and mosques should be built in a manner that it can accommodate many at a time without getting crowded.

Vrinda Gopi,
On email.

Watch them now

The list of claustrophobic movies that you brought out was very interesting ('Boxed in', July 5). These are the kind of films that one should be watching during a lockdown, and is surely going to freak out everyone.

I hope there are fewer such incidents in real life.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

Churchill connection

The Last Word (July 5) was a reminder that the legendary Winston Churchill was once a war correspondent. And, that, apparently, the concept of psyops was in vogue in Britain from Churchill's time.

P.M. Gopalan,
On email.

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Pregnancy care during COVID-19: All you need to know

COVID-19, the disease caused by a new coronavirus, has rapidly spread globally and is now a pandemic, according to the World Health Organization. Many pregnant patients have expressed concerns, both for themselves and their babies, about the impact of COVID-19 on their health. Understandably, mothers-to-be have innumerable questions about safe pregnancy and delivery in the times of coronavirus. Let's try and understand some of the challenging questions that pregnant women are facing during this period of fear and uncertainty.

Are pregnant women more susceptible to the disease?

Pregnant women do not appear more likely to contract the infection than the general population. Pregnant women experience immunologic and physiologic changes which make them more susceptible to viral respiratory infections which can occasionally be related to more severe symptoms and this will be the same for COVID-19.

Are some pregnant women more at risk of becoming seriously unwell from coronavirus than others?

Pregnant women over the age of 35, those who are overweight or obese, and those women who have pre-existing medical problems, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, also appear to be at higher risk of developing severe illness.

Can COVID-19 be passed from mother to her newborn baby or fetus?

Again, there is paucity of evidence on this. Worldwide research is being done on this aspect.

Pregnant women are fearing hospital visits. When do you think it is absolutely essential for them to not skip an appointment?

Women should be advised to attend routine antenatal care, tailored to minimum, at the discretion of the maternal care provider at 12, 20, 28 and 36 weeks of gestation.

As healthcare workers we try and ensure all safe precautions are being taken for all pregnant women for safe motherhood.

Will a pregnant woman be able to breastfeed her baby if she has suspected or confirmed coronavirus?

Yes. It has been proposed that the virus cannot be carried or passed on in breastmilk, but studies are still being carried out.

What can a pregnant woman do to reduce the risk of catching coronavirus

The most important thing to do is to follow the advice below:

- ❖ Wash your hands regularly
- ❖ Use a tissue when you or anyone in your family coughs or sneezes, discard it and wash your hands
- ❖ Avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (these symptoms include high temperature and/or new and continuous cough)
- ❖ Avoid non-essential use of public transport when possible
- ❖ Work from home, when possible
- ❖ Avoid large and small gatherings
- ❖ Keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet and social media



Dr Bandana Sodhi

Senior Consultant (Obstetrics & Gynaecology) & Gyn laparoscopic surgeon
Ex faculty AFMC, Pune,
Army Hospital (R & R)

Coping with stress

Pandemics can be stressful for everyone. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions during pregnancy. The coronavirus epidemic increases the risk of perinatal anxiety and depression.

Tips to cope with stress during COVID-19:

PAUSE. Breathe. TAKE BREAKS from COVID-19 content, MAKE TIME to sleep and exercise. REACH OUT and stay connected, SEEK HELP and call the helpline

In conclusion

We are all aware that the whole world is putting a united front in battling against the novel coronavirus. It has given rise to a series of queries, especially for those planning to welcome a new born in their household. Since there is not enough data to understand the impact of COVID-19 on pregnant women, it is a harrowing time for expectant mothers and families. Mothers across the world are anxious about the looming fear of coronavirus and its effects.

I would like to emphasise to all the moms to be to have a positive mindset and allay all fears and anxiety. They should follow all precautions to stay safe for a healthy pregnancy outcome.



■ **APERITIF** ■
THE BIG PICTURE

NO SMOKE SANS FIRE

A Tibetan Buddhist monk lights a ceremonial fire on the terrace of a small monastery in Dharamshala to mark the 85th birthday of the Dalai Lama on July 6. The Indian government is considering a proposal to send a strong message to China by conferring Bharat Ratna on the Dalai Lama, who has been leading the exiled Tibetan government in India for 61 years.

PHOTO BY AP

POINT BLANK



It is like a batting tactic. It is not the same on all pitches. You play differently on slower pitches. You play differently when it turns, and you play differently when it is flat.

Sourav Ganguly,
BCCI president, on the fight against Covid-19

It is very easy coming after M.S. Dhoni and think, well, I have got to be like Dhoni. I have got to be this calm, calculated finisher, cool ice man. Virat Kohli could never be the cool ice man.

Nasser Hussain,
former England cricket captain

Diplomacy does not work on hospitality or friendly rapport. Diplomacy works on leverage—who does what for who. China offers cheap and reliable factories for the world. India does not (yet).

Chetan Bhagat,
author

The BJP is the LeBron James of election management and organisational agility. By comparison, we look like dilly-dallying dilettantes. It is an asymmetrical war.

Sanjay Jha,
Congress leader

I watch my films almost daily. I make several notes about how to improve. [My notes] keep on changing, which means I am evolving as an actor.

Abhishek Bachchan,
actor

WORD PLAY

NASA researchers are now investigating the potential of employing **mycoarchitecture** to build habitats in Mars and the moon. Mycoarchitecture refers to the architectural practice of designing buildings out of mycelia—the vegetative part of a fungus. In the right conditions, mycelia can be coaxed to make building blocks. Who knows, the future could be that of fungal homes.

MILESTONES

GIGI'S FEAT

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon created a new appearances record in Serie A, Italy's top football league, with his 648th appearance on July 4. AC Milan great Paolo Maldini held the record previously.



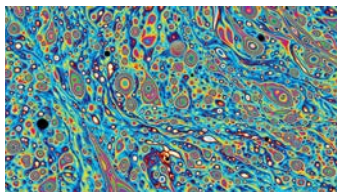
CARE GETS LARGER

The 10,000-bed Sardar Patel Covid Care Centre and Hospital (SPCCCH) at the Radha Soami Satsang Beas in Delhi, one of the largest Covid care facilities in the world, was inaugurated on July 5. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police is the nodal agency operating the SPCCCH.



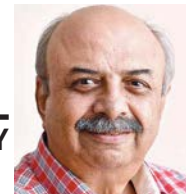
LIGHT RIVER

A team of Israeli researchers achieved the phenomenon of "branching flow" of light, where light appears to "flow" like a river or branch out like a tree. The discovery, achieved by passing a laser through a soap bubble, has implications in the study of relativity.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Administer sans minister

The phrase 'group of ministers' is anathema to the Narendra Modi government, as it was a much ridiculed tool of decision-making in the Manmohan Singh government. In the decade-long rule of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, the GoMs were constituted on every third important subject before the cabinet. Pranab Mukherjee, till he became president, headed the most number of GoMs; fellow ministers frequented his offices in different ministries.

When Modi did constitute these groups—for inter-ministerial issues that needed to be sorted out—they were given complicated names to avoid the acronym GoM. One popular title was 'alternative mechanism', but the names kept changing. A ministerial group headed by Home Minister Amit Shah to decide on disinvestment is called Air India-Specific Alternative Mechanism. But its recommendations need to go to either the cabinet or the cabinet committee on economic affairs, as it happened during the UPA government.

But, when the Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown called for large-scale co-ordination among ministries, a group of ministers was constituted under the chairmanship of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. The group met regularly in the initial weeks of the lockdown to solve complex issues.

But the frequency of the meetings came down as there were fewer issues to consider as the lockdown progressed, and also because another governmental mechanism took over. Instead of burdening ministers with routine subjects, the cabinet secretariat and the Prime Minister's Office set up 10 committees of secretaries of ministries. These committees were tasked with specific issues like ensuring availability of drugs,

protective gear and other medical equipment, transportation of goods and people, protection of migrant labourers, supply of food grains and other essential commodities, community messaging and propping up industries. Members included heads of large public-sector companies like the Food Corporation of India, Indian Oil Corporation, National Housing Bank, Employees Provident Fund, Indian Railways and National Highways Authority of India and various port trusts.

The secretaries would coordinate among themselves and consult with ministers only on policy issues. Officials deputed from the Prime Minister's Office would give the final green light after consulting with P.K. Mishra, principal secretary to the prime minister. So there was a sense of quicker decision-making.

These committees also created the framework for the ₹20 lakh crore economic stimulus package and the slew of reforms announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Some ministers wanted to announce measures relating to their sectors, but they were advised that it would be better if a single minister

announced the whole package. Fellow ministers could take ownership by organising a big event to implement the decisions involving their ministries. Thus, Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi could organise a big virtual function to launch the privatisation of coal mining, which was attended by Prime Minister Modi.

The slew of reforms put a heavy load on the legislative affairs department of the law ministry, which had to quickly vet the drafts of ordinances issued by President Ram Nath Kovind and several new rules which were gazetted. It is to be seen how this new system to tackle the fallout from health and economic emergencies would redefine the minister-bureaucrat relationship in a government dominated by Modi's power and persona.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

sachi@theweek.in

COST NO BAR

Maharashtra is facing a severe funds crunch, according to the government. Every now and then, there are reports of the state planning various cost cutting measures. However, the education department does not seem to be affected. It has cleared the decks to buy a new Toyota Innova Crysta for Education Minister Varsha Gaikwad, at a cost of around ₹23 lakh. Soon, Gaikwad will be zooming in and out of Mantralaya in her brand new SUV.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

ONLINE INITIATIVE

Former chief election commissioner of India Navin Chawla has been entrusted with an unenviable task—being the election officer for the pending elections of office-bearers for the notorious Delhi and District Cricket Association. DDCA ombudsman Justice (retd) Deepak Verma had ordered elections to the vacant posts of president and treasurer in March. A Delhi High Court order on June 17 set a deadline of six weeks. Chawla, who is over 70, cannot step out of his home despite the easing of restrictions as the government has advised those above 65 to stay at home. But, he has set the ball rolling by holding videoconferences with DDCA officials and his aides.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

A viral video featuring Telangana Deputy Speaker Padma Rao could serve as an effective educational tool to convey the importance of wearing masks. The video shows Rao, who recently tested positive for Covid-19, participating in an event without wearing a mask. When a minister offered him a mask, he took it, stuffed it in his pocket and walked away laughing. A perfect example of what not to do.



SON OF THE FOREST

Dressing up for an occasion sometimes goes a little too far. Last week, Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar inaugurated an urban forest in Delhi and donned a leaf green kurta in honour of the occasion. But, he would have blended into the rain-nurtured foliage had it not been for his bright pink waistcoat.

PRAISE TO PLASMA

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal faced criticism for the alleged mishandling of the Covid-19 situation, giving Union Home Minister Amit Shah an opportunity to step in and undermine his leadership. Now, he is looking for redemption, by highlighting his government's initiatives in making plasma therapy available. Delhi recently set up the country's first plasma bank. Kejriwal has now launched a major publicity drive for plasma therapy; he is personally calling up people who have recovered from Covid-19, and is urging them to donate plasma.

Besieged and vulnerable

The unrelenting Covid-19 situation coupled with the monsoon could be too much to handle for Maharashtra's strained health infrastructure

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

ON JULY 1, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray went to Pandharpur, a pilgrimage town in Solapur district, with his wife and son Aditya, minister of tourism and environment. It was Ashadhi Ekadashi, a holy day for Hindus. Thackeray prayed for a miracle that would help not just Maharashtra—the Indian state worst affected by Covid-19—but the whole of mankind to get rid of the pandemic. Later, he reiterated this sentiment on Twitter, saying that man was down on his knees and there was no cure for the disease, yet.

The chief minister, who had in the past maintained that the state was doing extremely well in its fight against Covid-19 and assured people victory over the virus, showed the first signs of fatigue and resignation with his entreaty for divine intervention. As of July 5, over two lakh people had been infected in Maharashtra and close to 9,000 had died. With over 84,000 cases, Mumbai accounted for 41 per cent of the total.

The heavy showers in the state's Konkan regions could compound the problem as monsoon-related illnesses would overload the already strained health infrastructure. "Our biggest worry is how we will differentiate those with malaria, leptospi-

rosis and dengue from those with Covid-19," says Dr Harshad Limaye, internal medicine specialist at Nana-vati Hospital in Mumbai. "We are also expecting a few cases of swine flu. The already acute bed-availability crisis might worsen anytime now."

After a steep spike in cases during Unlock 1, the chief minister decided to restrict movement in Mumbai. The police imposed a new rule asking citizens to move only within a 2km radius from their homes; only of-office-goers were exempt. The sudden enforcement of the rule caught many unawares and evoked strong reactions from those who were fined and had their vehicles seized.

The Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party—partners in the ruling alliance—expressed displeasure that ministers from the allies, including Home Minister Anil Deshmukh of the NCP, were not kept in the loop by the chief minister's office before asking Mumbai Police to enforce the blockade. Similarly, a 10-day lockdown was imposed in Thane, despite a difference of opinion between Housing Minister Jitendra Awhad of the NCP and the Shiv Sena's Eknath Shinde, minister for urban development and public works. After ministers from the NCP complained to party chief Sharad Pawar that they

were not being taken into confidence by the chief minister, Pawar met Thackeray and the periphery blockade in Mumbai was withdrawn. But, the chief minister was adamant that strict restrictions were needed in the corporations neighbouring Mumbai.

Meanwhile, shortage of health care personnel is leading to extreme working conditions. "There is burn-out and confusion among civilians and frontline workers," said Swati Rane, vice president, Clinical Nursing and Research Society. "I know of a nursing hostel in Mumbai where bouncers were sent to ensure that

SEEKING DIVINE INTERVENTION

Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and wife, Rashmi, at Lord Vitthal-Rukmini Temple at Pandharpur in Solapur

nurses kept working for 12 hours at a stretch, despite their protests. The government continues to face staff shortage and many have to work for inhuman hours. IAS officers alone cannot manage Mumbai, especially when those in the wards have no idea what to do." A structure is lacking and decentralisation is the need of the hour, she adds.

Most experts and health activists agree that Mumbai's Covid-19 numbers have stabilised to an extent over time. But, the relentless rise in cases in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) is adding to the city's case load. These fringe towns, which include Navi Mumbai, Mira-Bhayandar, Ulhasnagar, Kalyan Dombivli, Thane, Ambernath, Badlapur and Bhiwandi, have contributed over 15,000 cases so far. "These towns do not have the infrastructure to fight a pandemic," says Brinelle D'Souza, assistant professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and co-convener

of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan's Mumbai chapter. "Covid-19 patients from these areas are coming to the city's hospitals and testing facilities. So one cannot actually say that Mumbai has gotten over the pandemic unless the other corporations, too, report a decrease in numbers. Right now, there seems to be a lack of coordination between MCGM (Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai) and the eight other corporations of the MMR, which share boundaries and depend so much on each other for human resources."

In a bid to get a grip on the situa-



tion, the government deputed four IAS officers with medical backgrounds as municipal commissioners. Sudhakar Deshmukh, municipal commissioner of Panvel Municipal Corporation (PMC), told THE WEEK that 90 per cent of the infections in PMC were from Mumbai. "Residents here go to Mumbai for work and catch the infection because of lack of social distancing and spread it here," he says. Seven of the nine municipal corporations in the MMR are now in lockdown and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is hoping to build giant Covid-19 care facilities on the city's periphery.

Additional chief secretary, S.J. Kunte, who is in charge of tackling Covid-19 in the MMR, says that this situation was expected because of the unlocking and restarting of local trains to ferry passengers for essential services. "Now, the point is to trace, track and test cases and minimise the spread," he says. "We are trying to manage, but we have

IN ALL WEATHERS

Health workers at a containment zone at Malad in Mumbai

no manpower," says Kunte. "They (doctors) ask for a lot of money to serve and we are asking corporations to pay up to ₹1.10 lakh, instead of the ₹75,000 per month stipulated by the National Health Mission. That is the only way."

On July 4, the cabinet secretary held a meeting in which he stated that the fatality rate should be brought down to 1 per cent. Mumbai's fatality rate is close to 6 per cent; the state average is 4.49 per cent and the national average is 2.9 per cent, according to the Medical Education and Drugs Department, Maharashtra.

The BMC had already come up with a nine-point strategy—Save Lives—on June 30 to reduce Covid-19 fatality. It includes closer monitoring of critical patients, including video surveillance by heads of units and heads of hospitals, among other aspects. "The number of positive cases are declining, but the city's ICUs remain largely full," says Dr Om Shrivastav, member of the state Covid-19 task force. "In the next few weeks, we will know how effective it (Save Lives) is."

Another important initiative has been Project Platina—a convalescent plasma therapy trial, which will be free of cost in 17 medical colleges across the state—launched by the chief minister on June 29.

Even as Mumbai continues to report over 1,000 cases a day, there is a silver lining. Dharavi, which was once a Covid-19 hotspot, reported significantly fewer cases at the start of July. The load has now shifted from the slums to the city's high-rises as residents step out of their homes and get house help back in. For instance, housing complexes in the city's D Ward, which includes "posh" localities such as Malabar Hill, Gamdevi and Nepean Sea Road, witnessed a surge in cases in June.

To make things worse, even as people desperately try to save their loved ones, private hospitals continue to charge a premium for hospital beds and present the patient's families with exorbitant bills. This has not gone unnoticed and, on July 4, Santacruz police registered an FIR against Nanavati Hospital for allegedly charging ₹2 lakh per bed per night. ❶

INTERVIEW



Ajoy Mehta
principal adviser to the chief minister, Maharashtra

Fatality rate is high because of urbanisation

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL

AJOY MEHTA, a 1984-batch IAS officer was at the helm of the Covid-19 response in Maharashtra as the chief secretary. After his term ended on June 30, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray created a new post—principal adviser to the chief minister—to keep him on board. Mehta talks to THE WEEK about the state's fight against Covid-19 and why private hospitals continue to overcharge patients. Edited excerpts:

What is your take on the Covid-19 situation in Maharashtra? There are over two lakh cases now.

In one line, we are very much in control. Yes, there are some hotspots where we are working to bring down the number of cases. But, in most places we have plateaued. I would not say it is coming down, because we are also opening up. As you open up, there is bound to be an increase. But the increase should be within the control of your health system. Today our health system is not swamped [as] our reopening is calibrated. We are building health infrastructure, too.

Has Maharashtra entered the community transmission phase?

No. We are far from it. When community transmission starts, you will see geometric progression; 6,000 will become 12,000 the next day and 12,000 will become 24,000. Also, in community transmission, one is not able to trace the index cases. But today, we are able to trace the index cases and that, too, in containment zones and hotspots.

The opposition has alleged that the government is underreporting deaths.

Covid-19 deaths must be notified under the Epidemic Act, which was not done in the rush of things when we started. Our people were involved in saving lives and that did not get reported. So, all figures were reconciled over the state. Yes, the death rate went up, but at least we have told the people the truth.

The state's fatality rate is very high in comparison with the national rate.

The rate is high because we are undeniably the most urbanised state and Mumbai has the highest level of urbanisation. And unfortunately this disease has been an urban phenomena. Social distancing in public transport is not possible today. The trains in Mumbai carry 6,000 passengers. Our offices, shops, sabzi mandis... we have just not thought about social distancing. It is a new concept and it will take time to put all these things in place. Our work ethics, social ethics and a lot of things will have to change.

Is the state nearing a second peak?

Monsoon tends to lower your immunity and brings along certain diseases, including dengue and malaria. So we are now making huge efforts to keep monsoon-related illnesses in control. Because a combination of these with Covid-19 will become deadly.

There have been instances of overcharging in private hospitals.

This situation existed about a month back; we were fighting it. Today, 80 per cent beds have been taken over. We have also got auditors now in each hospital, looking at their billing section. We also have a complaints mechanism in place and as a result we filed an FIR against the CEO of a very renowned hospital in Mumbai for overcharging patients. This is the first of its kind in the country. We have conveyed very strongly that we need everybody's support during this crisis. And if you support us voluntarily it is fine, else we have the backing of the law.

The 80:20 bed ratio was confusing and many hospitals came out with their own versions of it.

At the start, we converted government hospitals across the state into Covid-19 hospitals. Then we made the Mahatma Jyotiba Phule insurance applicable to everybody—12 crore people. Thousands of private hospitals and 900 procedures came under that umbrella. But, hospitals were not ready to treat patients at insurance rates. That is when we asked for 80 per cent of their beds for treatments covered under the insurance. While some hospitals offered 80 per cent of the 10 per cent charity beds, others showed some beds to be unoperational.

[We said] that we will send a person and count all the beds, and I want 80 per cent of the total beds available. So, to counter this, hospitals began overcharging with, for example, personal protective equipment costing ₹10,000 and other consumables. So then we fixed charges of PPE and said we could supply them to the hospitals, too, and asked them to display the rates on a board outside. So as hospitals came up with new things, we [stepped in].

For the full interview, log on to www.theweek.in



Imperfect prescription

Experts question the efficacy of measures like home quarantine and argue that blindly following WHO guidelines will continue to drive up the number of Covid deaths in India

BY RABI BANERJEE

SWAPAN GHOSH chose to run a small sweet shop in Kolkata, although he was from Singur in Hooghly district, one of the most fertile regions in West Bengal. The 55-year-old, however, had to shut his shop and return to his village following the nationwide lockdown imposed on March 26 to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. He was back in business a few weeks later, after Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee permitted the reopening of shops, especially in Kolkata.

When the unlock process began, Kolkata residents perhaps let down their guard. From pakora joints to paani puri stalls, all shops were crowded. Ghosh's shop, too, was packed. A few days after reopening his shop, he started having intermittent fever, cough and cold. On June 30, a local doctor asked him to get tested for Covid-19. Ghosh got himself tested at a Covid-19 hospital on July 2 and died the next day, before the results came. As the hospital did not issue a death certificate, his body could not be cremated. As the morgues were full, it was kept in his shop. Corporation officials took the decomposed body away for crema-

tion after his test results came back positive. Ghosh's worried customers are now trying to get themselves tested.

Back in Singur, Ghosh's family has no clue about how he contracted the infection. His wife and two children are inconsolable. "We will help the family financially if required. They are already getting free ration," said Mahadeb Das, block president of the Trinamool Congress. He said infections were going up in Singur. "All are caused by migrant workers. We are finding it hard to stop the disease from spreading," he said.

Seventy-year-old Prashanta Bose (name changed on request) from Amherst Street in Central Kolkata, too, fell ill around the same time. His family consulted a local doctor, who came wearing personal protective equipment. "He gave some medicines and ordered a Covid-19 test," said Bose's nephew. The family contacted Calcutta Medical College, the nearest testing facility. Bose took the test on June 29 and, like Ghosh, died the next day, while waiting for the results. The family could not find a morgue; they kept the body in a hired ice cream freezer. "We paid ₹20,000

for it," said a family member.

His family blames the system which, it feels, has made the detection of Covid-19 a complex issue. "Although he had a cough and shortness of breath, he never thought of getting tested as no one thought he could contract the infection. Even the local doctor who treated him was not sure that he had Covid-19. But we got worried as he came wearing PPE," said Bose's nephew.

Corporation authorities came to take the body away for cremation on July 2, after the test results returned positive. Atin Ghosh, deputy mayor of the Kolkata municipal corpora-

tion, said the corporation did not want to put its staff at risk. "There are rules for handling such bodies. The blood report was more urgent," he said. Now the entire Bose family is being tested and have been placed under quarantine for 14 days. Also, tests are being intensified in the area near the Bose residence.

Despite the precautions adopted by the corporation and health officials, people are dying at homes and families are finding it tough to get death certificates and a slot in the morgue. On July 4, a 72-year-old resident of Sodepur in North 24 Parganas district was admitted to a hospital

in Barrackpore. As her condition deteriorated, she was sent to Kolkata. But when the patient reached the city hospital, she was sent back. Her son, Biswajit De, made an emotional appeal to the health department to save his mother; she was admitted to a private hospital after the department intervened.

"It is pathetic and careless. We are facing a grave situation," said Dr Amitava Nandy, former adviser to the Indian Council of Medical Research and former consultant to the World Health Organisation.

Nandy said the ICMR was following guidelines prescribed by

WHO-approved international journals like gospel truth, without assessing their impact across different geographic locations. "The ICMR was under tremendous pressure from Central and state governments to act. But science cannot function like that," said Nandy. Calling the home quarantine destructive, he said such methods accentuated the spread of the virus in India. "The ICMR failed to understand that what is good in Europe may not be good for India, where common people are not that much literate," he said. "Also, it brought technology and kits without standardising them to suit India's



TOUGH TIMES
A health worker collects swab sample of a woman for Covid-19 testing in Kolkata

geographical situation. So we had bad kits and bad methods of testing and then bad methods of safety. Everything went against us.”

Nandy said the Central and state governments tried to reap political benefit out of the situation, and some businessmen made huge profits. “While the governments wanted to downplay the epidemic by not circulating enough information, many companies started producing fake safety kits and masks,” he said. He said the rushed declaration of a vaccine was yet another example of the ICMR allowing itself to be put under pressure.

According to Nandy, because of the inadequate preventive measures, patients are dying and hospitals are running out of beds, forcing people to get treated at home. “How can such infectious patients be treated at home? They are bound to infect others, including children and the elderly who have comorbidities,” he said.

Nandy said the way Ghosh and others died showed that people were being forced to conceal the disease. “They are afraid of being stigmatised,” he said. “Even doctors cannot enter their apartments after coming back from duty. Covid-19 has become a social curse in Bengal and perhaps in many other states.”

Covid-19 numbers in West Bengal have been rising steadily, although the number of tests remained low at 5,000 tests per million people. The return of migrant workers has added to the crisis. Random rapid antibody tests done in and around Kolkata have shown an infection rate of 14 per cent. The conclusion is that asymptomatic patients must have infected the people at home during the lockdown, including the elderly and the vulnerable. Experts said the government failed to announce basic information like the lists of Covid-19 hospitals and the number of beds available in each place at



BREAKING THE CHAIN

Kolkata Municipal Corporation workers sanitise their hands after putting the body of a dead Covid-19 patient in a vehicle

any given time. WHO-empanelled molecular virologist Partho Sarathi Roy said only 5 per cent of Covid-19 patients would require critical care in hospitals. “It is disheartening that the government is finding it hard to give such a small number of people proper hospital facilities,” he said.

Nandy said the government had missed the bus. “Yes, only five per cent would require hospital care,” he said. “Today, the rate of infection is around 15 per cent. But when it reaches 70 per cent, that 5 per cent will be a big number. The Central and state governments fear that such a situation will hit them politically if

they fail to provide treatment to such a big number.”

That fear was perhaps the reason why Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended the free ration scheme till November. The Centre has also offered other freebies such as direct money transfer worth ₹1,000 crore and free cooking gas cylinders for people below poverty line. After Modi’s announcement, Mamata said she would extend the free ration scheme till June 2021. But the West Bengal government is already finding it difficult to fund its ambitious schemes. Finance Minister Amit Mitra said the Modi government had not given West Bengal even “a single rupee” to tackle Covid-19. “What they are saying is untrue. We have had to arrange our own money to fight the pandemic,” said Mitra.

Government sources, however, indicated that money would not be a problem for Mamata’s grand schemes, especially with assembly elections due in 2021. “We have no shortage of food, as we buy rice directly from farmers,” said Food Minister Jyotipriyo Mullick. “We will feed the people of Bengal freely.”

The return of migrant workers has added to the crisis. Random rapid antibody tests done in and around Kolkata have shown an infection rate of 14 per cent.

IVORY TOWER

SANJAYA BARU



Trade is also strategic

Talking about his recent book on his tenure at the White House, former United States national security adviser John Bolton told an Indian journalist that he disagreed with President Donald Trump focusing far too much on bilateral trade issues and not enough on larger strategic issues with India. This distinction is an old fudge that both the tribes of economists and foreign policy experts indulge in. Every now and then we are reminded that while the US State department wants better relations with India, the US Trade Representative (USTR) marches to a different tune.

This distinction that keeps trade policy in one silo, and foreign policy and strategic ties in another is mirrored even on the Indian side. In New Delhi, the partitioning is made complete by the fact that the Indian Administrative Service runs trade policy while the Indian Foreign Service runs foreign policy. When a certain former prime minister wanted to post an IFS officer as India’s ambassador to the World Trade Organization, the IAS killed the proposal with a ton of files. On the other hand, diplomats have often complained about the insularity of the trade bureaucracy that prevents closer relations with the US.

The current stand-off with China and the new policy of *atmanirbharta* has forced the government of India to wipe out this distinction between trade policy and foreign policy. Even so, the ideological diehards among both economists and foreign policy analysts remain critical of blurring the distinction. Those who remain sceptical of taking a tough view on trade with China, as a response to China getting tough on border issues and political relations, would do well to read the views of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas C. Schelling who deployed game theory in defining nuclear deterrence.

Schelling told a US Congressional committee on trade and national security way back in 1971: “Aside from war and preparations for war, and occasionally aside from migration, trade is the most important relationship that most countries have with each other.... Trade is what most international relations are about. For that reason, trade policy is national security policy.”

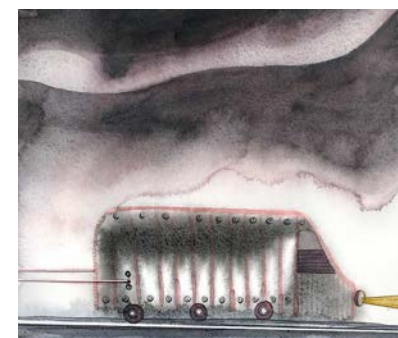
Schelling’s views have been echoed over the years across Washington DC. The White House has used the USTR to browbeat friend and foe. In the 1980s, Japan was the target. Today, it is China, India and many other trade partners. So, Bolton is making much of a muchness criticising Trump for doing what many of his predecessors have

done—weaponise trade. What is amusing is that so many Indian apologists for US action continue to peddle the argument that while the White House and the US state department want good relations with India, the USTR is such a bloody-minded fellow.

For good or bad, political and economic relations between countries do get inter-twined. China was a beneficiary of a

mounting trade surplus with India during the pre-Xi Jinping period when the political relationship was improving. As the political relationship deteriorated, trade ties, too, took the hit. The theory that trade can buy peace was dumped long ago and China’s deteriorating relations with all its major trade partners goes to show that money cannot buy love.

As for the US-India relationship, the media has reported that India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has been receiving reassuring phone calls from Mike Pompeo, the US secretary of state, in the context of the spat with China. It would be equally helpful if New Delhi also received reassuring calls from the USTR, Robert Lighthizer. As George Bernard Shaw’s Eliza Doolittle told Freddy Eynsford-Hill, “Do not talk of love, show me!”



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

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN



Partho Sarothi Ray,
*associate professor, Indian Institute of Science
Education and Research, Kolkata*

The August 15 deadline is a gimmick

BY RABI BANERJEE

PROFESSOR PARTHO SAROTHI RAY, a molecular biologist and associate professor at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Kolkata, is among the several medical professionals the WHO is consulting for the management of Covid-19. In an interview with THE WEEK, Ray talks about the lockdown, unlocking and why India has botched the transition. Excerpts:

Q/What is the current situation?

A/We are in the middle of an increas-

ing curve of viral infection. It will increase more in the days to come. During the lockdown, with very low testing and people cooped up in their homes, the virus incubated and spread among close contacts. Therefore, during the lockdown, there was no period in which the curve showed flattening. Now, after unlocking, it is spreading everywhere.

Q/How is it spreading?

A/Initially, the government focused on the so-called doubling rate and

it was widely proclaimed that the rate had decreased. However, that is a useful parameter only during the early stages. It will definitely take longer for 5,000 cases to become 10,000 than [it takes for] 50 to become 100. We need to see how many days it takes to reach a fixed number like one lakh. In India, the first one lakh cases took 110 days. Now, it takes three to four days.

Q/Is there no way to check the increase now?

A/There is no easy way now. At the time when it was possible to test and isolate the limited number of cases, it was not done. Subsequently, tests have increased, but it is difficult to keep up with the number of cases now. Also, the medical system is reaching its limits as it was not sufficiently strengthened during this time.

Q/How long will the pandemic last?


A/No one should predict how long it would take. In the absence of real data parameters, no models have been able to successfully predict the course of the infection. This is not just a mathematical exercise; the virus is also mutating and changing the transmission dynamics. For example, in Europe, a single change in the spike protein, from aspartic acid to glycine (D614G), has made it significantly more infective than the virus found in Wuhan.

Q/Is it now a community-level infection?


A/It is fully a community-level infection whether we choose to call it that or not. In a recent exercise to look for Covid-19 antibodies in a sample of people, around 14 per cent were found seropositive in Kolkata.

Q/Is the virus as lethal as before?

A/Case fatality rate, which is the number of deaths divided by the number of positive cases, determines whether it is lethal or not. The case fatality rate in India is around 3 per cent. Then there is another measure, called infectious fatality rate, which is the number of deaths divided by the number of infected people. That is most likely 0.1 to 0.3 percent, as the number of infected people found is still low due to inadequate testing. This data is estimated because in some places in Europe and the US, nearly everyone was tested. India could also have



In India, patients are dying in ambulances after being refused admission in nine or 10 hospitals. It is a failure of intervention.



the same rate as it is largely invariable. So, the virus is not very lethal in terms of numbers.

Q/As the virus has been around for a while, would fewer people die now?

A/The virus is already low in lethality—one to three in 1,000 infected people would possibly die. Some global reports suggest that case severity is decreasing. But this is anecdotal and I would not vouch for it. However, it is expected that less lethal variants of the virus will be spreading more.

Q/But when the virus is widespread, even a small percentage is a big number. How can medicine be used to manage it?

A/The nature of the disease is much better understood now. Covid-19 infection causes major inflammation in lungs, causing death. This inflammation allows water accumulation in lungs and clotting of blood in the small blood vessels. Drugs that can control the inflammation in severe cases can prevent deaths. Dexamethasone, a steroid, has given good results. It is quite cheap and, therefore, useful in India. In early stages of the

infection, some of the antiviral drugs such as remdesivir or favipiravir are showing some results, but these are not specifically against this virus.

Q/But a lot of patients with comorbidities are dying, especially in cities.

A/That is more a result of policy paralysis and lack of planning. Hospitals are refusing patients. It is a policy matter that the government would have to deal with. Private hospitals must take all Covid-19 patients. See, for example, Germany. It had as high a number of cases as Italy or France or the UK, but much fewer deaths. It used its medical system to its utmost capacity. In India, patients are dying in ambulances after being refused admission in nine or 10 hospitals. It is a failure of intervention.

Q/As per reports, the government is planning to introduce a vaccine before August 15. Is it possible?

A/It is a gimmick. Look at the vaccine development effort at Oxford; they started in April, but said they could not give results before October. Many things, such as efficacy, safety and tolerability, have to be tested before a vaccine can be given to the people. I am more worried about safety. It would take at least three months to get the safety data. There can be some rare adverse reactions. You may not get a reaction in 1,000 people, but if you apply [the vaccine] to one lakh, you may get 100 deaths. So, trials involving more people are necessary to rule out rare adverse reactions. Antibodies are generated in three to four weeks after vaccination, but it takes longer to estimate safety.

Q/A section of the Indian Council of Medical Research blames red-tapism.

A/India's legal process is not very different from the regulations followed by other countries. Safety is the pri-



DESPERATE TIMES

The campus hall of Radha Soami Satsang Beas in Delhi has been converted into a Covid-19 care centre

AFP

mary concern here. Many [levels of] approval and testing are required to make a safe vaccine. As a scientist, I say we should have as stringent a law as possible for vaccines.

Q/What is the WHO telling you now?

A/I think the world body is more worried about the unlocking process. Like an unplanned lockdown, unlocking is also unplanned. Take, for instance, public transport in Kolkata. Some sectors are open, but some are still closed. This has created huge pressure on the sectors that are open. And you are exposing more people to infection by causing crowding. Pressure should be evenly distributed and sectors opened accordingly. There has been unplanned unlocking in the US, too, and cases are rising very fast. Today, the epicentre has shifted to India, Brazil and Russia.

There will be multiple waves of this virus and the second wave is yet to start.

Q/But unlocking is important.


A/Of course. But it is important to do it in a planned manner. For example, all offices should not have been opened together. In many places in Europe, they first opened government offices. And some weeks later, more essential private sector [offices]. Then, government and private offices on alternate days. Here, we seem to have no clear-cut policy.

Q/Today, people are more worried about the cost of treatment.

A/Only 10 per cent possibly require hospitalisation. Say five lakh are infected; 10 per cent of that is not a big number, and India should give them good treatment. What hurts is that we are failing to do that. This is

because of policy paralysis. Private bodies are using corrupt practices. They are charging [too much] and there is also news of them giving false positive reports. The government needs to prevent commercialisation of a pandemic.

Q/How could India have done this?

A/Not everyone needed hospitalisation, but required isolation. All hotels are empty. We could have used them as large isolation units as they have separate rooms with attached bathrooms. We could have used indoor stadiums and other large vacant places. India did not enforce the pandemic laws for the benefit of the common people. Instead, they were enforced to target common people and make their lives difficult. We still need a comprehensive and people-friendly plan to tackle the pandemic. 

PMO BEAT

R. PRASANNAN



Perils of personal diplomacy

The fans of neither of them would approve of me saying so, but Jawaharlal Nehru and Narendra Modi have certain things in common. Both have been practitioners of personal diplomacy, and both paid the price for being too trusting in their dealings with China.

First about personal diplomacy. It is that in which heads of states and governments not only meet and mingle in person, but also haggle over matters of bilateral trade and border truce. Left to diplomats, these issues would get entangled in red tape, locked up in round brackets and square brackets, and tripped over commas, colons and communicate prose. Issues can be sorted out better, so say the champions of personal diplomacy, if the principals develop a personal chemistry between them.

It is generally held that Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated personal diplomacy in modern times. He got Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin to meet him a dozen times in less than four years during World War II, at times in such odd places as Malta, Yalta and Casablanca. In the pre-jet age, that must have been some summiteering! And we talk of Modi and Xi Jinping meeting 18 times in six years—in Wuhan, Mamallapuram and elsewhere.

The Europeans, who thought they were wiser to the world and its bad ways than the upstart Americans, had traditionally abhorred personal diplomacy. Their statesmen, save for oddballs like Lloyd George who had tried the personal touch and failed, used to scrupulously leave dealings with foreign powers to ministers and ambassadors. Even Lord Palmerston, who had achieved name and fame as one of the greatest diplomats of the 19th century, left deal-making with foreign powers to the foreign office when he became prime minister. So much so, British diplomat Sir Harold Nicolson wrote at the start

of World War II, that frequent meetings between world leaders “should not be encouraged” and that “such visits arouse public expectations, lead to misunderstanding and create confusion”. Don’t we know how A.B. Vajpayee’s Agra summit with Pervez Musharraf had raised hopes and then flopped?

The problem with personal diplomacy is that the odium is greater if things go wrong. As Dean Acheson, who was secretary of state to Roosevelt’s successor Harry Truman, cautioned, “When a chief of state or head of government makes a fumble, the goal line is open behind him.”

That is what happened to Nehru and Modi.

Nehru had no foreign minister throughout his term, and handled much of the diplomacy by himself. He loved the company of world statesmen, and believed he could talk them into making a fairer world order that he had fondled in his idealistic mind. Modi has had foreign ministers, but he loves to

handle much of the diplomacy himself, and bask in the glow of camera lights.

Both started with a deep admiration for China—Nehru for its civilisational greatness and for the historical struggles that its people had waged against conquerors, and Modi for China’s miraculous modernisation and material progress in the post-Mao era. Nehru saw in China a potential partner in his plan to rouse an Afro-Asian resurgence; Modi saw in China a partner to shape an Asian century.

Both made the cardinal mistake of believing in the terms of summit-level endearment—Nehru in Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai and Modi in the Wuhan and Mamallapuram bonding. The bottom line in diplomacy is: trust but verify. The comrades in China may profess communism, but their strategic instincts are as expansionist as those of the Songs, the Mings and the Qings who ruled the Middle Kingdom.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

WAR BY OTHER MEANS

BEING FREED OF AN EXPENSIVE
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN INVOLVING
CONSTANT TRAVEL BECAUSE OF COVID-19,
JOE BIDEN, WITH HIS PALPABLE EMPATHY,
WILL BE A TOUGH OPPONENT
FOR DONALD TRUMP

BY LAVINA MELWANI / New York

Who would have imagined that the 'Biden for President' campaign would be launched from the basement of the candidate's home? In the era of Covid-induced quarantine and social distancing, the rituals of political campaigning are playing out from strange new locations.

Instead of the big, raucous rallies which are part of American political life, former vice president Joe Biden has been conducting a series of virtual meetings with donors and supporters. This reporter was privy to one such meeting organised by Shekar Narasimhan, chairman and founder of the AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) Victory Fund, the first and only Asian American Super PAC (political action committee). Present along with Biden at the meeting were high-profile decision makers like Senator Kamala Harris, Congressman Ami Bera and former US ambassador to India Richard Verma, speaking from the intimacy of their own homes.

With the sound of Canada geese honking from the pond in the background, Biden spoke from his home office: "My prayers are with all those who are scared or sick or grieving and struggling just to get by." He spoke about the large number of Americans who lost their lives to the pandemic. "It's infuriating. More than that, it's heartbreaking to think how much fear, how much loss, how much agony could have been avoided if the president had not wasted so much time in taking responsibility."

FLAG-BEARER OF CHANGE

Joe Biden has described the November election as a "battle for the soul of the nation"

GETTY IMAGES

For Biden, who on June 6 won the nomination of the Democratic party in the presidential election scheduled for November 3, the fight against President Donald Trump is very personal, all-consuming, and a “battle for the soul of the nation”. It is indeed a triumphant moment—he won the gruelling race for the Democratic nomination. If this were a video action game, we would have to give him points for persistence, persistence and persistence as he battled more than 20 contenders—some weak and some strong—until he became the last man standing in his third bid for presidency.

All of his former opponents including Senators Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Cory Booker and Amy Klobuchar, Mayor Pete Buttigieg and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg have coalesced behind him in a massive show of strength. Biden’s last big battle was with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders who has a huge following and a progressive agenda. The two have come together, with Sanders endorsing Biden in a friendly virtual meeting.

All these formidable contenders now support Biden, forming a powerful network. Biden has also received ringing endorsements and support from former president Barack Obama, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton. “Joe has the character and the experience to guide us through one of our darkest times and heal us through a long recovery,” said Obama. “I know he’ll surround himself with good people—experts, scientists, military officials who actually know how to run the government and care about doing a good job running the government, and know how to work with our allies, and who will always put the American people’s interests above their own.”

Biden has pledged to select a female vice president, and Harris is a strong contender. She is solidly

behind Biden and has emphasised the importance of a Democratic victory at a time when Trump might get the chance to nominate yet another judge to the supreme court, and radically alter its delicate balance. “Who is president of the United States matters on this very important issue of the supreme court,” said Harris. “Joe understands what’s at stake, and has supported justices who believe in upholding all the rights that we have fought for and care about and rely on.”

People know Biden by his actions in the White House for eight years as vice president and as a senator for 36 years. To many people, he is simply ‘Joe’ who will watch out for the underdog and the middle class. As he says, “I’ll make sure everyone in this country is treated with dignity, respect. My dad used to say, ‘Joey, everybody’—and he meant it—everybody is entitled to be treated with respect, be it the guys who shine

“Joe [Biden] has the character and the experience to guide us through one of our darkest times and heal us through a long recovery.”

—Barack Obama,
former US president

THROWING CAUTION TO THE WIND
President Trump takes a tour of a medical swab manufacturing unit



your shoes or the president of the hotel chain.’ We have a strong and resilient safety net, and we have to reconstruct to keep us going when hard times hit.” After losing his son Beau to a brain tumour in 2015, he created in his private capacity the Biden Foundation, the Biden Cancer Initiative, the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, and the Biden Institute at the University of Delaware.

Verma recollected how Biden built the inclusive and diverse staff of the senate foreign relations committee. “He listened and gave everyone a chance. And, of course, I saw him work so hard during the day, and then take that train back to Delaware each and every night for decades just so he could spend time with his family.”

The Biden campaign has received more than 2,100 endorsements from

current and former senators, representatives, governors, state representatives, state senators, community leaders and national security professionals. For once, Trump—a hugely divisive force—has unintentionally acted as a unifying glue, bringing together all of them.

But how will this play out in November, especially with Covid-19 completely upsetting the best laid plans of both parties? The pandemic sneaked into the country, unfazed by walls and borders and immigration protocols. It has become a living nightmare, killing 1.32 lakh Americans and infecting 29.83 lakh as on July 6, and the numbers continue to rise.

Trump’s bragging rights have been seriously compromised. His USP was the economy and the healthy stockmarket numbers, which now lie in a shambles. The American

economy has been decimated by the pandemic. Many parts of the country are shuttered and businesses lie in tatters with more than 38 million people losing their jobs.

Even as many cities attempt to reopen, there are long lines outside food banks, and the curve has not flattened in many states. Underlying all this is the fact that thousands of American lives which were lost could have been saved by more prompt action and preparation. A study by Columbia University researchers shows that more than 36,000 deaths could have been averted had social distancing measures been put in place just one week earlier.

Trump has been anxious to reclaim the economy in time for the elections but the virus has not been supportive. Schools and businesses remain largely shut as governors debate how much to reopen. The main

problem is the woefully inadequate testing and tracking, which has hurt the reopening of businesses, hampering economic resurgence. Polls indicate that Trump is trailing Biden in the states he had won handsomely in 2016.

So much depends on the vagaries of the pandemic. Will there be a second wave or even a third wave? Will people be able to return to school and to work? Can millions of tests be done every single day?

As president, the buck stops with Trump. But as he has famously said, “I do not take responsibility at all.”

Biden is hard at work in the background, preparing his multiethnic army of supporters and his legislative arsenal to combat Trump. It is a role he has been rehearsing for all his life. Despite the pandemic and the inability to hold live rallies and meet voters face to face, he has readied a

full agenda.

It is by no means going to be easy as Trump remains a formidable opponent. There are also so many variables like the sexual harassment case brought against Biden by former staffer Tara Reade which could trip up the campaign.

Is there a silver lining to this contactless political campaign? “If Joe Biden plays his cards right, the death of the traditional presidential campaign will turn out to be a blessing in disguise,” wrote Democratic political strategist Lis Smith in *The New York Times*. “The 77-year-old Mr. Biden, whom the president derisively calls ‘Sleepy Joe,’ can become the hottest bad boy and disrupter in the media game.”

Smith said being freed of an expensive campaign involving constant travel would help Biden, and so would his palpable empathy, which was his greatest asset as a campaigner. “Politicians can learn a lot of tricks—talking points, debate and interview strategies—but personal warmth is something that cannot be taught. It also happens to be a trait that translates well on TV.”

The latest RealClearPolitics national average poll shows Biden with 49.6 per cent support, while 40.9 per cent said they would vote for Trump. It is to be seen which way the strong Indian American community votes. While most Indian Americans tend to vote blue, those who follow Prime Minister Narendra Modi may be tempted to follow Trump to the voting booth, particularly after his successful visit to India and his many beliefs which are similar to the Modi philosophy. It remains to be seen whether Biden’s critical views on certain key Modi initiatives like the abrogation of Article 370, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which recently appeared on his campaign website, will have an impact on the voting preferences of Indian Americans.



AGE OF OUTRAGE

People protest the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis

AFP

everything from outreach to voter registration, and include everyone from college kids to seniors, from heavy hitters to those just entering politics.

Indian Americans, as part of the 21-million strong Asian American Pacific Islander community, form a powerful segment of the voter base. It is the fastest growing racial group in America and has 20 members in the Congress. It has doubled voter registration numbers from two million to four million people. It is solidly behind Biden.

As Congresswoman Judy Chu told supporters during the recent event with Biden, “We are the swing vote in key swing states, adding congressional districts, all across the nation. And that is why I like to say we’ve gone from being marginalised to becoming the margin of victory.”

The death of an unarmed, handcuffed black man George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minnesota has turned the whole of America into an angry tinderbox with riots in many cities and the demand for racial justice in America. In an emotional plea, the dead man’s brother told America to vote in November to change the status quo. Biden is beloved in the African American community.

Asked about a single quality which makes Biden eligible to be president, Verma said, “It’s the humanity of Joe Biden. His decency, his kindness, his integrity, his caring for others. He exhibits that empathy, that character that is the best of us and it is that character that we see in the frontline health care providers. It’s that character that is the soul of Joe Biden, but also the soul of America.”

The author is a New York-based journalist who blogs at Lassi with Lavina.

“If Biden plays his cards right, the death of the traditional presidential campaign will turn out to be a blessing in disguise.”

—Lis Smith,
Democratic political
strategist, in *The New
York Times*

on the climate control task force.

The fabric of America is woven with many different people and races and Biden’s challenge is to bring them all to the polls to vote blue in November. “Biden is Donald Trump’s worst nightmare, and you don’t have to take my word for it,” said Ajay Bhutoria of Fremont, California. “Even Trump’s own advisors have admitted he is terrified of running against Biden.”

Bhutoria, who is a political activist and fundraiser for the Democratic National Committee, is on the Biden National Finance Committee. He says the choice for the American people could not be clearer: “Donald Trump is a man of chaos and cruelty; Joe Biden is a man of character and compassion. Trump has failed every

test of presidential leadership and has broken just about every promise he’s made, including during this public health crisis.”

South Asians for Biden is a new grassroots volunteer group which has several young Indian Americans anxious to bring out the voters for Biden and ensure a Democratic victory in November. It has 15 chapters across the US. Neha Dewan, a New York lawyer who was previously the national co-chair of South Asians for Hillary, is the group’s national director. “We are a national grassroots organisation that is dedicated to engaging, educating and mobilising the south Asian community to get Joe Biden elected in November,” she said. The teams are headed by regional representatives and perform

IN JOE, WE TRUST

Biden enjoys a clear edge in the opinion polls. But to win in November, he needs to further step up his campaign and tackle Trump head on

BY AJISH P. JOY

FOR HIS CLASSMATES at the Archmere Academy, a Roman Catholic day school in Claymont, Delaware, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr was Joe “Bye-bye”. The nickname stuck because Biden had a debilitating stutter and could not even pronounce his surname properly. He was Joe Impedimenta in his Latin class as he just could not finish a sentence. But Biden never gave up. He worked on his staccato delivery by memorising routine conversations and reciting poems—W.B. Yeats was a favourite, thanks to his Irish roots—in front of the mirror for hours. He even practised talking with pebbles in his mouth, like the Greek orator Demosthenes. By his sophomore year, the stutter was under control and he even managed to get himself elected class president, despite a patchy academic performance. Even today, most of his prepared speeches have markings on them, showing where to take breaks between words.

Taming his stutter gave “the scrappy kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania”, enormous self-confidence. He was 10 when his family moved to Delaware after Biden Sr got a job as a car salesman. Biden met his future wife Neilia Hunter in the spring of 1965, while he was in the Bahamas, enjoying a break from undergraduate studies at the University of Delaware. While talking to the Hunters, Biden revealed his ambition: he wanted to be the president of the United States. That fire still burns even after 56 years, as he takes on Donald Trump in the presidential election this November.

It has not been an easy journey. In 1972, as a 29-year-old, Biden caused a major political upset in Delaware’s history by beating incumbent Republican J. Caleb Boggs in the senate race. Biden had to take out a second mortgage to finance his campaign after wealthy donors deserted him as he was against lowering capital gains

tax. He overcame a 30-point deficit and beat Boggs, a former governor and Congressman, who was a household name in Delaware.

Tragedy struck a month later. Neilia was driving home with their three children after picking up a Christmas tree when a tractor-trailer carrying corn cobs slammed into their station wagon. Neilia and their one-year-old daughter, Naomi, died on the spot, while the two sons, Beau and Hunter, escaped with serious injuries. Biden was devastated, but he took charge as senator, taking oath from his sons’ hospital room. He never moved to the national capital, but commuted daily between Wilmington and Washington on Amtrak for more than 30 years, earning him the nickname Amtrak Joe.

Five years after he lost Neilia, Biden fell in love with Jill, an English teacher at a community college. “She gave me back my life,” Biden wrote in his 2007 memoir *Promises to Keep*. “She made me start to think my family might be whole again.” Their wedding took place at the United Nations chapel in New York City



GOT YOUR BACK

Biden and Barack Obama at the White House in 2010; (below) Jill Biden wards off protesters who stormed the stage during a rally in March



with only close friends and family in attendance. Beau and Hunter stood with the bride and the groom at the altar and later joined them on their honeymoon trip.

With things looking up again, Biden entered the 1988 presidential campaign. He was soon caught in a plagiarism controversy after he passed off first the speech and then the life experiences of British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock as his own,

finding too much inspiration from a Kinnock campaign video. Biden falsely claimed that his ancestors worked in the coal mines of northern Pennsylvania and that he was the first university graduate in his family. The campaign collapsed after a front page exposé in *The New York Times*. Soon came stories about Biden borrowing quotes from American stalwarts like Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey without attribu-

tion. A plagiarism charge from his days as a law student at Syracuse University, too, resurfaced, forcing him to withdraw in disgrace. Political commentator William Schneider, who gave Biden the Kinnock tape, recently told *The Atlantic* that Biden had all the benefits and failings of a normal guy, which got him into trouble in the first place. “In 1988, it was a different universe,” said Schneider. “Now he’s seen as a normal response to Donald Trump, and Trump is not normal.”

A few months after his disgraced exit, Biden, who complained of recurring headaches while on the campaign trail, collapsed in the middle of a snow storm. He was rushed to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, where doctors diagnosed him with a ruptured aneurysm. He was so close to death that a local priest was summoned to administer last rites. Two months later, he was operated on for a second aneurysm. It took Biden more than seven months to return to active political life.

For the next 20 years, Biden remained a solid presence in Washington. As the senate judiciary committee chairman, he helped president Bill Clinton secure bipartisan support for his favourite initiatives like the ban on assault weapons and the bill to prevent violence against women. By the time George W. Bush became president, Biden had moved on as chairman of the senate foreign relations committee. He was strongly critical of Bush’s philosophy of interventionism and the neocon moorings of his foreign policy.

Biden’s second presidential bid

was in 2007 for the 2008 elections, but in the Democratic party it soon became a two-horse race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. After securing the nomination, Obama invited Biden to be his running mate, which he accepted on Jill's persuasion. It was not easy for Biden as it was the first time in 36 years that he agreed to become somebody's wingman. But the arrangement clicked. Biden's decades of experience was crucial to the ticket, and it played an important role in convincing white America to vote for the young, black senator from Illinois.

Notwithstanding the occasional skirmishes with Obama's 'Chicago cabal', Biden had a satisfying run as vice president. When he was offered the job, Biden had just one demand: "I want to be the last guy in the room on every major decision," he told Obama. For most part, the president granted that wish, and, in return, Biden soldiered on as a staunch Obama loyalist, despite his ambition to run for president one more time. In the early days of the presidency, when the United States and the world were experiencing a major financial meltdown, Obama deputed Biden to sell his controversial \$787 billion economic stimulus bill. Under Biden's watchful eyes, only 1 per cent of the total outlay was lost in waste or fraud.

After the Republicans seized majority in the House of Representatives in 2010, Biden was the White House's face on the hill, leading protracted negotiations on budget and debt-ceiling. He also played a key role in getting Obama's signature legislation, the Affordable Care Act, passed by the Congress. Biden was instrumental in convincing Arlen Specter, the Republican senator from Pennsylvania, to switch over to the Democratic party. Specter gave Obama the crucial 60th vote to pass the bill in the senate. Biden also provided critical inputs on the

JOE BIDEN

BORN

November 20, 1942, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Grew up in New Castle county, Delaware

EDUCATION

Bachelor's degree from University of Delaware, law degree from Syracuse University

SPOUSE

Neilia Hunter (deceased), Jill Tracy Jacobs

CHILDREN

Naomi (deceased), Beau (deceased), Hunter, Ashley

POLITICAL CAREER

1970-1972: Member, New Castle County Council

1972-2009: Senator from Delaware

1987-1995: Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee

2001-2003; 2007-2009: Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

2009-2016: 47th vice president of the United States

foreign policy front, especially on Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine, and remained steadfastly against the use of force. Interestingly, he counselled Obama against the raid to kill Osama bin Laden, pointing out that the mission's failure would cost him his second term.

Over the course of years, Obama and Biden grew close despite their differences in style, substance and temperament. The president stood like a rock behind Biden when Beau was diagnosed with brain tumour. When asked in a CNN interview about his most memorable moment at the White House, Biden spoke about how Obama offered to pay for Beau's treatment. During one of their weekly private lunches, Biden told Obama that he might take out a second mortgage on his home to pay the mounting medical bills.



THROUGH THICK AND THIN

Biden takes oath as senator at the bedside of his son, Beau, in a hospital in 1972; (below) Biden and former president Jimmy Carter



PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Obama got up, walked up to Biden, put his hands on his shoulders and said, "Don't do that. I'll give you the money. I have it. You can pay me back whenever." After Beau's death on May 30, 2015, it was Obama who delivered the eulogy. Finally, before leaving office, Obama conferred Biden with the nation's highest civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Yet, Obama has never been enthusiastic about Biden's presidential ambitions. He had personally talked him out of running in 2016. Early this year, according to a *New York Times* report, Obama tried to persuade

Biden to drop out. "You don't have to do this, Joe, you really don't," he told Biden. But, like in 2016, Biden has been convinced that he stood the best chance to beat Trump.

The early days of the Democratic primary, however, turned out to be a major disappointment for Biden. Despite leading opinion polls for nearly a year, the Biden campaign collapsed under the onslaught of his more savvy colleagues like Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg. He finished fourth in Iowa, fifth in New Hampshire and a distant second in Nevada. The money flow dried up and the campaign was in

a shambles. Going into the South Carolina primary on February 29, not many people gave him a chance. But then came the most pivotal moment in the Biden campaign. He won the endorsement of James Clyburn, the senior-most African American member on the capitol and a doyen of South Carolina's Democratic politics. After Clyburn's emotional speech, Biden romped home in a landslide, winning 61 per cent of the African American votes, beating Sanders by 30 points. Biden had to wait for 33 years to win a primary, but it was worth it. The black voters in the American south knew and remembered that Biden had stood loyally behind the country's first black president, not trying to undercut Obama even once.

With South Carolina, Biden turned the primary contest on its head, winning 10 of the next 14 states on Super Tuesday, following it up with four out of six states a week later. The momentum was finally with him, convincing his rivals Buttigieg, Amy

Klobuchar, Michael Bloomberg and Warren to withdraw. Finally, even Sanders chose to suspend his campaign and endorse Biden.

With Biden becoming the presumptive nominee, Obama stepped in with his endorsement through a video message. In a stinging take down of the Trump administration, Obama said Biden would "banish the corruption, carelessness, self-dealing, disinformation, ignorance and just plain meanness" plaguing the Trump White House. With Covid-19 completely upending his calculations, Trump is finding it difficult to campaign on the American economic performance, which he hoped would secure his second term. But his apathetic and inept handling of the pandemic has given Biden a crucial opening.

Biden would fancy his chances against Trump after having trumped Sanders, who ran a massive digital operation, and Bloomberg, who had an endless supply of money. Despite being confined to his Delaware home

because of the lockdown, Biden has widened his lead over Trump. Opinion polls from key states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida, North Carolina and Arizona, which voted for Trump in 2016, show that Biden is moving ahead.

It is, however, not going to be easy for Biden. His younger son Hunter's indiscretions could prove costly. The Biden campaign was shaken further by allegations of sexual assault by his former staff assistant Tara Reade. After Biden's forceful repudiation, that storm seems to have passed, at least for now.

Biden, meanwhile, needs to step out of his basement and tackle Trump head on. He needs to ensure that minority and progressive voters get out and vote. He has to consolidate his support among African Americans and suburban white voters. Latinos and young Americans need further convincing from the Biden campaign. He also needs to ramp up his online presence. David Axelrod and David Plouffe, who managed Obama's campaigns, recently wrote that Biden's home videos looked like "an astronaut beaming back to earth from the International Space Station". And, he needs to stop putting his foot in his mouth. Biden recently got into a tiff with a prominent black radio host after he wanted to cut short an interview because of time constraints. "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black," said Biden. He expressed regret the same day, saying he "shouldn't have been such a wise guy".

The gaffe may not hurt Biden much, because it is not easy to hate him. As Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, a Trump ally who is one of Biden's long-standing political rivals, says, "If you can't admire Joe Biden as a person, then probably, you've got a problem. What's not to like?"

WITH LAVINA MELWANI.



ACES UP HIS SLEEVE

Donald Trump on the White House South Lawn to celebrate US Independence Day on July 4

KEEPING THE HOUSE

Donald Trump is badly bruised by the protests and the pandemic, but trust him to fight hard and dirty to stay on as president

BY AJISH P. JOY

SEVENTY-TWO YEARS ago, when America went to the polls to elect its president, Republican nominee Thomas Dewey was the odds-on favourite. Back then, opinion polls were a novelty, and all of them had given Dewey a double digit lead over

Democratic candidate Harry S. Truman, who had succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt as president after his unexpected death while in office. Dewey's advantage appeared so obvious and overwhelming that even before all the votes were counted, the *Chicago*

Tribune published an early edition with a banner headline, "Dewey defeats Truman". But when the counting was over, Truman won with 303 electoral votes against Dewey's 189.

At this point in his reelection campaign, President Donald Trump hopes he can emulate Truman. The Covid-19 pandemic and the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign have eroded Trump's approval ratings. Most opinion polls now give the Democratic candidate Joe Biden a double-digit edge. He is ahead in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, the key to Trump's unexpected triumph in 2016. The president is also trailing in Florida and Arizona, and he could even lose Texas, which the Democrats won last in 1976. His political rally on June 21 at Tulsa, Oklahoma, the first such campaign event after the pandemic struck, was a disaster. Despite claims that millions were waiting for a ticket, only about 6,000 people showed up.

Four months ago, Trump was leading a buoyant economy with unemployment rates at a half-century low. Now, his chances rest on the possi-

bility of a quick economic recovery after strict lockdown measures are withdrawn. "A bumper third quarter recovery will help Trump sell himself as the leader who can put the US economy back on track once again," says Joshy M. Paul, international relations expert at the Delhi-based Centre for Air Power Studies. "Even now, Americans trust Trump more than Biden on economic issues."

Moreover, there is still time for Trump to turn the Covid-19 crisis into an opportunity. He enjoys the advantages of the bully pulpit and is certain to take credit whenever Covid numbers start coming down. He could even ask the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to fast track regulatory approval for a vaccine. A dramatic launch of a vaccine could be the critical boost the president is looking at.

A low-hanging fruit for the Trump campaign would be to viciously target Biden and his family. Trump will certainly try to define Biden for the voters as a sloppy, senile loudmouth, who is close to China. The nickname "Sleepy Joe" seems to

be sticking. Trump is also likely to go after Biden's son Hunter and his \$6,00,000-a-year gig at an Ukrainian energy company at a time his father was overseeing Barack Obama's Ukraine policy.

Biden is known to be gaffe-prone. So far, he has been spared the intense scrutiny experienced by presidential candidates as he has been confined to his Delaware home because of the pandemic. But once the campaign gathers steam, there is a possibility that he may slip up. The Trump team is already pushing for more debates, hoping that Biden may embarrass himself.

"Trump should focus on Biden's vulnerabilities," says James E. Campbell, who teaches at State University of New York at Buffalo. "Biden has been nearly absent from the campaign. Many voters have given him a pass since attention has not been focused on his liabilities. Trump should make the point that Biden's mental capabilities have slipped over the years and that he would be controlled by the very dangerous and radical elements of his party."

Trump enjoys yet another advantage over Biden in the form of complete command over his party and absolute loyalty from his base. Among Democrats, supporters of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are yet to warm up to Biden. "There is the possibility of hardcore Sanders and Warren supporters staying home on election day," says Paul. "Unfortunately for Biden, he does not command the absolute loyalty of a base. Moreover, he has not yet been able to fully enthrone the Obama coalition of the young and the Afro Americans." It is, therefore, not surprising that the same polls which show Biden leading

Trump by nearly 10 points nationally show that his base is less passionate about him than the Republicans are about Trump.

And, Trump has more aces up his sleeve to keep his base excited. Using the Covid-induced economic crisis as a ruse, he has imposed massive curbs on immigration, suspending green cards and other major visa classes like H-1B, H-2B and L till the end of the year. It has been one of the key demands of the Trump base. Trump is also likely to use the ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign to drive political mileage. “His reaction to the movement has been to follow former president Richard Nixon’s playbook by invoking the virtues of ‘law and order’ and pushing for a forceful response to protests in a cynical effort to placate his electoral base,” says Graham G. Dodds, an expert on US presidential elections at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

There could be attempts to whip up anti-black sentiment among white voters, especially if violent protests break out, and it could increase further if Biden picks a black running mate. The strategy was evident during the Trump rally in Tulsa. “The unhinged left-wing mob is trying to vandalise our history, desecrate our monuments, tear down our statues, and persecute anyone who does not conform to their demands for absolute and total control,” said Trump. “They want to demolish our heritage.”

Democrats worry that the president could also facilitate voter suppression tactics, especially in key black areas. If blacks vote the way they did in 2012, Biden is likely to win. But the Covid pandemic poses serious challenges to the traditional voting system. The Democrats want to have extensive mail-in voting facilities; Trump and the Republican party are opposed to it. Pro-Democratic groups have been supporting lawsuits filed in at least 18 states to

“A bumper third quarter recovery will help Trump sell himself as the leader who can put the US economy back on track once again.”

—Joshy M. Paul, international relations expert, Centre for Air Power Studies

remove administrative restrictions that could hamper mail-in voting. Trump says mail-in ballots pose the biggest threat to his reelection prospects and will make 2020 the most rigged election in American history.

Democratic strategists are worried about other tactics such as voter intimidation outside polling booths, denial of funding to the US Postal Service which is in charge of delivering mail-in ballots and even the use of the pandemic as an excuse to keep voters away. “Trump’s reelection strategy appears to depend on cutting off channels for voters to have polling places and then sending operatives and right-wingers to intimidate and suppress voters in person,” Ben Wikler, chairman of Wisconsin’s Democratic party, told *New York Magazine* a few days ago.

Trump will also make a play for groups like Indian Americans who have forever been staunch Democratic voters. He is expected to use his friendship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to draw their support. In contrast, the Biden campaign has been critical of Modi’s pet initiatives like the Citizenship

(Amendment) Act and the abrogation of Article 370.

As the election day draws close, Trump could use foreign policy tools to boost his reelection bid. “A flare up of foreign threats through China or Iran is possible,” says Uma Purushothaman, an expert on American politics at the Central University of Kerala. A muscular foreign policy has always helped incumbent presidents. Trump may also benefit if countries like Russia and China launch cyberattacks to sabotage Democrats or try and help him with strategically timed favourable trade deals.

“It is no secret that presidents have more ability to act independently in the realm of foreign policy, and some have arguably used that ability for short-term political gain shortly before an election. Trump is not above such tactics,” says Dodds. Trump can also look at fast tracking the military drawdown in Afghanistan. He has already scaled down US military presence in Iraq and Syria and has reached an understanding with the Taliban, aimed at pulling out most US troops out of Afghanistan. “Trump could make a dramatic announcement of troop withdrawal just before the elections,” says Paul.

Despite the commanding lead enjoyed by Biden, the presidential race is by no means over. In July 1988, Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis had a 17-point lead over George H.W. Bush. Four months later, Bush swept the election, winning 40 of 50 states and 426 of 538 electoral votes. “Biden’s current lead in national polls is impressive. What, however, matters is not nationwide support, but rather which candidate wins which states in November,” says Dodds. “Trump can afford to lose some of the states he surprisingly won in 2016 and still win again, and just a slight change in people’s preferences could cause several states to go one way or the other. The race is far from over.”



DONALD TRUMP
US president, nominee of the Republican Party

ADVANTAGE BIDEN

POLLING DATA (REALCLEARPOLITICS)

Donald Trump	(%)	Joe Biden
40	<i>Economist/YouGov</i> (June 28-30)	49
41	<i>CNBC/Change Research</i> (June 26-28)	49
44	<i>NPR/PBS/Marist</i> (June 22-24)	52
39	<i>The Hill/HarrisX</i> (June 22-23)	43
36	<i>NYT/Siena</i> (June 17-22)	50
40.9	<i>RealClearPolitics national average</i>	49.6



JOE BIDEN
Nominee of the Democratic Party

ELECTING THE PRESIDENT

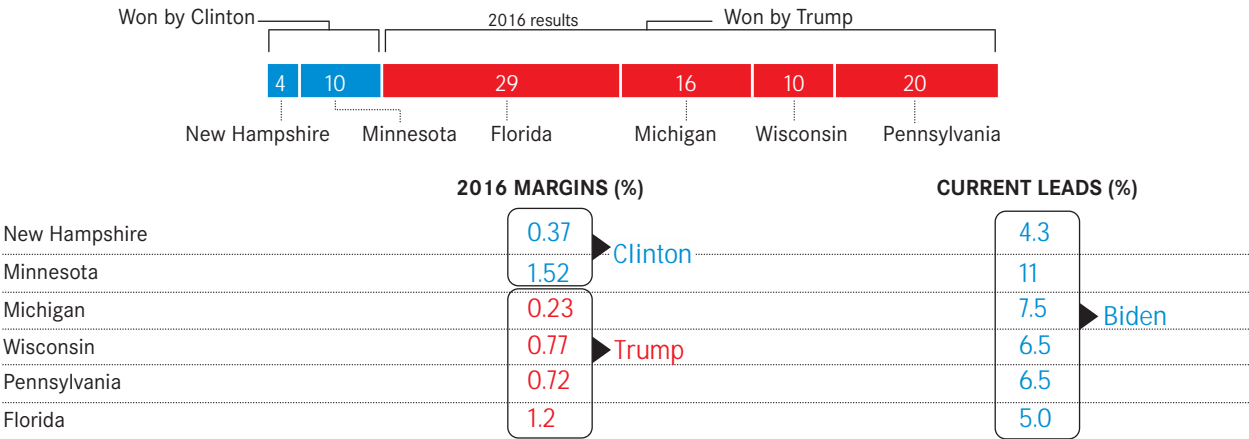
On election day, Americans vote for 538 electors, who meet in their respective states and vote for president and vice president. Each state gets as many members in the electoral college as it has representatives in the house (depends on population) plus senators (always two). In all states except Maine and Nebraska, the winner of the majority of the statewide vote receives all of that state’s electoral votes. The candidate who gets 270 electoral votes— half of the total votes plus one—will win the election. So, a candidate can win the popular vote and still lose, like Hillary Clinton did in 2016.

2016 RESULTS	Donald Trump	Total electoral votes	Popular vote
		304	6,29,80,160
	Hillary Clinton	227	6,58,45,063

SWING STATES

Party bastions rarely change hands in US elections. While southern states and states like Idaho and Alaska are reliably Republican, coastal states like California and New York always vote Democratic. So, the real contest happens in states where neither party has a decisive advantage. These are called swing states or battleground states and they determine the final result.

ELECTORAL COLLEGE VOTES IN KEY SWING STATES



GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S./RESEARCH AJISH P. JOY/ ILLUSTRATION JOB P.K.



GUEST COLUMN • CHRISTOPHER DEVINE

The art of the comeback

AT THIS POINT in the presidential elections, you would have to say that Joe Biden is the favourite. That is not just because he is doing so well in the polls. It is also because most presidential elections are decided by a small set of “fundamental” factors. These include the state of the economy, public approval of the current president and how long the president or his party has served in office. For the most part, these factors work against Donald Trump. The United States is facing a major financial downturn, primarily because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Trump’s approval ratings are quite low. The only thing working in his favour is that he is the incumbent, and—despite Americans’ proclaimed disdain for politicians and the status quo in Washington—voters tend to reelect incumbent presidents and other federal officials.

The best thing Trump could do for his reelection campaign is to demonstrate effective, principled leadership to slow the spread of the pandemic and help unify the country on issues of race and policing. He has had ample opportunities to take these steps, but has resisted doing so, preferring to wish the pandemic away and exacerbate rather than combat racial tensions. It is his lack of discipline, principle, and ultimately leadership, that has caused him to sink so low in the polls. Until Trump changes course—and, crucially, stays that course—I do not expect his current problems to go away.

There is good reason to believe—based on the impeachment investigation and former national security adviser John Bolton’s recent book—that Trump has been and is willing to seek help from other countries to aid in his reelection effort,

whether that is from smearing Biden or obtaining more favourable trade policies for electorally important states or regions. Having survived the impeachment effort and dismissed Bolton’s claims, I see no evidence that Trump will discontinue these efforts. In fact, it does not appear that he sees such efforts as problematic from an ethical, legal or constitutional standpoint.

The Covid pandemic has undermined the US economy and voters’ faith in Trump’s leadership. Given the virus’ disproportionate impact on Black Americans in particular, the pandemic also may have contributed to the anger and frustration expressed in the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests. Trump has mostly focused on responding to the most violent elements of the protests against the murder of George Floyd. He, along with allied politicians and media organisations, has sought to frame the protest movement not as peaceful but as lawless and violent, often referring categorically to “riots and looting” rather than protests. This shifts the focus from racial justice and police reform to Trump’s long-favoured “law and order” approach. He thinks doing so helps him with his party’s base, and to some extent he may be right. But polling also shows that this response has caused many Americans to view him as dividing, rather than uniting, the nation at this time. In fact, his response to the protests seems to have hurt his popularity among Americans more so than his response to the epidemic or the state of the economy.

AS TOLD TO AJISH P. JOY

Devine, an expert on US presidential elections, teaches at University of Dayton, Ohio.

MANI-FESTO

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR



Pax Sinica: Did China-watchers caution Modi?

The elite corps of our foreign service are the Mandarin-speaking China experts. It is only the “best and the brightest” who head the China division or are sent to Beijing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong to represent India. Surrounding China, we have set up a number of diplomatic sounding posts. These too are often manned (and “women-ed”) by Sinologists. In Delhi, too, there is no want of high expertise and experience, both in the foreign office and ministries like defence, finance and commerce, besides some top-class think tanks like the Institute of Chinese Studies (headed by former ambassador Ashok Kantha—envoy to Beijing from 2014 to 2016), the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses which brings together senior retired diplomats and military men (and serving intellectuals) and the Centre for Policy Research.

Why then in the last three decades, and particularly in the last six years, were Indian prime ministers not warned off the perfidious Chinese? Why have they all so assiduously cultivated the Chinese, none more passionately than Modi, making China just about our most important trade partner, a major source of investment and techno-innovation in crucial sectors, a growing tourist attraction, and even an expatriate employment destination? And, all this against a background of peace and tranquility on our borders, guaranteed by treaty, mechanisms for localised conflict-resolution at the military level, and 22 rounds of discussion at special envoy level. Yet, none of this has not yielded any significant outcome on even the alignment of the Line of Actual Control, which remains to this day undefined, undelineated and un-demarcated. We are arguing, and now fighting, over a legacy left to us by the British who had cynically followed a policy of “flexible frontiers” in the remote and virtually inaccessible northern reaches of British India.

The question arises because a whole host of former ambassadors to China, and foreign secretaries and other Indian Foreign Service China-watchers have abandoned their professional omerta to thunder in the media about the pernicious Chinese. Where were these ambassadorial hawks when Modi and China’s President Xi Jinping were cooing like turtledoves as they shared a “lovers’ swing” on the Sabarmati waterfront? Why were they not hooting at the hype generated over Xi being at Xian Airport to receive Modi?

We are now told that Xi is out to establish a Pax Sinica—an addition to our vocabulary for which we need to thank Gautam Bambawale, our most recent former envoy to Beijing (2017-2018): “The Chinese dream is nothing else than to dominate the world, become the sole superpower in international politics and create a Pax Sinica”. Did he whisper this in Modi’s ears when, during his tenure, Xi and Modi were proclaiming the much-touted “Wuhan Spirit”?

Before Bambawale, we had Ambassador Vijay Keshav Gokhale in Beijing (2016-2017), who so impressed Modi that he replaced S. Jaishankar as foreign secretary. Gokhale now tells us that Xi is “tightening his grip on power everywhere” and even has the “chutzpah to equate himself to Marx” in propagating his “New Type of Great Power Relations theory”. Did he mention this to the prime minister when Modi-Xi were sharing a masala dosa in Mamallapuram? And, did Modi embrace Xi in spite of that—or, because he thought, “What a great example to follow!”

Jaishankar and Modi became buddies when the rest of the world was refusing to let in Modi after he presided over the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. He, therefore, made four trips to China, some of which ambassador Jaishankar (2009-2013) helped organise. That is when Modi’s romance with China began. Was Modi cautioned? Did he brush off those warnings like flies? And, is it not thus that it has now come to this?



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

Aiyar is a former Union minister and social commentator.

BOTHERING HEIGHTS

In Ladakh, India looks at an operational window between August and October in case disengagement plans with China fail

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR/Leh
PHOTOS BY SANJAY AHLAWAT

The Chinese should be thrown out from the territory which does not belong to them at all. Our military should give them a strong response,” said Ghulam Nabi Galwan, the grandson of Ghulam Rassul Galwan, who discovered the Galwan valley in 1899. The valley, located nearly

200km from Leh, saw a fierce clash between Indian and Chinese forces on June 15, in which 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives. The region has become the epicentre of the ongoing Sino-Indian clashes in the western sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.

With the standoff continuing for

more than two months, Ladakhis are hoping for a ‘tough’ response from the Indian military, which will help wipe out bitter memories of 1962. In Ladakh, all roads to forward areas are sealed. No movement is permitted beyond the Army’s 3 Infantry Division headquarters in Karu, nearly 30km from Leh. The division is in

charge of eastern Ladakh, including the flashpoints with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Telephone lines beyond Leh have been cut for security reasons, causing panic among relatives of those who live close to the LAC. All inner line permits, too, stand cancelled.

For Ladakhis, the border tensions have come at a time when the region is struggling with its fight against Covid-19. According to the Union territory’s health department, there are now 115 active cases in Leh and 65 cases in Kargil district, but all patients are stable. No new cases have been reported in the past couple of days.

While there is some good news on the Covid front, the border situation is making Ladakhis anxious. The last time they were on such a state of heightened alert was in 1999, during the Kargil war against Pakistan. China, however, poses a far bigger challenge, and the military planners know it. Every single day, nearly 150 vehicles of the Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border

Police move towards forward areas, passing through Leh, the headquarters of the Army’s XIV Corps, which was raised after the Kargil war.

PLA incursions are not new for Ladakhis. The situation got out of hand this time because the enemy moved aggressively across multiple locations. And, after the Galwan clash, the fear of war is in their minds. “The Chinese have never been our friends,” said P.T. Kunzang, president of the Ladakh Tourist and Trade Alliance. “They betrayed us in 1962 and took away Aksai Chin. Now they want to take away our land in Pangong Tso and Galwan, which was never contested.” Kunzang said more than 70 per cent of the Ladakhi households were dependent on tourism, which

provided revenues up to ₹600 crore a year, and any instability along the border would be a big blow for them.

In Leh, authorities have shut down everything except shops selling essential goods. All vehicular traffic is banned. An eerie silence envelops the city which is broken only by the sound of the Indian Air Force aircraft. Fighter jets make frequent sorties, while heavy lift aircraft like the C-17 Globemaster and IL-76 ferry

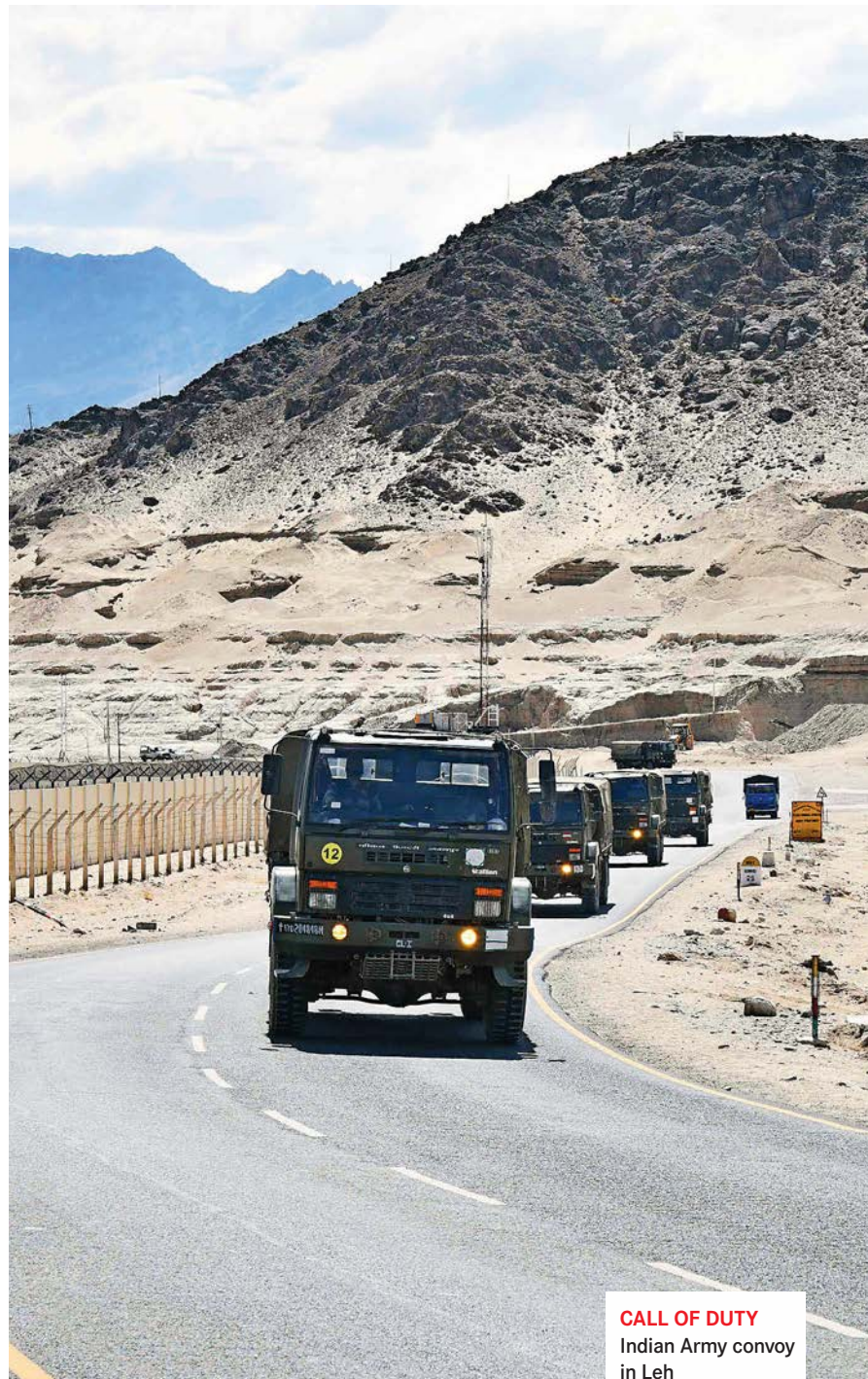
KEEPING VIGIL
A Sukhoi during a sortie in Ladakh

tanks and mechanised elements from the western sector. This is a first in the region, since 1962. To boost its deterrence, the Army has sent the newly-inducted T-90 tanks, although three armoured regiments are already based in Ladakh.

After intense parleys, disengagement has started on the border, but the process has been excruciatingly slow. India has already deployed one lakh troops in eastern Ladakh, beefing up security along the 826km-long LAC in the region. Enhancing road connectivity in eastern Ladakh is a key priority, with infrastructure projects worth ₹20,000 crore, including 30 permanent bridges, picking up speed. The Changthang region, which includes Darbuk and Nyoma sub divisions, is the most crucial one for road infrastructure. Sensitive areas like Galwan, Chushul, Shyok, Demchok and Chumar fall under Darbuk and Nyoma.

Unlike in 1962, the IAF has increased its presence on the border, especially after the PLA further strengthened its deployment following the Galwan clashes. Additional deployment of fighter jets like Su-30 MKI, MiG-29K and Mirage-2000 along with the newly-acquired Apache and Chinook helicopters, are maintaining operational readiness with frequent sorties close to the border. With its array of modern electronics, the Apache is considered to be one of the most advanced combat helicopters. Its air-to-air missiles are capable of detecting up to 256 moving targets and engaging them. Over a dozen squadrons of fighter jets have landed at the Leh military base to give more teeth to the IAF. "We have been training for the last 45 days to support the Army for any offensive operation," said a fighter pilot.

Movement of air assets to Ladakh conveys an impression that air power will play a major role in any likely military action by India. According



CALL OF DUTY
Indian Army convoy in Leh

India has already deployed one lakh troops in eastern Ladakh, beefing up security along the 826km-long Line of Actual Control in the region.



CONNECTING LIVES
Contract workers of Border Roads Organisation from Jharkhand waiting for transport in Leh

to sources in the military establishment, high mountain warfare has an operational window, which is the period between August and October. "Military buildup on the border could be an indicator," said a military observer. "We can surprise the enemy by launching an offensive in this period. Weather and terrain give you an operational window to carry out any offensive mission. Both sides are worried about this." India and China are preparing for the long haul, as the process of disengagement, if it indeed goes through, will take at least three to four months. Moreover, the trust deficit will force India to continue with its deployment during winter, when the Ladakhi highlands get disconnected from the rest of the world.

Amidst military preparations, residents of the border villages say the Chinese often intrude into their territory and usurp their pastures, the Ladakhi highlands famous for the

Pashmina goats. While the Galwan valley is uninhabited, it is used as a winter grazing ground by nomadic communities to feed their livestock. These nomads are being pushed back from forward areas.

Namgyal Darbuk, a local resident and a former councillor, said the Chinese always sent their nomads first, and their troops next. "Indian security forces do not allow our nomads to move forward. Moreover, urbanisation of nomads has helped the Chinese grab our pasture lands. The nomads are coming down to the town, leaving behind their land on the border villages," said Namgyal. "Urbanisation of nomads is giving an easy option to the Chinese to expand their territory and many nomads have joined the tourism sector for easy money."

Locals worry that if Pangong Tso and Nubra valley, the main tourist attractions of the region, remain affected, the economy will suffer. Ladakh

became a popular tourist destination after the 2009 Bollywood hit *3 Idiots*. "Ladakh is the most neglected part of the country despite its strategic importance. There is no electricity in our border areas. We are totally dependent on solar plants," said Namgyal. He said that in the ongoing conflict in the Galwan valley, India lost nearly three square kilometres of pasture land.

Talking about the Chinese expansion in the region, a Ladakhi said although the 3 Infantry Division was also known as the Trishul Division, none of the three mountains shown on its insignia were with India. "Those were in the Chushul area and the Chinese have captured all those mountain ranges," he said.

Captain (ret'd) Tashi Chhepal of the Ladakh Scouts, an infantry regiment of the Army, said he was surprised that the Chinese managed to usurp Indian territory, which he once used to patrol with his colleagues. Chhe-



ON GUARD
A Dhruv helicopter during a sortie in Ladakh



We are tired of giving away our land to China. Time has come to teach China a lesson.

—Ghulam Nabi Galwan, grandson of Ghulam Rasul Galwan, who discovered the Galwan valley in 1899

pal, who was awarded Vir Chakra during the Kargil war, said the Army should raise more battalions of the Ladakh Scouts to deal with the situation as Ladakhis were familiar with the terrain and the environment. But Ladakh Scouts are not being deployed on the frontline with China as Chhepal suspects the Army does not have complete confidence in them.

“The Chinese troops always pay special attention to Ladakh Scouts during flag meetings. They click

pictures with us and give us gifts. I think it raises some suspicion among personnel from other units. They doubt our loyalty,” said Chhepal. “Most Ladakhi soldiers feel that the Army do not trust them.”

Strategic expert and former diplomat P. Stobdan, who hails from Ladakh, said the region had been facing trans-border problems for centuries. “Ladakhis fight for pasture land and border demarcation. Now, unfortunately, a middle way has been found,

like a compromise formula,” he said. Stobdan wants India to enhance connectivity projects in Ladakh with a forward objective to push for trade beyond the Karakoram pass into the Mazar valley of China’s Xinjiang province and revive the old Leh-Kashgar Silk Road.

Ghulam Nabi, however, is in no mood for a compromise. “We are tired of giving away our land to China,” he said. “Time has come to teach China a lesson.”



IN A SPOT
Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, M. Sivasankar IAS and Swapna Suresh at the space technology conclave EDGE 2020 in Thiruvananthapuram

All that glitters

A gold-smuggling case takes the shine off the Kerala government’s image

BY CITHARA PAUL

ON JULY 4, a diplomatic consignment from Dubai arrived at the Trivandrum International Airport. It was addressed to Rashed Khamis Ali Musaiqri Alshemeili, charge d’affaires at the UAE consulate in Kerala. The “diplomatic bag”, which weighed around 50kg, contained dates, oats, butter cookies and noodles, as per the consulate’s order. However, it also had something that was not ordered, at least officially—30kg of gold.

The customs department, which had been tipped off about gold being smuggled in a “diplomatic bag”, was waiting for the recipient. Even-

tually, Sarith Kumar, a former public relations officer at the consulate, came to collect the bag. He was immediately arrested and remanded to custody by customs officers. It was reportedly the first time that such a case—in which diplomatic exceptions were used for smuggling—had been registered in India.

A diplomatic bag is used for carrying official correspondence or other items between a diplomatic mission and its home government or diplomatic, consular and other official entities. It has certain legal protections. A customs official told THE WEEK that, as per the Customs Act and Diplomatic Relations (Vienna Convention) Act, two types of objects are exempt from inspection: Articles for office use and the personal baggage of a diplomatic agent. “We had to seek permission from higher authorities to check the consignment as it was brought in as personal baggage,” he said.

Upon interrogation, Sarith Kumar revealed that Swapna Suresh, his former colleague at the UAE consulate, was at the centre of the smuggling ring and that this was not the first consignment that had reached Kerala this way. Suresh, a contract employee with the Kerala State Information Technology Infrastructure Limited (KSITIL), under the IT department, was immediately sacked.

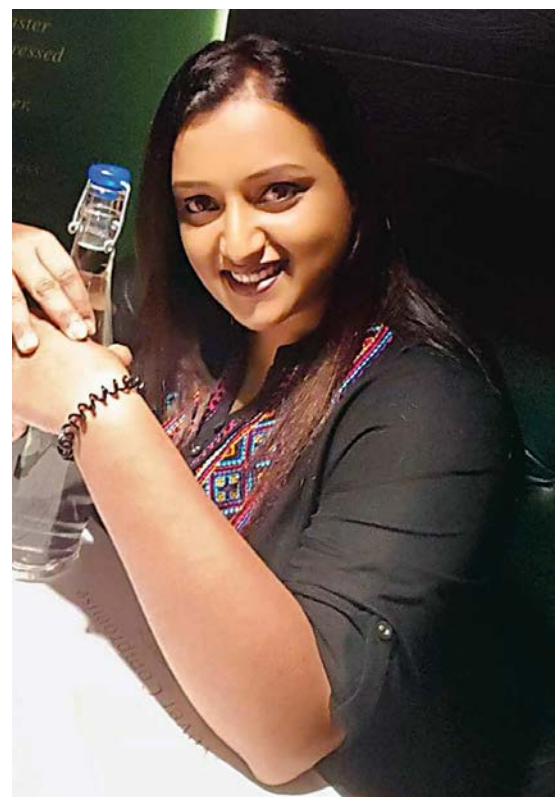
Suresh's career has been a story of spectacular growth. She was born and raised in the UAE and apparently started her career as a front-office manager of a dance bar in Dubai. After getting married, she lived in Thiruvananthapuram for a while, but separated from her husband after her daughter was born, and went back to Dubai.

She returned to Kerala in 2017, soon after the UAE started its consulate there, and was appointed executive secretary. Her knowledge of Arabic and her pleasing manners were well noted at the consulate, which is where she met Sarith, the prime accused in the case. She used to organise all major events at the consulate and invited several political leaders to these, slowly making her way into the power circles of the state capital. She was apparently close to leaders of both the ruling and opposition fronts.

The story took a dramatic twist when Suresh's close ties to M. Sivasankar, principal secretary to Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, came to light. Apparently, Sivasankar was a frequent visitor at her apartment, and it was after first meeting Sivasankar at the consulate that Suresh quit the job and joined the IT department on contract. She organised events and hobnobbed with leaders there, too.

Apparently, protocol was not followed in her appointment to KSITIL; at the time, the crime branch was investigating her for allegedly framing an employee of Air India's ground handling crew in a sexual harassment case. Suresh is now absconding.

Also in the cross hairs is Sivasankar, who was also the IT secretary, one of the most powerful bureaucrats in the state; he always had Vijayan's ear. In fact, Sivasankar's had been one of the first appointments by the current Left Democratic Front government. "He was a surprise choice for many in the party because of his Congress connections," said a CPI(M) leader. "But the chief minister went ahead as he was apparently impressed by the fact that Sivasankar was a good taskmaster."



UNHOLY NEXUS
Swapna Suresh;
(right) Customs officials producing Sarith Kumar before the magistrate in Kochi

The day after the gold was seized, Sivasankar was removed from both posts. However, the controversy kept snowballing. Both the Congress-led United Democratic Front and the BJP are baying for Vijayan's blood. "The chief minister cannot wash his hands [of the case] by removing the IT secretary. Sivasankar was removed because the chief minister feared the investigation would reach him," said opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala. Demanding Vijayan's resignation, he added, "The influence of the smuggling cartel in the chief minister's office and the nexus between politicians, government officials and the smugglers point to a grave situation."

The BJP has also trained its guns at Vijayan. The party's national spokesperson Sambit Patra



Amid complaints about lapses on its part, the UAE consulate in India has issued a statement condemning the attempted use of diplomatic channels for smuggling.

tweeted a photo collage featuring Vijayan and Suresh, captioning it "gold". In the state, the BJP leadership has announced a series of protests demanding Vijayan's resignation.

The chief minister, however, looks least perturbed by the developments. "The state government has nothing to hide or fear as it has got

nothing to do with the case," he said. "Sivasankar was removed from all the posts the very day the allegations came up. If he has done something wrong, he will have to pay the price for it. The left government will not try to save any culprit."

He added that he welcomed any sort of investigation by Central agencies. "In fact, we would like the Central government to investigate the case thoroughly so that all the links in this case are exposed," he said.

His cool demeanour notwithstanding, it is clear that the controversy has tarnished the state government's image. "Kerala is a very sensitive state, politically. Even a minor tremor could cause large repercussions," said senior journalist Jacob George. "The controversy has come at a time when the left government has earned a good image nationally and internationally for its effective handling of the Covid-19 situation. A small drop of kerosene is enough to destroy a well-cooked payasam."

George also said that the incident had given a fresh lease of life to the UDF, which was struggling to find its feet. And if there is anyone who should be especially happy about the controversy, it is former chief minister Oommen Chandy. Many have already drawn parallels between the current case and what happened to the previous UDF government towards the end of its term. There, too, was a woman—Saritha Nair—whose links with the chief minister's office had hurt the government. In fact, it could be argued that the 'solar panel scam' effectively demolished the UDF's chances of re-election. The Left Democratic Front had, at the time, gone hammer and tongs to sully Chandy's image. The solar case is still under investigation. "I am a believer. I have no complaints," said Chandy. "Many are praying for me.... The truth will prevail."

Meanwhile, amid complaints about lapses on its part, the UAE consulate in India has issued a statement condemning the attempted use of diplomatic channels for smuggling, and has promised full cooperation with customs authorities. "Smuggling has happened many times," said a customs official. "The fact that they (consulate) never checked the weight marked on the cover of the parcel is surprising. Also, how can they send someone who is no longer part of the consulate to collect a diplomatic bag?"

The authorities in the UAE have also launched an internal investigation to find out who sent the cargo containing gold to the consulate in Kerala. **●**



BLAST FROM THE PAST

The remnants of the boat St Antony at Neendakara harbour in Kollam, Kerala

At sea

Families and friends of the two fishermen allegedly killed by Italian marines feel let down by the international tribunal's verdict

BY CITHARA PAUL

IT WAS THE day after Valentine's Day in 2012. The 11-member crew of the fishing boat St Antony had biryani left over from the previous day for lunch; they had cooked biryani to celebrate "lover's day".

Valentine Jalastine, 50, did not join the crew for lunch; he was fast asleep after pulling an all-nighter behind the wheel. He woke up at around 3pm, had lunch and took the helm again. "Jalastine asked me to take a break from steering," said Freddy Bosco, owner of the vessel. "I was reluctant as he would have to be up again that night. But he insisted and I went to sleep."

That decision saved Bosco's life. For, barely an hour later, Jalastine was shot dead, allegedly by the secu-

rity detail onboard the Enrica Lexie, an Italian oil tanker. "I woke up hearing a loud sound and saw Jalastine collapsing before me. There was blood all over," recalled Bosco, 39.

Another round of firing soon followed. "I saw Ajesh Binki falling down," said Bosco. "We all rushed to him. He asked for water, but died before he could drink it. He was barely 20."

The crew members spotted the Enrica Lexie that was heading towards Kochi port. They also saw two men on it pointing guns at them. The men were reportedly identified as Italian marines Salvatore Girone and Massimiliano Latorre.

"All I knew then was that we needed to get away from them," said

Bosco. "I took the wheel and rushed to [Neendakara port, near Kollam], which was some six hours away." The crew, meanwhile, alerted the Indian Coast Guard. The Enrica Lexie was soon intercepted by the Coast Guard and the Indian Navy; the marines were arrested by the Kerala Police for murder only on February 19.

The incident had led to a diplomatic tussle between India and Italy. India insisted that the killing happened in India's exclusive economic zone, giving Indian courts jurisdiction. But Italy maintained that the incident happened in international waters and on an Italian ship, giving Italian courts jurisdiction.

The international legal battle ended on July 2, 2020, when The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration Tribunal published its verdict. It ruled that the marines had violated international law, and as a result Italy had breached India's freedom of navigation under the United Nations Convention on Law of Seas. New Delhi was entitled to get compensation, it added. But it also confirmed that the marines had immunity and could not be prosecuted in India.

"Does the verdict mean that rich men can get away with killings if they pay money?" asked Jalastine's elder son Derrick. He was 16 when Jalastine was killed. "How did we lose a case that was foolproof? They need to be punished," he said. "Those who milked the killings for political gains did nothing to win the case when they came to power." Derrick was alluding to the BJP, which was then in the opposition. The party had raised a hue and cry over the issue, implicating Congress president Sonia Gandhi in the case because of her Italian roots.

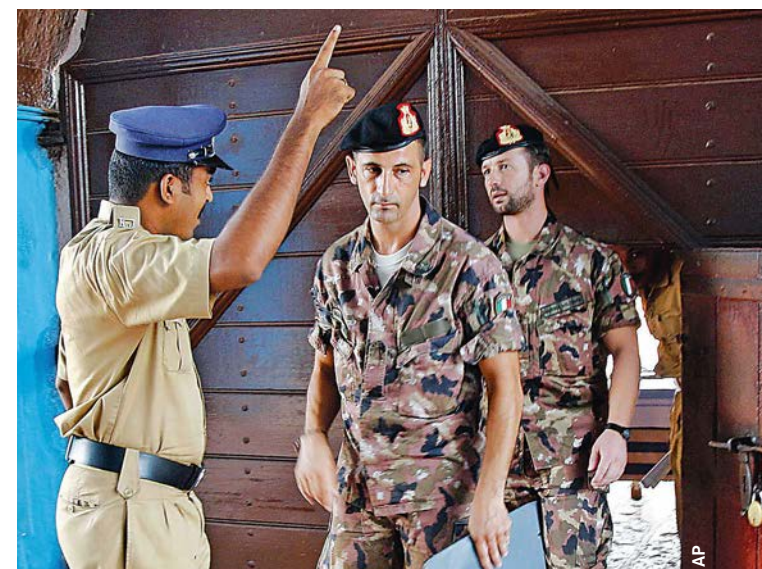
Jalastine's wife, Dora, said that initially the families of the marines would call them every Christmas and ask for forgiveness. "But there has been no contact for the last few years," she said. She quickly added that the family was paid ₹1 crore compensation by Italy. "I educated my sons with that money, and built a house," she said.

The payment of 'blood money' had created quite a furore then. The Italians were accused of using the Catholic Church in Kerala to get the families to withdraw the civil cases against the marines and the ship's owner. The Kerala High Court had permitted the families to legalise an out-of-court settlement at the Lok Adalat, but the Supreme Court took exception, calling it a "direct challenge to the Indian judicial system".

While the case was on in the Supreme Court, the two marines were allowed to travel to Italy to vote in the general election in February 2013. Later, Italy refused to send them back. This led to a huge diplomatic row. The Supreme Court then said that the Italian ambassador would not be allowed to leave the country unless the marines returned. This forced Italy to send the marines back. In 2014, Latorre was granted bail and allowed to go to Italy on medical grounds. Girone was granted conditional bail and permitted to go home in 2016.

GONE FOR GOOD

Italian marines Massimiliano Latorre and Salvatore Girone at the central prison in Thiruvananthapuram in 2012



Jalastine's wife, Dora, said the family was paid ₹1 crore compensation by Italy. "I educated my sons with that money, and built a house," she said.

The recent verdict has not given closure to the families. Dora is confused: "We don't know whether the verdict is good or bad as some section of the media say it is a victory for India while others say we have lost the case." But she is certain about one thing: "I will never send my children to sea ever."

Ajesh Binki went to sea to provide for his two younger sisters. Natives

of Kanyakumari, they were orphans. Both his sisters are now married and settled in Tamil Nadu. "He was the youngest one in my crew," said Bosco. "He died on my lap. I can never forget that."

The verdict has further dismayed him. Bosco had doggedly pursued the case against the marines in the Kerala High Court. He had also gone to The Hague to testify against them. "I was told by Indian diplomats and lawyers that we would win and that those two will be punished for killing my crew members," he said.

The compensation aspect of the verdict, said Bosco, was something that the Italians had agreed to in 2012. "The whole case was an argument for punishing the Italians who had killed two poor fishermen," he said. "If Jalastine had not insisted that I take rest on that horrible day, I would have been the one who was shot at. Not a single day passes by without me remembering that."

Perhaps, in a bid to erase memories, the Enrica Lexie itself has changed hands, names and flags. It is now the Olympic Sky, owned by Athens-based Melodia Marine SA. Registered in Majuro, it now flies a Marshall Islands flag. **1**

Return game

Will Sasikala walk out of prison early and muddy the political waters of Tamil Nadu?

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

FOR SOME TIME now, Edappadi K. Palaniswami has been trying to establish himself as a leader tall enough to take on DMK president M.K. Stalin. And yes, for a while, he seemed to have won over the people with his policies, before Covid-19 struck. In the months since, he has been accused of coming up short, especially in the fight against the pandemic.

And now, he has to contend with the possibility of meeting a ghost from the past sooner than he had thought. On June 25, BJP member Aseervatham Achary tweeted: “Mrs Sasikala Natarajan is likely to be released from Parappana Agrahara Central Jail, Bangalore, on 14th August 2020. Wait for further updates.”

Sasikala, confidante of former chief minister J. Jayalalithaa, was convicted in a disproportionate assets case, and has been in jail since February 2017. Her sentence ends next February.

When THE WEEK asked Achary to elaborate on his tweet, he refused, saying, “I cannot divulge anything more on this. But I am sure about the date of release.”

Achary is known to be close to BJP leader Subramanian Swamy, who, of late, has been talking about Sasikala’s release and how she cannot be excluded from Tamil Nadu politics.

Sasikala completed 40 months and 16 days in prison at the end of June. Her term is 48 months. She had done time for the case in 1996 and 2004, for 13 and 22 days respectively. However, she was out on parole in October 2017 and March 2018, for five and 15 days, first to see her ailing husband, Natarajan, and later to attend his funeral.

A prisoner is eligible for remission only after serving two-thirds of the sentence. Generally, per prison rules, a reduction in sentence is based on conduct and employment in prison. In certain states like Karnataka, learning Kannada is also taken into account. According to the Karnataka Prison Rules 1974, a convict is eligible for six days of ordinary remission a month, or 72 days a year.

So, at the end of June 2020, Sasikala would have been eligible for 240 days of remission. Add to this the 35 days she had spent in jail earlier, in the same case, and Sasikala should be able to walk out of jail at least 275 days before February 14, 2021, the day her sentence ends.

Her advocate N. Raja Senthoo Pandian told THE WEEK: “By all means, Sasikala is eligible for a premature release. The eligibility came up in December 2019 itself. I have been continuously working for it. I



met her on March 7 this year, before the lockdown began. [Since then], we have not been able to strategise as I have not met her.”

Even if she is granted early release, Sasikala would have to pay a fine of ₹10 crore, as per the Supreme Court judgment that put her in jail. Also, the allegations that Sasikala had bribed prison officials for preferential treatment, which IPS officer Roopa Moudgil had levelled, could also come up while Sasikala’s release is being considered.

“We are ready to pay the fine of ₹10 crore whenever we are asked to,” said Senthoo Pandian. Regarding allegations made by Moudgil, he said that the enquiry committee set up to investigate them, headed by IAS officer Vinay Kumar, had found no violation of prison rules.

Regardless, another stumbling block for Sasikala would be the Karnataka prison guidelines of 2014, which do not allow for the early release of a person booked for an economic offence, along with a handful of other crimes.

Also, in an RTI reply to Bengaluru-resident T. Narasimha Murthy on June 6, the office of the chief superintendent of prisons said that “Multiple norms are encompassed to calculate

the date of release for any given convict prisoner. For example, the date of release changes based on the fine payment status. Hence, we are unable to provide you with a precise date of release.”

In October 2019, while handing over the sanction papers to prematurely release 140 lifers at the Parappana Agrahara prison, N.S. Megharikh, then Karnataka DGP (prisons), had told a television channel, “The prisoners now being released belong to a different category of convicts; Sasikala was different as she was convicted under the Prevention of Corruption Act.”

Apparently, he was implying that the tag of “good conduct” would not be enough for Sasikala’s early release. Commenting on social media posts that hinted at Sasikala’s early release, he had said, “These are all motivated and false news.”

Senthoo Pandian, however, insisted that any prisoner who has completed two-thirds of the jail term becomes eligible for early release. “As per the Karnataka Prison Manual, the rights are bestowed on all prisoners,” he said. “[What has to be decided is] whether it is special remission or ordinary remission. There is no bar on remission for prisoners retained under the Prevention of Corruption Act. If suppose such a bar is sought to be imposed, the High Courts and the Supreme Court have intervened in the past to maintain parity for all prisoners.”

If she does walk out early, Sasikala could muddy the waters in a state facing elections in less than a year. On March 7, at a news conference in Coimbatore, Subramanian Swamy had said, “There will be changes in Tamil Nadu politics after her release. It will be difficult to exclude her from politics. She has experience, talent and a whole community behind her.”

Sasikala is said to know the pulse of the AIADMK cadres as she had steered the party from behind Jay-

Sasikala completed 40 months and 16 days in prison at the end of June. Her term is 48 months. She had done time for the case in 1996 and 2004, for 13 and 22 days respectively.



CLOSE WATCH
Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami with Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam

AFP

alalithaa for two decades. Also, there is the image of Palaniswami and his deputy O. Panneerselvam, tears in their eyes, requesting her to take over the party at Poes Garden in 2016.

“Sasikala’s return will definitely bring about big changes in Tamil Nadu politics,” said former MLA P. Vetrivel, who is now with T.T.V. Dhinakaran’s Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam, which was formed as a breakaway faction of the AIADMK in 2018. “She, along with T.T.V. Dhinakaran, can be the strong leaders who can give a tough fight to the DMK during the elections.” Incidentally, Dhinakaran, who is also said to be expecting his aunt Sasikala to return soon, did not react to Achary’s tweet. Sources said that Dhinakaran, now in Puducherry because of the lockdown, has not spoken to anyone on the legality of Sasikala’s remission.

“She will be a strength to the AIADMK,” said political analyst Tharasu Shyam. “But it depends on whether there will be pressure from the BJP or whether the existing AIADMK will accept her.”

The AIADMK has changed a lot since Sasikala went to jail. Both EPS and OPS, as co-coordinator and coordinator, have taken over all the powers vested in the party general secretary. “There will be no political impact when she comes out of prison,” Fisheries Minister D. Jayakumar told THE WEEK. “Be it the cabinet ministers or party executives or district secretaries or branch secretaries, at every level in the party, we have decided to do away with Sasikala and her family. [Anyway,] the Karnataka prison authorities have denied her early release.”

AIADMK sources said that, even after Achary’s tweet, no one in the party has bothered to talk about Sasikala. A senior minister from one of the prominent southern districts, who was once an ardent Sasikala supporter, said he wanted her to come back, but also that the party had been performing well in the past four years. “I do not know if her comeback would bring any changes in the party,” said the min-

ister. “EPS will never want to give up his post or work under her.”

Besides, the AIADMK seems to have more urgent problems. The faction feuds have become more pronounced, and EPS, said sources, is struggling to keep the flock together. Even Stalin pointed this out at a recent news conference, saying that “the ministers should shed their egos”.

As for Sasikala, even an early return does not necessarily mean re-entry into active politics. She still faces a slew of other cases and, according to the Supreme Court sentence, cannot contest elections for another six years. “Sasikala’s alienation was a well-thought-out strategy by [Narendra] Modi and the BJP,” said political observer Raveenthiran Duraisamy. “There will not be any going back. Sasikala is not a proven political force. In 2024, there may be a compromise between Dhinakaran and the BJP, excluding Sasikala. But no major change will happen in the run-up to the 2021 elections.”

FLIGHT PLAN

Despite challenges, India’s sole aircraft manufacturer aims for the sky

BY ABHINAV SINGH

HINDUSTAN AERONAUTICS

Limited (HAL) has often been in the news for the wrong reasons, be it the long project delays, quality issues or labour problems. But the aircraft-maker—India’s only one—is trying to shed that image. With an order book of ₹50,500 crore and a number of big projects in hand, HAL is all set to take on the multinational

giants that have been looking for a piece of the Indian aerospace and defence pie.

“Our current production projects include Su-30 MKI aircraft, Light Combat Aircraft Tejas, Dornier Do-228, Advanced Light Helicopter Dhruv, Chetak helicopter, and engines and aerospace structures to fulfil the requirement of our cus-

tomers, mainly from the defence services,” said R. Madhavan, chairman and managing director of HAL. “HAL is also undertaking upgrade programmes of Mirage 2000 and Jaguar DARIN-III.”

HAL recorded a turnover of ₹21,100 crore for the financial year ended in March, which was 7 per cent more than the previous year.



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

TO THE FUTURE

An aircraft takes off from the HAL facility in Bengaluru



■ INTERVIEW



R. Madhavan,
chairman and managing director, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited

Competitive private industry gives an opportunity for HAL to evolve

BY ABHINAV SINGH

Q/What is the current status of the production of LCA Tejas?

A/The order for the first 40 aircraft is categorised into two tranches of 20 each—initial operational clearance (IOC) and final operation clearance (FOC)—with 16 fighters and four trainers in each batch. The delivery of the first 16 fighters in IOC configuration is complete. The FOC for the fighter variant was issued to us in February 2019. This FOC variant additionally comes with air-to-air refuelling capability, close combat gun, additional drop tanks, BVR (beyond-visual-range) missile capability, updated avionics and flight control software suite. The FOC variant will reduce the maintenance man hours and turnaround time.

The first LCA in FOC standard took to the skies on March 17, 2020. We had achieved the feat within a record time of 12 months after the release of the Drawing Applicability List (DAL) and SOP by CEMILAC. On May 27, FOC standard LCA Tejas was inducted into the IAF Squadron 'Flying Bullets', marking a major milestone for us.

Similarly, the production of eight LCA twin-seat trainers based on the provisional design document provided in June 2019 is also progressing at HAL. The current LCA manufacturing capacity established at HAL is for eight

aircraft a year. The capacity is being augmented for production of 16, for which a second production line has been set up and entire structural modules of front, centre, rear and wing are being manufactured through our outsource partners.

Q/How do you view the growing competition from the private sector?

A/I feel that a vibrant, competitive private industry base in the country is an opportunity for HAL to evolve and exert for greater challenges. The aerospace and defence (A&D) industry involves complex technology, high investment cost, long gestation period, stringent quality requirement, long development cycle and tedious certification process. This acts as a major challenge for new entrants. The recent past has witnessed a paradigm shift in defence procurement procedure with the introduction of the strategic partnership (SP) model. SP provides the opportunity to the Indian private sector for making an entry into the industry with a product by collaborating with an original equipment manufacturer.

Currently, the defence manufacturing ecosystem in the country is developing. We have spearheaded this by collaborating with private players, foreign OEMs and academia for various production and development projects. We are also making significant efforts toward the de-

velopment of a skilled workforce through an apprentice training programme, Aerospace and the Aviation Sector Skill Council and other skill development initiatives. We are also aiming to become a major system integrator and have outsourced different activities to different private vendors.

Q/There are talks of making India more self-reliant in defence production. How would it benefit HAL?

A/We play a significant role in the domestic aerospace industry in terms of service provided to the Indian armed forces and the aerospace manufacturing ecosystem. In order to ensure maximum utilisation of existing defence and aerospace facilities in the country, the urgent need is to provide orders for aircraft and helicopters manufactured and developed by HAL under Make in India.

Q/Has there been an exodus of talent from HAL because of the arrival of multinational aerospace companies?

A/It is in line with the industry average and there has been no mass exodus. Though the advent of MNC aerospace companies can result in talent drain, in my opinion, the learning opportunities and the challenging and inviting work environment and pro employee policies of the company will help HAL retain the workforce.



HALe and hearty

Production capacity

40 aircraft/helicopters every year
Includes Tejas LCA, Su-30MKI, Do-228, Dhruv ALH and Chetak

Repairs and overhaul (ROH) capacity

220 aircraft/helicopters every year
Includes upgrade or overhaul of Mirage 2000, Jaguar DARIN-III, Su-30MKI and Hawk trainers

Engine production and ROH capacity

Production: Around **120** engines;
ROH: Around **550** engines

Government orders

83 Tejas Mk1A and 15 light combat helicopters, similar to the Boeing Apache, in the pipeline

Orders expected: HTT-40 trainer, light utility helicopters and Su-30MKI

Current projects

Order book position: **₹50,500 crore (March 2020)**

Then the Covid-19 pandemic played spoilsport, and the company is trying to overcome the stress on production by working with private suppliers. "HAL has roped in many private organisations to provide components," said Air Marshal B.K. Pandey, former head of the Headquarters Training Command of the Air Force. "However, the main assembly of the aircraft and the helicopters rests with HAL."

HAL has faced many challenges from time to time. Delayed schedules, difficulty in procurement of spares, and human resource problems have been regular. It took around three decades for the company to develop the Light Combat Aircraft Tejas. Pandey, however, said these problems were similar to those of aerospace and defence companies around the world, and HAL was not entirely responsible for the delay.

"Partly, the Indian Air Force has to be blamed for delayed deliveries by HAL," he said. "The Air Force keeps changing its requirements. It should be part of the process of developing an aircraft rather than a bystander. On the other hand, the Navy is somewhat fully involved in the process of an aircraft's development." In its initial years, said Pandey, HAL did far better. "It started developing the first fighter, HF-24, in 1956, and delivered it in 11 years," he said.

It is exactly that kind of efficiency

that HAL needs at the moment, as private players have started challenging its dominance in the domestic market. The company has been struggling to sell its products even to the Air Force.

In fact, HAL seems to have woken up to the challenge. "The second batch of the Hawk aircraft orders

were produced ahead of target," said S. Mallikarjuna Swamy, former executive director of HAL. "The company has also taken steps in advance on orders of trainer aircraft, combat helicopters and the development of engines." Experts suggest that the government should let the company explore the civilian market for helicopters and small planes.

About half of HAL's revenues come from international deals to manufacture aircraft engines, spare parts, and other materials, which include the fighter jet programme with the Sukhoi Corporation of Russia, the contract to manufacture aircraft parts for Boeing and the multi-role transport aircraft project with Ilyushin of Russia. HAL is planning to set up logistics bases in Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, which would help it sell its products and act as service centres.

HAL has a longstanding relationship with the Indian Space Research Organisation. "All launch vehicles of ISRO have parts manufactured by HAL," said Madhavan. "We have a dedicated aerospace division to support ISRO's requirements. We are focusing on more technology-intensive requirements and have set up a new facility for manufacturing cryogenic engines to support ISRO's programmes." ■

Veteran's viewpoint

In his new book, Bhargava offers a template for working and living

BY PRATUL SHARMA

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU and Narendra Modi represent two distinct models of governance, both steeped in their ideological moorings. One common thread in both of them, however, is an emphasis on massive industrialisation for economic growth. While Nehru looked at public sector-driven industrialisation as an engine for social justice, Modi wants to keep the two objectives separate. It is between these two extremes that Maruti Suzuki chairman R.C. Bhargava slots his prescription for making Indian industry globally competitive. In his new book, *Getting Competitive: A Practitioner's Guide for India*, Bhargava praises Modi for making the manufacturing process competitive, a key ingredient that was missing in Nehru's socialist vision.

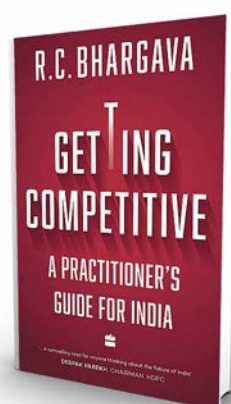
Bhargava, 85, has a unique vantage point: His first assignment as an IAS officer was in the Uttar Pradesh secretariat in 1956, when Nehru gave a socialistic roadmap for the country. After serving as a bureaucrat for two decades, he spent the following four in building Maruti.

Having experienced bureaucracy from both sides, he suggests that the current cadre management system be changed to a cadre of specialists for industrial and economic management, something which the government is pushing with the lateral entry of domain experts. He goes a step ahead to suggest that the government and industry exchange officers for three years.

Bhargava offers a template which he argues would work for India, which is torn between a socialist past and the capitalist pull—the Japanese way of work-

ing and living. He recommends it even for the top management of India Inc. He goes on to discuss other aspects like the role played by reliable supply chains, the need to empower policymakers and the downside of not factoring consumers in policymaking.

The book has come at a time when both corporations and individuals have been forced to hit the reset button and the country at large is focusing on the need to become self-reliant and competitive. As the lockdown-induced humanitarian crisis unfolded, a debate has already started on the ways the government, industry and civil society need to adapt to rewrite the India story. This book is a valuable contribution to that debate. ①



Getting competitive: A Practitioner's Guide for India
By R.C. Bhargava
Published by Harper Collins
Price ₹599, Pages 240

Q/ Apart from policy intervention, the book says the Japanese management style is best suited for Indian conditions. The behavioural shift appears to be a tall order.

A/ It is necessary to understand what aspects of Japanese management I am suggesting Indian industry should adopt. There can be no doubt that if workers believe that their future job security and quality of life would be best ensured by their company becoming and remaining highly competitive and prospering as a result, they can make a big contribution to making that happen. That would create a win-win situation for the management and all others and be in the national interest.

Managements need to understand this, as otherwise it is unlikely that global competitiveness can be achieved. They should therefore look for ways to make this happen. That is the essence of the Japanese management system. Incidentally, this kind of management effort would also help to build trust with the political system and be more in consonance with our political and social conditions, making it sustainable over the long term.

Q/ The book draws comparisons between the Nehruvian approach to industrialisation and Modi's.

A/ The fundamental difference is that in the Nehruvian approach competition was deliberately excluded by policy. There was no objective of making public or private enterprises competitive. There was no realisation that customers, who are the citizens of India, would gain if manufacturing resulted in better quality and lower-cost

■ INTERVIEW

R.C. Bhargava
chairman, Maruti Suzuki

India should target 15 per cent growth



products. The recommendation in the book is that the emphasis should be on maximising competitiveness and various recommendations have been made on what the government and industry can do. One of these is that manufacturing costs should not be increased to help achieve social justice goals.

Q/ The increased focus on the need for India to become globally competitive is also translating into calls for banning imports from China.

A/ The call to ban imports from China is for reasons other than achieving global competitiveness. Ban on imports is not required for achieving competitiveness. Indian products can compete on merits if manufacturing becomes highly competitive as a result of the political system and industrialists working together to achieve this objective, and adopting the correct policies and strategies.

Q/ You mentioned that despite the 1991 reforms, growth has been fettered by the lack of demand. What are your suggestions for keeping the cost of production low?

A/ Reducing costs of production is one of the essentials for becoming more competitive. If the governments, Central and state, fully accept that they have to help in making this happen, in all their interfaces with industry they should see how costs can be reduced. Governments provide infrastructure, many inputs, and create an environment for industry to function. All of these can become more efficient and be provided at lower cost. Time has a cost and reducing delays would lower costs.

Q/ How do you see the demand for the car industry changing as people will prefer personal vehicles?

A/ It is too early to make any long-term forecast. Presently, there is a shift towards smaller hatchbacks.

Customers may again change their thinking in the future.

Q/ Maruti Suzuki has been the market leader because of the brand and pricing. New players are now vying for consumer attention with jazzier products and competitive prices.

A/ The car sector has been competitive for many years. Such competition is good for the industry as well as for customers. MSIL will continue to do its best to remain competitive.

Q/ In a changed world after the pandemic, what are the lessons for the industry?

A/ An opportunity has been created to change our ways of doing business. India has failed to develop fast enough in the past decades and the current opportunity should be used to remedy this by making manufacturing highly competitive and targeting a growth rate of around 15 per cent a year. That will benefit everyone. ①

Oral cancer: awareness and risk factors

Oral cancer (mouth cancer) is a major problem in our country where it ranks among the top three types of cancers. In India, oral cancer accounts for about 30 per cent of all types of cancer. A more recent trend is the increased incidence of oral cancer among women and young adults due to increase in consumption of smokeless tobacco.

The death rate associated with oral cancers remains particularly high because more often the cancer is identified at an advanced stage. Lack of awareness about early symptoms of oral cancer is the main reason for cancer being detected at advanced stages. Oral cancer causes significant damage to quality of life and affects financial stability of individuals.

How does it start?

It starts as a tumour/ulcer on the surface of the tongue, inside the cheeks, roof of the mouth (palate), or on the lips or gums.

Who is at risk?

People who use tobacco and betel nut/areca nut (supari), alcohol consumers, those with sharp teeth or ill-fitting dentures, human papillomavirus (HPV) infection and diet lacking in fruits and vegetables.

When to consult/seek medical help?

Consult a healthcare professional when you have non-healing

ulcer in the mouth; chronic pain in mouth, tongue or jaw; bleeding from mouth; difficulty in chewing or swallowing; difficulty or decrease in opening the mouth; loose teeth or recent loss of teeth; development of white, red or mixed patches on tongue, gums or inner linings of the mouth; a lump or hard mass in the neck.

How to avoid oral cancer?

Avoid all forms of tobacco, areca nut, betel nut and alcohol consumption. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. In case of symptoms, do not neglect the symptoms and consult your doctor immediately.

Treatment options

Surgery is the preferred modality of treatment, whenever feasible; followed by adjuvant radiation and chemotherapy in advanced disease.

If oral cancer is diagnosed early, a complete cure is often possible in up to 90 per cent of cases using surgery alone; hence early detection of the disease is associated with a vast improvement in survival.

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Promoted by Smt. Nandamuri Basavataraka Ramarao Memorial Cancer Foundation and Indo-American Cancer Organisation.
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THANK YOU

I am really honoured to receive your blessings on our successful completion of 20 years of excellence in cancer care. I thank you for taking out time & sending your warm wishes to us.

Nandamuri Balakrishna

20 years of Excellence in Cancer Care

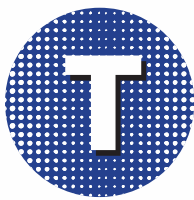
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A BURNING BRIGHT

Megha Majumdar has shot to literary fame with her debut novel, *A Burning*, a chronicle of the present political times

BY MANDIRA NAYAR



The only Megha Majumdar that exists on Skype that matches the id is located in Beijing. And that is all that it says. No photograph, no personal details, nothing to suggest Majumdar has burst into literary stardom with her debut novel—*A Burning*.

"I spent seven months in Beijing," she says from her Brooklyn home, by way of explanation. She worked with high school teachers and students in Beijing, helping them research schools in the US. Majumdar is a poster girl for everything that middle-class India dreams of. Her academic credentials are stellar: Harvard and then Johns Hopkins University for social anthropology. "My parents have always been very supportive, even when I wanted to do humanities," says Majumdar, who did her schooling at Ashoka Hall, Kolkata. "They supported me on research for college and reaching for the sky. It was quite unusual in my year."

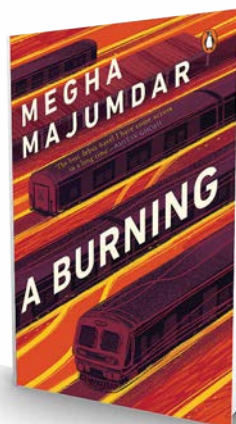
There have been few other books from the subcontinent in recent memory that have generated the kind of interest that Majumdar's first book has. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* was one, thanks to the sheer power of his narrative.

The rave reviews for *A Burning* continue to pour in. Margaret Atwood recommended it; Amitav Ghosh endorsed it before it hit the stands. Over the past month, Majumdar has found fame with her book. She is a favourite at webinars, her name acquiring heft at a time when the world stayed indoors and bookshops remained largely shut. "It is very gratifying," she says. "People are dealing with pay cuts, job losses. I am glad people are just reading."

Majumdar's book is fast-paced,

almost breathless—a word that one would not usually associate with a literary novel. Manasi Subramaniam, head of literary rights at Penguin Random House India, stayed up the night to read it. In the morning, Subramaniam, who edited the book, called up Alfred A. Knopf in the US and said she had to publish it. An editor herself, Majumdar spent four years on the book to ensure that each word and sentence propelled her story further. "A book makes a claim on a reader's time," she says. "It must reward that time."

Majumdar left Kolkata barely an adult, at a time when Bengal was at the cusp of change. In 2006, the Singur issue was raging, and it propelled Mamata Banerjee straight into Writers' Building, ending the Red years. More than a decade later, at 32, Majumdar has written a political novel capturing India's less than shiny side. Asked if she set out to write a political



A Burning
by Megha Majumdar
Published by Penguin
Random House India
Price ₹599 Pages 304

novel on JLF's Brave New World, Majumdar answered earnestly: "I don't think it is possible to write a novel that doesn't grapple with power and freedom in some way."

Her book opens with a curfew, after men have thrown flaming torches into a train. The fire spreads to the huts that border the station. Jivan, a young Muslim woman who witnesses the attack, posts something "dangerous" on Facebook: 'If the police didn't help ordinary people like you and me, if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean that the government is also a terrorist?' She is arrested and accused of collaborating with a terrorist to start the fire.

The novel weaves in the lives of two other characters who become integral to Jivan's battle to tell her side

of the narrative. Lovely, a transgender who dreams of being an actor. Jivan teaches Lovely English—a skill that she needs to get ahead. The other character is PT Sir, who teaches physical education at the girls' school where Jivan studies. He hopes Jivan, a natural at kabaddi, will become an athlete like him; he forgives her soiled skirt and old shoes. But she drops out without an explanation. Fuelled by his ambitions, PT Sir gets pulled into right-wing politics. Both Lovely and he have to testify at her trial. The choices they make—linked to their own ambitions—and the story they choose to tell will determine her future.

A Burning is dark, eerily real and accurately depicts India's hyper-nationalism and its steady shift to the

BOOK EXTRACT

FEAR COMES CALLING

A FEW NIGHTS later, there was a knocking. It was late, two or three a.m., when any sound brings your heart to your throat. My mother was shouting, "Wake up, wake up!"

A hand reached out of the dark and dragged me up in my nightie. I screamed and fought, believing it was a man come to do what men do. But it was a policewoman.

My father, on the floor, his throat dry and his painful back rigid, mewled. Nighttime turned him into a child.

Then I was in the back of the police van, watching through the wire mesh a view of roads glowing orange under street lamps. I exhausted myself appealing to the policewoman and group of policemen sitting in front of me: "Sister, what is happening? I am a working girl. I work at Pantaloons. I have nothing to do with police!"

They said nothing. Now and then a crackle came from the radio on the dashboard, far in front. At some point, a car filled with boys sped by, and I heard whooping and cheering. They were coming from a nightclub. The doddering police van meant nothing to those boys. They did not slow down. They were not afraid. Their fathers knew police commissioners and members of the legislature, figures who were capable of making all problems disappear. And me, how would I get out of this? Whom did I know?

—Excerpted with permission from Penguin Random House India.

right. The sheer enormity of the themes—from nationalism to the system that has unfairness built into it—is enough to bog down any writer, especially one who has never written before. This is where Majumdar's craft shows. "Because I am an editor, I am my own harshest critic," she

"I DON'T THINK IT IS POSSIBLE TO WRITE A NOVEL THAT DOESN'T GRAPPLE WITH POWER AND FREEDOM IN SOME WAY."

says, laughing. "I kept asking questions: Is this confusing? Am I bored? What do I want to say?"

She always wrote, right from "essay competitions in school". Like many people, she says, she dabbled with short stories. Did she win competitions? "Sometimes I won," she says. "I got more serious about writing with the book."

Majumdar's book has the lightness of a jamdani—a sari her Bengal is famous for—blended with the urgency that makes it impossible to put down. Has her life changed? "When [you] sit down, and you are alone with the page, it is as hard as it is to get as close to the vision you have in your head," she says. "It is solitary, it is slow, it is hard work."

And, she has begun again. ●



ILLUSTRATION: DENI LAL

■ INTERVIEW

Kritika Pandey
winner, Commonwealth
Short Story Prize 2020

Writing helps you explore the limits of what is possible

BY ANJULY MATHAI

The girl with the black bindi knows she is not supposed to glance at the boy in the white skull cap, but she does.” Thus begins Kritika Pandey’s short story, *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes*, which could perhaps alternatively have been titled, Love in the age of hindutva. One can imagine where the story is leading, but the beauty is how Pandey takes us there, through a wondrously lyrical world of moustachioed men who clean their ears with Q-tips and brides who hide the names of their future husbands amid swirly, intricate henna patterns. So perhaps it came as no surprise when Pandey won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2020 for her “gut punch of a story”, as described by one of the judges. After all, the 29-year-old MFA graduate from the University of Massachusetts Amherst is no stranger to accolades, having won the 2020 James W. Foley Memorial Award, the 2018 Harvey Swados Fiction Prize and the 2018 Cara Paravani Memorial Award in Fiction. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ How did *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes* come about?

A/ I wrote the story after Tabrez Ansari was lynched by a mob not far from my parents’ house in Jharkhand. I was visiting them at the time. And I could not do much else other than write in order to cope with my grief. I can only imagine

what Ansari’s family must have gone through.... I wrote *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes* to help my readers acknowledge that we need a lot more compassion in this world. What we have right now is far from enough.

Q/ What does it mean to be a writer from Jharkhand? How has the place you grew up in influenced your writing?

A/ When you grow up in a place that is not part of the popular imagination, a place that you do not see in any of the movies or read about in any of the books you come across, then you move through the world feeling immensely alienated. This sense of alienation is evident in everything I write. All my characters struggle to belong, even to themselves. My childhood in Jharkhand was mostly about staying locked up in my parents’ house. One set of windows overlooked the slums. Another set of windows overlooked relatively

“I WROTE *THE GREAT INDIAN TEE AND SNAKES* TO HELP MY READERS ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE NEED A LOT MORE COMPASSION IN THIS WORLD.”



wealthier people’s houses and cars. As I grew older, I discovered the third set of windows: books. I read as often as I could. It helped me get away. I made friends with fictional characters with effortless ease. But if I found myself in a family gathering—full of elders who wanted me to touch their feet and be a soft-spoken girl who does not talk to boys—then I had no idea what to say or do. So I would return to reading once again.

Q/ Why did you pick engineering over writing? How did you arrive at the decision to give it up?

A/ I did not decide. It was decided for me. I got 97.2 per cent in Class 10. And my entire family, as well as most of my teachers, kept telling me that I should be an engineer. So that is what I did. Then, when I finished college, I refused to take up the job I had been offered during campus placements because I could not bear to keep feeling as miserable as I had felt for four long years at college. At some point, you have to stand up for yourself. Especially if you are a woman, because people tend to think that women are too stupid to know what they are talking about.

Q/ How did it feel like to win the Commonwealth award? Can you describe your reaction when you first heard about it?

A/ I felt two things. One, that I was not wrong in realising that I want-

ed to be a writer in Class 7 when I read Sarojini Naidu’s poems in my literature textbook. Two, that I have a renewed responsibility towards people whose struggles have been historically (made invisible). Writing cannot single-handedly change the world, but it has its place in the project of resistance.

Q/ Which is the one novel you could read and re-read a dozen times and still not grow bored of? And why does it hold such an appeal for you?

A/ Anything that Clarice Lispector has ever written. She is more than just a writer. She is a magician. She can reach into the innermost crevices of your soul and reveal a part of yourself to you that you would not have encountered without having read her. Here’s a snippet of her genius: “I write as if to save somebody’s life.

Probably my own. Life is a kind of madness that death makes. Long live the dead, because we live in them.”

Q/ You have described with such insight the emotions of a girl who falls in love, perhaps for the first time, in your story. Did you draw upon your own first love to give it authenticity? If yes, could you describe your experience of falling in love for the first time?

A/ Without getting into too many personal details, I will say that, let alone marrying, not being able to even hold hands with the person you are infatuated with is a lived reality for many young people in India. And it is no surprise that romantic love is such a taboo in our society. This is precisely what it takes to maintain one of the cruellest systems of social segregation in the history of human civilisation: the caste system. And a

lot of it relies on controlling the bodies and sexualities of women. Upper caste women, like me, must at all costs be forced to marry upper caste men in order to reproduce caste hierarchies. This is why if we say no to being controlled by social norms, then all hell breaks loose.

Q/ What is the first short story/poem you ever wrote? What inspired it and how do you feel about it now, after so many years?

A/ Our English teacher had asked us to write something, anything, and I had written a poem about war. It was obviously not good poetry. But I remember feeling an unparalleled excitement as I discovered certain ideas only once I wrote them down. That is the power of writing. It helps you explore the limits of what is possible, both inside and outside of your head. 🕯



LIKE A CHILD

Aditi Rao Hydari has traversed the Indian cinema landscape, often choosing soft but strong roles

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

Most of Aditi Rao Hydari's days in lockdown have been good. She admits that the negative news that one comes across every day can be demoralising. "But I am one of those eternally positive humans," says the actor, talking from her home in Hyderabad, a day before the release of her Malayalam film *Sufiyum Sujatayum* on Amazon Prime Video. "I know a lot of people are really suffering and it is very tough [for them], but I feel as humans we always have those two choices, and there are enough people who suffer every day who also smile and choose positivity. So, it is possible."

She knows the place of privilege she comes from and that "somebody will turn around and say that it is easier for me". "But we all have our struggles and our difficulties in our own place," she says. Unlike a lot of celebrities, who have been taking up various social media challenges and are keeping fans entertained in numerous ways, Hydari's social media updates are sparse. "From a place of privilege, what I am going through is very different from what [most of] India is going through. Rather

than post my day-to-day activities, I would rather put that energy into reaching out to people in a way that is more real," she says.

And hence, she is doing things that she used to do as a young girl, because of the time she has at home. "It is giving me that opportunity to be a child again," says Hydari. "I have gotten back to dancing, which I have been doing since I was five. I am doing kalari-payat, which I also learnt as a child. I am singing more. I help in cooking.



I am helping my brother set up his house. I am also talking to my friends and anybody who is feeling low, to try and cheer them up. For me, that is very important."

But having said that, she yearns to return to the film sets, to do what makes her happiest. There is fear in the air in anticipation of what a post-pandemic set might look like. "But I am not going to fear what the situation would be once things open up," she says. "At the risk of sounding like a child, I think we really need to reassess the chaos we have created in this world."

Perhaps, it is the inherent belief in the childlike innocence that drew her to *Sufiyum Sujatayum*—a film about pure love between a Sufi singer and a mute girl. "This film is so sweet and so special," says Hydari. "There is so much innocence about it. It is people and their million complications that put their own burdens on simplicity and purity." Sujata is a girl, she would always hope



"I WANTED TO LOOK AT DIFFERENT KINDS OF CONTENT BECAUSE DIFFERENT CONTENT IS ALWAYS CULTURALLY ROOTED IN THEIR OWN SPACE."



and aspire to be. "It is almost like you don't want anybody to ruin her innocence. You want to protect that girl," she says.

Playing a speech-impaired girl was challenging, but that is why she found the role fascinating, too. "The director (Naranipuzha Shanavas) and the director of photography (Anu Moothedath) were very careful in how they chose to shoot," she says. "They wanted so many cuts. When you are speech impaired, your other senses are so heightened. You have to look into the person's eyes and talk. That makes you very vulnerable and also very true. It was almost unreal."

Although Hydari's film career began with the lead role in Tamil film *Sringaram* (2007), she had a small cameo as a dancer in Malayalam film *Prajapathi* (2006). But she considers *Sufiyum Sujatayum* to be her Malayalam debut.

The innocence that Hydari talks about is often synonymous with most roles she does; her characters are often very sensitive, subdued and soft. Mehrunissa in *Padmaavaat* (2018), Bhoomi Sachdeva in *Bhoomi* (2017) and Leela in *Kaattru Veliyidai* (2017) have all been roles of women struggling to find their space. "Somebody else told me I always choose strong charac-

ters. So, I am confused," she says and laughs, adding that that works for her. "Hopefully, I will never be put in a box."

One still wonders if she has ever thought about being associated with seemingly delicate roles. "I can't change the way I look," says Hydari. "I might have a delicate structure and face, but I think every part that I pick has strength of character." She says one can be gentle and loving, and at the same time fearless and strong. One of her directors once told her that instead of trying to change her looks, what would matter more is what she does in front of the camera. "Now, I don't look in the mirror while doing my shots," she says.

Over the years, Hydari has successfully traversed the Indian cinema landscape, even making her Telugu debut with *Sammohanam* in 2018. She is thrilled to have worked with Mani Ratnam—in *Kaattru Veliyidai* and *Cheekha Chivantha Vaanam* (2018)—a director who really helped her grow. That is one reason she looks forward to working across regions, because of the depth that it brings. "I grew up in a mixed background," she says. "My ancestry is mixed. For me, it is so natural to have a syncretism of different cultures in the same household. I have never seen it as anything strange or something that needed to be adjusted to. It has just been so beautiful, everybody coexisting. Because of that comfort, I was attracted to being a pan-Indian actor. I wanted to look at different kinds of content because different content is always culturally rooted in their own space, and the directors have their own voices. For me, it is not really the region, but the director and the team. I hope I can continue because it is not easy."

It is no surprise then that after this Malayalam debut, she already has *The Girl On The Train* (Hindi), *V* (Telugu) and *Hey Sinamika* (Tamil) lined up for the rest of this year. **●**

CURTAINS DOWN

These TikTokers are bracing for a future without their favourite app

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Soon after the video-sharing app TikTok entered the scene in 2012, it became a virtual Pied-Piper, seducing its followers to dance to its tune (often literally). As TikTok's popularity began to surge, it started getting embroiled in controversies. There was the worry that the Chinese were using the app to steal data. Then there was the allegation that TikTok was hiding videos of the protests in Hong Kong to appease the Chinese. Some people denounced it for promoting illicit content and pornography. Then, on June 29, the border stand-off between India and China led to the Union government banning 59 Chinese apps, including TikTok.

Sure, there are the bigger questions of espionage, ethics, international posturing and political tit-for-tat, but none of this largely mattered to the over 200 million TikTok users in India. For them, TikTok was a free-for-all bazaar of creativity, full of quirky microwave challenges, 'sad panda' memes, funny couple fights and re-enactments of famous dialogues. The app offered a way for them to create a glitzy, happy-go-lucky alter-ego of

themselves that sometimes bore little resemblance to their real-life versions. It was escapism at its goofiest.

"On TikTok, everything was ready-made," says Mumbaikar Nivya Velayudhan, 28, who has posted on the platform between 200 and 500 videos of her singing and performing Bollywood dance sequences.

"And, there were no copyright issues like there are on YouTube," she says.

She has been on TikTok for a year-and-a-half now. "I immediately downloaded all my videos when I heard about the ban," she says. "It came to around 32 GB."

The appeal of TikTok for many was that it was a great leveller. You did not need to be a celeb to amass

followers on the platform. Instead, you could become a celeb through the platform. "People say I look like actor Dhanush, so I recreate songs from his trending movies," says Vivek, a content creator with six lakh followers on TikTok, who goes by the handle Maari Vicky. "My cover song of [the Dhanush song], Rowdy Baby, went viral and got over 11 million views."

This opened the door for many app promotions for Vivek, and ultimately, to the world of television, with several stand-up performances in TV shows. The BTech graduate says that his family was always happy with his creative pursuits because it created a secondary source of income. "I never asked them for money," he says. "I am grateful to TikTok [for helping me enter the world of entertainment]."

With TikTok no longer there, content creators have been forced to migrate to other platforms. "The options in TikTok were so easy to use," says Venkatesh Poddisetty, a TikToker from Telangana. "It helped us reach the target audience perfectly. We hope (similar) Indian apps will come up." But what TikTok opened for them, they are not willing to give up. "I will express my creativity in other ways," says Velayudhan. "I can dub for other videos. I can lip-sync dialogues and put it up elsewhere."

Many people dismiss TikTok as "mindless fun". But it was much more than that. It did not have the uppity vibe of Facebook or Instagram, where everyone clamoured to present sugar-coated versions of themselves. TikTok was less about one-upmanship and more about self-expression. And that is something TikTokers are unwilling to give up. 📌



Nivya Velayudhan



Venkatesh Poddisetty



Vivek

BITTER CHOCOLATE

SWARA BHASKER



Tale of a quiet commitment

My parents had a 'mixed love marriage.' My father is a Telugu-speaking Andhraite and my mother a Hindi-speaking Uttar Pradesh/Bihar product. They met and made a life together in Delhi. Born into modest, but comfortable backgrounds, privileged by education and caste identity with social and cultural capital, yet idealistic and progressive; eager to learn and grow as individuals, enthusiastic to adopt the technologies and tools of the modern world; but traditional in their personal values; and yet open-minded in their outlook; I guess my parents represented the post-colonial, post-Nehruvian young, professional, urban Indian citizen.

Their (pre-marriage) love story had the distinctive flavour of a Farooque Shaikh-Deepti Naval film from the early 80s. The reticence, the unsaid understanding, the long walks, the letter writing, the lack of fanfare and display and the refusal to give their relationship a name until they were married—just a quiet commitment.

As a 90s' teenager, who was learning all about romance and dating from cable TV that aired American TV shows, I often quizzed my parents about their pre-marriage relationship, and always had the same answer—"We were just good friends."

"So you just decided one day to marry your friend? Isn't that weird? Like tomorrow if I just decided to marry Rafi?" I would tease my mother.

"Oh ho! Your generation doesn't understand these things," my mother would brush me off.

Without my realising my parents' quiet commitment to each other became the most central influence in my life. Their marriage silently provided the most positive role model for the love, companionship and commitment my brother and I would look for in our lives.

My mother had a full-fledged career from the time we were born. They were equal partners when it came to parenting. My mother never sought permission from my father for anything—rather she discussed issues with him and they took mutual decisions. He applauded her every achievement and enabled all her career goals, even becoming a single

parent for a few years when she went alone to New York to pursue a Ph.D leaving her two children in the care of her husband.

When my mother got a full scholarship to pursue the Ph.D. at New York University, we celebrated as a family, and our father took us to the airport to bid her farewell. We wrote letters to my mother, mine full of school gossip and complaints about my brother. We recorded tapes of our voices talking to her. Our father would use up the whole of side A for himself and side B was divided between my brother, me and, Chandra, our cook. My mother would listen to these tapes on her Walkman repeatedly as she travelled on the New York subway; smilingly sometimes, and sometimes in tears.

At the time, I didn't realise how radical and unusual it was for an Indian middle class family to have the husband look after the children, while the wife pursued a career goal. It was only when I struggled with adult romantic relationships, that I came to appreciate how wonderfully unusual and enabling my parents' relationship was. It seemed inexplicable to me that they had made a long distance relationship work and without any fanfare or proclamations of great heartache or great love. Just that quiet commitment.

When I was in my twenties and emboldened to be more honest in my questions, I'd ask my parents:

"You guys were away from each other for three years and never felt like having an affair?"

"What nonsense! Of course we didn't."

"How come?"

"We just didn't. Because we loved each other."

"Yes, but it's natural instinct."

"No, it isn't. Not for us."

"Did you repress yourself?"

"Don't throw fancy terms at me."

"Okay, tell."

"Oh ho! Your generation doesn't understand these things. You'll understand only fulfilment, not commitment."

And, perhaps, that commitment, which eludes my generation, is what has seen this couple through four decades, as they celebrate 40 years of a journey of togetherness on July 9.

Happy anniversary, Ma and Dad. Watching you both has been my greatest life lesson.

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



CHANDRACHUR SINGH, actor

Return of the boy next door

Actor Chandrachur Singh made a promising return recently as the owner of a pharmaceutical company in the Disney+ Hotstar show *Aarya*, alongside Sushmita Sen. Currently based in Gurgaon, he looks back at his journey as an actor and the opportunities that streaming platforms have created.

Q/ You have not done too many projects in the recent past. What was it about *Aarya* that attracted you?

A/ I would say that I was really keen to work with Ram (Madhvani, creator) because of his work in the past. Besides, I was supposed to work with Sushmita long ago, which did not happen then. That was again a draw. Plus, I thought the entire concept of *Aarya* was very enticing.

Q/ When *Tere Mere Sapne* and *Maachis* released in 1996, you had become quite the sensation with your boy-next-door image. When things started crumbling, were you badly affected?

A/ I would like to mention that I am really grateful to *Jaya ji* (Bachchan) and *Gulzar ji* for giving me a break in the two projects [respectively]. *Maachis* released first and became an overnight success, both critically and commercially. But I think by the time [things started falling apart], I had been through enough struggles. I knew how to take stardom in a very different way. I was more in it for the creative joy. The struggle and the journey, I feel, only make you a better artiste at the end of the day.



SAMBIT BISWAS

Music with a difference

For the video of his latest single, *Kasoor*, singer Prateek Kuhad sourced footage from his fans, apart from featuring well-known faces like actors Jim Sarbh and Zoya Hussain, comedians Kunal Kamra and Mallika Dua, and musician Kavya Trehan. The song is about the universality of love. The three-minute video was made via remote collaboration. He broke off from the production house which helped him make the video of his chart-topping single, *Cold/Mess*.

Crossover cuisine

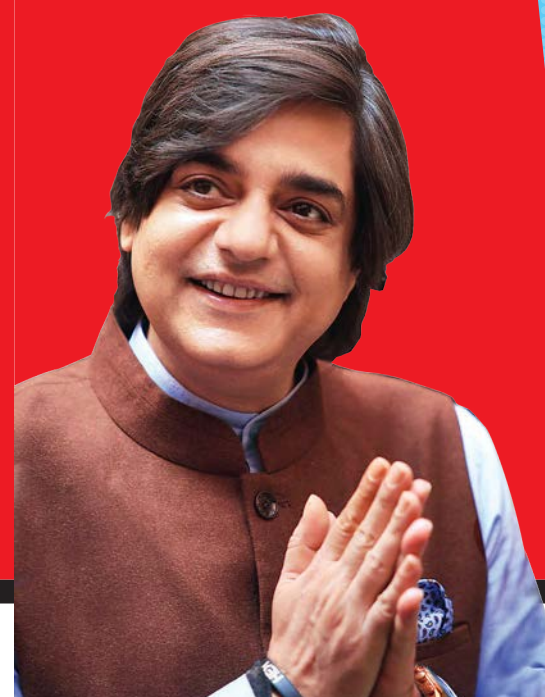
Ravinder Bhogal, award-winning food writer, chef and owner of the London restaurant Jikoni, is coming out with a new book, *Jikoni: Recipes from an Immigrant Kitchen*. Bhogal, who was born in Kenya to Indian parents and moved to London as a child, draws inspiration from her multicultural heritage. "Ravinder's recipes do indeed have a rebellious soul," says the publisher, Bloomsbury. "They are lawless concoctions that draw their influences from one tradition and then another."



Q/ You started your career in an era when digital was almost non-existent. How do you see the changes in the entertainment industry over the last two decades?

A/ I feel lucky to have been able to witness the growth of the industry from the time of single screen theatres to multiplexes, to be able to work in television and now on streaming services. I feel there is a certain professionalism now that is very different. When I started, things were not as personalised as they are now. There is a lot of punctuality and consistency in the setup today. The acting workshops that happen now really help one in the final performance. Another thing that impressed me a lot is how the schedule was followed religiously. I think an actor can show his versatility now because there is so much content being produced. As an actor, you are not stereotyped. Just see how [someone like] Akshay Kumar is juggling so many genres. I think it is a great time to be a performer.

— Priyanka Bhadani



AFP

Man of honour

Sidharth Malhotra, who is set to play Kargil martyr and Param Vir Chakra recipient Vikram Batra in the film *Shershaah*, honoured the soldier through a tweet on his 21st death anniversary. "Salute to the Indian army for their undying service to the nation and to our Kargil hero #VikramBatra who laid down his life today, 21 years ago," Malhotra tweeted. The film, directed by Tamil filmmaker Vishnuvardhan and produced by Karan Johar, was initially set to release this month, but was postponed because of the pandemic.



FOTOCORP

Indecent proposal

Getting marriage proposals might not be a big deal for our stars, but it is probably not every day that you get one from someone who promises to take a male virginity test. Actor Tillotama Shome shared a screenshot of the proposal on Instagram. "I love you," wrote the lover boy. "Will you marry me for my whole life forever? I am virgin and vegetarian guy who is always ready for a RNA 16S sequence male virginity test, lie detector test, narco test, brain mapping test." "What sort of a vegetarian joke is this?" asked the actor. "No thanks, bye bye tata bata alvida." Probably a wise decision.

CONTRIBUTOR / SNEHA BHURA
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



The tangle of taxes

Should one use tax policy to address concerns about equity, tax the rich relatively more and redistribute income from the rich to the poor? Most people will say yes. Indeed, this is one of the principles behind taxation, though equity concerns are often better addressed through instruments other than tax policy.

Should one use indirect tax policy to address concerns about equity? For direct taxes, it is natural to have a progressive system; higher tax rates for the relatively rich. One should hesitate before answering yes to the second question. But most people do not hesitate. A higher tax rate for high-end cars, compared with bicycles, sounds like an eminently sensible idea. How will this work? Ex-show room, car prices can range from just under ₹3 lakh to just under ₹3 crore. Following the logic of the eminently sensible idea, we should not tax them at the same rate. We should have one rate for cars under ₹5 lakh, another for cars around ₹10 lakh, another for those between ₹25 lakh and ₹50 lakh and so on. We will quibble about what kind of car a “middle class” household buys. We will quibble about what happens at the border, with one rate for below ₹20 lakh and another for more. Will manufacturers indulge in what has been called the Bata syndrome, pricing at some value that ends in ninety-nine?

It gets worse. How will we tax motorcycles and scooters, based on prices ranging from ₹50,000 to ₹50 lakh? Most of us smiled when we read a news report about a Karnataka ruling on the difference between a roti and a parotta. The question to ask is, why did this ruling become necessary? It was necessary because parottas have a GST rate of 18 per cent, while rotis have 5 per cent. Think about the following weighty matters. Is green coconut a fruit or a vegetable? Is Parachute oil, occasion-

ally used for hair, too, “coconut oil” or “hair oil”? Is Lal Dant Manjan toothpowder or a medicinal product? Is McDonalds’ McSwirl ice-cream or a dairy product? Is Scrabble a game or a puzzle? We had differences in tax rates. That led to litigation, disputes and judgements. Every question I have just mentioned is rhetorical. They have been addressed by courts, including the highest court of the land.

Indeed, the issue of the coconut led to a split decision in the Supreme Court. For indirect taxes, unlike direct taxes, what the heart suggests as an eminently sensible idea is fraught with problems. Indirect taxes should not be used to address questions of equity. Such complications enrich chartered accountants and lawyers, and feed into tax terrorism. They increase tax compliance costs.

I was once told an anecdote about pre-1991 India, circa mid-1980s. I cannot vouch for its veracity. Apparently, a large number of washing machines, at that time perceived as item of elitist consumption, were being sold in Punjab (much more than in other parts of the country). Investigations revealed these were being used for making lassi, not washing clothes.

I think this anecdote has a message. Perceptions of elitism can be wrong. I used the sentence “we had differences in tax rates”. I should not have used the past tense. We still have differences in tax rates, despite Goods and Services Tax. Other than all products not yet being included in GST, there are too many GST rates. The ideal GST should have a single unified rate. Economists will generally (not always) agree with this. Most others will not. So, we will talk about an ideal with three rates for merit goods, standard products and luxury items, and scratch our heads over which item is what.





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